Voting—Reading

Should voting be compulsory in our democracy?

Worries about Low Voter Participation in Elections

Free and fair elections are essential to a democracy. They make true representative government possible. Through voting, people express their views about government. They choose leaders who will improve their country and community. But what happens when people choose not to vote? Does that indicate democracy is thriving or failing? What, if anything, should be done to improve voter turnout?

In newer democracies, voter turnout is usually high. For example, in Lithuania, nearly 80 percent of registered voters took part in their first open elections in 1993. Fifteen years later, only 48 percent voted. In some older democracies, many people do not vote. Only about 60 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. The same was true for Mexican voters in the 2006 presidential election. In Colombia’s 2010 presidential election, less than 50 percent of people eligible decided to vote. Usually, even fewer voters turn out for state or city elections. In March of 2011, less than 12 percent of Los Angeles’ registered voters cast ballots to elect their local officials.

Many people are concerned about low voter turnout. They fear that if citizens do not vote, unqualified or bad leaders will be elected or stay in power. They doubt that leaders will be accountable. How can leaders speak for “the people” when so few people actually chose them?

Strategies to Increase Voter Participation

Democracies have many strategies to increase voter turnout, including making it easier to vote. Governments that allow people to vote at home and to mail in their ballots tend to see higher
In Colorado, the turnout for *primary elections* more than doubled between 2006 and 2010 after voting laws were changed to make absentee voting easier. Easy voter registration increases voter turnout, too. In most places, including Mexico and most U.S. states, people must *register* before they can vote. This process may take up to 45 days. Minnesota and North Carolina are among nine U.S. states that allow people to register and cast a ballot on the same day. Typically, states that provide Election Day registration have 10 to 12 percent higher voter turnout rates. For example, in the state of Minnesota, nearly 80 percent of eligible voters voted in 2008. Nearly 20 percent of those voters registered on Election Day. In many Latin American countries, the government issues national identification cards to all adult citizens. In some countries, including Peru and Ecuador, these ID cards include automatic voter registration.

Other ideas also seem to increase voting. When governments or political parties send sample ballots before Election Day or advertise to convince and remind people to vote, more people do. When election officials put polling places in convenient locations and keep polls open longer or for many days, more people vote. Election officials can also increase turnout by allowing early voting, before Election Day.

Some people believe that citizens should be required to vote. This is called *compulsory voting*. While voters are not required to vote for any particular candidate, they must be able to prove they voted. Usually, these voters get their national identification card marked at the polling place.

### Civic Participation and Compulsory Voting

In 16 democratic countries, citizens are required to vote in national elections. Without a valid excuse, they may face *sanctions* if they do not vote. In Peru, the fine is 20 Peru Nuevo Sols (about $7 USD). Nonvoters in Peru can also be denied bank loans and can be prohibited from receiving...
government goods and services. In Bolivia, people who cannot prove they voted may be denied their
salary for up to three months after the election. In Ecuador, everyone who is required to vote and fails to
do so must pay a fine, even if there is a valid excuse such as being out of the country. In some countries,
compulsory voting laws are rarely enforced. These countries include Costa Rica and Italy.

Some countries with compulsory voting have special exceptions. In Brazil, where most adults
are required to vote, people doing compulsory military service cannot vote. In Ecuador, people
who are illiterate or who are over the age of 64 are not required to vote. In Bolivia, the age at
which someone is required to vote depends on if they are married or not.

Compulsory Voting: Advocates and Opponents

Advocates often give the following arguments in support of compulsory voting:

- Compulsory voting laws do increase voter turnout. Studies show that compulsory voting
  increases turnout by 7 to 16 percent. In Australia, voter turnout is about 95 percent.

- Compulsory voting increases voting among people who are poor, less educated, and
  were previously disenfranchised. At one point, Ecuador, Peru, and some U.S. states
  required voters to pass literacy tests. This practice discriminated against indigenous
  people and others who could not read. Today, indigenous people in most countries are
  still less likely to vote. This is also true of Afro-Ecuadorians as well as Latinos, young
  voters, and African Americans living in the United States of America. Compulsory
  voting amplifies the voices of people who may not be paid much attention, which is
  good for democracy.

- Elections with high rates of voter participation are more legitimate because they better
  represent the will of the people.
Citizens are required to pay taxes, register for the military, and other responsibilities for the common good. It is reasonable to require voting.

Compulsory voting educates voters. If people know they must vote, they will pay closer attention to the issues. They will go to the polls more informed.

Compulsory voting laws reinforce that voting is a vital part of democratic citizenship.

Many candidates and political parties use negative campaigns to “scare” people to go to the polls. Mandatory voting would reduce the incentive to air negative advertisements.\(^\text{10}\)

**Opponents** of compulsory voting often use these arguments against it:

- Democracy is about freedom, including the freedom to choose to participate. Authoritarian governments often coerce people to vote and to attend political rallies to give the appearance that their leaders are popular. Voluntary voting makes democracy more transparent.

- People who are happy with the way things are may feel no need to vote. Low voter turnout may be a sign of overall voter satisfaction with the current system. Similarly, people will vote if they really care about the election results. Egyptians voted in huge numbers after the democracy movement toppled Mubarak’s regime. If people who do not care about an election are forced to vote, their votes will be uninformed or random.

- People who do not know or care about the candidates or the issues will not make wise or informed decisions. They may simply vote for someone at random and cancel the votes of people who do care. Forcing uninterested people to vote turns an election into a farce.

- Citizens can challenge corruption or fraud by *not* voting. People should not have to vote for politicians they do not trust. In Ecuador, where voting is mandatory, some voters deliberately spoil their ballots. They do this to show their disapproval of the candidates.
Some people are concerned that their votes will not be counted or will be tampered with. It makes a corrupt election seem legitimate when so many people vote.

- Sometimes, people are afraid to vote. They should not be forced to do so. For nearly 50 years after they had the constitutional right to vote in the United States of America, many African Americans were intimidated or harassed when they tried to vote. In the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas, a candidate for governor was assassinated the day after he announced that he would crack down on drug cartels if elected. This prompted President Felipe Calderon to plead with voters to vote and to show they would not be intimidated. Yet many voters remain afraid to cast ballots there.11

- There are easier ways to increase voting. Democracies should better educate potential voters about the issues and the candidates’ plans. Then, people will know what is “at stake” and why they should bother to vote. In the state of Maryland, where voter turnout in the September 2010 primary election was described as “dismal,” the state legislature called for new voter registration and education programs.12 Voluntary voting promotes thoughtful voting.

- Voluntary voting inspires people to take personal responsibility for their democracy. Compulsory voting does not.

Does compulsory voting improve democracy? Does it make voters more or less informed? Does it strengthen or weaken the power citizens have to get the best government possible?

Representative democracy is at stake.


Voting—Glossary

Advocates: (1. noun) People who argue for a policy, plan, or idea; supporters. (2. verb) Argues for a policy, plan, or idea.

Compulsory voting: Policy that requires eligible voters to cast ballots in elections.

Disenfranchise: Prevent or deprive a person or group of people from having a legal right, particularly the right to vote.

Eligible voters: People who meet the qualifications to vote in a particular nation, state, city, etc.

Opponents: People who argue against a policy, plan, or idea.

Primary elections: Preliminary vote in which members of political party or voters select candidates for a subsequent (or “general”) election.

Register: Sign up to have one’s name put on the list of official voters.

Representative government: Form of government in which the people elect officials to act for them.

Sanctions: Penalties provided for in the law.

Voter turnout: Percentage of eligible voters who cast a ballot in an election.
Voting—Quotations

“Requiring citizens to vote is no more restrictive than requiring them to register for the draft. And it is far less restrictive than requiring us, for example, to attend school; to serve on juries, possibly for weeks or months at a time; to pay taxes; or to serve in the military when drafted…. [V]oting is the least a citizen can do for his or her country.”


“The less legitimate politicians feel, the more they try to pass laws that build . . . a . . . façade of citizen involvement. This is why Soviet Bloc countries forced their citizens to vote.”

~ Filip Palda, *Canadian scholar* (2001)


“These people aren’t thinking about the elections – they’re focused on surviving.”

~ Jorge Rojas, *human rights worker, on the thousands of Colombians who missed voting because they were fleeing Los Rastrojos, a paramilitary group* (2010)


“Usually, turnout is very high at this precinct. It shows that there doesn’t appear to be any contentious issues.”

~ Douglas Tursman, *Chief Election Judge, Takoma Park, Maryland* (2010)

Quoted in Michael E. Ruane, “Across the Region, a Trickle; Voters, Candidates, and Election Officials Shocked At Meager Turnout,” *Washington Post* (September 15, 2010), B1.

“I can’t believe, in this day and age, with everything we’re facing, that people are so lackadasical.”

~ Bill Buslee, *one of 292 who voted at a Maryland precinct with 3626 registered voters* (2010)

Quoted in Michael E. Ruane, “Across the Region, a Trickle; Voters, Candidates, and Election Officials Shocked At Meager Turnout,” *Washington Post* (September 15, 2010), B1.

[Anyone who fails to vote would be making a] “horrible mistake…. You’ll get the exact result you don’t want.”

~ Bill Clinton, *former President of the United States of America* (2010)

“Could you imagine if 95 percent of the people in little Ridgway voted? I would bet at the statehouse they would start paying attention to us. I know [the gubernatorial candidate… ] would come here if it happened.”

~Greg Clifton, administrator of the small Colorado town of Ridgway, as the town considered a proposal for compulsory voting (2010)


“In Minnesota, we not only believe citizenship is an American right, it is also an American responsibility…Election Day Registration has guaranteed them that right – fairly and freely. It’s a right that all Americans should share.”

~Keith Ellison, Member of the U.S. House of Representatives (2009)


“… to the extent that compulsory voting increases turnout, compulsory voting also removes socioeconomic differences in electoral participation.”

~ Simon Jackman, voter participation analyst (2009)

Voting—Graphs

These charts show the percentage of voting-age people who actually voted in recent nation-wide elections in.

- **Colombia**
- **Ecuador**
- **Mexico**
- **Peru**
- **United States**

This data was drawn from the work of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). See more reports and statistics at [www.idea.int](http://www.idea.int). For U.S.A. data, see [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).
Voting—Political Cartoons


Translation: We already learned to vote...When will we learn to elect?
Voting—Selected Resources

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