

This just in:

AP-“America faces an epidemic of recycling fraud. People are stealing newspapers from their neighbors’ front yards so they can put them in their own recycling bins,” said the director of Ohio’s recycling program. He added, “This practice threatens the integrity of the entire recycling program. It must end immediately.”

He and other regulators across the country are imposing new safeguards against recycling fraud. Before their newspapers will be accepted for recycling, residents in Ohio and nine other states must tape copies of their newspaper subscriptions onto their recycling bins. As a further safeguard, they must provide copies of their canceled subscription checks on demand.

State officials in Ohio and elsewhere dismissed claims by environmental advocates that these new documentation rules would discourage legitimate recycling.

OK, so this story isn’t really from AP; it’s not even from the *Onion*. But the interesting question is *why* the story is so ridiculous — and what that tells us about claims of widespread voter fraud.

The basic reason the story seems so implausible is the nature of recycling as a public good. As with voting, there is no tangible reward to recycling in most places. For that very reason, it can be something of a struggle to get people to recycle. Some scholars think that you can motivate recycling by encouraging a social norm; others like Ann Carlson are skeptical. But whatever environmental or social motives lead people to recycle, they apply even more weakly, or not at all, to fake recycling. That’s why there’s no epidemic of residential newspaper recycling fraud.

Voting is similar. In fact, economists struggle to come up with reasons why any rational person would bother to vote, since the odds of affecting an election are virtually nil. And if it’s hard to explain voting, it’s even harder to explain fraudulent voting. The fake voter is equally unlikely to change the election outcome, faces the risk of being hassled if caught, and can’t get the warm glow of feeling a legitimate part of the democratic process. In other words, the fake voter is more or less like the fraudulent recycler who steals newspapers just to have the chance to recycle them.

It's not surprising that it's so difficult to find cases of individual voter fraud. Very few people are crazy enough to pretend to have the right to vote just so they can get the "I voted" sticker. In fact, the number of fraudulent voters may not be much bigger than the number who steal newspapers from their neighbors just so they can pretend to be legitimate recyclers.

In short, everything we've learned from recycling programs about the difficulty of motivating participation tells us that low rates of voter turnout are no surprise. As with recycling, we're very unlikely to have the problem of too *many* people wanting to vote, when they shouldn't be voting. In reality, the problem with voting, as with recycling, is getting people to do their civic duty and participate.