

In times of war, who is conscripted may depend on who they voted for



In many circumstances, governments attempt to protect their supporters from adverse outcomes, and this can also be the case in wartime. In new research on conscription in the US during the Second World War, [Douglas B. Atkinson](#) and [Kevin Fahey](#) find that counties that narrowly voted for Democratic presidential and congressional candidates had lower levels of enlistment than other counties, which they attribute to the discretionary power of politically appointed local draft boards.

One of the many puzzling aspects of its invasion of Ukraine is Russia's decision— in the face of [substantial casualties](#) and [setbacks](#) – to maintain its [existing, highly selective conscription system](#) and other [arbitrary recruitment](#) policies. Even the announcement on the 21st September of “partial mobilization” avoids tapping into the massive pool of potential Russian soldiers. These policies allow most Russians to avoid service in the military during wartime and thus their lives have been relatively unaffected by the many thousands of [battlefield deaths](#). Why would the Russian government do this, even now that [victory seems increasingly unlikely](#)? The answer seems obvious. Russia's President, Vladimir Putin is seeking to protect politically valuable segments of society from the costs of war. While those within democratic societies might expect this from an autocracy, they are likely to not think that this will occur within their own democratic states, where the burdens of national security—especially compulsory military service— are usually [thought to be spread out more evenly](#) throughout society. In new research, we [demonstrate](#) that this is not the case. Instead, we show a link between partisan voting and enlistment.

Reducing the costs of conscription for a government's supporters

In our research, we suggest that distributional politics do not stop during war. Just as is the case with politics in times of peace, leader will seek to provide benefits to segments of society that are their most crucial supporters. The high costs of war make this difficult, so in times of war the best the leader can do is protect these crucial supporters from the war's costs. Of these costs, the highest costs come in the form of military service and death on the battlefield. The leader's ability to alleviate these costs for the communities that make up its most crucial supporters will be dependent upon the type of military labor acquisition system that is in place. Often when states face severe threats, they will depend upon conscription—the government compelling members of society to serve in the military, regardless of their desires.

Conscription systems come in many different forms. Some conscription systems approach being universal, that require everyone meeting certain age and gender requirements to serve. Others are far more permissive and allow governments more flexibility in deciding who serves. It is important, however, even in states that employ selective systems of conscription that they avoid the appearance of favoritism. To this end, decentralized systems of conscription are more opaque and offer governments the ability to engage in favoritism with less oversight.

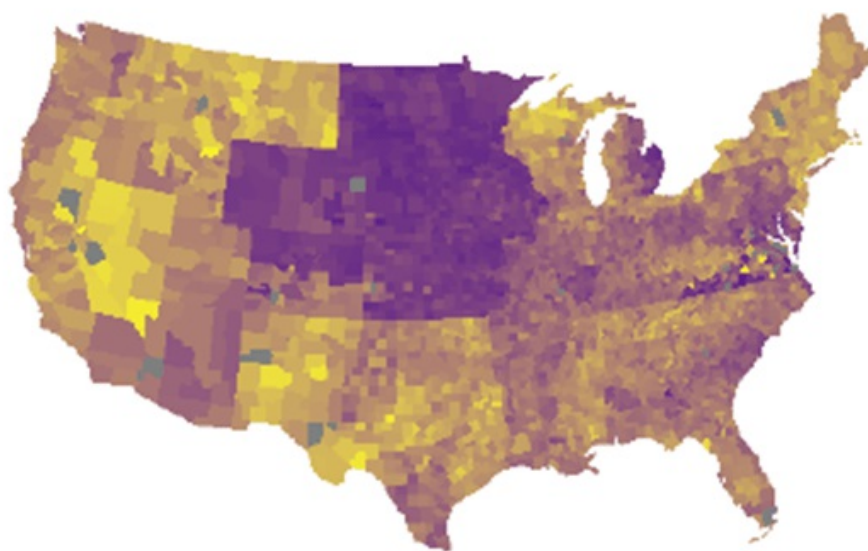


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We test our argument on the case of the United States during the Second World War. During the war, the US relied upon the military service of millions of young people. A vast majority of these young people entered military service as a product of system of conscription that was introduced during the lead up to America's entry into the war. Realizing the threat posed by potential enemies in Europe and Asia, the United States set up a system that would allow them to quickly raise a military. It was, however, was set up in a manner that would potentially allow for political manipulation. Specifically, it relied upon local county draft boards to select eligible men from their population, the thinking being that these local boards would better know the circumstances of their communities. While this may have been true, they had considerable discretionary power and were politically appointed by a state draft board that were politically appointed and overseen by the Selective Service System, which was run by General Lewis B. Hershey. Hershey, in turn, was politically appointed and reported directly to the President. All of this suggests that the United States had a system that was vulnerable to the type of political shielding that we describe above.

To see if this was the case, we used a novel dataset of all 9.2 million people that served in the US Army during the Second World War. Figure 1 below shows enlistment patterns by county in 1942, the first full year of American involvement in the war. Brighter yellow refers to higher enlistment rates, while deeper purple reflects lower enlistment levels.

Figure 1 – US enlistment patterns by county, 1942



Enlistment disparities on party lines

We show that counties that narrowly voted for Democratic (the party in power at the time) presidential and congressional candidates – 50 and 55 percent of the vote – had lower levels of enlistment than other counties, accounting for many controls. We also show that this argument is robust to a number of alternate specifications, including looking at swing states rather than swing counties. In total, we estimate that nearly 140,000 fewer soldiers enlisted than would have been expected, due to this disparity in enlistment policy. That figure is equivalent to nearly twice the number of US soldiers who landed at Normandy on D-Day.

We anticipate that our future work will find similar political inequities in enlistment in other countries, democratic and authoritarian alike. Our findings may help explain why the Russian government is unfazed by large casualties as well as explaining why it is not more willing to [further mobilize](#), as such a move would impact parts of the country that have largely been [untouched by the war](#) and could undercut Putin's grasp on power. While the [Ukrainian government recently fired its defense chief](#). Democracies in wartime are responsive to their citizens, and act to win elections, but authoritarian regimes are not responsive to their citizens. Whether Russia can manage the war – and further setbacks – without a full mobilization remains to be seen.

- This article is based on the paper, [‘Ain’t No Fortunate Son: The Political Calculus of Conscription’](#) in *Political Research Quarterly*.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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