Affirmative: Compulsory Voting

By “Coach Vance” Trefethen

Resolved: In a democracy, voting ought to be compulsory.

Democracy is a good thing because it produces the best results for the greatest number of people. Compulsory voting is good because it strengthens democracy, makes government more responsive to the needs of the people, and reduces polarization that threatens to undo democracy in the long run.

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In 1947, Winston Churchill said QUOTE:
“Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed **it has been said** that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

END QUOTE. Upholding democracy and the conditions that maintain it and the benefits it produces are essential because it’s the least bad form of government and all other options would be worse. That’s why I’m glad to affirm that: In a democracy, voting ought to be compulsory.

DEFINITIONS

Compulsory Voting. It means citizens are legally required to vote in elections, subject to small penalties if they don’t

Prof. Shane Singh 2015  *(Assistant professor of international affairs at the University of Georgia) “*BEYOND TURNOUT: THE CONSEQUENCES OF COMPULSORY VOTI” <https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/beyond-turnout-consequences-compulsory-voting>

Today, nearly 30 countries employ compulsory voting. In many places, such as Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador, while voting is legally required, abstainers are not fined. In countries where sanctions for abstention are generally enforced, no two laws are the same. For example, in Brazil, while the fine for abstention is generally less than the equivalent of £1, those who do not vote, among other things, cannot work in the public sector, cannot obtain admission to public schools, and cannot acquire a passport or a loan from a public bank. Nonvoters are also barred from making banking transactions in neighbouring Bolivia and Peru. In Australia, the fine for abstention is equivalent to £11, and nonpayment can lead to imprisonment for contempt of court.

VALUE: Democracy. That is, promoting, upholding, and strengthening the participation of the people in determining their government

Definition

Oxford Learner’s Dictionary copyright 2020 <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/democracy>

a system of government in which the people of a country can vote to elect their representatives

Reason to Prefer: Best results. Democracy produces the best outcomes for the well-being and human rights of the citizens

Nanhee Byrnes 2015. (PhD candidate at Univ. of Calif. San Diego) The Best Results Argument for Democracy, doctoral thesis <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/87m2f141>

In this section, I argue that the problem is solved, and the outcome is the best results argument for democracy. I maintain that the key to break the circularity obtains as we ask why we would distrust a plural voting polity. That is, even if we concede that there are some individuals of exceptional political talent, why would we prefer to hold on to the democratic right? I believe that the answer lies in the presumption of self-protection, that is, when people protect their interests by themselves they can protect the interests best. The democratic right is the best available means to this end. I maintain that this presumption serves as a decisive reason for us to prefer democracy to plural voting. Presently, Arneson develops the protection of liberal right argument for democracy, based on the self-protection presumption. That is, the people are the most able to protect their liberal (or basic or human) rights.Once democracy is chosen for this presumptive reason, all the three effects, discussed earlier, follow in the manner of reinforcing each other. The outcome is the best results.
**[END QUOTE. She goes on later in the same article to conclude QUOTE:]**
I believe that the most obvious fact about democratic decision making is that it allows the most preference satisfaction for the most people. Clearly, democracy allows more people to be satisfied more frequently than any alternatives. If preference satisfaction is essential to happiness, democracy can maximize the happiness of people.

CONTENTION 1: Reduced corruption

Compulsory voting reduces political corruption because it motivates the democratic process to more actively solve it

Prof. Shane Singh 2015  *(Assistant professor of international affairs at the University of Georgia) “*BEYOND TURNOUT: THE CONSEQUENCES OF COMPULSORY VOTI” <https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/beyond-turnout-consequences-compulsory-voting>

 Further, compulsory voting has been linked to reduced political corruption, potentially because it incentivises disillusioned voters, many of whom would otherwise stay home, to go to the polls and vote against improbity. Anecdotal evidence for this is found in Australia, which is considered by Transparency International to be one of the least corrupt countries in the world – and less corrupt than the United Kingdom and the United States.

CONTENTION 2. More responsive and beneficial government.

Democracy is good and more democracy is better. Mandatory voting makes government more responsive to all the citizens

William A. Galston 2011 (Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings Institution) 5 Nov 2011 “Telling Americans to Vote, or Else” <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/telling-americans-to-vote-or-else/>

The second argument for mandatory voting is democratic. Ideally, a democracy will take into account the interests and views of all citizens. But if some regularly vote while others don’t, officials are likely to give greater weight to participants. This might not matter much if nonparticipants were evenly distributed through the population. But political scientists have long known that they aren’t. People with lower levels of income and education are less likely to vote, as are young adults and recent first-generation immigrants. Changes in our political system have magnified these disparities. During the 1950s and ’60s, when turnout rates were much higher, political parties reached out to citizens year-round. At the local level these parties, which reformers often criticized as “machines,” connected even citizens of modest means and limited education with neighborhood institutions and gave them a sense of participation in national politics as well. (In its heyday, organized labor reinforced these effects.) But in the absence of these more organic forms of political mobilization, the second-best option is a top-down mechanism of universal mobilization. Mandatory voting would tend to even out disparities stemming from income, education and age, enhancing our system’s inclusiveness.

CONTENTION 3. Reduced polarization

A. Low turnout = polarization

**Advocating compulsory voting in the U.S., William Galston in 2011 explained that low voter turnout leads to political polarization and compulsory voting would help solve it**

William A. Galston 2011 (Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings Institution) 5 Nov 2011 “Telling Americans to Vote, or Else” <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/telling-americans-to-vote-or-else/>

The third argument for mandatory voting goes to the heart of our current ills. Our low turnout rate pushes American politics toward increased polarization. The reason is that hard-core partisans are more likely to dominate lower-turnout elections, while those who are less fervent about specific issues and less attached to political organizations tend not to participate at levels proportional to their share of the electorate.
**[END QUOTE. He goes on later in the same context to say QUOTE:]**
If events combine to energize one part of the political spectrum and dishearten the other, a relatively small portion of the electorate can shift the system out of all proportion to its numbers. Some observers are comfortable with this asymmetry. But if you think that today’s intensely polarized politics impedes governance and exacerbates mistrust — and that is what most Americans firmly (and in my view rightly) believe — then you should be willing to consider reforms that would strengthen the forces of conciliation.

B. This matters because polarization is bad

**High polarization in democracies leads to instabilities that damage democracy and can even lead to its destruction**

Prof. Jennifer McCoy 2018 (Professor of Political Science, Georgia State University) 31 Oct 2018 **Extreme political polarization weakens democracy – can the US avoid that fate?** <https://theconversation.com/extreme-political-polarization-weakens-democracy-can-the-us-avoid-that-fate-105540>

[A collaborative research project I led](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0002764218759576) on polarized democracies around the world examines the processes by which societies divide into political “tribes” and democracy is harmed. Based on a study of 11 countries including the U.S., Turkey, Hungary, Venezuela, Thailand and others, we found that when political leaders cast their opponents as immoral or corrupt, they create “us” and “them” camps – called by political scientists and psychologists “in-groups” and “out-groups” – in the society. In this tribal dynamic, each side views the other “out group” party with increasing distrust, bias and enmity. Perceptions that “If you win, I lose” grow. Each side views the other political party and their supporters as a threat to the nation or their way of life if that other political party is in power. For that reason, the incumbent’s followers tolerate more illiberal and increasingly authoritarian behavior to stay in power, while the opponents are more and more willing to resort to undemocratic means to remove them from power. This damages democracy.

**In summary, democracy is a good thing because it produces the best results for the greatest number of people. Compulsory voting makes it cleaner, more responsive, less polarized and more likely to survive and thrive.**

Negative Counter-Brief: Democracy

In order to counter this affirmative case, we provide evidence that compulsory voting doesn’t help uphold democracy, doesn’t produce better results and actually makes things worse.

Doesn’t reduce polarization. Turn: Brazil study finds it increases preference for extreme-left parties like the PSDB (Partido da Social Democracia Braslieira)

Dr. Fernanda Letite Lopez De Leon and Renata Rizzi 2016 (De Leon – PhD economics. Rizzi - cofounder and director of Strategy & Business at Nexo, Brazil's most successful digital news startup ) “Does forced voting result in political polarization?” PUBLIC CHOICE 25 Feb 2016 <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11127-016-0318-7.pdf>

In this paper, we document the short-term effects of compulsory voting in determining individuals’ political positioning. We explore a quasi-experimental design that exogenously assigns people to different voting systems: voluntary and compulsory. Similar to this paper, Meredith (2009) uses an RD approach comparing future political party alignments for individuals who are almost eligible (are almost 18 years old) with those that are just eligible to vote in the United States. Meredith (2009) finds that 2000-eligible voters became 2 percentage points more likely to be registered with a party and to be registered as a Democrat. We find that, upon being exposed to the compulsory voting legislation, individuals become 2–4 percentage points more likely to self-declare an extreme-left orientation and 5–8 percentage points more likely to express a preference for the PSDB party in the 2010 Brazilian election.

Doesn’t produce better results. Turn: Brazil study finds it makes “charisma” more important than honesty or competence for attracting votes

Dr. Fernanda Letite Lopez De Leon and Renata Rizzi 2016 (De Leon – PhD economics. Rizzi - cofounder and director of Strategy & Business at Nexo, Brazil's most successful digital news startup ) “Does forced voting result in political polarization?” PUBLIC CHOICE 25 Feb 2016 <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11127-016-0318-7.pdf>

We find that charisma becomes 7 percentage points more likely to be cited as the most important characteristic in an ideal president (row 8) when citizens are under compulsory voting. The size of this effect is large. It is cited three times more often as the most important quality in a president among compulsory voters (9.7 %) than among voluntary voters (2.7 %). In rows (9)–(12), we find a similar pattern for the impact of compulsory voting on the most important characteristic in a mayor. Individuals become 5.9 percentage points more likely to mention charisma as the most important characteristic in an ideal mayor.
**[END QUOTE. They go on later in the same context to conclude QUOTE**:]
Remarkably, we find robust evidence that charisma is more likely to be cited as the most important characteristic in an ideal candidate than other traits that are more commonly associated with higher-quality politicians, such as competence, honesty, and genuine care about the people.

Compulsory voting doesn’t improve democracy. Turn: It brings in non-interested voters, producing random outcomes

**Analysis: Forcing a bunch of people to vote who don’t know and don’t care about the candidates means they will show up and vote pretty much at random. This can lead to an outcome where the actual preferences of the majority who have preferences will be overturned by the randomness of the ignorant/apathetic voters.**

Prof. Keith Jakee and Prof. Guang-Zhen Sun 2006. (Jakee - Associate Professor at the Wilkes Honors College of Florida Atlantic University . Sun – Economics Dept., Monash University, Australia) <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Keith_Jakee/publication/5154583_Is_compulsory_voting_more_democratic/links/559fffea08aed84bedf44d25.pdf>

Contrary to some recent assertions, we show that if we take an expressive view of the voting act and consider the role of information on that act, an increase in electoral turnout alone does not necessarily lead to a superior aggregate electoral outcome. From our perspective, the decision to vote is a function of the intensity of the individual’s preferences over the very act of voting itself and the extent to which the individual is confident in her understanding of the world and the particular electoral context. We therefore argue that the unexamined assumption that forcing citizens to vote will make them unambiguously more interested in, and informed about, the political process is, at least at present, untenable. Our results help clarify some of the normative questions surrounding democratic legitimacy and voter turnout. It should be apparent that equating higher turnout with greater “legitimacy” (or even improved “democracy”) is overly optimistic, if not simplistic. Compulsory voting systems can certainly deliver the former, but not necessarily the latter. Advocating the maximization of voter turnout – by any means, including coercion – is fraught with more complications than the commonly accepted one of infringing upon the citizen’s right to choose not to participate in the electoral process: we showed that as more random voters are forced to cast ballots, the more likely the electoral outcome will approximate a coin toss. Thus, a superior revelation of political preferences is not necessarily forthcoming from such coercion, if many of those who are forced to vote lack any intensity of preference, or information about the electoral process, or both. To argue the opposite, as Lijphart does for example, requires knowing much more (or assuming much more!) about the preferences and information set of those who are coerced than we can reasonably expect of political analysts. The possibility that information cascades might exist only exacerbates the potential randomness of voting outcomes.

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1. <https://richardlangworth.com/worst-form-of-government> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)