

Doctors shouldn't push voting on patients, GOP says

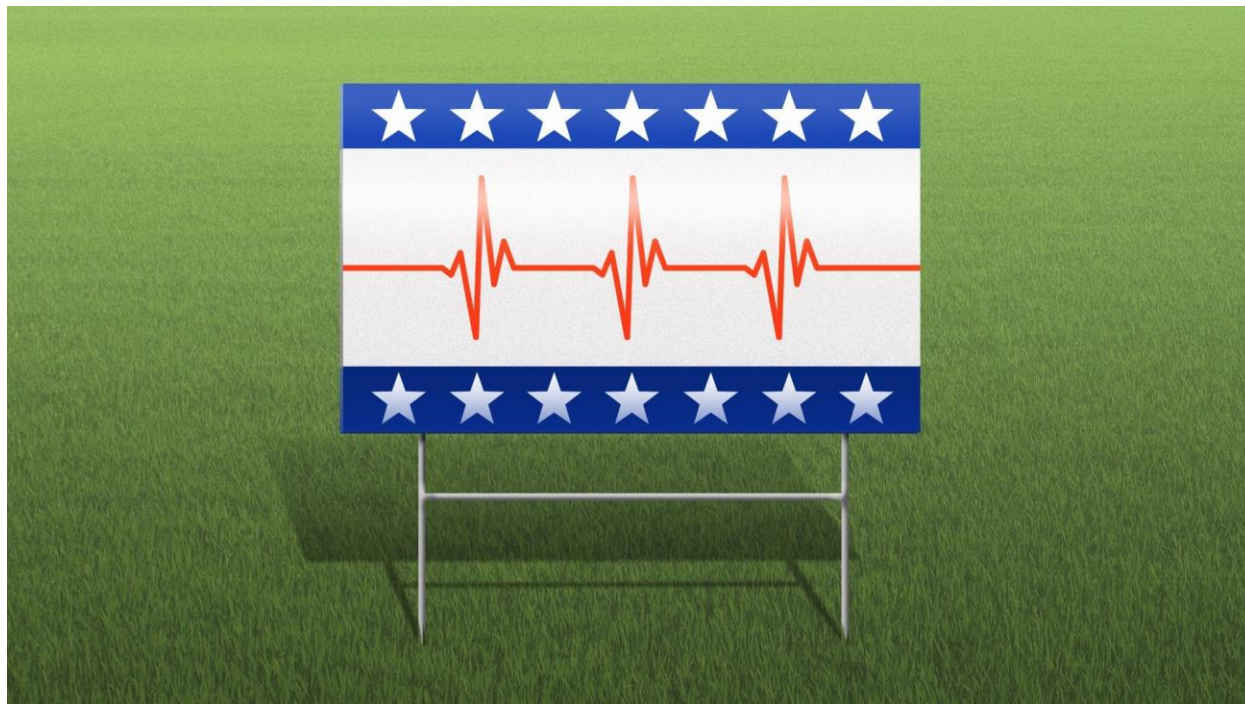


Illustration: Sarah Grillo/Axios

An effort to get doctors to register their patients to vote during office visits is drawing the ire of national Republicans as Election Day nears and threatening to again make health care facilities partisan battlegrounds.

The big picture: Vot-ER, a nonprofit spearheading health care-related voting efforts, likens the initiatives to nonpartisan voter registration at local motor vehicle departments. Conservatives contend they're exploitive and stretch the boundaries of physician freedom.

- With voter turnout key in one of the [closest](#), most bitterly fought elections in modern times, even modest success with sign-ups could affect outcomes.

State of play: The 1993 National Voter Registration Act allowed hospitals and other health care facilities to provide nonpartisan voting information and register voters onsite.

- These initiatives have picked up in recent years as the medical profession [embraced the belief](#) that voting is a "social determinant" of health because it can foster a feeling of belonging and influence the allocation of medical resources.
- But the current effort comes on the heels of a pandemic that saw hospitals and clinics become pitched battlegrounds over the COVID response — and put practitioners in the position of debunking [misinformation](#).

Zoom in: Mara Gordon, a family physician in New Jersey, has talked about voting with her patients since at least 2016, but this year she's being "more systematic about it," she told Axios.

- She typically asks patients if they're registered to vote as she's walking them to the front desk after an appointment.
- "It's a way of channeling some of my energy about the upcoming election into something that feels really productive and brings me closer to my patients," she said.

Where it stands: [Vot-ER](#) was launched by ER physician Alister Martin in 2019 and has orchestrated efforts like distributing free badges with QR codes that link to nonpartisan voter registration website TurboVote.

- "Policies that shape the social drivers of health play a big role in determining health outcomes," [Vot-ER](#) executive director Aliya Bhatia said. "We want patients' voices to be heard, and in turn, their health, quality of life and longevity improved."
- Research [shows that](#) civic engagement — including voting — helps people build connections and a sense of purpose, which can lead to better health.

The other side: Some conservatives claim the group's efforts are a way to register more Democratic-leaning voters. The website [Influence Watch](#) calls [Vot-ER](#) a left-of-center organization that seeks to identify low-income and minority voters.

- "Vot-ER seeks to fundamentally change the relationship between Americans and their healthcare providers for partisan advantage," the Republican National Committee charged [in a letter](#) to election officials in at least six states, asking them to monitor the group for illegal activity.
- The RNC did not respond to a request for comment. The letter it sent to a North Carolina official, published online, does not list any evidence of illegalities.
- [Vot-ER](#) receives funding from large philanthropies like the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, as well as individual donors. It has [reportedly](#) received donations from left-leaning donors, as well.

Similar concerns over voter influence led Republicans in Congress last month to force the Department of Veterans Affairs to identify the vendors it's using to do voter outreach at VA hospitals in Michigan and other swing states, [Stars and Stripes reported](#).

- GOP lawmakers reportedly said they're concerned the Biden administration is using federal resources for efforts that will benefit its political party, while a Democrat lawmaker called the subpoena "anti-democratic."

Reality check: [Vot-ER's](#) advisory board includes former election officials from both parties.

- "It's unfortunate and frankly it's a shame that nonpartisan efforts to promote civic engagement are coming under unwarranted scrutiny, alongside many other disinformation tactics we're seeing out there," Bhatia said about the RNC's letters.
- Patients, for their part, are generally appreciative when they're asked about voting by a medical provider, and if they don't want to talk about it they'll say so, said Judd Flesch, a doctor who's co-leading Penn Medicine's voter engagement work.

