

Compulsory Voting: A Path towards More and More Equal Participation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Voter turnout levels have been steadily declining in the whole of the world's democracies, for the last decades. This finding is quite consensual among electoral behavior scholars. For example, Blais (2007) looks at 106 democracies throughout around 35 years, concluding that average voter turnout levels have begun to decline in the 1990's, and that the average level of such decline is 8 percentage points. This situation is even more problematic if we take into account that one of the major drivers of such a decline is the demobilization of young citizens, who vote at even lower rates than the rest of the population. Such fact has led some to predict a worsening of this problem in the future (Blais & Rubenson 2013).

This finding has led to an intensification of the debate around policies that may be able to reverse it. One of such policies is compulsory voting. As such, its implementation has been more frequently discussed recently, in countries such as United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand or Jordan (Hill 2014).

In this paper, I will argue in favor of compulsory voting as a way of addressing low in voter turnout levels and, more specifically, of fighting the unequal political participation that such levels frequently imply. It should be noted, however, that the aim of the paper *is not* to discuss the arguments put forward for and against compulsory voting. Rather, it aims for the presentation of some recent empirical findings in the field of electoral behavior that, in my view, sustain the case for compulsory voting as a way of addressing political inequality. I also present some studies that suggest which penalties on nonvoters have a more beneficial effect, and should thus be imposed, if a country is to make voting compulsory in an effective manner.

2. THE SO-WHAT QUESTION: WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT VOTER TURNOUT LEVELS?

In electoral democracies, the principle of 'one man, one vote' is one of most important manners in which to assure political equality, as it guarantees that the opinion of each individual is given equal weight, when

deciding on the most important matters regarding the *polis*.

Does low voter turnout put such a principle under threat? Not necessarily. If the part of the citizens who vote were a representative sample of the whole population, we would not need to worry about turnout levels, because the issue opinions of voters would reflect those of nonvoters. To put it differently, we only need to worry about turnout levels as long as turnout is unequal, meaning that there are differences in relevant political and social characteristics of voters and nonvoters (Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995). Unequal turnout is a problem, because it means that the concerns of different social groups are not addressed equally. When electoral participation is unequal, even if political actors are responsive to the views of voters, such views do not reflect those of the population *as a whole*. As Walter Burnham (1987, p. 99) as famously put it, '*if you don't vote, you don't count*'. This means that political actors may not feel the need to implement measures that address the concerns of social groups that permanently abstain from voting – if only because they are not aware of such concerns.

This problem of reduced responsiveness is even greater because it may create a vicious circle (Gallego 2014). Given that it leads members of low turnout groups to feel like their views do not matter as much as those of others, it can increase their dissatisfaction towards the functioning of democracy, and thus demobilize even the individuals of those groups that actually did vote (Lever 2009). This, in turn, gives those groups even less relative weight in each election, thus making the incentives of politicians to be responsive to their views even smaller. And cycle starts once more.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand whether or not turnout is unequal. That is what I shall turn to in the next section.

3. A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF TURNOUT INEQUALITY

Most studies on electoral participation inequality have focused in the United States of America (USA). They are quite consensual as to the fact that, in that country, turnout is very unequal: people from groups

with a lower socioeconomic status participate at consistently lower levels than those of groups with a higher socioeconomic status.

However, there is some controversy as to whether or not that finding can be replicated in other countries. In a robust recent study, Gallego (2014) shows that turnout inequality is neither a particularity of the United States case, as some authors have argued (e.g., Nie, Poweel & Prewitt 1969), nor ubiquitous, as others have defended (e.g., Fowler 2011). Taking formal education level as an indicator of socioeconomic status, the author rather shows how turnout inequality varies widely across the world, as Figure 1 shows us.

Figure 1. Predicted Probability to Vote by Education, in 85 Elections



Source: Gallego, 2014

According to these results, the author divides countries included in her sample into four categories: one in which the association between education and voter participation is strong – USA, Poland, Canada, Finland, Hungary and Switzerland; one in which such association is medium – Austria, Israel, Japan, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, Portugal, Romania and the UK; one in which the association between education and turnout is weak or even nonexistent – Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Denmark, Iceland, Korea, Peru, Spain and Taiwan; and one in which the size of such association varies widely from election to election, thus making its actual dimension hard to classify – Czech Republic, Germany, Netherlands, New Zealand and Norway. As we can see, even though there are a number of countries in which the level of inequality in political participation is not particularly worrying, most countries do in fact present considerable levels of such inequality. Furthermore, one should take into account that a number of countries in which participation inequality is not particularly worrying

already have compulsory voting: Australia, Belgium, Brazil and Peru. Also, Chile had compulsory voting between 1925 and 2012. And, as we know, voting is path-dependent, meaning that people create a habit to vote or not to vote, and such habit takes some time before it is reversed (Franklin 2004). Therefore, one could hypothesize that the low levels of turnout inequality found in Chile are still the effect of the long period of compulsory voting it experienced. This being true, what this analysis shows us is that half the countries with equal or near-equal turnout are countries in which voting is already compulsory, or in which voting was compulsory for a long time and just recently became voluntary. Conversely, it leaves us with a small number of voluntary-voting countries in which turnout inequality is small or inexistent.

4. HOW TO MAKE TURNOUT MORE EQUAL: CONTEXTUAL CHARACTERISTICS WITH HOMOGENEOUS AND HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS

To understand the ways in which one could aim for more equal electoral participation, in countries where such participation is unequal, it is useful to rely on the distinction, also made by Gallego (2014), between contextual factors that affect participation in heterogeneous and homogeneous ways (see also Verba, Nie & Kim 1978). The former disproportionately affect citizens of a specific socioeconomic group, whereas the latter affect citizens of all social groups in the same manner. For example, rainy election days or long waiting lines are likely to have a homogeneous negative effect on turnout, because one can expect individuals of different socioeconomic status to be equally demobilized by it. On the other hand, factors such as difficult registration procedures are likely to demobilize underprivileged citizens at higher rates, as these have a smaller number of resources that enable them to cope with the challenges posed by such procedure.

This distinction has important implications for policy prescriptions, if one is to aim towards more equal participation. Both heterogeneous and homogeneous effects may be able to push towards that goal, even though they can do so in different ways. Contextual characteristics with heterogeneous effects can equalize participation if they disproportionately mobilize citizens from low socioeconomic status groups. On the other hand, contextual characteristics with homogeneous effects can equalize participation only if they bring the overall participation levels close to its maximum, because, when participation gets very close to 100%, the difference between the participation of

different socioeconomic groups necessarily starts to shrink (Lijphart 1997). As the electoral participation of higher socioeconomic status groups gets close to its maximum, further increases in overall turnout are made at the expense of lower socioeconomic status individuals, thus making participation *more equal*. If electoral participation was actually 100%, there could be no difference between the participation of individuals of different groups, because *everyone* voted. However, compulsory voting is the only institution that can, on its own, have a homogeneous effect of such magnitude.

5. COMPULSORY VOTING

5.1 Why Compulsory Voting?

Whereas one can find several examples of contextual characteristics that can equalize participation through heterogeneous effects – such as vote-facilitating rules, for example, compulsory voting is the only institution able to have, on its own, a homogeneous effect that is strong enough as to make participation more equal. It is true that a great number of authors would call for other measures to be applied *before*, or even *instead* of compulsory voting. However, it is also true that the actual power of each of those measures to increase and equalize participation *on its own* is small. Also, those measures take a long time before their effects are actually felt. And even enormous investments in areas such as education would lead to relatively small increases in turnout levels (Franklin 2004). Therefore, compulsory voting has the great advantage of being the only policy able to, on its own, not only increase the overall levels of turnout, but also make it more equal. Needless to say, its financial costs on the state are small. Furthermore, compulsory voting can produce more and more equal participation even without the need to reach a consensus on the factors that make it both low and unequal (Hill, 2014). This is particularly important if we take into account that there is intense debate among political behavior scholars concerning the contextual factors that affect voter turnout, and that these scholars find it very difficult to disentangle such factors from each other, as most of them are highly correlated (for a good overview of this debate, see Blais 2006).

5.2 How and Where Should Compulsory Voting be Applied?

Naturally, compulsory voting does not make sense everywhere. It makes sense in countries in which turnout is unequal, and its pertinence and benefits are larger in countries with higher levels of such

inequality. However, as we have seen, countries in which participation inequality is small or inexistent are the exception rather than the rule.

Also, being in favor of compulsory voting does not necessarily mean that we need to leave aside all other measures that bring about more equal turnout. In fact, I would argue that such measures are in fact a necessary complement for compulsory voting. The application of compulsory voting on its own is not able to magically fix all problems of political inequality. Naturally, there are some risks associated with its implementation. Authors that oppose to compulsory voting have made some important points regarding those risks. However, compulsory voting can be a huge step forward in terms of enhancing levels of political equality. And, by implementing it alongside other measures that fight political inequality, we can actually avoid its risks.

Let me give you an example. There is an ongoing debate between political behavior scholars concerning the relationship between compulsory voting and political knowledge and interest for politics. Some authors (e.g., Hoffman e Graham 2006) argue that, when people are compelled to vote, they will try to do so with as much information as possible, thus increasing the levels of political knowledge and interest for politics of the population. Others argue that, if people are not *a priori* interested in politics, compelling them to vote will do nothing more than increasing their alienation towards it (Ballinger 2006). According to this view, compulsory voting can thus create what, in Social Psychology, is called a reactance phenomenon: the situation in which a person feels that a certain liberty is being taken away from him or her, thus reacting by intensifying the behavior associated with the liberty he or she perceives as being under threat (Brehm 1995). In this case, when a person is compelled to vote and does not want to do so, he or she reacts by dragging further away from politics. This example illustrates my point of how compulsory voting should be implemented alongside other policies aiming towards an increase in people's interest for politics. If, together with making voting compulsory, we implement measures capable of engaging people into the public affairs of their countries, as well as measures that make the act of voting easier, we have a better chance of fulfilling its beneficial potential, increasing people's engagement in the *polis*, while avoiding its risks – namely, that of pushing people even further away from public issues. Some examples of those measures include civic education programs, vote-facilitating rules, etc. My aim here is not to discuss those measures (but,

for a good discussion, see, for example, Hoffman & Graham 2006, pp. 111-3). My point here is, simply, that compulsory voting does not need to be applied *instead* of other measures capable of bringing about higher levels of turnout and political engagement on the behalf of citizens. On the contrary: its chances of success will actually increase if it is applied *alongside* such measures.

5.3 Sanctions on Nonvoters

It should be noted, however, that compulsory voting does not bring turnout levels close to 100% in all the countries in which it is applied. For example, voter turnout in 2015 Greece parliamentary election was no higher than 63.6% (IDEA 2016). This finding suggests that the effectiveness of compulsory voting in bringing about near-universal turnout rates depends on the conditions under which it is implemented. Central among those is the kind of sanctions imposed on nonvoters. Therefore, in this last section I shall draw upon those penalties. My goals here are twofold. First of all, I aim to present a typology of the sanctions that can be imposed on people who refrain from voting, as well as to provide an overall perspective of the ones that are more frequently used. After that, I will refer to the results of some empirical studies suggesting which of those sanctions are more effective in pushing turnout levels towards near-universal rates. This is very important, because I am arguing for compulsory voting as a way of reducing inequality in electoral participation. And, as we have seen, the way in which compulsory voting can accomplish that goal is through such near-universal rates. Therefore, when compulsory voting fails to do so, it fails to go through with its most important objective. That is why it is crucial to look at the conditions under which this policy has greater chances of enhancing electoral participation.

Gratschew (2004) draws a distinction four kinds of penalties that can be imposed on people who fail to vote, under compulsory voting. These are not mutually exclusive, and combinations of several kinds can, in fact, be found in several countries. This being said, the first kind referred by the author is the obligation of the person that refrains from voting to present a valid explanation of why he or she did so. Naturally, this penalty can be more or less strict, depending on the amount of explanations that are considered to be valid. The second kind of penalty is the obligation of the people who do not vote to pay a fine. Again, this penalty can assume several levels of harshness, depending on the value of the fine. The third type of sanction corresponds to the possibility

of incarceration of the abstentionist. And the last one corresponds to the withdrawal of some of his or her civil rights.

This author presents also a list of countries in which voting is compulsory, or in which it was so in the past. If one takes into account the nations in which voting is currently compulsory, as well as those in which it was compulsory in the past but no longer is, and those in which the penalties applied on abstentionists have been changed, we come up with a total of 33 cases. Among these, 11 demanded an explanation on the behalf of the individuals who failed to vote, 19 applied fines on them, 3 considered the possibility of their incarceration, and 3 admitted the withdrawal of some of his or her civil rights. There are still 3 cases in which the penalties applied on abstentionists cannot be fitted into either of these categories, and 9 in which there is no sanction whatsoever.

This quick overview shows us that fines are the most common mechanism of punishing those who do not participate electorally. But one can also find a relatively high number of cases in which no sanction is imposed on them. For that reason, it is important to remember the distinction between formal and informal obligation to vote (Birch 2009). The former designates the actual enforcement of penalties on abstentionists, whereas the latter refers to social and/or political pressure for an individual to cast a vote. Again, these are not mutually exclusive. But the distinction is important, as some authors who are in favor of compulsory voting argue that, even though formal penalties may be imposed, the determinant factor in driving individuals to polls will be informal sanctions (Hoffman & Graham 2006; Lijphart 1997). Their argument is that compulsory voting leads to the creation of an electoral participation culture, leading to the creation of a habit to vote and getting individuals to perceive abstention as morally wrong. However, empirical studies on the effects of compulsory voting suggest that its influence on turnout levels and, consequently, on turnout inequality, is only significant when there are formal sanctions (Blais, Massicotte & Dobrzynska 2003). On its own, moral obligation does not seem to be capable of raising electoral participation levels. But what is more, the probability of citizens to cast a vote seems to be higher when the penalties on abstentionists are heavier (Panagopoulos 2008; Singh 2011).

Nevertheless, some studies present results that do not seem to fit well into the ones I just referred. For example, in his study of the effect of compulsory voting on the level of political knowledge of citizens,

Sheppard (2015) concludes that it is on countries in which the fines on abstentionists are softer that individuals present higher levels of such knowledge. One can thus conclude that we still have a poor understanding of the effects of the harshness of penalties imposed upon abstentionists, given the small number of studies on that matter that have been published. It may be that such effects depend on the social, institutional and political characteristics of each country. Either way, it is clear that we need further studies on this matter, and that those studies need to take into account the specific characteristics of different countries. So far, all one seems to be able to state is that compulsory voting should, in fact, be accompanied by some kind of formal sanction on people who do not vote. But how harsh should those sanctions be, we cannot know for sure.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I aimed at showing how compulsory voting can be a path towards reducing unequal political participation. I argued that, because it raises the levels of participation close to its maximum, it dilutes the differences between turnout levels of different social groups, in a way that no other measure can. However, I contended that the application of compulsory voting does not need to go against the application of other measures that aim at a greater involvement of citizens in the public matters of their country. In fact, I have argued that the chances of compulsory voting being able to achieve its beneficial potential are greater when its implementation is *accompanied* by such measures. Regarding the sanctions that should be imposed on abstentionists, I have shown that electoral behavior studies suggest that only formal sanctions seem to be effective in bringing about considerable increases in turnout levels and, thus, in fighting unequal political participation. However, it is hard to know just how harsh those sanctions should be, as the scarce empirical work on that matter presents some contradictory findings.

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