Compulsory Voting: What Choices Matter?

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Key Points:

- Compulsory voting keeps our voting turnout levels at the highest in the world in a period when voting is in decline throughout the rest of the industrialized world.
- Compulsory voting drastically reduces inequalities in voting participation. This reduction is correlated with less wealth inequality than voluntary systems. Compulsory voting systems also have lower levels of political corruption and higher levels of satisfaction with the way democracy is working than voluntary systems.
- Support for compulsory voting has been high in Australia for many years. This support is strong across all social groups.
- It is sometimes suggested that there are better ways of stimulating voter turnout but none can equal the decisiveness and immediacy of compulsory voting.
- Contrary to the common assertion, antipathy towards compulsory voting is not the ‘cause’ of our higher-than-average informal voting rate.
- The Australian voting system is arguably the best managed in the world. We have successfully demonstrated that it is possible to have almost universal voting participation, with high levels of electoral integrity, at low cost and with very little inconvenience to voters.

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Before taking up her position at the University of Adelaide, Lisa was an ARC Senior Fellow and a Fellow at the Research School of Social Sciences, ANU. Prior to that she lectured for 7 years in the Department of Government, University of Sydney and, as a Rhodes Scholar, took a D.Phil. in Politics at the University of Oxford. Her current areas of interest are: political theory, intellectual history, issues in electoral law and selected issues in Australian Politics.

Note: The argument in this policy brief has been adapted to the compulsory voting debate in the United States in The New York Times; please see ‘Mandatory Voting Works’
Background

Australia has one of the oldest systems of compulsory voting in the world. Compulsory enrolment was introduced at the federal level in 1911 but voting itself did not become mandatory until 1924. It wasn’t until 1984 that it became compulsory for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders to register and vote.

Compulsory voting was introduced to address the problem of low voter turnout and it proved to be an extremely decisive and successful remedy. At the last federal election immediately prior to the introduction of compulsory voting (1922) the average turnout of registered voters was 59% (RV) but turnout at the first federal election after 1924 (in 1925) surged dramatically to an average of 91% (RV). The net increase over time since the introduction of compulsory voting has been 30.4 percentage points. Turnout rates among the voting age population in Australia have remained consistently high and against the pattern that has emerged in the rest of the industrialized, voluntary-voting world.

Although Australia is one of the few advanced democracies (and the only English speaking country) to compel citizens to vote, a number of other established democracies have shown serious interest in the idea. For example, due to declining turnout in Britain, the idea of compulsory voting is now being taken seriously there with one MP introducing a private member’s bill for its adoption. The UK Electoral Commission, the Electoral Reform Society of Britain and the Institute of Public Policy Research (UK) have all undertaken research to gauge its suitability for the British context. Likewise, there have been calls for its introduction in the US, Canada, New Zealand, Israel and even Jordan. But a significant obstacle to the adoption of compulsory voting in settings where it could be of real benefit is the uncritical acceptance of claims that it is impractical and expensive; that the public find it an unacceptable burden on autonomy; and that it is inimical to liberal and democratic ideals.
Public Acceptance

Australia’s is arguably the most accessible and user-friendly electoral system in the world with extremely low transaction and opportunity costs to voters. This is because the compulsion to vote hastened the development of a complex raft of measures designed to ensure that all the obstacles normally experienced by abstainers in voluntary systems are removed so that every Australian, regardless of circumstances, restrictions and contingent status, is enabled to vote. Perhaps partly because of this, compulsory voting enjoys high levels of community acceptance with the majority of Australians (around 70%+ for the last four decades) indicating that they consider it to be a reasonable imposition on personal freedom. This support is strong across all social groups.

High Turnout and Political Equality

Compulsory voting serves to maintain unusually high voting turnout in Australia. Whereas turnout in most places in the industrialised world is low and declining, Australia has maintained healthy levels (around 82% of voting age population (VAP) and 95% of registered voters) for many years. Compare this to figures of between 50 and 60% VAP at U.S. and British elections. But turnout has remained steady here in Australia where compulsory voting has also been able to effectively close the SES (socio-economic status) gap that operates in most (industrially advanced) voluntary systems. In these settings, failure to vote is generally concentrated among groups already experiencing one or more forms of exclusion or deprivation, namely: the poor, the unemployed, the homeless, indigenous peoples, remote citizens, new citizens, prisoners, the young, and people with low literacy, numeracy and majority language competence. Low and socially-uneven voting levels therefore operate as the functional equivalent of weighted votes for the well off (Lijphart, 1997: 7). This, in turn, undermines the legitimacy of the democracy in question.

Not only has turnout in almost every advanced democracy worldwide has been declining steadily; it has been declining in a socially-uneven fashion so that it is steepest among the young and disadvantaged, signifying the slow
death of democracy and with it, political equality. By preventing decline and ensuring that voting participation is not confined to the more prosperous members of society, compulsory voting serves to protect such important democratic values as representativeness, legitimacy, accountability, political equality and minimisation of elite power. Compulsory voting regimes have a number of other advantages over voluntary regimes: they have better (i.e. more even) income distribution, lower levels of political corruption and higher levels of satisfaction with the way democracy is working (Birch, 2009). Contrary to the claims of critics, all these benefits are achieved fairly cheaply; in fact, the average cost of a formal vote in Australian elections is around 179 cents. Further, as the Australian example clearly demonstrates, the practical difficulties of ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to vote are far from insurmountable.

Are There Better Ways of Stimulating Turnout?

It has been suggested that there are other ways of raising turnout that do not involve compulsion (e.g. Saunders, 2010). The trouble is that none these suggested remedies actually work very well while those that might have a chance of success are generally too difficult to achieve. For example, raising levels of social capital is a nice idea but, even if achievable, would take decades to deliver the desired effects. Engaging ‘particular marginalised groups’ via ‘public education or dialogue’ (Saunders, 2010: 71) is also a worthy idea but it is a strategy that has already been in wide use for many years and in many settings with obviously limited effect. Proportional representation is often touted as the great saviour of low turnout but its capacity to raise turnout is modest compared to that of compulsory voting. While it is true that countries with PR have higher turnout than those which are majoritarian, the gain in switching from a majoritarian to a proportional system has been estimated at variously between 3%, 7% and 12%. By contrast, compulsory voting —when properly administered— can increase turnout by up to 30+ percentage points. In fact, it is the only mechanism that on its own can push turnout into the 90+% (VAP) range. Further, its effect on turnout is immediate (Louth and Hill, 2005).
Compulsory Voting and Informal Voting

One down side of compulsory voting is that compulsory voting regimes tend to have higher than average levels of informal votes. In Australia, the rate of informality hovers between 3 and 5% of total votes cast. Despite strong public approval for compulsory voting, some voting libertarians have claimed that Australia’s high level of informality is an artefact of resentment towards being compelled to vote. On this view, informal voting is both deliberate and a form of ‘protest’ against compulsion.

At first sight, there seems to be a grain of truth to this claim because; first, as mentioned, compulsory voting regimes tend to have high rates of informality; and second, because around 30 per cent of the electorate do object to the compulsion. But it pays to remember that approximately 75 per cent of informal votes in any given election are unintentional, the result of either defective numbering or the use of ticks or crosses instead of numbers (Dario, 2005). Hill and Young (2007) have found that intentional informal voting is related, not to antipathy towards compulsion to vote, but to the interaction between near-universal turnout, complexity of the ballot, and Australia’s high threshold for deeming a vote valid. Significantly, the highest rates of informal voting are recorded in disadvantaged areas with large immigrant populations. Therefore, familiarity with the electoral system and low levels of majority language, literacy and numeracy competence are strongly implicated in the unintentional informal vote. Although protest at other factors present in the political environment (such as the failure of a major party to stand a candidate) may provoke intentional informality the evidence strongly suggests that it too is unrelated to protest against compulsory voting. In fact, explicit objections to compulsory voting figure in less than .14% of the total informal votes cast (Hill, 2011).

Violation of Autonomy?

Critics of compulsory voting sometimes say that it is an unwarranted breach of individual liberty. But it should be remembered that, technically, only registration and attendance are compulsory. Because of the secret ballot, voters cannot be compelled to either mark their ballot or vote formally.
Voters always have the option of returning blank or spoiled ballots. And when compulsory attendance is compared to other problems of collective action solved by mandatory means such as schooling, taxation, military service and even garbage separation, it isn’t that intrusive considering the benefits. Even so, it is still fair to say that compulsory registration and attendance do infringe the liberal-democratic principle of choice but this is only a compelling argument against compulsion if it is granted that choice is more important than a whole range of other important values that compulsion may serve, among them: legitimacy, representativeness, political equality, inclusiveness, minimization of elite power and corruption reduction.

References


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This will address issues relating to the organisation of markets and politics, and their effectiveness and fairness in addressing complex economic and social problems. It will also include an examination of the transformations of political organisation and authority at various scales – global, national, and regional – which have a bearing on the complex multilevel governance of the delivery of public goods and regulations.

The centre has a particular focus on the global and regional challenges arising from the shifting tectonic plates of economic and political power to the Indo-Pacific region.