The trouble with ballot harvesting

Walter Olson

May 13, 2022

The topic of ballot harvesting is likely to be the topic of much shouting in coming weeks, so for now I'd just like to get one point on the table: even for those of us who reject former President Donald Trump's ridiculous stolen-election claims, there are genuine reasons to be skeptical about this practice.

For those coming in late, ballot harvesting or ballot collection happens when one person gathers absentee/mail ballots from many voters — bundling, you might say — for submission at a mail or drop box. This obviously happens on an innocuous micro scale when someone offers to post the completed ballot of a spouse or disabled friend, so it's usual to define the threshold by reference to quantity (you're not a collector unless you accept more than, say, three or six ballots) or relationship (it's okay to do it for family members or persons with a specified incapacity).

Restrictions on ballot collection are common around the states . The best known exception is California, which legalized ballot collecting in 2016, upon which Democrats are said to have employed the method quite effectively to increase their vote. Even California, as the *Washington Post* notes , "has since made it illegal to get paid per ballot collected and for employers to ask employees to bring their ballots into their workplace."

That last point highlights one of the first problems with the practice: the person standing there asking you to hand over your ballot may be someone you have a hard time saying no to, owing to dependence, economic or otherwise. What if it's a union steward at your workplace, or the political boss of your community, or a patriarchal family member? What if they're pressing you for a faster decision than you'd prefer to make? There's a requirement that the envelope be sealed before you hand it over, but that might work mostly as an honor system. If you yield to improper pressure, who's going to complain to the authorities, or verify a complaint?

Contrast all this with the idea behind the secret ballot, the idea of leaving you free to vote your conscience or maybe not vote at all, no matter what powerful people in your life or community may expect of you. As they used to say, it's just you alone in the voting booth.

Next consider the dangers of ballot tampering. Contrary to some imaginings, the abuse that is probably likeliest is not that the collector will switch the choice of party at the top of the ticket. Far harder to police is the practice of "helping" unsophisticated voters by filling in choices for down-ballot races that they might have left blank on their own.

Gaudier abuses, such as the collection of pseudo-ballots from voters who are dead, never intended to vote, or never existed at all, are not unthinkable — politicos are capable of thinking of anything — but leave a trail that is in principle checkable, differing in this from some of the subtler abuses.

All of which will not prevent conniptions in various quarters over a new movie by conservative provocateur Dinesh D'Souza, entitled 2000 Mules, sensationally alleging widespread fraudulent use of ballot harvesting in the 2020 election. I'll leave the critique of that movie to others — the Associated Press and the Bulwark's Charles Sykes have already started the job, among others , and more is to come . AP quotes an academic I much respect: "There's no evidence a massive ballot harvesting scheme dumped a large amount of votes for one candidate into drop boxes, and if there were, it would likely be caught quickly, according to [Iowa law professor] Derek Muller."

Underneath it all, election integrity is a genuine issue with many complications and trade-offs that should not be written off or dismissed. What a shame it would be were it understood merely with reference to the personal interests of one losing presidential candidate.

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