Compulsory Voting

A Practical Research Guide

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Narrowing the gap between research and public dialogue, the University of Chicago Center for Effective Government’s Democracy Reform Primers responsibly advance conversations and strategy about proposed changes to our political institutions. Each Primer focuses on a particular reform, clarifies its intended purposes, and critically evaluates what the best available research has to say about it. The Primers do not serve as a platform for either authors or the Center to advance their own independent views about the reform; to the contrary, they serve as an objective and authoritative guide about what we actually know—and what we still don’t know—about the likely effects of adopting prominent reforms to our political institutions.

In some instances, the available evidence may clearly support the claims of a reform’s advocates. In other instances, it may cut against them. And in still others, the scholarly literature may be mixed, indeterminate, or altogether silent. Without partisan judgment or ideological pretense, and grounded in objective scholarship, these Primers set the record straight by clarifying what can be said about democracy reforms with confidence and what requires further study.

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About the Series Editor
Promise of the Reform

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. The promise of compulsory voting is that it would incentivize people to turn out and, in turn, bolster the quality of democracy.
Key Takeaways From Existing Research

- Compulsory voting increases turnout, especially where there exist enforced penalties for abstention.
- The composition of the voting population (those who do vote) tends to better reflect the composition of the electorate (those who can vote) where voting is compulsory.
- Compulsory voting increases the rate of invalid ballots cast.
- Compulsory voting probably moves election results and policy to the left.
- There is little evidence that compulsory voting makes people more politically informed and engaged.

Important Questions that the Research Does Not Answer

- What effect does compulsory voting have on citizens’ attitudes?
- What effect does compulsory voting have on how parties and politicians behave?
- What effects does compulsory voting have on political representation and party polarization?
"Polls suggest that around 20-30 percent of Americans support compulsory voting."

While turnout in the United States has recently climbed, the country’s participation rate lags that of many of its democratic peers. In some such countries, including Australia, Belgium, and Luxembourg, voting is mandatory. Turnout is also robust in younger democracies with compulsory voting, including Argentina, Brazil, and Peru.

The United States has a single experience with compulsory voting: it was used in Kansas City in the 1890s. Compulsory voting bills have since been introduced in several localities and states, most recently in California (2020), Connecticut (2023), Massachusetts (2021), New York (2023), and Washington (2023). At the federal level, a mandatory voting bill was introduced in the House of Representatives in 2022. Polls suggest that around 20-30 percent of Americans support compulsory voting.

This primer will assess the theoretical and empirical research on the effects of compulsory voting. In doing so, it will touch on the following:

- the theory of voter turnout, which suggests that compulsory voting will increase the participation rate and could iron out socioeconomic disparities in the voting population
- theoretical arguments regarding the downstream effects of compulsory voting on people and parties
- evidence of compulsory voting’s effects on turnout
- evidence of compulsory voting’s effects beyond turnout
- what existing research means for the potential of compulsory voting and what open questions remain unanswered.
In this cost-benefit framework, compulsory voting should clearly increase turnout. By introducing an expense for not voting, it effectively adds a “negative cost” of participation. For example, even if one must spend $3 on bus fare and forgo $10 in wages to take part in an election, they’d still come out $7 ahead by voting if the fine for abstention were $20.

Credible threats of a penalty for abstention are most likely to alter the cost-benefit calculation. Still, even the mere existence of a compulsory voting law could, in theory, boost turnout. People might, for example, comply with mandatory voting out of civic duty. Or, compulsory voting could send a societal signal that voting is desirable and that abstention is bad. The idea that compulsory voting levels out socioeconomic disparities in turnout also has a solid theoretical basis: it should help equalize voting rates by bringing less participatory groups—typically the socioeconomically disadvantaged—to the polls.

Moving beyond turnout, there is a longstanding thesis that compulsory voting induces political engagement and sophistication. As far back as the 1890s, it was claimed that an obligation to vote in the United States would spur the “desire of doing so intelligently,” and that a compelled American voter would “gradually come to act from the higher motive of serving his country.” More recently, mandatory voting has been described as a “form of civic education and political stimulation.”

So far, theory paints a rosy picture of compulsory voting. It not only increases and equalizes turnout; it also makes voters more engaged and politically astute. But there are important caveats and alternative perspectives to consider.
“Mandates increase participation, but the next logical rung—that they also engender engagement and knowledge—requires a rather buoyant view of the democratic citizen.”

First, some types of penalties could have more bite for people in the upper classes. A handful of countries employ nonmonetary sanctions for abstention, such as ineligibility for passport services or state-sponsored qualification exams. These types of punishments may matter little to someone without the ability to travel abroad or pursue higher education. If so, compulsory voting could widen socioeconomic gaps in turnout rates.

Second, nonvoters are arguably less politically competent, and requiring them to vote may do nothing to change this. As one academic brusquely put it, compulsory voting “is like a magic wand that makes the electorate dumber about politics.” If this is true, we might expect “lower quality” vote choices and more invalid ballots among those compelled to the polls. Further, many nonvoters are skeptical of the democratic enterprise to begin with. Some might even withdraw further or become irritated when obliged to vote, perhaps casting blank or spoiled ballots out of protest.

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 the mandate to take part? The answer to this question depends on what one believes about the people’s reactions to democratic obligations. It is rather uncontroversial that mandates increase participation, but the next logical rung—that they also engender engagement and knowledge—requires a rather buoyant view of the democratic citizen.
Like citizens, political parties should, in theory, act differently where voting is compulsory. First, they will be less likely to try and pay people to participate or stay home (in settings where this phenomenon occurs). There will be little value in paying likely supporters to turn out, and it will cost more to pay someone to stay home if doing so attracts a fine. A decrease in the availability of such underhanded methods may induce parties to rely more on persuasion, and, in their attempts to persuade, they may focus more on policy-based and ideological appeals. Even in developed democracies where vote buying is uncommon, party strategies may be shaped by compulsory voting. Parties may choose to pitch broadly appealing policies, given that mandatory voting incentivizes them to consider the preferences of the whole electorate. If this is the case, compulsory voting could also enhance democratic representation.

Relatedly, parties may temper their stances. Here, the logic is that politically moderate citizens are induced to vote where doing so is required, meaning centrist platforms are more likely to pay off. However, there is an alternative perspective to this moderation thesis. Uninformed or disinclined people who are obliged to vote may select fringe or protest parties out of apathy or to signal dissent. This could increase the number of seats won by such parties, while encouraging them to intensify their positions.

Who is brought to the polls by compulsory voting will also help determine if and how it moves policy. If mandatory voting brings out people who tend to favor the left—perhaps those of lower socioeconomic status—then left-leaning parties should be more successful, along with their favored policies. If the compelled electorate is instead ideologically diverse or rightwing, the link between compulsory voting and leftism would be absent or reversed.

So, whether parties moderate or polarize where people must vote, and whether and in what ways compulsory voting affects policy, largely depends on who is induced to participate by a mandatory voting rule. Ask yourself, what type of person is most likely to be brought to the polls by compulsory voting? Similarly, what type of person is most likely to sit out elections where voting is voluntary?

The answers to these questions could change with time. In the U.S., nonvoters have traditionally held left-leaning policy preferences. Yet, as the Democratic Party has developed into the mainstay of college-educated people in large cities, who tend to be participatory, it has become more likely that nonvoting Americans lean to the right.
As detailed in the previous section, theoretical predictions about the consequences of compulsory voting are often divergent. A growing literature on the effects of compulsory voting has helped to resolve some, but not all, of these tensions.

“Compulsory voting reduces socioeconomic inequalities in turnout rates, meaning the composition of the voting population tends to better reflect that of the electorate.”

To this end, many authors have taken advantage of age-based cutoffs in the requirement to vote. For example, in Argentina and Brazil voting is voluntary for those aged 16-17 and 70 or above but compulsory for those aged 18-69. Individuals nearby these age thresholds should be, on average, similar on all variables but the requirement to vote. One paper leveraged one such threshold in Argentina to show that compulsory voting increases turnout in legislative elections. With a similar design, another study showed that, in Brazil, it does so in municipal contests, pushing up turnout by about 12 percentage points among younger people and about four points for older people. A third study reported a larger effect—around 20 percentage points—in presidential elections. In Peru, it was found that the halt in the voting requirement at age 70 depressed turnout by about eight percentage points.
Authors leveraging age cutoffs also provide insight into the effect of compulsory voting on what type of person votes. Compulsory voting in Argentina has a bigger effect on those with lower socioeconomic status. In Brazil, the opposite is the case, likely because Brazil’s nonfinancial abstention penalties are more relevant to people in the middle and upper classes.

Changes to or from compulsory voting laws provide researchers with an opportunity to contrast trends in places that changed their voting rules to with those of similarly situated places that did not. For example, one study shows that Australia’s adoption of compulsory voting increased turnout in national elections—by about 19 percentage points—by comparing trends in participation across Australia and a group of similar countries. Using a similar method, compulsory voting in a Swiss canton was shown to have increased turnout substantially. Others have leveraged the state-by-state abolition of compulsory voting in Austria to show that shifts to voluntary rules decreased turnout.

Some researchers have leveraged a unique feature of Peru’s system of compulsory voting, where the fine for abstention is determined by district poverty rates. In this case, doubling the fine slightly increases turnout, with the authors not finding the impact of the penalties to be bigger among the richer or more educated, even though Peru’s nonmonetary sanctions resemble Brazil’s.

To sum up so far, cross-national comparisons suggest that compulsory voting increases turnout, especially when penalties for abstention are enforced, and credible evidence gleaned from studies that leverage intra-country and intertemporal variation in the application of compulsory voting verify its upward impact. Further, evidence, on balance, suggests that compulsory voting helps iron out socioeconomic disparities in electoral participation.

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Impacts on Political Engagement

While compulsory voting increases turnout, many of the people who participate because of compulsion cast an invalid ballot. A meta-analysis of cross-national research found that compulsory voting has the largest and most consistent effect on invalid voting among nine possible predictors. Research in Peru suggested that a large majority of those who turn out because of a bigger fine cast an invalid ballot, findings that appear consistent with the experience of Austria. Meanwhile, a study leveraging age cutoffs found that higher levels of invalid balloting under mandatory voting are driven by people who distrust or dislike democratic institutions.

Evidence that compulsory voting induces citizen engagement and political sophistication is weak. One study found that people impelled to participate in a San Francisco election under threat of the revocation of a $25 gift card became more politically informed, while a similar experiment in Quebec found no such effect. Scholars who take advantage of age thresholds also tend to find little evidence that mandatory voting induces engagement or sophistication. While those obliged to vote in Brazil are more likely to watch television news, another, similar study in Brazil found no evidence that mandatory voting increases political knowledge or information consumption. A paper on the Argentine experience found no evidence that being required to vote increases political interest or leads voters to rely on “sophisticated” criteria, such as candidates’ policy positions.

In Peru, no link was found between informing people about larger abstention penalties and political information, nor were researchers able to detect an effect of the bigger fines on political information, at the same time finding that they reduce interest in politics. Similarly, in Austria, the requirement to vote appeared to have no effect on political interest. Turning to political attitudes, research exploiting age cutoffs in voting requirements shows that mandatory voting can make people who are downbeat about democracy to begin with less dissatisfied with the way it functions or unsupportive of political authorities. In Austrian states, compulsory voting was to drive down belief in free will and national pride, while in Peru there was a negative but imprecise link between larger fines for abstention and trust in political parties. While it is likely that mandatory voting has attitudinal consequences, owing to comparatively little causally sound research on the topic, we do not yet have a good idea of how compulsory voting affects political attitudes.

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Impact on Election Results

Turning to election outcomes, evidence suggests that compulsory voting brings to the polls people likely to support left-leaning parties. In a Swiss canton, support for leftist policy in referendums was boosted by the implementation of compulsory voting. In Australia, research found that the adoption of mandatory voting increased the vote share of the center-left Labor Party. In Brazil, the voting requirement starting at age 18 made voters more likely to identify as extreme left and prefer the (more centrist) Brazilian Social Democracy Party. However, there are counterexamples to this trend. In the Netherlands, the performance of social democratic parties improved once the country dropped compulsory voting, an outcome reflected in an analysis of Austria. Another paper on Austria, meanwhile, found no evidence that Austria’s reforms affected the fortunes of any party.

In terms of policy impact, Australia’s adoption of compulsory voting caused pension spending to increase. In Venezuela, the removal of the requirement to vote led to a rise in income inequality. While in Austria, there was no evidence that the state-by-state removal of mandatory voting affected government expenditures. So, while results are not fully congruous, on balance it seems compulsory voting probably moves election results and policy outcomes to the left.

Turning to parties and politicians, there is evidence that mandatory voting in Australia led the Labor party to field candidates in districts that it previously did not contest, perhaps in anticipation of increased turnout among its base. Leveraging the adoption of mandatory voting in Thailand and Argentina’s age-conditional turnout requirements, it seems that compulsory voting encourages parties toward policy-based campaigning and away from efforts to buy votes. Still, owing to little empirical research on the topic, it is not yet clear how politicians and political parties respond to compulsory voting.

Similarly, due to a lack of research, little is known about how mandatory voting affects political representation. One paper found less bias toward the rich where voting is mandatory, while another found that compulsory voting does little to explain differences in representation between richer and poorer citizens. At any rate, these studies compare patterns across countries, making it hard to distinguish correlation from causation. There is also little empirical support for or against the common claim that compulsory voting induces parties to moderate their positions. It seems that large parties moderate their stances under enforced compulsory voting, while smaller parties tend toward the extremes, but this is again based on a comparative analysis that could be tainted by unaccounted variables.

“On balance it seems compulsory voting probably moves election results and policy outcomes to the left.”
Theory and evidence about the effects of compulsory voting do not always correspond. Yet one thing is clear: compulsory voting increases voter turnout, especially where penalties for staying home are enforced. Obligatory voting also seems to encourage people of lower socioeconomic status to the polls. And, it is plain that compulsory voting increases the rate of invalid ballots cast. Though evidence is less overwhelming, research suggests that compulsory voting moves election results and public policy leftward. Despite common claims, evidence that compulsory voting makes people more politically informed and engaged is scant.

There are also theoretical predictions about compulsory voting for which we do not have enough empirical evidence to reach a conclusion. It is not clear whether a requirement to vote shapes individuals’ political attitudes or the political strategies of parties and politicians. Further, it is not yet evident how compulsory voting affects political representation or the extent to which parties moderate or extremize their stances.

Those interested in compulsory voting as a tool for bolstering turnout can be confident that it is effective in this regard. They should also recognize that the impact of compulsory voting, were it to be adopted, is likely to go beyond turnout.

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Endnotes


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