

Prompt 3: Guarantees of Compulsory Voting

Within a democracy, perhaps one of the most foundational rights one is able to express is that of the right to vote. The right to vote guarantees that an individual's opinions and preferences are not only seen as important but codified into the opinions of the larger democratic state. In this sense, the right to vote is the most fundamental of rights within a democracy. However, it has not always been a right guaranteed to all. Throughout the history of voting, the right to vote has been one that has had to be fought for—expanding from the discourse of white males to that of virtually all types of people.

Where virtually all individuals have received the right to vote, a sizable portion of the population consistently does not vote. For many political scientists, this discrepancy is puzzling and tends to draw a large pool of questions: Why does such a large portion of voters generally abstain from voting? Who tends to vote? Why don't people vote, despite not having the ability to vote centuries ago? Is it important for one to vote? Are there benefits to having high turnout?

One of the most obvious solutions to the dilemma of low voter turnout has been compulsory voting. Compulsory voting is quite what it sounds like—voting that has been made into law through a series of penalties for not voting. Where the traditional view of voting is that of a civic duty, compulsory voting mandates that all citizens vote or be penalized. These “fines and penalties under a system of compulsory voting are a minor matter. The important feature of the system is that voting is regarded as a civic duty and the government does everything to impress upon voters this point of view” (Gosnell 1930). For this reason, punishments are minimal: sometimes they're fines, other times they're a loss of privileges. For good reason, most political scientists can see the benefits offered by a system endorsing compulsory voting.

In order to better understand the potential solution compulsory voting could bring to the problem of non-voters, I'll be exploring the potential consequences, both good and bad, of enforcing compulsory voting. First, I'll explain and weigh the normative rationale for supporting compulsory voting. Second, I'll show, briefly, that compulsory voting increases voter turnout across the board. Third, I'll discuss how the increase in voter turnout will change political representation. And finally, I'll finish by investigating other potential outcomes of making voting compulsory. It is important that I say this about compulsory voting before I progress—it is impossible to get a complete picture about compulsory voting from the empirical examples that exist. As each country varies in terms of class structure, voting accessibility, non-voting penalty and domestic culture, it is difficult to predict the impact that the enforcement of compulsory voting brings. Results will inherently vary between countries. That disclosure aside, there is still much to be said about the potential benefits and disadvantages that compulsory voting can bring.

Why don't we vote?

In understanding how the issue of non-voting can be solved, it is important to understand the most prominent reasons as to why individuals don't vote. According to Ipsos Public Affairs Study conducted in 2012, there are four over-arching reasons as to why individuals tend not to vote:

1. *Institutional Barriers*: The first and most prominent reason why individuals don't vote is largely due to institutional barriers. Either individuals are intimidated by the institutional framework or are too busy to participate. The individuals in this group comprise 47% of the non-voting population

2. *Pessimism*: The second reason individuals don't vote is largely because these individuals are pessimistic about the country's future. The individuals in this group comprise 27% of the non-voting population
3. *Apathy*: The third reason individuals don't vote is predominantly because they, as an individual, are largely apathetic. The individuals in this group comprise 16% of the non-voting population
4. *Religion*: The fourth and final reason abstain from the voting process is largely because they have a religious imperative not to. The individuals in this group comprise 11% of the non-voting population ¹ (Shearer 2012)

Knowing the general composition of the individuals in the category of “non-voter” we can now move forward to larger questions relevant to compulsory voting.

Should one be forced to vote?

Voting is perhaps the most important form of civic engagement expressed in modern day democracies. From a young age, individuals within most democratic societies are made to feel compelled to vote. In order to encourage optimism at a young age, the individual is told that their individual vote matters—which it does immensely—irrespective of larger societal trends. And if all individuals vote, then society can have an accurate representation of individual opinions and policy preferences. What results from having all voices measured, hypothetically, is a government that best represents its society. This is often the ideal.

Yet, it is far from the reality of the situation—a large percent of voters don't vote. These voters end up falling into one of the four categories of non-voting: institutional barriers, pessi-

¹ For the sake of simplicity in concept, the original six categories were condensed to four.

mism, apathy and religion. And even if an individual does muster the will to vote, they might encounter various issues actually representing their vote. Most frustratingly, most individuals voting simply lack the education and interest in order to voter along policy lines; instead, they vote in accordance with party, ideology, or minimal information. Ultimately, through a bastardization of intent and desire, what results is a large incongruence between a people with actual preferences and a government political action.

Compulsory voting, while not addressing all of these issues, attempts to correct the issue posed by voters simply not voting. As some political theorists and scientists would argue, the right to vote is not only a privilege that all citizens should take advantage of but a service demanded by the government of the people in tacit accordance with the societies social contract. In essence, compulsory voting adds institutional backing to something that is considered a moral imperative—the chief responsibility society demands from the individual.

Where some see voting as an essential civic duty, others see voting as something that should be limited to only those who are interested in voting. Coercing all individuals to vote, according to these individuals, would constitute a certain form of institutional control—one that would suppress liberty. In democratic systems where individuals have no alternative and cannot select “no opinion” it coerces an individual into choosing a side and this, admittedly, is problematic. Moreover, as Annabelle Lever explains, “the dual character of democratic politics means that voting is not morally superior to not-voting, in and of itself. The propensity to vote, like the right to vote, implies no special virtue, insight or knowledge” (2008). Thus, in a voting system where all demographic categories are maintained according to certain standards of representation, perhaps it isn’t all that important to vote?

Though, I see little reason as to why coerced voting would be any more different than other mandatory forms of institutional participation. In truth, voting is not dissimilar to getting ones drivers license from DMV or paying taxes—there just are certain things that one must do in order to be considered a citizen in society. Additionally, the ability to vote is a privilege that many individuals around the globe do not share. To take no advantage of the privileges they have is comparatively arrogant. In regards to the problems of forcing a vote, all one would need to do is add a “no opinion” or “decline to state” option for all potential options; thus, individuals who do not wish to vote or contribute don’t feel coerced to choose between candidates that they don’t care to learn about.

Increased Voter Turnout

The most direct and empirically proven consequence of compulsory voting is that there is an increase in voter turnout. Cross-national comparisons show that increases with some level of compulsory voting tend to range between 6-7%. (IDEA 1997) In essence, states that have compulsory voting, overall, have increased levels of voter participation across the board. The same phenomenon has been seen in other multi-variable studies. (Lijphart 1997; Powell 1981; Jackman 1987; Jackman and Miller 1995; Franklin 1999)

By comparison, intra-national analyses show relatively dramatic increases in numbers. (Jackman 2001) This points toward the fact that the increases in the amount of people voting is a function of the countries specific voting circumstances. This isn’t necessarily problematic; it just emphasizes that the passage of compulsory voting law does not automatically increase voter participation by a set percentage. Instead, it highlights that different societies are dynamic, with

changes largely dependent on class structure, voting accessibility, non-voting penalty, and domestic culture

Changing Democratic Representation

Ultimately, enforcing compulsory voting creates a more representative and, consequently, liberal voting population. In mandating that virtually all individuals within a country be required to vote, the voting distribution between social classes is relatively normalized (Jackman 2001; Lijphart 1997). Now, the staggering 47% of voters who faced institutional obstacles no longer have “excuses” for low turnout.² For when the government mandates that voting is necessary, government tends to “do their part” and reduces some of the institutional barriers that often cause trouble voting, such as policy clarity and voting accessibility. Moreover, enforcing a financial burden disproportionately encourages individuals of a lower socioeconomic status to vote. (Lijphart 1997) As Jackman writes, “penalties offset the costs of electoral participation, effectively attaching a cost to not turning out and thereby overcoming the fact that turnout is a low benefit activity for many citizens” (2001).

The normalization of socioeconomic classes leads to a relative “disappearance” in socioeconomic participation, resulting in increased support for the political left. (Pacek and Radcliff 1995; Nagel 1988; McAllister and Mughan 1986) One of the most substantive consequences is that the enforcement of compulsory voting, “shifts the distribution of voters’ policy preferences further to the left than would otherwise result, pulling party competition and policy in that direction also” (Jackman 2001). As a consequence, the median voter would become increasingly liberal, drawing both political parties more toward the political left. Ultimately, though, the primary

² I say “excuses” because voters who face institutional difficulty simply in *voting* are not to blame for their inability to vote. Often these individuals work multiple jobs or know very little about the political system, resulting in their abstention from voting.

result of enforcing compulsory voting through its system of penalties is the achievement of a much larger, accurate, and leftist voter representation.

When stratifying on age and education levels before and after the imposition of compulsory voting, there are disproportionate effects. (Quintelier, Hooghe and Marien 2011) Compulsory voting tends to increase the age gap between voters and non-voters—when voting is made compulsory, older individuals tend to vote substantially more than younger voters. With education, there is no noticeable change, suggesting that compulsory voting does little to encourage less educated voters to vote more. Both of these reasons suggest that, although compulsory voting tends to better represent individuals across a varied socioeconomic stratum, it still doesn't fully capture the votes and perspectives of younger and less-educated citizens.

There is one substantial downside to enforcing compulsory voting—the newly converted voters are substantially more subject to reliance on heuristic usage. Within the category of non-voters, there are four predominant reasons individuals don't vote: institutional barriers, pessimism, apathy and religion. In particular, individuals who are pessimistic and apathetic are more inclined than others who have been coerced to vote to be *lazy* in the voting process. This tangible laziness causes a reliance on heuristics—mental shortcuts made for ease of decision-making. (Mackerras and McAllister 1996) And where heuristics were created for survivalist, rapid-fire decision making, they can be problematic in influencing how voters vote. For instance, putting the candidates in a certain order can cause issues with the anchoring heuristic—candidates that are a higher up will likely tend to be cognitively preferred for no *logical* reason.

Additionally, these newfound voters often encounter difficulties in voting. In a system that is subject to compulsory voting, there tends to be a higher rate of invalid and “donkey ballots” than expected. (Tingsten 1937)

Invalid ballots are ballots where a voter's preference for a certain voting issue cannot be identified; as a consequence, these ballots are often thrown out. Removing these ballots can obviously cause a deal of controversy and thoughts of government manipulation; "The stated objective of this procedure is to avoid antidemocratic and illegal voting behavior" (Aldashev and Mastrobuoni 2010). Yet, perceived controversy aside, Aldashev and Mastrobuoni managed to find that there exists a high correlation between the closeness of the electoral race and the fraction of invalid ballots; the more invalid ballots, the closer the race. Thus, in some ways, the influx of non-voters, causing an increase in invalid ballots, could be responsible for creating a much closer election than previously predicted.

Donkey ballots are a more obvious and problematic form of voting difficulty. Donkey ballots are, essentially, ballots that have been cast that don't arguably show any policy preference; rather, the ballot mimics certain ballot-established hierarchies. In being forced to vote, when these citizens arrive at the polls, they could misinterpret or fail to understand how to vote. Yet, knowing they have to vote, they choose the most obvious lineup—either out of carelessness or misunderstanding. For instance, individuals may vote for the first candidate shown on the ballot, simply because that individual was first. Or, in elections that use candidate rankings, they could follow established lineup meant as an example rather than voting with their aligned preferences. Ultimately, what this shows is that non-voters could pose even more difficulty, as being coerced to vote and show a preference could ultimately lead them, whether by apathy or misunderstanding, to vote in a way that should conceivably be discounted.

Other Perceived Consequences

Everything that has been discussed before is relatively well supported by the literature on compulsory voting. In summary that is: compulsory voting increases voters and these voters tend to be older and of a lower social class, these voters are also more likely support the political left, and are more subject to reliance on heuristics than most “regular” voters. These next two potential consequences cover potential areas for further research; the slight research and theory behind each one does, however suggest there are correlations.

Improving Campaign Quality

An interesting potential consequence of establishing compulsory voting is that campaigns could considerably improve immensely in quality. (Lijphart 1997) Many political campaigns spend a lot of political and economic resources to “get out the vote”. Yet, in making voting compulsory there is no need to get out the vote—it is already mandatory or, at least, highly recommended that an individual vote in the current election. All focus of the campaign would be able to go strictly toward travel appearances and advertising. In diverting focus away from the baser goal of getting the population to vote, more effort is put into the campaign, platforms, appearances and advertisement arguably resulting in a higher quality campaign simply as a consequence of having more resources to distribute.

Improving Political Cognitive Engagement

Another potential consequence of the establishment of compulsory voting is, put simply, that it could improve cognitive engagement within the political realm from the voting population. Gordon and Segura observed a small, yet statistically significant improvement in political class and overall civic awareness. (1997) This could be true for several reasons:

First, it could be the direct consequence of government changes to improve the accessibility and clarity of, for instance, the candidates' platforms and general bills and proposals. To show an example, if there ever was a system that established the voting day as one of their national holidays, they could spend substantial resources on that day ensuring that individuals are the most knowledgeable about the candidates and proposals they intend to vote for.

Second, with the messages less diluted by other distractions, such as seen above with the necessary "get out to vote" campaigns, it is very much a possibility that voters end up feeling more comfortable and knowledgeable with information as a direct consequence of higher per voter spending.

Third, there exists a certain subset of voters who do not vote unless they feel comfortable in knowing that they voted using their best understandings of the positions. When these individuals fall into the non-voter category in a system where voting is compulsory, they are compelled to better understand information and consequently decide how they feel about this information. Without this administrative "push" they wouldn't feel the need nor spend the time to be a competent voter.

Conclusion

Compulsory voting is perhaps one of the most prominent of the many present solutions to the issue of low voter turnout. At the (potential) suppression of certain liberties, compulsory increases voter turnout that helps to level the socioeconomic political representation. This balance often moves the median further to left, bringing both parties with it. Yet, these benefits come at the price of increasing problems in the act of voting, namely non-voters suffer comparatively increased reliance on heuristics and a tendency to submit invalid/donkey ballots. And while com-

pulsory voting normalizes socioeconomic representation, it experiences no change in education distribution and a disproportionately high change in age distribution. Ultimately, though, these consequences are less important than the ultimate normative question of whether or not it is essential to coerce all individuals to vote so as to keep a democratic society. As Annabelle Lever helps me conclude, “It is the great merit of arguments for compulsory voting that they force us to confront the complexities and peculiarities of democratic politics” (2008).

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