

Do Symbolic Penalties Work?

Evidence from Compulsory Voting Laws in Argentina

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Abstract

Do symbolic penalties work? This paper provides causal evidence that even minimal, unenforced legal sanctions can influence civic behavior. I study a 2012 reform in Argentina that introduced optional voting for 16- to 17-year-olds, while voting from age 18 remained compulsory and formally subject to a small, unindexed fine of 50 pesos. Using a regression discontinuity design and administrative data from 15 national elections between 2015 and 2023, I find that turnout increases by about 20 percentage points at age 18, despite negligible enforcement. Complementary evidence from national survey data suggests this effect reflects expressive compliance: symbolic penalties act as normative signals, activating a sense of civic duty rather than deterring through material sanctions. The response is especially pronounced among lower-income and lower-education youth. These findings offer rare causal evidence that symbolic penalties can shape civic behavior by appealing to internalized civic norms rather than fear of punishment.

JEL Classification: D72, C31, K10, Z13, P16.

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1 Introduction

Can a five-cent fine—almost never enforced—really drive millions to the polls? In Argentinas 2023 presidential election, almost 80% of voters participated (Cámara Nacional Electoral, 2023), despite the fact that the penalty for abstention—a 50-peso fine worth approximately five U.S. cents—is negligible and rarely collected. This striking level of compliance raises a broader question about the power of law: can legal obligations meaningfully shape behavior even when enforcement is symbolic or effectively absent?

Compulsory voting laws, adopted in roughly a quarter of democracies (Birch, 2016), aim to increase turnout by establishing a legal duty to vote and reducing voting inequality. The logic is both instrumental and normative: such laws raise the cost of abstention while reinforcing the norm that voting is a civic responsibility essential to democratic legitimacy (Fowler, 2013; Singh, 2021). In most cases, this obligation is backed by at least modest sanctions. Argentina, however, offers a notable exception: the obligation is formal and widely understood, but the penalties are minimal, enforcement is rare, and yet compliance remains high.

This setting offers a test of whether the existence of a formal, codified penalty—even if trivial and rarely enforced—can meaningfully influence behavior. From an instrumental perspective, individuals comply because the law raises the costs of noncompliance through sanctions. From an expressive perspective, by contrast, individuals comply because the law signals what behavior is expected and reinforces shared norms (Cooter, 1998; McAdams, 2000; Sunstein, 1996). In this view, it is not the severity of the sanction that matters, but the existence of a formal legal obligation. I refer to such cases as involving symbolic penalties: sanctions that are codified in law but carry little or no practical consequence. Symbolic penalties may still shape behavior by affirming what is socially expected, marking the boundary between compliance and violation, and reinforcing the behaviors importance within the political community. The laws effectiveness, then, may lie not in the threat it poses, but in the meaning it conveys.

Empirically, identifying the effect of legal obligation independent of enforcement remains challenging. In most countries, compulsory voting laws are accompanied by at least some credible sanctions—fines, administrative restrictions, or service barriers—making it difficult to disentangle civic duty from deterrence. Even modest sanctions, as in Brazil and Peru, have been shown to affect turnout at enforcement-linked thresholds (Feierherd *et al.*, 2022; Gonzales *et al.*, 2022). This paper addresses that challenge by leveraging Argentina as a

setting where obligation is highly salient but enforcement is minimal to the point of being symbolic.

Argentinas electoral system formalizes this weakly enforced obligation. Compulsory voting applies to citizens aged 18 to 70 and establishes sanctions for abstention, including a 50-peso fine and potential administrative restrictions. In practice, however, enforcement is almost nonexistent: fewer than 1% of abstainers pay the fine, bureaucratic penalties are inconsistently applied, and the infraction registry operates passively. Despite this, the obligation remains highly salient, sustained by electoral norms, public messaging, and longstanding institutional practice.

To study this puzzle, I exploit a 2012 legal reform that created a sharp age-based discontinuity in voting rules: while voting remained mandatory for those aged 18 and older, it became optional for 16- and 17-year-olds. This sharp cutoff enables a regression discontinuity (RD) design comparing turnout just below and just above the age-18 threshold, where individuals are otherwise similar in institutional exposure and demographics. Because the only difference between the two groups is whether voting is legally compulsory, the treatment isolates the effect of obligation itself. Importantly, no other major legal or institutional changes occur precisely at age 18 that would plausibly confound turnout behavior.

Using administrative voter records from 15 national elections between 2015 and 2023, I estimate the causal impact of legal obligation on turnout. The results show that becoming subject to mandatory voting at age 18 increases turnout by approximately 20 percentage points, a large and robust effect that holds across electoral cycles. The effect is consistent across gender and is especially pronounced among lower-income and lower-education groups. These findings suggest that even symbolic legal obligations, decoupled from credible enforcement, can significantly shape political behavior.

To explain the strong behavioral response to this symbolic penalty, I consider two candidate mechanisms. The first is expressive compliance: individuals vote not because they expect to be punished, but because the law signals that participation is a civic obligation. In this framework, legal mandates influence behavior by activating internalized norms and clarifying what is socially expected (Funk, 2007; Linos and Twist, 2016; McAdams, 2000). The second is precautionary compliance, where people act not out of duty, but out of uncertainty, overestimating enforcement or seeking to avoid even minor bureaucratic hassle (Nathan *et al.*, 2025). I also rule out civic maturation, in which turnout increases naturally with age due to growing political interest or institutional trust (Holbein and Rangel, 2020; Singh, 2021),

independent of the voting law.

I assess the plausibility of each explanation using nationally representative survey data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). The results show that turnout intention remains high even among respondents who are confident that sanctions are not enforced. In addition, intention to vote is substantially more associated with civic attitudes, such as support for democracy and political interest, than beliefs about enforcement. While some precautionary behavior cannot be entirely ruled out and may operate at the margins, the evidence suggests that it is not the threat of punishment that drives participation. Rather, the findings point toward an expressive compliance mechanism: symbolic legal obligations appear to sustain political participation by activating internalized civic norms, not by deterring noncompliance through fear of punishment.

This paper advances the literature on compulsory voting by providing causal evidence that legal obligation - decoupled from credible enforcement - can significantly increase voter turnout. While prior research shows that CV laws boost participation, these effects are generally observed in settings where sanctions are meaningful and enforced (Kostelka *et al.*, 2024; Singh, 2019). Even regression discontinuity studies in Brazil and Peru exploit thresholds linked to financial or administrative penalties (Feierherd *et al.*, 2022; Gonzales *et al.*, 2022), making it difficult to separate the effect of obligation from deterrence. Argentina offers a rare opportunity to isolate the behavioral effect of obligation alone. This paper exploits a sharp legal discontinuity at age 18—previously unused in the Argentine context—where voting becomes compulsory but enforcement remains minimal. Crucially, this threshold coincides with a formative period in political socialization, when civic norms and institutional signals are particularly influential (Galiani *et al.*, 2011; Holbein and Rangel, 2020; Niemi and Sobieszek, 1977; Searing *et al.*, 1973). The findings show that acquiring the obligation increases turnout by about 20 percentage points, providing rare causal evidence that symbolic legal mandates can shape political behavior during a critical stage of civic development.

Second, this paper contributes to research on the expressive function of law. A long-standing theoretical tradition argues that legal rules can shape behavior by clarifying social expectations and reinforcing civic norms, even when enforcement is weak (Cooter, 1998; McAdams, 2000; Sunstein, 1996). Yet empirical evidence for this mechanism has been scarce. Prior studies, such as Funk (2007), document that turnout declines after the repeal of compulsory voting laws with low enforcement, but rely on observational correlations without clear causal identification. By exploiting a sharp institutional discontinuity in a weak-enforcement

regime, this paper provides evidence that formal legal obligations can increase civic participation even when sanctions are negligible. Survey-based patterns suggest that expressive compliance may be the dominant mechanism, as individuals appear more motivated by civic norms than by fear of sanction. These findings offer new empirical support for the expressive function of law and suggest that symbolic mandates, when embedded in supportive institutional environments, can serve as effective tools for civic mobilization.

Third, this paper contributes to debates on voting inequality. A large literature finds that compulsory voting, when meaningfully enforced, tends to reduce disparities in participation by income and education, increasing representation of historically underrepresented groups (Dassonneville *et al.*, 2023; Lijphart, 1997). However, recent evidence from Brazil shows that compliance can skew toward higher-income voters when linked to access to public services (Cepaluni and Hidalgo, 2016), raising concerns about whether compulsory voting without credible sanctions can achieve similar equalizing effects. This paper provides new evidence in favor of the equalizing view: even when enforcement is minimal, symbolic compulsory voting can disproportionately mobilize lower-income and lower-education voters. These findings suggest that the distributive benefits of compulsory voting may depend less on strict enforcement than on the presence of formal legal obligations embedded in supportive civic environments.

Beyond these contributions, the findings have important implications for the design of civic institutions. In low-capacity democracies, where sustained enforcement is costly or politically sensitive, codified symbolic mandates may offer a scalable alternative for encouraging civic engagement. By embedding civic expectations into visible legal structures—even when sanctions are minimal—states can activate behavioral norms at relatively low cost. The Argentine case suggests that the effectiveness of symbolic mandates depends not on coercive power, but on their ability to reinforce widely shared understandings of civic duty. At the same time, the success of symbolic mandates depends on specific institutional and social conditions. These findings therefore highlight both the potential and the limits of expressive legal design: symbolic obligations can shape civic behavior, but only when embedded within supportive institutional environments.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on compulsory voting and behavioral mechanisms underlying legal compliance. Section 3 describes Argentina's institutional setting, highlighting the combination of symbolic sanctions and stable civic infrastructure. Section 4 presents the data sources, including administrative

voting records and nationally representative surveys. Section 5 outlines the identification strategy, leveraging a regression discontinuity design around the age-18 threshold to identify the causal effect of legal obligation. Section 6 reports the main results, documenting a large and robust increase in turnout at the onset of mandatory voting. Section 7 examines potential mechanisms, testing whether the observed effects are better explained by deterrence, civic maturation, or expressive compliance. Section 8 discusses the broader theoretical and policy implications of symbolic legal design in shaping civic behavior and section 9 concludes.

2 Literature Review

Compulsory voting (CV) transforms electoral participation from a voluntary act into a legal obligation. Across institutional contexts, its rationale is typically dual: to raise overall turnout and to reduce socioeconomic disparities in participation. A robust empirical record supports the first of these aims. Cross-national studies have long documented higher participation rates in countries with CV laws (Birch, 2016; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998), and more recent quasi-experimental designs offer causal evidence. Exploiting age-based voting thresholds and variation in sanction regimes, studies in Brazil and Peru show that CV increases turnout by 10–25 percentage points, depending on the credibility of enforcement and the electoral setting (Feierherd *et al.*, 2022; Gonzales *et al.*, 2022; Jaitman, 2013). A global analysis by Kostelka *et al.* (2024) finds that only enforced CV regimes have succeeded in slowing or reversing the long-term decline in turnout across democracies.

A second strand of research examines CVs impact on voting inequality. Lijphart (1997) famously argued that CV could equalize participation by mobilizing less-educated and lower-income voters. This prediction has received empirical support in high-enforcement settings such as Australia, Belgium, and Venezuela (Carey and Horiuchi, 2017; Dassonneville *et al.*, 2023). However, the equalizing effects of CV are not uniform across contexts. In Brazil, for instance, enforcement tied to access to public services has disproportionately increased participation among middle- and upper-income groups (Cepaluni and Hidalgo, 2016). Other evidence suggests that even under enforced CV, institutional frictions such as voter ID requirements can depress turnout among low-income voters (Fujiwara, 2015). These findings point to the importance of examining how institutional design mediates the effects of compulsory voting on electoral participation.

Research has also turned to CVs downstream consequences for civic engagement and

political attitudes. Some studies suggest that early exposure to a voting obligation fosters political interest, internal efficacy, or democratic attachment (Singh, 2021), while others find more limited effects on political knowledge or sophistication (Bechtel *et al.*, 2018; Hoffman *et al.*, 2017). A recent review concludes that while CV promotes representational equity with some consistency, its effects on civic learning and attitudinal change are more mixed (Kostelka *et al.*, 2024).

Notably, much of this literature focuses on contexts where legal obligations are backed by at least moderate enforcement. Less is known about whether codified obligation can influence behavior when sanctions are minimal or purely symbolic. Yet some evidence suggests that compliance may persist even when material deterrence is weak. In Switzerland, turnout declined following the repeal of a compulsory voting law that had long gone unenforced (Funk, 2007), raising broader questions about why individuals comply with legal mandates in the absence of credible sanctions.

Theories of legal compliance offer two distinct perspectives. An instrumental view holds that individuals comply to avoid material costs, such as fines, legal penalties, or bureaucratic sanctions. From this perspective, laws alter behavior by shifting the incentives associated with compliance versus noncompliance. An expressive view, by contrast, emphasizes that laws may also influence behavior by signaling societal expectations. In this framework, individuals comply not necessarily out of fear, but because the law communicates what society considers appropriate. Compliance may arise from the internalization of civic norms, the desire to act consistently with social expectations, or the belief that others will also comply (McAdams, 2000; Sunstein, 1996).

Building on this theoretical foundation, Funk (2007) introduces the concept of expressive compliance into the empirical study of voting behavior. She defines expressive compliance as a behavioral response to legal obligation rooted in the normative meaning conveyed by the law, rather than in the threat of enforcement. Analyzing turnout across Swiss cantons, Funk finds that participation declined significantly after symbolic CV laws were repealed—even though enforcement had been negligible for decades. These findings suggest that the existence of a legal obligation alone can sustain civic behavior by affirming collective expectations. However, Funks analysis relies on observational cross-cantonal comparisons, raising concerns about potential confounding by unobserved differences in civic culture or institutional strength. While her evidence is consistent with expressive compliance, causal identification remains limited.

The broader logic of expressive compliance has received support across other policy do-

mains. Linos and Twist (2016) show that the legal recognition of same-sex relationships shifts individuals perceptions of prevailing social norms, even among those not directly affected by the legal change. In experimental settings, simply informing individuals about legal change leads to updates in beliefs about societal approval. Acemoglu and Jackson (2017) formally model how even unenforced laws can influence behavior by shaping expectations about others likely actions. Levi *et al.* (2009) emphasize that individuals often comply with legal obligations not solely out of self-interest, but because they perceive the law as legitimate and normatively binding. Collectively, this literature suggests that laws—particularly visible and codified ones—may function as normative signals that shape civic behavior even in the absence of strong material incentives.

This paper builds on these insights by providing rare causal evidence that symbolic compulsory voting laws, where sanctions are effectively absent, can activate civic norms and meaningfully increase democratic participation. In doing so, it bridges theoretical accounts of expressive compliance with empirical questions about the behavioral effects of symbolic legal design.

3 Institutional Setting

Argentina has maintained a system of compulsory voting (CV) for over a century, with the obligation formally codified in both electoral law and the national constitution. The system was first established in 1912 with the passage of the Sáenz Peña Law, which introduced secret, universal, and mandatory suffrage for men. Over the 20th century, the franchise expanded—most notably in 1947 with the extension of voting rights to women—while compulsory participation remained a consistent feature of electoral governance, despite periodic interruptions under military rule. Following the restoration of democracy in 1983, the obligation to vote was reinstated and subsequently elevated to constitutional status through the 1994 reform. Article 37 of the Argentine Constitution affirms that the suffrage is universal, equal, secret, and obligatory, establishing voting as both a right and a civic duty.

Today, the legal mandate applies to all Argentine citizens between the ages of 18 and 70. Those over 70 are exempt from the obligation, though they retain the right to vote. A 2012 reform (Law 26.774) extended voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds on a voluntary basis. These clearly defined age thresholds standardize expectations around participation and create visible points where legal obligation begins and ends—though enforcement remains weak, as

discussed below.

To implement the mandate, Argentinas electoral system includes institutional features that reduce logistical barriers to participation. All eligible citizens are automatically registered to vote, and polling places—typically schools—are assigned to be within proximity of a voters residence. Elections are held every two years on Sundays, and the state provides broad logistical support: polling stations are widely distributed, public transportation is free on election day, and employers are required to provide time off for voting during the workday. Electoral weekends are also governed by special regulations intended to promote neutrality and public order, including bans on alcohol sales and public events. The electoral calendar includes three stages: the Primarias Abiertas, Simultáneas y Obligatorias (PASO), or open, simultaneous, and mandatory primaries; the general election; and, if necessary, a runoff (balotaje).

The legal framework includes both monetary and administrative sanctions for non-compliance. According to Article 125 of the Electoral Code, citizens who fail to vote without justification are entered into the Registro de Infractores al Deber de Votar (Register of Offenders) and fined. The base fine, set at 50 pesos in 2012, initially equaled roughly 2.5 U.S. dollars but has since declined in real value to just a few cents. The penalty increases with repeated violations, up to 500 pesos. In addition, individuals who do not regularize their infraction, by either paying the fine or submitting justification for their absence, are formally restricted for one year from conducting official transactions such as renewing a passport or national identification card, and are prohibited from holding public office for three years. On paper, this framework constitutes a functioning enforcement regime.

In practice, however, enforcement is minimal. The Registro de Infractores operates passively: individuals are not notified of their listing, and electoral authorities do not initiate collections or send reminders. Citizens must proactively check their status online and take steps to resolve any infractions. There is no centralized or automated enforcement mechanism, and coordination among agencies responsible for applying sanctions is limited.

Administrative data reflect the limited reach of these penalties. In the most recent national election, approximately 25% of registered voters abstained. Of these, fewer than 3% took any steps to regularize their status: around 2.5% submitted justification for their absence, and fewer than 0.5% paid the fine. Across all 24 provinces, fine payment rates did not exceed 1%. According to reporting from La Nación (La Nación, 2023), one of Argentinas major news outlets, government agencies responsible for enforcing administrative penalties

rarely consult the infraction registry, and citizens are routinely able to renew official documents or assume public office despite being formally listed as non-compliant.

Despite minimal enforcement, the obligation to vote remains publicly visible. Electoral authorities and civic education materials consistently present voting as a duty, and participation is framed as a core component of citizenship. This messaging persists within an institutional setting shaped by recurring interruptions of democratic rule: during the 20th century, Argentina experienced multiple breakdowns of constitutional government, including extended periods of military control. In this context, the combination of a formal legal mandate and limited enforcement is a durable feature of the electoral system rather than a transitory or unintended gap.

This institutional configuration offers a valuable opportunity to study expressive compliance—legal adherence driven by norms rather than material sanctions. Argentinas regime combines strong symbolic signaling, standardized participation thresholds, and broad civic infrastructure, while placing the responsibility for compliance primarily on individuals. Where participation occurs, it is unlikely to be driven by deterrence. Instead, it reflects non-material mechanisms such as civic identity, political socialization, or the internalization of legal norms. As such, the Argentine case provides a rare empirical window into how law can shape behavior through symbolic rather than coercive means.

4 Data

This paper draws on administrative records from Argentinas electoral system, specifically the national electoral roll and the infraction registry. These individual-level datasets—maintained by electoral authorities—include information on registration, turnout, and formal justifications for non-voting across national elections from 2015 to 2023.

The electoral roll¹ includes basic demographic and geographic information, such as year of birth, electoral district, and polling place. The infraction registry² records whether individuals voted in a given election and, if not, whether their absence was formally justified.

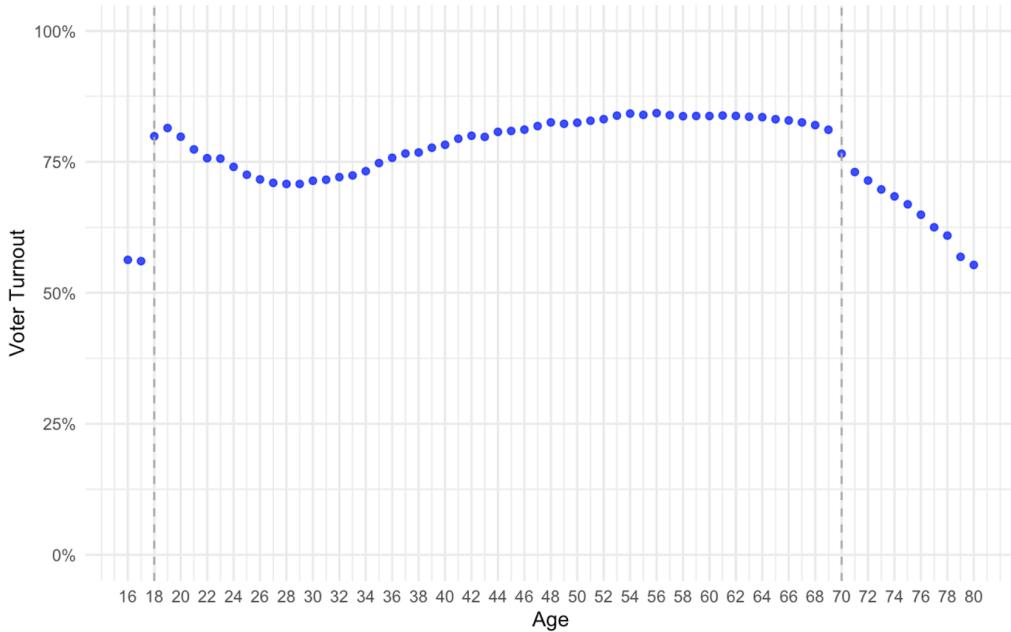
¹ Available at <https://www.padron.gob.ar/>, the national electoral roll (*padrón electoral*) allows citizens to verify their registration status, assigned polling place, and basic demographic details such as name, year of birth, and electoral district. It is maintained by the Cámara Nacional Electoral.

² Accessible at <https://infractores.padron.gob.ar/>, the infraction registry (*Registro de Infractores al Deber de Votar*) records whether individuals voted in each national election, whether their absence was formally justified, and whether a fine applies. The site enables citizens to check their infraction status and, if applicable, download or pay fines online.

Together, these sources enable direct measurement of compliance under a system where voting is legally mandatory but weakly enforced in practice.

Figure 1 presents average voter turnout by age in the City of Buenos Aires, based on official data from the 2019 national elections. The plot reveals two sharp transitions in participation: a marked increase at age 18, where compulsory voting begins, and a decline after age 70, when the obligation ends. This nonparametric pattern motivates the regression discontinuity design that follows, which compares turnout just below and just above the age-18 threshold.

Figure 1: Voter Turnout by Age in the City of Buenos Aires



Notes: Average voter turnout by age, based on official data from the 2019 national elections. Turnout rates are calculated using individual-level records from the Cámara Nacional Electoral.

To study voting behavior around the threshold of compulsory voting, I construct a balanced panel of 20,020 individuals born between 1998 and 2004 and residing in the City of Buenos Aires. This age cohort spans the legal eligibility threshold at age 18, enabling a sharp comparison of behavior just before and just after voting becomes compulsory. Each individual is observed for an average of eight elections (up to twelve), resulting in a high-frequency dataset on electoral participation.

Table 1 shows that individuals on either side of the age-18 threshold are statistically similar across key demographic and socioeconomic variables. This balance supports a central assumption of the research design: near the threshold, individuals are comparable in

Table 1: Descriptive Covariates Around the Age-18 Threshold

Variable	Full Sample	<18	≥ 18	Diff.	p-value
Female (%)	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.00	0.828
Lives in low-SES neighborhood (%)	0.45	0.45	0.45	0.00	0.230
Lives in high-SES neighborhood (%)	0.24	0.24	0.24	0.00	0.554
Mean age	18.10	17.09	19.06	-1.97	0.000***
Justified Absence (%)	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.000***
Avg. elections observed	8.10	2.26	6.08	0.19	0.000***
Observations	20,020	20,020	20,020		

Notes: The table presents descriptive statistics for the full sample and separately for individuals just below and above the age-18 voting eligibility threshold. The Diff. column shows the discontinuity at age 18, with associated p-values from statistical tests. Significance: *** $p < 0.01$.

observable traits, allowing for credible comparisons of voting behavior.

While the administrative data offer high-frequency observations of participation and justification, they do not include individual-level information on fine payment. Aggregate evidence suggests that fewer than 0.5% of abstainers pay a fine to regularize their status. Most take no formal action, and—as the data show—only a small share justify their absence. For analytical purposes, I treat individuals as compliant if they either vote or formally justify their absence; all others are coded as noncompliant.³

To explore potential mechanisms behind compliance—such as civic duty, perceived enforcement, or expressive motivation—I supplement the administrative data with survey responses from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP).⁴ These surveys include self-reported information on civic attitudes and beliefs about electoral institutions. While not linked to the administrative sample, they provide suggestive evidence about the behavioral drivers of compliance in a weakly enforced regime. Descriptive statistics by age group are presented in Appendix Table A2, which confirms balance in key variables around the voting eligibility threshold.

³Individual-level records were retrieved through automated queries to Argentinas electoral roll and infraction registry websites (<https://www.padron.gob.ar/> and <https://infractores.padron.gob.ar/>). While the data are publicly visible, the platforms do not offer downloadable datasets or APIs. Due to format and licensing limitations, the raw dataset cannot be shared. Replication materials based on synthetic data and full code will be made available upon request.

⁴For more information on the LAPOP surveys, see <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

5 Identification Strategy

To estimate the causal effect of legal obligation on voter turnout, I exploit a sharp age-based discontinuity in Argentinas compulsory voting law. Since 2012, voting has been mandatory for citizens aged 18 and older, while those aged 16 and 17 may vote voluntarily. This institutional rule creates a discontinuous change in legal status at age 18, which serves as a quasi-experimental cutoff for identifying the behavioral impact of compulsory voting.

I implement a sharp regression discontinuity (RD) design centered on the age-18 threshold. The key identifying assumption is that individuals born just before and just after the cutoff are, on average, comparable in both observed and unobserved characteristics. Because birth dates are fixed, not manipulable, and effectively random near the cutoff, legal voting status can be treated as exogenous within a narrow window around the threshold.

The empirical model is specified as:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta \cdot \text{Mandatory}_i + f(\text{Age}_i) + \epsilon_i$$

where Y_i is a binary indicator equal to 1 if individual i voted, Mandatory_i is a treatment indicator equal to 1 if the individual was legally required to vote (i.e., aged 18 or older on election day), and $f(\text{Age}_i)$ is a flexible function of age to control for smooth trends around the threshold.

Because enforcement of the law is minimal—penalties are rarely applied and widely understood to be symbolic—this design isolates the effect of legal obligation itself on electoral behavior. In this setting, any behavioral change at the threshold can be attributed to the presence of the law, rather than to deterrence.

Importantly, the age-18 threshold does not coincide with other institutional or behavioral transitions that would plausibly affect turnout. Although 18 marks legal adulthood in symbolic terms, it is not associated with abrupt changes in educational status, labor market access, or residential autonomy. Youths may begin working before 18, tend to remain in the parental household into their 20s, and typically experience educational transitions gradually. While individuals become legally eligible to purchase alcohol, tobacco, or property at 18, these rights are unlikely to influence electoral participation. Survey evidence shows no discontinuities in political interest, internal efficacy, or democratic support at the threshold. Placebo RD tests centered at ages 17 and 19 yield null effects, and broader indicators—such as school enrollment, employment, and household structure—evolve smoothly with age. Fig-

ures 4 and A4 present these trends. The density of the running variable is also continuous at the cutoff (Figure A2), and treatment effects are robust to a wide range of bandwidth choices (Figure A1). Together, these checks strengthen the case that the observed turnout jump at age 18 is driven by the introduction of legal obligation, not by coincident life-cycle events.

6 Results

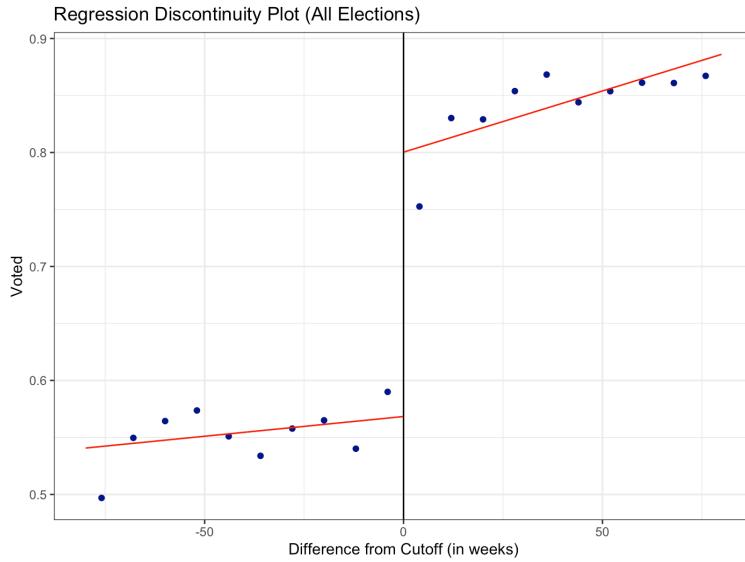
This section presents the core empirical finding: a sharp and discontinuous increase in voter turnout at the age-18 threshold, where compulsory voting legally begins. The institutional cutoff provides a credible counterfactual: individuals just below age 18, who may vote voluntarily, are otherwise highly comparable to those just above 18, who face a legal obligation to participate. I exploit this discontinuity using a sharp regression discontinuity (RD) design to estimate the causal effect of compulsory voting on electoral participation in a setting where enforcement is minimal and largely symbolic.

Figure 2 illustrates the primary result. The plot shows average turnout as a function of age, measured in weeks from the age-18 threshold, pooling data from all national elections between 2017 and 2021. Each dot represents a binned average, and the red lines show local linear regressions estimated separately on either side of the cutoff.

The graph reveals a sharp and immediate jump in turnout at age 18: individuals just old enough to be legally obligated are about 20 percentage points more likely to vote than those just below the threshold. Crucially, the slopes on either side of the cutoff are nearly flat. Turnout remains stable within each legal regime—whether voting is voluntary or compulsory—suggesting that age alone does not drive changes in participation. This visual pattern reinforces the core identification assumption: in the absence of the legal obligation, turnout would likely evolve smoothly. The discontinuity thus reflects the behavioral effect of acquiring a legal duty to vote.

Table 2 reports the corresponding RD estimates. The treatment effect, estimated using both conventional and robust bias-corrected methods, is consistently around 19.7 percentage points and statistically significant at the 1% level. These results reinforce the visual evidence: the onset of legal obligation leads to a discrete and sizable increase in voter turnout.

Figure 2: Regression Discontinuity Result



Notes: This figure plots binned average turnout (blue dots) against distance from the age-18 threshold, measured in weeks, pooling all four national elections between August 2017 and October 2019. Red lines indicate local linear fits estimated separately on each side of the threshold, where compulsory voting becomes legally binding. The sample includes 16,043 individuals residing in the City of Buenos Aires.

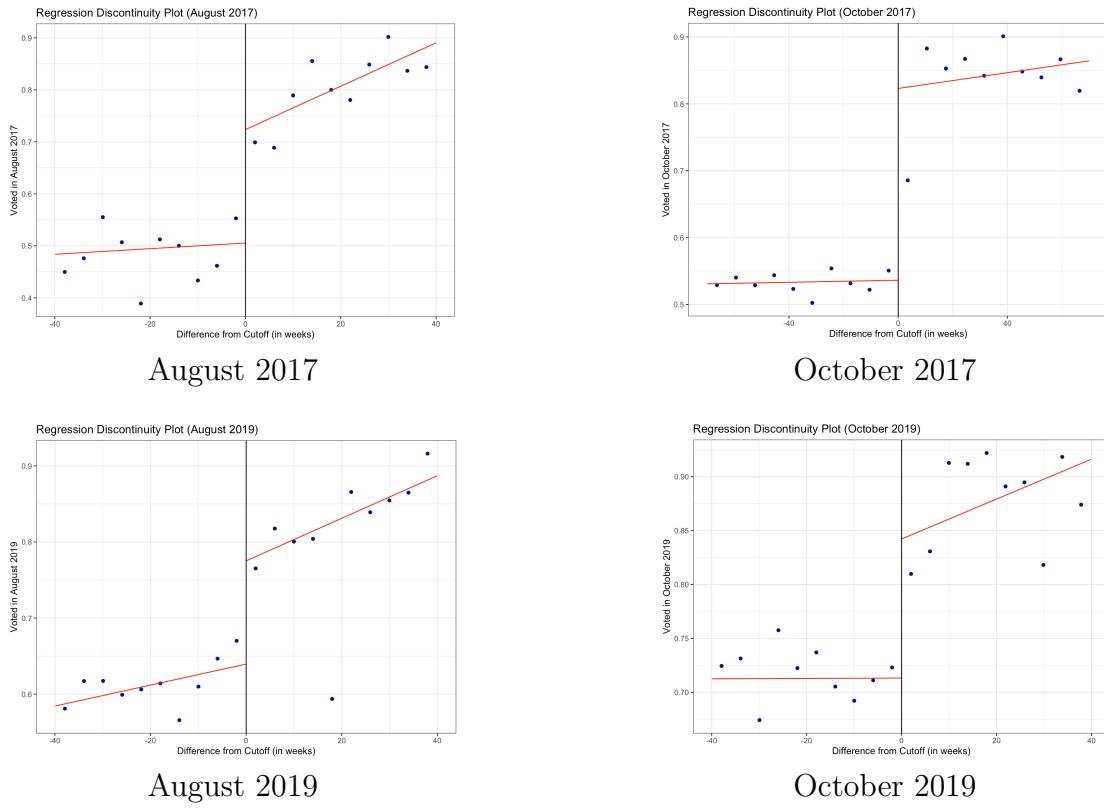
Table 2: Regression Discontinuity Estimates of the Effect of Compulsory Voting

	Estimate	Standard Error
Conventional RD	0.197	0.050
Robust RD	0.197	0.050
Below 18 Above 18		
Number of observations	8,910	7,133
Effective number of obs.	1,254	1,112
Order of estimation (p)	1	1
Order of bias (q)	2	2
Estimation bandwidth (h)	3.913	3.913
Bias bandwidth (b)	7.220	7.220
$\rho = h/b$	0.542	0.542
Unique observations	399	391

Notes: Estimates are based on local linear regressions using both conventional and robust bias-corrected methods, following Calonico et al. (2014). Standard errors are robust to heteroskedasticity. The lower panel reports estimation diagnostics, including sample sizes, polynomial orders, and data-driven bandwidths. All models use a triangular kernel. The sample includes 16,043 individuals residing in the City of Buenos Aires.

To assess the consistency of this effect across electoral cycles, Figure 3 presents RD estimates separately for each of the four national elections held between 2017 and 2019. Each panel uses the same local linear specification as in the pooled analysis. Across all contests—including legislative and presidential elections, as well as primary and general rounds—the estimated treatment effect remains large, positive, and statistically significant. The absence of null or negative effects across these elections supports the interpretation that the discontinuity reflects a general behavioral response to legal obligation.

Figure 3: Regression Discontinuity Estimates by Election



Notes: Each panel shows a separate RD plot for one national election, using the same local linear specification as in the pooled analysis. The horizontal axis measures distance in weeks from the age-18 threshold. The red lines are local linear fits estimated separately on each side of the cutoff. Turnout is measured using administrative records from the City of Buenos Aires. Across all four elections—two legislative (2017) and two presidential (2019), including both primaries and general rounds—the estimated discontinuity at age 18 remains large, positive, and statistically significant.

Taken together, these results provide compelling evidence that symbolic legal obligation—decoupled from credible enforcement—can significantly influence electoral behavior.

The 20-point increase in turnout at age 18, robust across election cycles and clearly aligned with institutional thresholds, suggests a meaningful behavioral response to the law as a civic mandate rather than as a coercive instrument. Yet this finding raises a deeper question: why do individuals comply with a law that carries virtually no material consequences for noncompliance? From the perspective of standard deterrence-based models, such behavior is difficult to explain. The next section turns to this puzzle by examining the mechanisms that may underlie this response, including internalized civic norms, normative expectations, and potential misperceptions about enforcement.

7 Mechanisms

The sharp increase in voter turnout at age 18—approximately 20 percentage points—occurs at a legal threshold where compulsory voting begins, yet in a setting where enforcement is negligible. This combination poses a central puzzle: how can a legal obligation backed by a trivial and rarely collected fine produce such a large behavioral effect?

To interpret this finding, I examine three candidate mechanisms: deterrence, civic maturation, and expressive compliance. Each generates distinct, testable predictions. First, deterrence-based explanations, including both direct sanction avoidance and precautionary compliance, where individuals act out of uncertainty about enforcement. Second, civic maturation, in which participation rises due to age-linked increases in political engagement or institutional trust. Third, expressive compliance, whereby individuals respond to the law as a civic signal: voting not out of fear or habit, but because the legal mandate activates internalized norms of duty.

If deterrence drives compliance, individuals who believe the law is enforced—or seek to avoid bureaucratic hassle—should be more likely to vote. If civic maturation explains the increase, we should observe smooth increases in turnout and civic attitudes (e.g., political interest, efficacy) with age. If expressive compliance is the operative mechanism, then the legal obligation itself should activate norms of civic duty, especially among those who already value democracy or identify with civic responsibilities. Crucially, these effects should arise even among respondents who do not expect to be sanctioned.

To test these mechanisms, I use nationally representative survey data from the 2023 Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)⁵, focusing on Argentine respondents aged 16 to

⁵While the regression discontinuity design provides causal evidence of a sharp behavioral response to legal

20. This age range spans the legal voting threshold and allows for direct comparison of behavior and beliefs before and after voting becomes compulsory. While these data do not permit causal identification, it offers suggestive insights into the plausibility of competing mechanisms and help trace how beliefs and civic norms shift around the threshold.

If deterrence plays a meaningful role in driving compliance, one would expect turnout intention to be significantly higher among those who believe the voting law is enforced. Survey responses reveal substantial variation in enforcement beliefs: as shown in Figure A1, only 19% of respondents are confident that voting fines are actually imposed, 32% are certain they are not, and the remaining 48% express uncertainty or ambivalence. This uncertainty leaves room for precautionary behavior. Turnout intention is indeed somewhat higher among those who believe fines are enforced—92% compared to 82% among skeptics (Table 3)—but this difference is modest. Moreover, once demographic controls are included, the relationship becomes statistically insignificant (Table A1).

Table 3: Voting Intention by Belief in Fine Enforcement

Belief About Voting Fine Enforcement	Turnout Intention
Fines likely	92% (2.7%)
Fines unlikely	82% (3.1%)

Notes: Based on LAPOP Argentina 2023 data. Sample includes 179 respondents aged 16–20. The variable cv5 measures perceived enforcement of voting fines in the community. Fines likely corresponds to responses definitely yes and probably yes; fines unlikely includes 50–50 chance, probably not, and definitely not. Standard errors in parentheses.

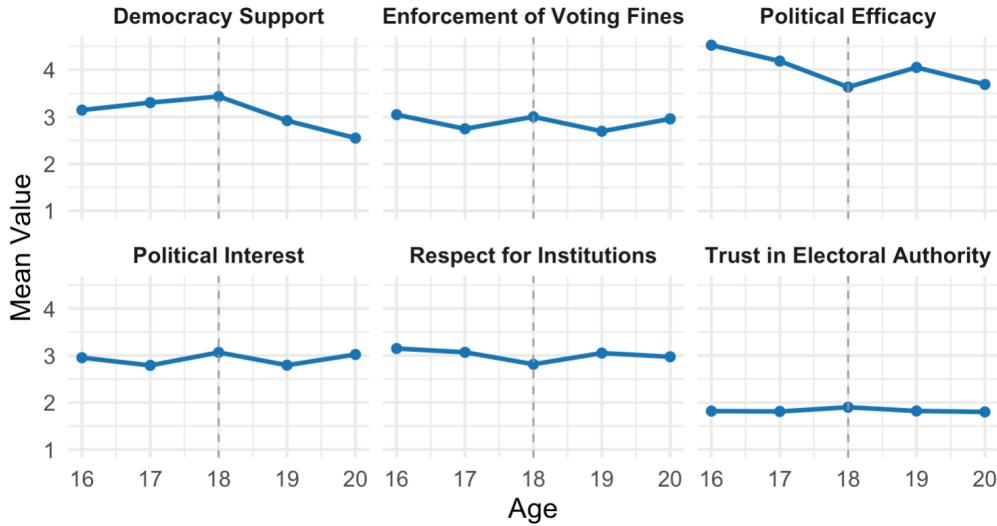
The low predictive power of perceived enforcement—combined with the triviality of the fine, its ease of payment, and the absence of bureaucratic friction—suggests that deterrence alone is unlikely to explain the sharp turnout increase. Most notably, the fine is paid online, using a mobile phone or computer, and the process requires no interaction with state offices or paperwork. In a population of young, tech-savvy respondents, such minimal transaction costs render hassle-based deterrence implausible.⁶ Moreover, while Google Trends data in A4 show some awareness of the fine around elections, this salience does not translate into behavior consistent with instrumental compliance.

obligation, it does not identify the underlying mechanism. To explore why individuals comply, I turn to nationally representative survey data that offer suggestive—but not causal—evidence.

⁶For details on the online payment process, see: (Clarín, 2023; Infobae, 2023; La Nación, 2023) and the official government portal at infractores.padron.gov.ar.

A second possibility is civic maturation: that turnout increases naturally with age due to greater political engagement. This would imply a gradual rather than a discontinuous pattern, with older youth being more likely to vote as their civic attitudes develop. However, the data do not support this interpretation.

Figure 4: Civic Attitudes Across Age



Notes: Authors calculations from LAPOP Argentina 2023 (179 respondents aged 16–20). Each panel plots the age-specific mean of one attitudinal item on its original Likert metric; dots are sample means and the solid line joins adjacent ages, while the dashed vertical line marks the compulsory-voting threshold at 18. Variable codes and ranges are: respect for institutions B2 (1 = Nothing to 7 = Much); perceived enforcement of the compulsory-voting fine CV5 (1 = Definitely yes to 5 = Definitely no, reverse-coded so higher values imply stronger enforcement); internal efficacy EFF2 (1–7); political interest POL1 (1 = Much to 4 = None, reverse-coded); trust in the electoral authority VB10 (1–7); and democratic support ING4 (1–7). Estimates are un-weighted; results are virtually identical with design weights.

As shown in Figure 4, political interest, support for democracy, and internal efficacy remain stable between ages 16 and 20. These attitudes do not track the sharp behavioral change at age 18. Sociodemographic context further weakens this account: most Argentine youth live with their parents through early adulthood, and do not experience major institutional transitions—such as leaving home or entering university—at age 18.⁷

The evidence is most consistent with an expressive compliance mechanism. If the legal obligation to vote functions as a civic signal—rather than a coercive threat—we should observe higher turnout intention among youth who hold strong civic values, regardless of their

⁷In the Argentine context, most young adults live with their parents well into their mid to late 20s, and relatively few leave home to attend university in large cities. These residential patterns may delay transitions into civic adulthood, reducing the likelihood that age alone drives political engagement during this period.

beliefs about enforcement. The obligation to vote is not only codified in law but reinforced by national history—through collective memory of military dictatorship (1976–1983), mass mobilization during the transition to democracy, and the constitutional enshrinement of voting rights. For many young Argentines, the act of voting may function less as a political decision and more as a public rite of passage: a declaration of civic belonging.

Table 4: Intention to Participate Among 16–20-Year-Olds

Response category	Share of respondents
Vote for a candidate or party ^a	51.6%
Cast a blank or null ballot	5.4%
Undecided	24.6%
Would not vote / none	15.7%
No response	2.7%

Notes: LAPOP Argentina 2023, respondents aged 16–20 ($N = 179$). ^a Aggregates all named party options and the “Otros (partidos naci.)” category. “Undecided corresponds to respondents who declare they do not yet know how they will vote. “No vota / Ninguno captures those who state explicitly that they would not vote or would choose no list. “No response records item non-response.

This logic is reflected in how youth approach participation. As shown in Table 4, a significant majority of respondents aged 16–20 express an intention to vote. However, only a minority—around 44%—indicate support for a specific candidate or party. A notable share participates through alternative means: approximately 5.4% intend to cast a blank or null vote, while 15.7% say they do not know yet. Meanwhile, just 10% report that they do not intend to vote or do not respond. This pattern is revealing: the willingness to engage even without a partisan stake—or indeed to spoil the ballot—suggests participation motivated less by instrumental choice than by the desire to satisfy a newly salient civic expectation.

Finally, attitudinal covariates align more closely with a normactivation story than with a deterrence model. If expressive compliance drives turnout, civic attitudes—such as support for democracy, political interest, and internal efficacy—should be more predictive of participation than beliefs about enforcement. This is precisely what the data show. Support for democracy and high political interest are associated with 10- to 16-percentage-point increases in turnout intention (Table A2). By contrast, the marginal effect of believing that fines are enforced is just three points—and becomes statistically insignificant once demographic con-

trols are included (Table A1).

In sum, the empirical evidence is inconsistent with deterrence-based or maturation explanations. Instead, it supports a norm-activation mechanism: a symbolic law, even when stripped of enforcement, can induce behavioral compliance when it affirms and clarifies social expectations. Civic obligation, in this case, operates less as a binding rule and more as an expressive cue—one that reshapes behavior not by changing costs, but by making civic duty more salient. Yet this expressive response is not uniformly distributed: it is especially pronounced among lower-income youth, and appears to function as a civic rite of passage more than a political calculation. The discussion that follows situates these findings within broader debates on democratic inclusion, symbolic design, and the institutional roots of civic identity.

8 Discussion

This paper shows that a symbolic legal obligation—compulsory voting backed by a five-cent fine that is rarely enforced—leads to a 20-percentage-point increase in voter turnout at age 18. The effect is immediate, discontinuous, and consistent across election cycles. This suggests that legal obligation alone, even when stripped of enforcement, can substantially alter behavior.

The empirical setting rules out standard deterrence mechanisms. The fine is trivial, payment is rare, and enforcement is passive. Survey data confirm that most young voters do not expect to be sanctioned, and that beliefs about enforcement have weak predictive power. Civic attitudes, by contrast, are more strongly associated with turnout intention. The increase in turnout therefore cannot be attributed to fear of penalty or improved political engagement due to age. The mechanism is best interpreted as expressive compliance: the law functions as a normative signal that activates participation.

The triviality of the fine is not incidental, but reflects a broader institutional and historical context. Although the monetary sanction has remained fixed at 50 pesos since 2012, inflation has rendered it practically worthless—equivalent to just five U.S. cents by 2023 (see Appendix Figures A1 and A2). Yet the turnout discontinuity remains stable across election years. This suggests that the actual cost of the fine is largely irrelevant: in Argentina, what matters is that voting is mandatory. The law retains expressive force not because it imposes meaningful sanctions, but because it signals civic duty in a society where democracy has been deeply

valued.

This expressive response is especially salient in Latin America, where voting is not merely a procedural act but a symbolically charged expression of democratic inclusion. Recent work by Kaplan *et al.* (2023) shows that Chileans eligible to vote in the 1988 plebiscite—marking the end of dictatorship—have persistently higher turnout decades later. While that setting captures long-run behavioral persistence following a pivotal democratic rupture, the underlying logic applies here as well: in societies shaped by authoritarian rule, civic acts like voting can retain expressive power even when enforcement is weak. In the Argentine context, the obligation to vote—though minimally sanctioned—may draw strength from shared historical narratives of democratic recovery, civic duty, and institutional resilience. What looks like compliance may in fact reflect deeply internalized expectations about the role of voting in post-authoritarian citizenship.

The behavioral response to symbolic obligation is not uniform. As A1 shows, turnout increases are significantly larger among youth from lower-income and lower-education backgrounds. These are groups that typically vote less and are often less engaged with formal institutions. That symbolic obligation increases their turnout more than it does for their higher-SES peers suggests that expressive mandates may act as leveling devices, closing participation gaps without coercion. This is in contrast to findings from Brazil, where enforced compulsory voting tends to reinforce existing inequalities (Cepaluni and Hidalgo, 2016).

The results also raise the possibility that expressive compliance is not purely internal. The transition to legal adulthood is public and shared. Youth may face social pressure to vote from parents, schools, or peers. While the administrative data do not capture these channels directly, the heterogeneity by SES suggests that the law's effect is shaped by its reception environment. In households or communities where voting is treated as a rite of passage, the symbolic obligation may carry more weight. Understanding how social context mediates expressive compliance is an important direction for future research.

This study focuses on first-time voters. It remains an open question whether the effect persists over time. If expressive compliance fades in subsequent elections, its long-term democratic value may be limited. If it instills durable voting habits, however, the implications are more significant. Future work should examine the persistence of turnout effects in weak-enforcement regimes and their impact on broader civic engagement.

More broadly, these findings contribute to a growing literature on how laws shape behavior even in the absence of material sanctions. Symbolic legal rules are common in low-capacity

states, but their behavioral impact is poorly understood. This paper provides evidence that they can be effective, particularly when institutionalized and visible. In such cases, the law acts not by deterring, but by telling people what is expected. This supports a longstanding theoretical view that laws can function as social signals, shaping behavior by affirming shared norms rather than threatening material punishment.

9 Conclusion

Do symbolic penalties work? This paper provides causal evidence that they can—at least under specific institutional conditions. Using a regression discontinuity design around Argentinas age-18 voting threshold—where a legal obligation to vote begins, but enforcement is minimal—I find that turnout increases by approximately 20 percentage points. The effect is large, sharp, and robust across election types and cycles. These findings suggest that even weakly enforced laws can shape civic behavior when the legal obligation is clear, visible, and embedded in a supportive institutional context.

The increase in participation is not evenly distributed. The effect is significantly larger among youth from lower-income neighborhoods, who are often underrepresented in voluntary systems. While the heterogeneity analysis is descriptive and should be interpreted with caution, it highlights that symbolic mandates may be particularly salient for marginalized groups. This contributes to ongoing debates about the potential for legal design to reduce participatory inequality.

To explore why individuals comply with a law that carries virtually no material consequences, I supplement the administrative analysis with survey data on attitudes and beliefs. While these data do not support causal inference, the patterns are more consistent with expressive compliance than with deterrence or civic maturation. Turnout intentions are high even among respondents who do not believe the law is enforced, and they correlate more strongly with civic values than with fear of sanctions. These patterns suggest that legal obligations may act as normative signals—activating internalized expectations of civic duty rather than deterring through enforcement.

These findings have broader implications for legal theory and policy. First, they offer rare behavioral support for a central claim in expressive law theory: that laws influence behavior not only through coercion, but by conveying civic norms. This mechanism has long been theorized but is rarely observed under clean empirical conditions. Argentinas institutional

setting—where legal obligation is stable and salient but enforcement is negligible—offers an unusually clear test.

Second, the disproportionate response among low-SES youth points to the potential of symbolic legal design as a tool for democratic inclusion. Prior work has documented that enforced compulsory voting can narrow participation gaps. This paper suggests that even symbolic obligation—when made visible and credible—may achieve similar goals in low-capacity states.

These findings also raise several avenues for future research. Does expressive compliance foster durable civic engagement, or is it primarily a one-off response? Are such effects moderated by the visibility of the mandate, the level of institutional trust, or the strength of civic infrastructure? A promising direction is to examine how symbolic mandates operate: by making civic norms more cognitively salient, more socially visible, or more tightly linked to personal identity. Distinguishing among these mechanisms could help clarify not only where symbolic mandates work, but how and for whom.

In sum, this paper contributes to our understanding of civic behavior and legal compliance by identifying a setting in which symbolic legal obligation—absent credible enforcement—substantially increases participation. The findings do not suggest that symbolic mandates are universally effective, nor that they can replace deeper democratic reforms. But they do indicate that under the right institutional and social conditions, laws can function as civic cues—shaping behavior not by instilling fear, but by signaling shared expectations.

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Appendix

A Supplementary Data Validation

This section reports robustness checks and descriptive evidence validating the empirical design, including covariate balance around the age-18 cutoff and summary statistics by age group from the LAPOP survey.

The administrative dataset includes a sample of the full universe of eligible voters aged 16 to 20 residing in the City of Buenos Aires, linked across multiple election periods. Age at each election is matched to the corresponding registry of turnout and justifications. The <18 and 18 groups refer to eligibility status at the time of voting. Average elections observed is calculated at the individual level.

Table A1: Descriptive Covariates Around the Age-18 Threshold

Variable	Full Sample	<18	≥ 18	Diff.	p-value
Female (%)	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.00	0.828
Lives in low-SES neighborhood (%)	0.45	0.45	0.45	0.00	0.230
Lives in high-SES neighborhood (%)	0.24	0.24	0.24	0.00	0.554
Mean age	18.10	17.09	19.06	-1.97	0.000***
Turnout (%)	77.27	58.1	82.2	—	..
Justified Absence (%)	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.000***
Avg. elections observed	8.10	2.26	6.08	0.19	0.000***
Observations	20,020	20,020	20,020		

Notes: The table presents descriptive statistics for the full sample and separately for individuals just below and above the age-18 voting eligibility threshold. The Diff. column shows the discontinuity at age 18, with associated p-values from statistical tests. Significance: *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A2: Summary statistics by age group

Variable	Full sample			Ages 16–18		Ages 18–20		<i>p</i> – value
	Mean	SD	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>N</i>	
A. Electoral behaviour & institutions								
Perceived fine enforcement	3.70	2.57	1,478	2.82	62	3.02	112	0.576
Turnout last election (%)	84.0		1,537	4.6	65	45.6	114	0.000
Trust in elections	4.65	3.12	1,520	5.15	65	4.87	113	0.402
Trust in parties	2.87	2.81	1,532	3.53	65	3.08	114	0.325
B. Political engagement & media								
Political interest	6.27	3.60	1,540	6.17	65	6.53	114	0.443
Political efficacy	5.44	3.02	1,528	5.50	64	4.73	114	0.041
Internet access at home	7.07	2.95	1,515	6.15	64	6.70	112	0.147
News consumption (days)	2.77	1.84	1,538	3.63	65	3.47	114	0.605
Social-media users (%)	85.0		1,536	85.0	65	84.0	114	0.612
Left–right self-placement	4.69	2.69	1,422	4.76	62	4.58	107	0.732
C. Demographics & controls								
Age (years)	41.9	17.3	1,540	16.7	65	19.1	114	–
Schooling category	6.30	3.55	1,539	5.18	65	6.57	114	–
Formal-sector job (%)	54.5		908	14.3	7	29.5	44	0.701
Urban residence (%)	89.3		1,537	96.9	65	92.1	114	0.333
Male respondents (%)	50.0		1,516	61.0	64	54.0	112	0.430
Currently enrolled (%)	9.2		1,537	80.0	65	39.5	114	–
High-school students (%)	4.0		1,540	72.3	65	10.5	114	0.000
Lives with parents (%)	67.0		1,532	96.9	65	83.2	113	0.013

Note. Data from LAPOP survey. All multi-point items are linearly rescaled to a common 0–10 range to facilitate comparability across measures. Binary indicators are reported as percentages; standard deviations are omitted for these rows. *p*-values correspond to two-sided tests of equality in means between respondents aged 16–18 and 18–20. All variables are coded such that higher values reflect more of the underlying construct.

B Institutional Context: Evolution of the Voting Fine

Compulsory voting in Argentina was established with the Sáenz Peña Law (Law No. 8871) in 1912, mandating secret and obligatory voting for male citizens over the age of 18. Electoral compliance was initially enforced through the issuance of the Libreta de Enrolamiento (for men) and, after the 1947 extension of suffrage, the Libreta Cívica (for women). These booklets served both as identity documents and as records of electoral participation, with voting stamps (sellos de voto) marking compliance. Citizens who failed to vote without justification risked annotations in their booklet, which could lead to administrative restrictions, such as limitations on accessing certain public services or holding public office.⁸

In 1968, the Documento Nacional de Identidad (DNI) replaced both the Libreta de Enrolamiento and the Libreta Cívica. The early version of the DNI—commonly referred to as the DNI libreta—continued the practice of recording voting participation through physical stamps. Although enforcement progressively weakened, especially by the 1990s, voting compliance could still be verified manually by inspecting the booklet.

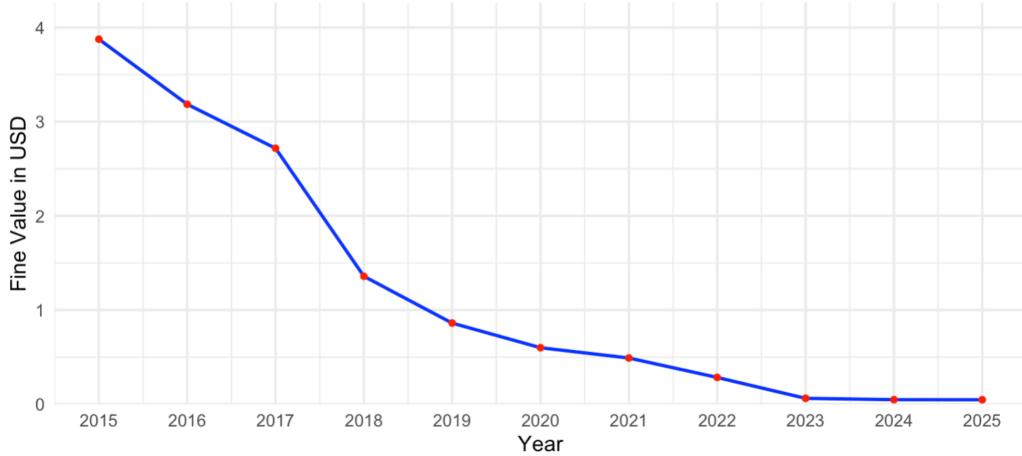
A fundamental change occurred with the introduction of the DNI tarjeta (plastic ID card) in the late 2000s. The new DNI format eliminated any physical space for recording electoral participation, thereby severing the longstanding link between identity documents and voting compliance. In response, authorities created the Registro de Infractores al Deber de Votar (Registry of Offenders of the Duty to Vote), an online database maintained by the Cámara Nacional Electoral. However, in practice, public administration agencies rarely consult this registry, and electoral sanctions have become largely symbolic.

In 2012, Argentina enacted Law No. 26.774, which lowered the voting age to 16. Voting was made voluntary for 16- and 17-year-olds but remained compulsory for citizens aged 18 to 70. Although the law did not introduce a new sanction, the existing fine for unjustified abstention—codified in the National Electoral Code—was maintained. By the time of the 2023 presidential election, this fine was fixed at 50 Argentine pesos. Due to persistent inflation and weak enforcement, the fines economic relevance has eroded over time, rendering it largely symbolic.

This erosion is illustrated in Figure A1, which shows the real value of the fine from 2012 to 2025 based on the parallel exchange rate. The dollar-equivalent value drops sharply—from around four U.S. dollars in 2015 to just a few cents in 2023. As a robustness check, Figure A2 uses World Bank purchasing power parity (PPP) conversion factors to express the fines

⁸See Law No. 8871 (1912) and Law No. 13.010 (1947).

Figure A1: Real Value of the Voting Fine in Argentina 2012-2025



Note: This figure illustrates the decline in the real value of the voting fine in Argentina, highlighting its diminishing economic significance due to inflation. The real value was calculated using the parallel exchange rate observed in August of each year.

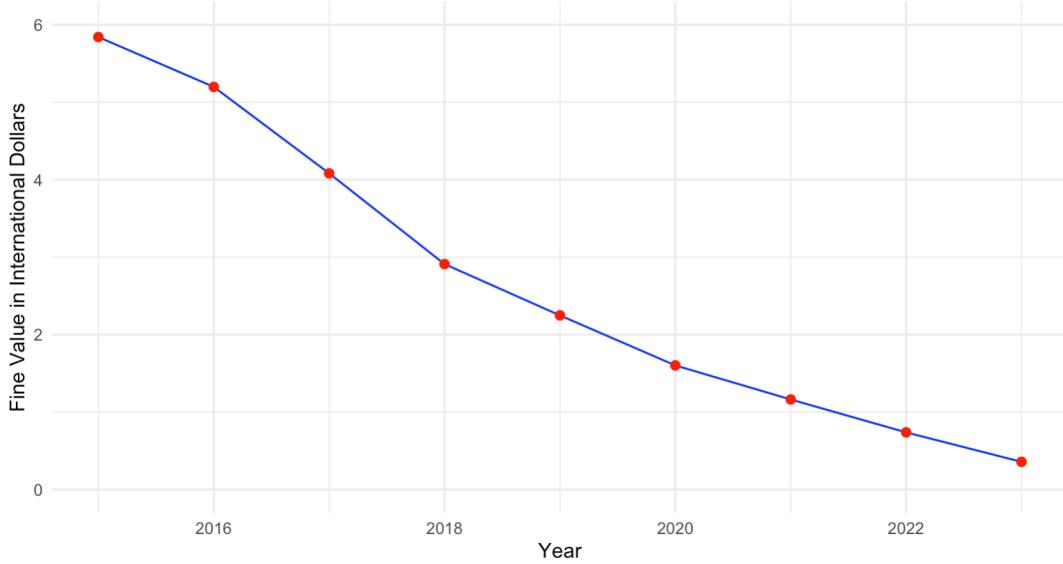
domestic buying power in international dollar terms. The pattern remains the same: a decline from 5.8 international dollars in 2015 to just 0.36 in 2023. While the two measures differ methodologically—one tracking external value, the other internal purchasing power—they both confirm that the sanction has lost its material bite and now functions almost entirely as a symbolic reaffirmation of civic obligation.

The figure shows a steady decline in the real value of the voting fine from approximately four U.S. dollars in 2015 to well below one dollar by 2023. This trend reflects persistent inflation in Argentina and the depreciation of the peso against the U.S. dollar on the parallel market. While the nominal fine remained fixed at 50 pesos, its real burden on citizens effectively disappeared over the period. By 2023–2025, the fine was equivalent to only a few cents, reinforcing its characterization as a purely symbolic sanction rather than an economically meaningful deterrent.

Although the nominal fine for abstention has remained fixed at 50 pesos, its real value declined from approximately four U.S. dollars in 2015 to less than five cents in 2023, as shown in Appendix Figure A1. Despite this dramatic erosion in the monetary sanction, turnout remains remarkably high among adults subject to the law. Figure A3 contrasts this pattern with the electoral behavior of 16- and 17-year-olds, for whom voting is voluntary. Since the 2012 reform, youth turnout has consistently lagged behind that of the general population, averaging nearly 25 percentage points lower across national elections.

While the economic cost of the voting fine has eroded over time, public awareness of its

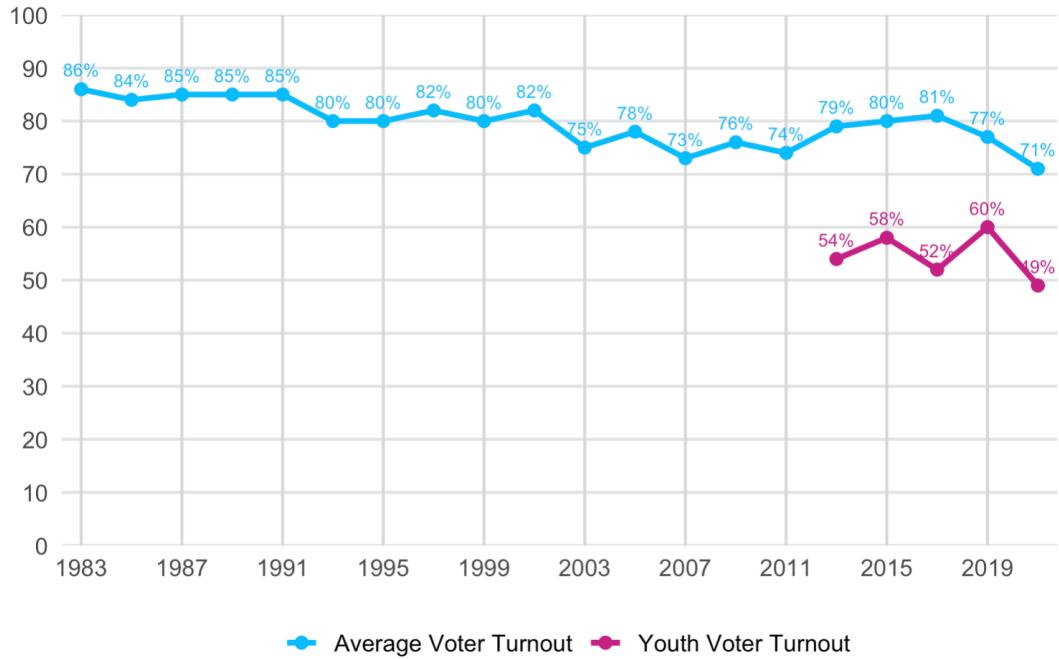
Figure A2: Real Value of the Voting Fine in Argentina (2015–2023, PPP-adjusted)



Note: This figure shows the decline in the real value of Argentina’s voting fine—fixed at 50 ARS—when adjusted for purchasing power using World Bank PPP conversion factors. The values are expressed in international dollars, illustrating the diminishing economic significance of the fine over time.

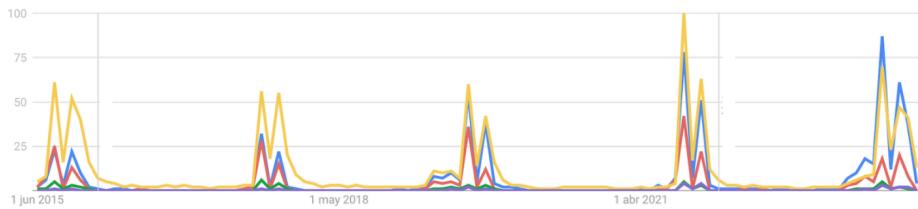
existence remains high. Figure A4 shows Google Trends data from 2015 to 2023 for five search terms related to electoral sanctions in Argentina. Search interest in phrases such as “fine for not voting” and “what happens if I do not vote” spikes sharply around national elections, indicating that citizens are aware of the sanction and actively seek information about it. However, interest quickly fades outside election periods, suggesting that the fine is not perceived as a persistent or coercive threat. Instead, it functions as an episodic civic prompt—reminding voters of their legal obligation and reinforcing shared expectations of participation. This pattern supports the interpretation that Argentina’s compulsory voting law works not through sustained deterrence, but through its symbolic and normative signaling.

Figure A3: Youth and General Voter Turnout in Argentina, 1983–2021



Note: This figure compares overall voter turnout and youth voter turnout (ages 16–17) in Argentina's national elections. While average turnout among the general population has remained consistently high—typically above 70%—youth participation since the introduction of optional voting for 16–17-year-olds in 2012 has been significantly lower and more variable. Author's compilation based on official electoral statistics from the Cámara Nacional Electoral (CNE)

Figure A4: Google Trends for Voting Sanctions in Argentina (2015–2023)



Note: Google Trends data showing normalized weekly search interest (0–100) for terms related to electoral sanctions in Argentina from June 2015 to June 2023. Search terms include “multa por no votar” (fine for not voting – blue), “qué pasa si no voto” (what happens if I do not vote – red), “infractores” (offenders – yellow), “cómo justificar el voto” (how to justify not voting – green), and “cómo pagar multa electoral” (how to pay the voting fine – purple). Interest spikes around national elections but remains minimal in non-election periods.

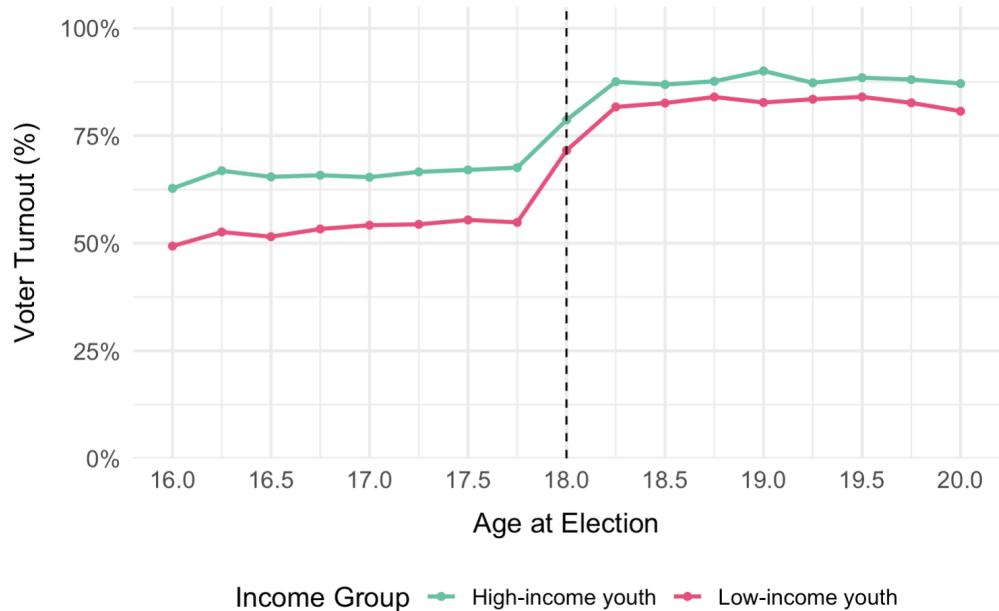
C Heterogeneity by Socioeconomic Background

To examine whether the behavioral response to the voting obligation differs by socioeconomic status, Figure A1 plots turnout rates by age for high- and low-income youth. Income is proxied using neighborhood-level data in CABA: individuals residing in Comunas 2, 12, 13,

and 14 are classified as high-income, while those in Comunas 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9 are classified as low-income.

Both groups exhibit a sharp increase in turnout at age 18, consistent with the introduction of legal obligation. However, the pre-treatment gap is notable: high-income youth are significantly more likely to vote voluntarily before age 18. This gap narrows sharply at the threshold, suggesting that compulsory voting may partially equalize participation across income groups. The result aligns with the idea that legal obligation plays a compensatory role by activating compliance even among those less likely to vote in its absence.

Figure A1: Voter Turnout by Age and Socioeconomic Background

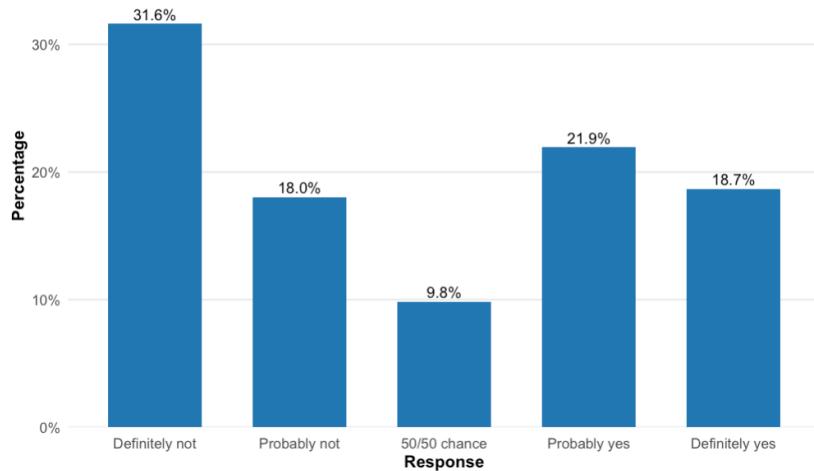


Notes: Figure based on administrative data from CABA. Income is proxied by neighborhood: high-income youth live in Comunas 2, 12, 13, and 14; low-income youth in Comunas 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9. Sample includes 20,020 individuals aged 16–21.

D Supplementary Mechanisms Analysis

This section explores potential mechanisms driving the observed turnout response to compulsory voting, focusing on beliefs about enforcement, civic values, and political engagement among youth aged 16–20. Using nationally representative LAPOP survey data for Argentina, I examine how turnout intention correlates with perceived fine enforcement, support for democracy, political interest, and internal efficacy.

Figure A1: Perceived Enforcement of Voting Fines



Note: Based on LAPOP Argentina 2023 data. Sample includes 179 respondents aged 16–20. The variable cv5 measures perceived enforcement of voting fines in the community.

I begin by testing whether belief in fine enforcement predicts turnout intention. If deterrence were a central driver of participation, individuals who believe the fine is enforced should be significantly more likely to intend to vote. Table A1 presents logistic regression results for turnout intention on perceived fine enforcement, controlling for demographic factors.

Table A1: Belief in Enforcement and Voting Intention (Logistic Regression)

Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	p-value
Probably yes	1.26	1.00	0.209
50/50 chance	0.95	1.23	0.440
Probably not	-0.01	1.01	0.993
Definitely not	-0.99	0.89	0.263
Age	-0.36	0.29	0.212
Female	-1.19	0.75	0.112
Income	-0.16	0.08	0.053*
Education	0.55	0.46	0.234

Notes: Logistic regression predicting turnout intention based on perceived fine enforcement (`cv5`), with controls for age, gender, income, and education. Reference category for enforcement is “Definitely yes.” Sample: 179 respondents aged 16–20 (LAPOP Argentina 2023).

The results show no statistically significant relationship between belief in fine enforcement and turnout intention. While enforcement perceptions have the expected sign, they are not predictive once demographics are accounted for. This suggests that fear of sanctions plays a limited role, if any, in explaining compliance behavior.

To evaluate whether civic values predict turnout intention, Table A2 examines bivariate associations between key normative attitudes—support for democracy, political interest, and internal efficacy—and voting intentions.

Table A2: Civic Values and Turnout Intention

Civic Attitude	Level	Turnout Intention
Support for democracy	Agree democracy is best	96%
	Neutral or disagree	80%
Political interest	High	94%
	Low	84%
Internal efficacy	High	95%
	Low	86%
External efficacy	High	88%
	Low	87%

Notes: Based on LAPOP Argentina 2023 data. “High” and “Low” refer to the top and bottom halves of each scale’s distribution.

The results indicate that civic attitudes are strong predictors of intended participation. Youth who support democracy, report higher political interest, or feel greater internal efficacy are substantially more likely to intend to vote. Notably, the differences between high and low civic engagement groups (10–16 percentage points) are much larger than those associated with enforcement beliefs.

Finally, to account for multiple factors simultaneously, Table A3 presents logistic regression estimates predicting turnout intention based on political interest, internal efficacy, external efficacy, and socioeconomic controls.

Table A3: Political Interest and Turnout Intention (Logistic Regression)

Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	p-value
Intercept	3.79	2.18	0.080
Political interest (low = 1)	-1.07	0.62	0.082
Internal efficacy	-0.12	0.40	0.761
External efficacy	0.02	0.36	0.960
Education	0.45	0.48	0.348
Income	-0.18	0.10	0.060

Notes: Logistic regression predicting turnout intention. Political interest coded as 1 if respondent reports little or no interest. Sample: 179 respondents aged 16–20 (LAPOP Argentina 2023).

Political interest remains a strong and statistically meaningful predictor of turnout intention, even after controlling for other predispositions. Youth with low political interest are significantly less likely to intend to vote. Internal and external efficacy show weaker and statistically insignificant associations.

Taken together, these results suggest that expressive motivations—rooted in civic values and engagement—better explain compliance with compulsory voting among young Argentines than do instrumental fears of enforcement. Symbolic legal obligation appears to activate civic norms, not deterrence-based calculations.

E Robustness of the Regression–Discontinuity Design

E.1 Bandwidth Sensitivity

Figure A1 evaluates the stability of the Local Linear RD estimate by varying the symmetric bandwidth around the age-18 cut-off from one to thirty weeks.⁹ Point estimates remain remarkably constant and precision does not deteriorate until the bandwidth exceeds roughly six months, indicating that the main result is not an artifact of bandwidth choice.

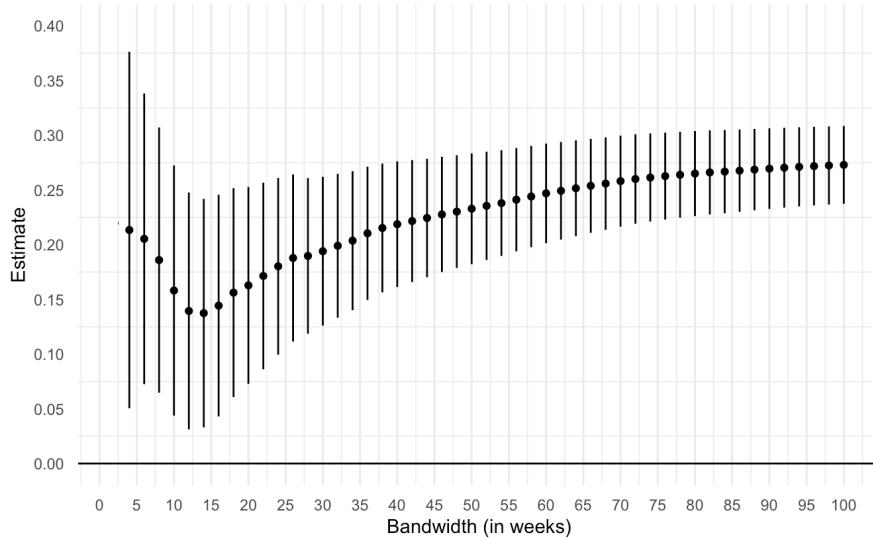


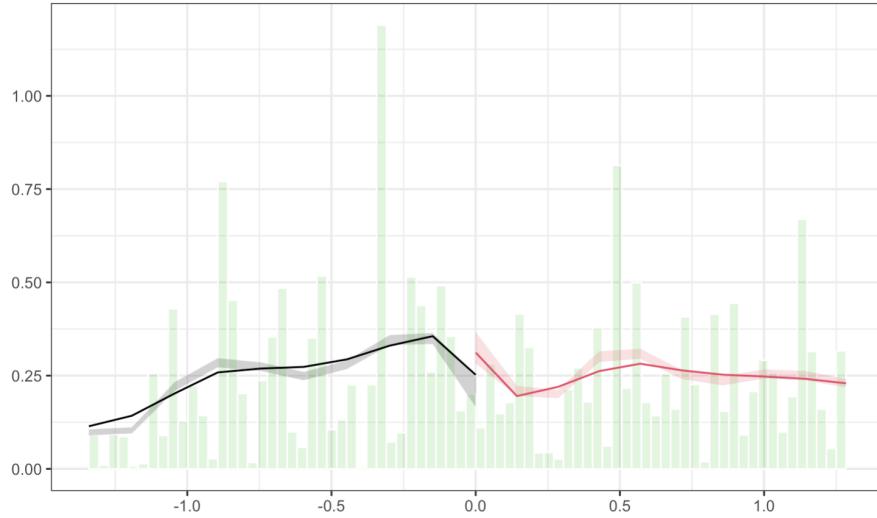
Figure A1: RD estimates for alternative bandwidths (weeks)

E.2 Cutoff Manipulation

A key identifying assumption of the RD design is that individuals cannot precisely manipulate their assignment around the cutoff. To assess this, I conduct a McCrary density test (McCrary, 2008), which examines whether there is a discontinuous jump in the density of the running variable at the threshold. In this setting, individuals cannot manipulate their date of birth or registration age to alter their voting eligibility, so no discontinuity is expected. Figure A2 plots the estimated density of the running variable (predicted birthday, centered at the age-18 cutoff). The density appears smooth and continuous across the threshold, providing no evidence of manipulation and supporting the validity of the RD design.

⁹All specifications employ a triangular kernel and robust bias–corrected confidence intervals.

Figure A2: Density of Running Variable Around the Cutoff (McCrary Test)



E.3 Placebo Cut-offs

To verify that the discontinuity is unique to the legal threshold, the RD specification is re-estimated with pseudo cut-offs at ages 17 and 19. Neither placebo shows a statistically detectable jump in turnout (Figure A3), reinforcing the claim that the observed effect is causally linked to the onset of compulsory voting at 18.

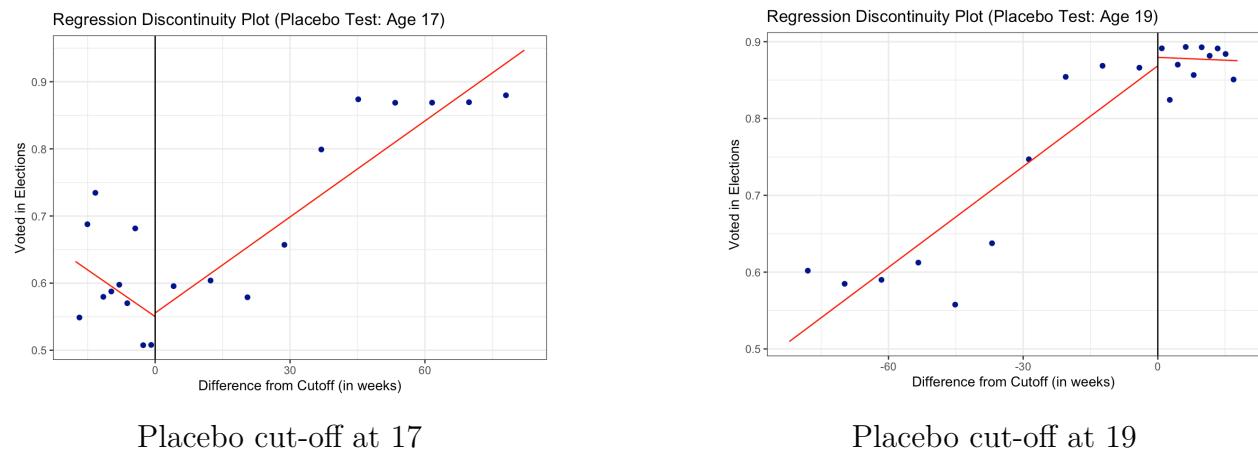


Figure A3: Placebo Tests: Pseudo Cut-offs at Ages 17 and 19

E.4 Smoothness Checks for Non-Turnout Outcomes

Based on Latinobarómetro 2023, no major Argentine institution triggers a discrete life transition at age 18 other than compulsory voting itself. Teenagers may work legally from fourteen

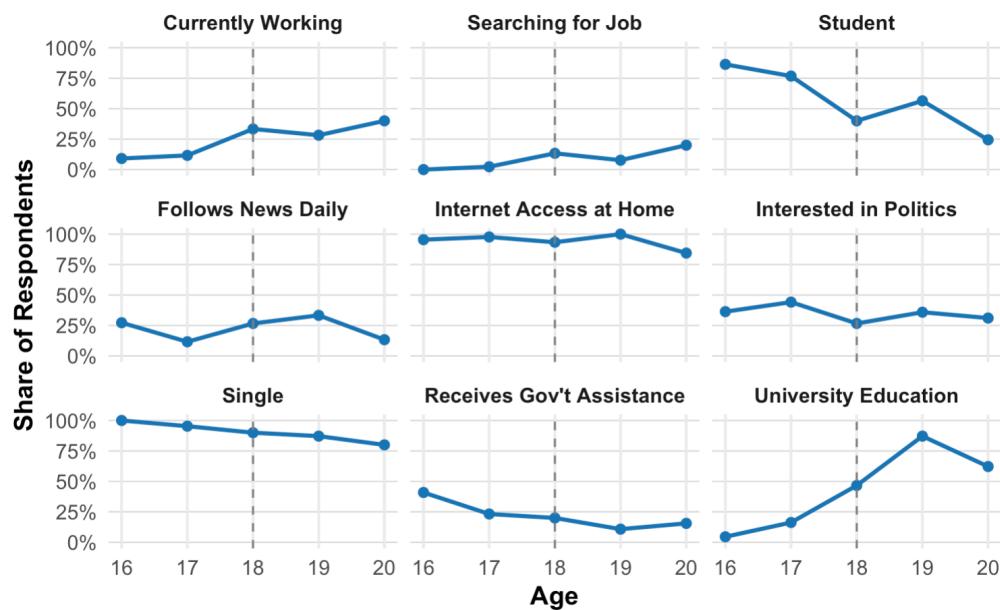
under restricted hours; upper-secondary schooling is compulsory through eighteen but university admission is staggered across the academic year; roughly 85 percent of eighteen-year-olds still live with their parents (with a sizeable minority continuing to co-reside well into their late twenties); and urban broadband penetration already exceeds 90 percent among sixteen-year-olds.

Figure 4 illustrates that civic attitudes reflect this institutional smoothness. Mean internal efficacy, political interest, respect for institutions, trust in the electoral authority, perceived enforcement of the voting fine, and support for democracy all follow gentle age trends between sixteen and twenty; none exhibits a jump at the compulsory-voting cut-off.

Figure A4 carries the same exercise to life-cycle and information variables. The shares of students, workers, job-seekers, daily news followers, social-media users, politically interested youth, singles, government-benefit recipients, and university students change gradually and monotonically; again, no series shows a break at eighteen. Appendix Table A3 presents placebo RD estimates centered at ages 17 and 19, all statistically indistinguishable from zero.

Together, the institutional overview and the graphical evidence show that neither labor-market status, schooling trajectory, living arrangements, digital connectivity, nor underlying political attitudes experience a discontinuity at age 18. The only sharp change at that threshold is the acquisition of the legal duty to vote; the turnout jump documented in Section 6 can therefore be attributed to compulsory voting rather than to coincident life events.

Figure A4: Life-Cycle and Information-Access Shares Across Age



Notes: Authors calculations from the same LAPOP sample (179 youths aged 16–20). Panels report the share of respondents with each characteristic; the dashed vertical line again denotes age 18. Student, Currently Working, and Searching for Job correspond to OCUP4A categories 4, 1, and 3, respectively. Follows News Daily equals one when GI0N = 1 (Diariamente). Social Media Use equals one when SMEDIA1N = 1 (respondent has at least one social-media account). Interested in Politics equals one when POL1 2 (Mucho or Algo). Receives Govt Assistance is WF1 = 1. Single is Q11N = 1. University Education is EDRE in 4, 5. Percentages are un-weighted and sum to 100 percent within each age.