Compulsory Voting

by Shane Singh
University of Georgia

Summary

For democracy to work, citizens must vote. Yet turnout rates are low or declining in many democratic countries. In the United States, turnout remains lower than in many peer countries. While turnout in the United States has recently climbed, the country’s participation rate lags that of many of its democratic peers. Current polls suggest that around 20-30 percent of Americans support compulsory voting. An analogy can be made to jury duty. Like voting, jury service is a necessary component of the modern democratic state. And, undoubtedly, fewer jurors would be recruited if serving were optional. Making jury duty obligatory increases compliance, just as making voting obligatory should increase turnout. But do those who would otherwise shirk jury service become enthusiastic and proficient jurists given their forced participation?

Advocates of compulsory voting argue that it would incentivize people to turn out and, in turn, bolster the quality of democracy. Critics point to evidence that compulsory voting increases the rate of invalid ballots cast, and fails to promote greater political literacy. Data is conclusive that compulsory voting increases turnout, especially amongst people of lower socioeconomic status when the policy includes penalties for abstention. Voting populations in nations with compulsory voting policies also tend to be demographically closer to the whole of the electorate. Though evidence is less overwhelming, research suggests that increased turnout as a result of a compulsory voting policy tends to advantage candidates and policies to the political left. Data is unclear whether a compulsory voting requirement would impact political parties, incentivizing them to moderate or extremize their stances. As a tool for bolstering turnout, compulsory voting is effective; but advocates must recognize that if the policy were adopted, the effects are likely to go beyond turnout.