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# Compulsory voting

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## Summary

Should there be a legal requirement to cast a vote in elections? Would compulsory voting increase engagement in the political process across social classes and ages?

The decrease in turnout at elections has led to calls for a debate about introducing compulsory voting in the United Kingdom. This Note examines the arguments for and against legislation to require voters to cast their votes, and suggestions that it is a citizen's duty, as well as a right, to vote. It also includes recent arguments for making voting compulsory for first time voters only, in order to instil the habit of voting.

The Note gives details of the experience of compulsory voting in other countries and draws together the conclusions of recent academic work on compulsory voting and summarises the publications of research institutes on this issue.

The House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee conducted an inquiry on voter engagement and published reports in November 2014 and February 2015. In 2014, the Committee considered whether compulsory voting could be an effective way to increase voter turnout and engagement, but did not come to a unanimous conclusion. However, it did recommend that the next Government should conduct further research on this issue. The Coalition Government's response to that Committee report was published in February 2015 and stated that the Government had no plans to introduce compulsory voting for elections in the UK.

In its second report the Committee was still not unanimous on compulsory voting, but recommended that the Government should consult early in the next Parliament and report its view to the House by May 2016.

# 1. Developments since 2010

There have been debates about whether there should be a legal compulsion to cast a vote for around a century. The question has been raised on several occasions in the past five years, usually with reference to concern about reduced turnout at elections. On each occasion it has been raised, the government has resisted taking this step.

## 1.1 The Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies Bill 2010-11

On 8 December 2010 an [amendment](#) was moved to the *Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies Bill*, during Committee Stage in the Lords, by Lord Snape. This would have added a question on compulsory voting to the referendum on the alternative voting system established by the Bill. In his speech moving the amendment Lord Snape stated:

We are aware from previous debates that although only Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Australia have favoured the system of AV inherent in the Bill, lots more countries have a system of compulsory voting. Across all those countries, turnout has increased dramatically. One might argue that that is because of the punishments for those who fail to vote, but by and large those punishments are minimal, if they are enforced at all. Yet, in Australia, for example, which has the system of AV that we are going to wish on ourselves if this Bill is carried, turnout at general elections is consistently over 90 per cent, although the penalties for failure to vote are very small indeed.

....Instead of having punitive punishments for those who fail to vote, why not have some sort of incentive if we are going to have compulsory voting? A voucher for £10, £15 or £20 off your rates bill, for example, would provide an incentive without the fear of punitive punishment if one fails to vote.<sup>1</sup>

In response the Minister, Lord Strathclyde, said the Government disagreed with the amendment:

Those who argue in favour of compulsory voting believe that the greater turnout that would likely ensue would enhance the legitimacy of the Government elected because the result of the election would be closer to the will of the population as a whole rather than that of those individuals who have voted. Those who are against compulsion say that the argument that greater legitimacy would flow from a higher turnout may be challenged on the grounds that people may be either ill-informed or have no wish to support the existing system....

I assure the House that the Government are committed to engaging the electorate in elections and wider democratic activity. In weighing up the arguments for and against compulsion, however, the Government believe that voting should be a civic responsibility and that the importance of political participation should be reinforced without the introduction of any sanction for non-compliance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [HL Deb 8 December 2010](#), c218

<sup>2</sup> [HL Deb 8 December 2010](#), c223

Lord Snape withdrew his amendment, after debate.

### 1.2 European Union Referendum Bill 2013-14

On 29 November 2013, at report stage of the *European Union Referendum Bill* in the House of Commons, Chris Williamson (Labour) moved an amendment to introduce compulsory voting within the referendum. Chris Williamson stated that his amendment proposed that:

...unless people have good reason, they should be subject to a penalty if they do not participate in the referendum....I favour compulsory voting, but I am not necessarily suggesting that we introduce it for general and local elections. I think this referendum is different, however, because the consequences of a vote, whatever the outcome, would be profound and potentially irreversible.<sup>3</sup>

In his response the Minister, Martin Horwood, stated:

The amendment would impose compulsory voting on us, which is not a principle that Liberals generally support. Voters reveal a lot when they abstain from a democratic election or a referendum and it is important that we understand what they are telling us when they abstain or do not turn out to vote.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3 Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee Report 2014

In 2014 the Select Committee conducted an inquiry on voter engagement. It received written and oral evidence from a wide range of witnesses, including professional electoral bodies, think tanks, pressure groups and academics. The Committee considered whether compulsory voting could be an effective way to increase voter turnout and engagement but did not come to a unanimous conclusion in its Interim report published in November 2014.<sup>5</sup>

The Government response to that report was published on 5 February 2015. This was firm that there were no plans to introduce either compulsory voting or a "None of the above" option on ballot papers:

The Government believes that, whilst it is true that in some countries voting is not just a fundamental political right but also a duty of the citizen, voting is a civic responsibility and that the importance of political participation should be reinforced without the need for a sanction for non-compliance. There are, therefore, no plans to introduce a system of compulsory voting for elections in the UK.

[...]

The inclusion of a 'positive abstention' box on the ballot paper would allow electors to register their dissatisfaction with a candidate, party or politics more broadly and a variation of a 'none of the above' option appears on ballot papers in Columbia,

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<sup>3</sup> [HC Deb 29 November 2013](#), c549

<sup>4</sup> [HC Deb 29 November 2013](#), c555

<sup>5</sup> Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Voter engagement in the UK](#), HC 232 2014-15, Conclusions 50-51.

India, Spain, Ukraine, and the state of Nevada in the USA. However, the Government believes that, when participating in a ballot, the position should be that the elector makes a positive choice of a representative rather than a negative one. It does not agree, therefore, that the introduction of such a provision would be a positive step. Rather, the Government believes it should be for candidates and the political parties to actively engage the electorate so they can make a positive choice of representation.<sup>6</sup>

In the 2014 report, the Committee also called for all political parties to include plans for improving voter engagement in their manifestos for the 2015 general election, including compulsory voting.

## 1.4 Political and Constitutional Reform Committee Follow up Report 2015

The Committee conducted further consultation with voters and interest groups. It published some of the results of this in a final report of the voter engagement inquiry, on 5 February 2015.<sup>7</sup>

On the subject of compulsory voting they reported:

105. Our interim report found that making voting compulsory would ensure that the vast majority of eligible voters participated at elections, and some members of the Committee, though not all, believed that it should be included in a package of measures to meet the threat of disengagement. The public response on the question of whether voting should be compulsory was relatively evenly split (just over 45% of respondents favoured compulsory voting, and just over 45% of respondents opposed it), with strong views on both side of the debate....

The Electoral Commission took no view on compulsory voting, but told us that it would "be happy to provide support to the UK Government in considering the practical implications of a compulsory voting", including "considering what additional options could be included on the ballot paper for different elections".

The Government did not really respond to the Committee's recommendation that they should examine how compulsory voting might work in the UK and report to Parliament, so that recommendation was reiterated, with a target date:

**107. International experience demonstrates conclusively that making voting compulsory ensures that the vast majority of eligible voters participate at elections. Some members of the Committee believe there is a strong case for including compulsory voting in a package of measures to meet the threat of disengagement. However, other members believe that voting should not, as a matter of principle, be made compulsory, and that people should be free not to participate at elections if they so choose. We note the Government's view that voting is a civic**

<sup>6</sup> Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Voter engagement in the UK: Government response](#) to the Committee's Fourth Report of 2014-15, HC 1037, 2014-15.

<sup>7</sup> Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Voter engagement in the UK: follow up](#), HC 938, 2014-15.

**responsibility and that the importance of political participation should be reinforced without the need for a sanction for non-compliance. The response to our consultation was mixed, with similar numbers in favour and against.** In light of the mixed views we received with regards to compulsory voting, we recommend that the Government consult early in the next Parliament on the possibility of making voting compulsory for certain types of election, and report to the House by May 2016 to set out its view. This would encourage debate about voting, as a right and civic duty, which we believe could only be beneficial to voter engagement.

The Committee also sought views, in surveys, on the “none of the above” option and reported:

108. In our interim report we concluded that if voting were to be made compulsory an option to formally “abstain” or vote for “none of the above” should be included on the ballot paper...Over 70% of respondents to our consultation supported having the option of voting for “none of the above” on the ballot paper, irrespective of whether or not voting were compulsory....

In light of this the Committee also recommended further Government consideration of this option:

**110. Having the option to vote for “none of the above” on the ballot paper is the proposal which has had the largest support among those who have given their views to the surveys we have drawn upon. This change would enable people to participate at elections even if they did not wish to vote for any of the candidates presented. If large numbers of people did choose to cast their vote in this way it would serve as a wakeup call for candidates and parties that they needed to do more to gain the support of the electorate.** We recommend that the Government consult on including, on ballot papers for national elections, an option for voters who wish to participate but not vote for any of the candidates presented, and report to the House on this proposal by May 2016.

## 1.5 Voting (Civic Obligation) Bill 2014-15

On 14 January 2015, David Winnick (Labour), introduced a bill to introduce a legal obligation to vote or to declare an intention not to vote. In his speech David Winnick stated:

Despite what I am going to say, my proposed measure will inevitably be described as compulsory voting. As I shall point out, it is not my intention to force anyone to vote in an election; if there was such a proposal, I would vote against it. I have, however, long advocated, with others, legislation for a civic obligation—a duty, if you like—to vote at least in a general election. However, if my Bill became law, if anyone had no wish to vote, so be it—all they would need do is let the electoral authorities know beforehand, and provide information about where they live, proof and so on, or turn up on the day and tell the clerk at the polling station that they do not intend to vote, and that would be the end of it..<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [HC Deb 15 January 2015, c889-891](#)

David Winnick suggested that concern about turnout led to his proposals:

More people did not vote then [in 2010] than voted for any one political party contesting the election. If we add that figure to the number not correctly registered, it adds up to more than voted for the two main parties in the election, and certainly more than voted for the two parties forming the coalition. That should be a matter of serious concern to the House, whether or not my proposal is accepted.

He contrasted turnout figures in Australia, where there are penalties for not voting:

In Australia, turnout in elections for the House of Representatives is 95%. Many years ago, in the last election there before the law was changed where everyone had a duty to vote—there is a small fine if people do not vote—that turnout was under 60%. However, in the first contest under the law that I would like to see applied in Britain, the turnout was 91%— and it has never gone below 90%.

The House agreed that the Bill be introduced, under the Private Member's Ten Minute Rule. This means that the Bill can be printed and has a date set for Second Reading, but will not become law.

## 1.6 Recent Parliamentary Questions

In the Commons, Chris Ruane, the former Labour MP for Vale of Clywd, asked a number of questions on compulsory voting. The most recent were on 10 February 2014:

**Chris Ruane:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what comparative assessment he has made of the international comparisons relating to (a) levels of voter turnout and registration and (b) compulsory voting and compulsory registration. [185895]

**Greg Clark:** The Government has not made any comparative assessment of the international comparisons relating to (a) levels of voter turnout and registration and (b) compulsory voting and compulsory registration.<sup>9</sup>

And on 10 March 2014:

**Chris Ruane:** To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the potential benefits of bringing forward legislative proposals to make voting compulsory as a means of increasing voter turnout and engagement. [190095]

**Greg Clark:** The Government has made no such assessment.<sup>10</sup>

In the Lords, on 1 April 2014, Lord Wright of Richmond asked a question about international examples:

**Lord Wright of Richmond (CB):** Will the Minister tell the House whether either the Government or the Electoral Commission have given any thought to following the example of Australia, Luxembourg and a few other countries of making voting compulsory?

<sup>9</sup> [HC Deb 10 February 2014](#) c524W

<sup>10</sup> [HC Deb 10 March 2014](#) c53W



**Lord Wallace of Saltaire:** The Government have considered everything, but that is not an idea that has led to enormous enthusiasm within government or, I suspect, within this House.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Discussion in the 1920 and 1930s

In the 1930s the question of compulsory voting was the subject of debate in both press and Parliament. Files in the National Archives deal with a series of Private Members' Bills on the subject, the first being in 1921.<sup>12</sup> A subsequent Bill, which was introduced on 24 March 1922 by Colonel Archer Shee, proposed that failure to vote should be a crime.<sup>13</sup> The matter was also the subject of a motion in the House of Lords on 17 March 1926.

Following low turnouts in Parliamentary by-elections in the 1930s,<sup>14</sup> there was a ten minute rule bill in 1934 (*Representation of the People (Disenfranchisement of Negligent Voters)*) Bill presented by H G Williams) and a bill introduced by Sir Frank Sanderson in November 1937.<sup>15</sup> A minute prepared by a Home Office official made clear that this Bill was to be blocked. An undated note in the National Archives file stated that 'the Secretary of State [Sir Samuel Hoare] was disposed to be favourable to the principle of this Bill' and therefore an extensive memorandum, dated 18 November 1937, was prepared to list the arguments against compulsory voting:

The cost of enforcement would be high and the law on compulsory voting in the Netherlands was unenforceable.

In some constituencies electors could only choose between Labour and Communists – not a full choice. In Czechoslovakia, where compulsory voting was in force, many Sudeten Germans apparently voted Communist purely as a protest against the Czech state.

If we were to introduce a system of compulsory voting, it would strengthen the case for PR on the ground that some provision ought to be made for the representation of minorities. Australia used the Alternative Vote and compulsory voting had only been introduced there due to turnouts as low as 59.37 per cent.

The Home Secretary accepted the advice of officials and told the Cabinet that the *Annual Holiday Bill* would occupy the whole of that sitting, and if the compulsory voting Bill were reached, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State would make a long speech setting out the arguments; an early example of blocking a Private Member's Bill. A motion in the House of Lords on 4 May 1938 also found no favour with the Government.

Sir Frank Sanderson made another attempt with a Bill, *Compulsory Voting Bill*, in May 1939 but this was no more successful. By the time of the 1950 general election, turnout was approaching 84 per cent, and the issue faded from the political debate.

<sup>12</sup> HO 45/24045 *Exercise of the Parliamentary Franchise*, Bill 76, April 1921

<sup>13</sup> *Bill to promote the wider exercise of the Parliamentary Franchise*, Bill 57 1922

<sup>14</sup> Home Office minutes noted that low turnouts in local elections were also common in the 1930, with figures as low as 30-40 per cent

<sup>15</sup> Bill 32 1937

## 2.2 Discussion 1997-2010

Falling turnout in the 1997 election, 71.4 per cent compared with the 1992 turnout of 77.7 per cent, brought the question back to prominence. It was discussed in the Home Affairs Select Committee report *Electoral Law and Administration*.<sup>16</sup> The Committee concluded:

28. Compulsory voting is normally discussed in the context of national parliamentary elections, but it would make far more difference in local elections - especially in areas where turnout is as low as 10 or 15 per cent - and would also raise far more difficult questions of enforcement...

29. Our view is that while it may not be desirable to have any form of compulsory voting we nevertheless consider that there should be a public debate over this, bearing in mind the much higher rate of voting in democracies where such a system exists.<sup>17</sup>

A number of academics have supported compulsory voting, as a means of integrating the community. Professor Robert Blackburn made this argument in evidence to the Home Affairs Committee in 1998<sup>18</sup> and in his book *The Electoral System in Britain*.<sup>19</sup> Blackburn suggested that the introduction of compulsory voting in the United Kingdom 'would be consistent with the legal compulsion in the first place to register one's name and address as a voter.'<sup>20</sup> He discussed the traditional view of compulsory voting:

...first, that it is an infringement of civil liberty: that politics is essentially a voluntary exercise...and people should be left alone to decide for themselves how and whether to vote. In other words, a great many British people instinctively feel that there is something rather totalitarian about being forced to vote...Second, it is often argued that compulsory voting is unnecessary in Britain and as a principle of election law tends to be resorted to only in states with a weak democratic culture or fragile national identity. Third, it is sometimes said that compulsory voting produces a highly undesirable 'donkey vote'....A final reservation has been the alleged impracticality of enforcing such an obligation. This is a factor that has especially troubled those who might be expected to enforce it.<sup>21</sup>

In *Votes for All: Compulsory Participation in Elections* by Tom Watson and Mark Tami, published by the Fabian Society in 2000, the authors examined the arguments for compulsory voting and reported on how it functioned elsewhere.<sup>22</sup>

Watson and Tami pointed out that a number of studies indicated that wherever compulsory voting has been introduced turnout has been raised, particularly in those countries where there are penalties for not voting. Compulsory voting can therefore be seen as a 'cost-efficient institutional remedy to the problem of low turnout in advanced

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<sup>16</sup> [HC 768 97/98](#)

<sup>17</sup> *Electoral Law and Administration*, Home Affairs Select Committee report, [HC 768 97/98](#)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, [Minutes of Evidence, Q22-30](#)

<sup>19</sup> *The Electoral System in Britain*, St Martin's Press, 1995. p109-112

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p109

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p110

<sup>22</sup> *Votes for All: Compulsory Participation in Elections*, by Tom Watson and Mark Tami. Fabian Society, 2000

democracies. It raises turnout, and as a result, elections become more representative (in both a socio-economic and party political sense) and the elected become more legitimate.'<sup>23</sup>

Watson and Tami examined the main arguments against the introduction of compulsory voting in the United Kingdom. These are:

It is not very British: compulsory voting is not part of the British democratic tradition and such a scheme may run counter to British political culture;

It would be unpopular;

It is wrong to force people to vote: in a free society one should have the right not to vote;

There would be problems of enforcement; and

Enforced participation is worse than no participation at all.

However, Watson and Tami concluded that 'the only way to guarantee high turnout is to transform that right [to vote] into a duty.'<sup>24</sup>

On 21 June 2004 compulsory voting was the subject of an adjournment debate in the Commons, initiated by Huw Irranca-Davies (Labour). Responding to the debate, the then Minister for Constitutional Affairs, Chris Leslie made a number of points:

...the Government do not now favour the introduction of compulsory voting...

There is also the issue of enforcement. Criminalisation of non-attendance at a polling station would be a very big step to take in British civil society... Enforcement would be a mammoth task, perhaps disproportionate to the nature of the offence....

It remains the Government's view that persuasion, in terms of engaging people in the act of voting, is better than coercion.

On 5 July 2005, Harriet Harman (Labour), then Minister of State at the Department for Constitutional Affairs, was questioned by a number of MPs on the subject of compulsory voting. She stated the Labour Government's position as being:

...we do not have any proposal on the table to introduce compulsory voting, backed up by criminal sanctions, but we must all think very hard about how we ensure that people are on the electoral register. A major problem is the near 3 million people who do not even get to the starting point because they are not on the electoral register. We must make absolutely sure that everyone is confident in the result of the election because it is free from fraud, but we must also ensure that people feel like turning out to vote, that they are committed to voting and that they vote.<sup>25</sup>

In October 2007 the Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, set up a commission to conduct a review of British citizenship. The Review was chaired by Lord Goldsmith and reported to the Prime Minister in March 2008.

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p12

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, p19

<sup>25</sup> [HC Deb 5 July 2005 c160-1](#)

## 13 Compulsory voting

In the report Lord Goldsmith made comments on the possibility of voting becoming part of a citizen's legal duties:

A duty to vote?

99. Creating a legal duty to vote would either attract very significant resistance, because people do not believe that they really owe such a duty; or it would lead to people merely complying with the law in order to avoid a penalty.

100. Mere compliance may be acceptable in some areas of the law but, when it comes to voting, it is important that people choose to vote, with an understanding of the reasons why they are voting. Hence, though creating a duty to vote may increase turnout, I am not convinced that it would do so for the right reasons.<sup>26</sup>

### 2.3 Turnout

The 59.4 per cent turnout for the 2001 general election brought a new urgency to the debate on the possibilities for compulsion to vote. There was a slight improvement at the 2005 General Election, with turnout rising to 61.4 per cent. This improvement continued in 2010, with a turnout of 65.1 per cent across the UK, and in 2015, with a turnout of 66.2% (Library Research Papers 05/33 [General Election 2005](#), 10/36 [General Election 2010](#) and 7186 [General Election 2015](#) give full details of turnout per constituency).

Over time, turnout has fallen in different types of election; national, European, and local. A variety of explanations have been offered; complacency, disillusionment with the political process, disengagement from politics, and the first past the post voting system.

The British Election Study team at the University of Essex considered some of the determinants of turnout in their review of the 2005 general election using data from the 2005 survey. They found a number of important differences between social groups in patterns of turnout and concluded that the "effective British electorate is becoming progressively older, election by election". A "life cycle effect" in which young non-voters would turn into voters as they became older had become more unlikely. Unless "remedial steps" were taken to counteract the effects of abstention among the current under-45 population, the BES team contended that voter turnout "looks set to continue trending downwards in the future".<sup>27</sup>

The decline in young people's engagement in politics has been a common theme of late. Voter turnout has been low among young people relative to older age groups, but in the context of falling overall turnout at General Elections, the decline has been sharpest amongst voters aged 18-24. In 2010 the turnout for voters 18-24 was 51.8%.<sup>28</sup> This has led to particular debate on the suggestion that voting should be made compulsory for first time voters at age 18. These arguments

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<sup>26</sup> [Citizenship: our common bond](#), Lord Goldsmith's citizenship review, 2008

<sup>27</sup> David Sanders et al., [The 2005 General Election in Great Britain: a report for the Electoral Commission](#) (2005)

<sup>28</sup> Aliyah Dar, Adam Mellows-Facer, [Elections: Turnout](#), House of Commons Library Standard Note, SN1467, January 2014.

are detailed below in research publications from the IPPR (see section 4.2).

## 3. Compulsory voting in other countries

The Electoral Commission has examined the issue of compulsory voting as part of its work on ways of improving turnout at elections.

This research was published as [Compulsory voting around the world](#), in June 2006. In his foreword to the report, the then Chairman of the Electoral Commission, Sam Younger, described the aims of the research the Commission had carried out:

The principal aim of this research was to provide factual information about how compulsory voting operates in different countries. This report analyses the historical background to the introduction of compulsory voting in several countries across the world (and its abolition in others). We have also looked at current legislation and enforcement, sought to identify common features of compulsory voting systems and reviewed academic studies into the impact of compulsory voting on turnout and political engagement. Finally, two important caveats. This report does not consider the merits or otherwise of compulsory voting for the UK, and the Commission makes no recommendation in this regard. Additionally, this report is not an exhaustive global survey, but aims instead to take an analytical approach to understanding the issues involved.

The [ACE Electoral Knowledge website](#) which is compiled by electoral administrators around the world provides comparative data on electoral issues. There is a page on [compulsory voting](#) which lists the countries where there is a legal requirement to vote: Angola, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Greece, Honduras, Luxembourg, Nauru, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, Singapore, Thailand, Turkey and Uruguay.

A page on the IDEA (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) website also has information about turnout and compulsory voting, as well as a table of sanctions for not voting.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.1 Australia

A factsheet on compulsory voting produced by the Australian Capital Government states:

Every Australian citizen (18 years or older) is required by law to vote. If an enrolled citizen fails to vote and is unable to provide a valid reason for not voting, a penalty is imposed. The penalty in the ACT is \$20. If the penalty is not paid the matter is taken to court.<sup>30</sup>

The Factsheet also gives details of the history of compulsory voting in Australia:

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<sup>29</sup> [IDEA website page on compulsory voting](#)

<sup>30</sup> [Factsheet on compulsory voting](#), ACT website

Compulsory voting has become a distinctive feature of the Australian political culture.

It was advocated by Alfred Deakin at the turn of the century but it was not introduced at federal elections until 1924, following the passage of a private members bill. Compulsory enrolment for federal elections was introduced in 1911....

In Australia voting is a civic duty comparable to other duties citizens perform like paying taxes, compulsorily attending school and performing jury duty.

With compulsory voting, it is claimed that parliaments reflect more accurately the "will of the electorate". Governments must consider the total electorate in policy formulation and management. Candidates can concentrate their campaigning energies on issues rather than encouraging voters to attend the poll.<sup>31</sup>

Compulsory voting for federal elections in Australia was introduced in 1924 by the coalition government of Stanley Bruce. It was first used in the election of 14 November 1925 when the Bruce government was re-elected with an increased majority.

The Australian Electoral Commission's [factsheet on compulsory voting](#) gives details of the enforcement rules.<sup>32</sup>

Support for compulsory voting has remained high amongst Australian voters. In a poll conducted in 2013 68 per cent supported compulsory voting and this has been a figure reflected across recent surveys:

When the question was first asked in an opinion poll, in 1943, 60 per cent supported compulsory voting. That proportion gradually increased during the 1950s and 1960s, peaking at 77 per cent in 1969....The figure of 68 per cent recorded in the current ANU poll is almost identical to the estimate for 2010...<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> [Factsheet on compulsory voting](#), ACT website

<sup>32</sup> [Electoral backgrounder: compulsory voting](#), Australian Electoral Commission, September 2014

<sup>33</sup> Australian National University, [Attitudes to electoral reform](#): ANU poll, August 2013.



## 4. Recent academic research

### 4.1 Books and journal articles

In 2009 Sarah Birch, then a Reader in Politics at the University of Essex (now Professor of Comparative Politics at Glasgow University), published a book *Full participation: a comparative study of compulsory voting*.<sup>34</sup>

Sarah Birch provided a history of compulsory voting as well as a chapter on the arguments for and against a legal obligation to participate in elections. Her conclusion noted that:

The aim of this book has been to provide a conceptual and empirical overview of the institution of compulsory voting. Though this has been a long-standing topic of debate and deliberation in most democracies, many of the arguments most commonly made both for and against the legal obligation to participate in elections have taken the form of hypothetical speculation, given to the paucity of evidence either to back them up or to refute them. This volume has sought to delineate the main arguments for and against, and to subject each of them to empirical tests as possible and appropriate. These tests have been conducted on large-scale datasets including countries from across the world, and though they have not provided definitive answers to many of the questions posed by those curious about mandatory voting rules, they do together represent the most systematic and comprehensive analysis to date of the impact of such rules.<sup>35</sup>

There is a comprehensive list of references at the end of Birch's book that would be helpful to anyone wishing to follow up on research on this topic. Sarah Birch also published an article on this subject in 2009.<sup>36</sup>

Professor Birch has recently contributed to a number of IPPR publications on voting behaviour (see below) and has written a number of blog posts on the subject, especially on compulsory voting for young voters.<sup>37 38</sup>

In 2010, Jacqui Briggs (Lincoln University) and Karen Celis published a comparison of the practice of compulsory voting in Belgium and attitudes to it, with the UK. This was partly based on a sample survey of MPs in both countries.<sup>39</sup>

Also in 2010, Annabelle Lever (Manchester Law School) published a review of legal arguments for and against compulsory voting, originally

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<sup>34</sup> *Full participation: a comparative study of compulsory voting* by Sarah Birch, Manchester University Press, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p153

<sup>36</sup> [The case for compulsory voting](#), Sarah Birch, *Public Policy Research*, March-May 2009.

<sup>37</sup> [First time compulsory voting is the best way to make democracy a habit](#). Conservative Home, 29 August 2013.

<sup>38</sup> [Reforms to our social and political institutions could go a long way...](#), LSE British Politics and Policy, 30 January 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Jacqui Briggs and Karen Celis, [For and against: compulsory voting in Britain and Belgium](#), *Social and Public Policy Review*, 4(1), 2010.

prepared for an ECPRD workshop on compulsory voting, principles and practice held in 2007.<sup>40</sup>

A further article by Krister Lundell, of Abo Akademi University, Finland concluded that:

The analysis indicates that compulsory voting has a positive effect on political trust but there is no 'spill-over' effect from higher levels of electoral participation to civic participation.<sup>41</sup>

In 2014 Cambridge University Press published a book on *Compulsory Voting*, in a *For and Against* series. Jason Brennan, a Professor at Georgetown University, USA presented the arguments against, while Lisa Hill, a Professor at University of Adelaide argued for the premise. The book draws on political and philosophical theories. For Jason Brennan compulsory voting is unjust and a petty violation of citizens' liberty. According to Lisa Hill, compulsory voting is a reasonable imposition on personal liberty. Hill points to the discernible benefits of compulsory voting and argues that high turnout elections are more democratically legitimate. The book also contains a detailed bibliography of sources on these arguments.<sup>42</sup>

## 4.2 Institute for Public Policy Research reports

### A Citizen's Duty

On 1 May 2006 the Institute for Public Policy Research published a report on compulsory voting, *A Citizen's Duty: Unequal Voting and the Case for Compulsory Turnout*.<sup>43</sup> The press notice gave further details:

Countries like Belgium and Australia have average turnouts of over 90 per cent in dozens of elections in recent decades and inequality of participation is almost eradicated when turnout is made obligatory.

Turnout inequality increased significantly when the Netherlands abolished compulsory turnout laws in 1970. Turnout for all social groups before abolition was over 90% but turnout after was as low as 66% for those with the lowest level of formal education.

ippr's analysis shows that other reforms – proportional representation, postal voting, weekend voting - only have a limited impact on increasing turnout and often the effects do not last during subsequent elections. ippr found that reforms like these often make it easier for people who already vote, rather than encouraging non-voters to get the voting habit.

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<sup>40</sup> Annabelle Lever, [Compulsory voting: a critical perspective](#), *British Journal of Political Science*, 40 (4), October 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Krister Lundell, [Civic participation and political trust: the impact of compulsory voting](#), *Representation*, 48:2, 6 June 2012

<sup>42</sup> Jason Brennan, Lisa Hill, *Compulsory voting: For and against*, CUP, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Ben Rogers and Emily Keaney, [A Citizen's Duty: Unequal Voting and the Case for Compulsory Turnout](#), IPPR, 2006.

## Divided Democracy

On 10 November 2013 the IPPR published a report on voter participation, *Divided Democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters*.<sup>44</sup>

The case for compulsory first time voting is developed in the report:

Under this model, voters would be obliged to go to the polls once, on the first occasion they were eligible. Voters would only be compelled to turn out and would be provided with a 'none of the above' option on the ballot paper, should they not wish to cast a vote for any of the candidates. To ensure high participation rates, a small fine should be set to enforce the policy. This measure would place a small burden on young people, but its main effect would be to force politicians to pay attention to them and their interests.

The first reason is that voting is *habitual*...

Second, first-time compulsory voting is deliberately targeted at improving the representation of young people, where levels of turnout inequality are highest...

Third if politicians realised that young people would be voting in larger numbers then they could not afford, as is often the case now, to ignore their concerns and interests in favour of those of groups that already vote in large numbers...

Fourth, if young people from poorer backgrounds were required to vote then this might encourage their non-voting parents and grandparents to exercise this democratic right, thereby closing the political inequality gap between classes as well as generations.

The report also addressed some of the possible objections to compulsory first time voting, and quoted opinion polling:

A final objection might be that compulsory first-time voting lacks popular support. This is hard to gauge as the idea has not been prominent in public debate. ...When asked if people should be required to vote in the first election for which they were eligible, 38.4 per cent of those surveyed in July 2013 agreed, with 34.7 per cent against the idea. (The remaining 27.0 per cent either did not know or neither agreed nor disagreed).<sup>45</sup>

The Government did not support the IPPR recommendation for compulsory first time voting. During the second reading debate on the *Voting Age (Comprehensive Reduction) Bill*, on 25 October 2013, the Minister Lord Wallace of Saltaire said:

We are all of us here, I am sure, committed to more effective citizenship education and encouraging young people to vote. I am not myself persuaded, nor are the Government, that making the first vote compulsory would help in this regard...., how we would enforce it. Would we impose fines on young people for not voting or would we send them to prison? Would we have compulsory service of some sort? There are real problems in insisting on compulsory voting if we want to put penalties on it.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Sarah Birch, Glen Gottfried, Guy Lodge, [Divided democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters](#), IPPR, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> The data reported here is taken from the British Election Study Continuous Monitoring Survey, July 2013.

<sup>46</sup> [HL Deb 25 October 2013](#), c1291

On 24 January 2014, the Labour Shadow Justice Secretary, Sadiq Khan, addressed an IPPR seminar linked to the publication *Divided democracy*. Commenting on the IPPR recommendation for first time compulsory voting for young people he said:

We may need to consider that further down the road... The reason I'm not scared by the recommendation of the IPPR is because actually, if you look at the evidence, compulsory voting isn't compulsory voting it's compulsory attendance. What we need to encourage young people to realise is that if they don't turn up and participate, they mustn't assume no one else will.<sup>47</sup>

## Democracy in Britain

In February 2014 the IPPR published *Democracy in Britain: Essays in honour of James Cornford*.<sup>48</sup> This included a chapter by Sarah Birch which set out the case for compulsory first time voting:

So-called 'compulsory voting' rubs against the grain of many traditionally libertarian British instincts. Though surveys over the course of the past decade have consistently shown that approximately a third of the population would support such a reform (Birch 2009: 144), it is difficult to envisage full-scale mandatory electoral participation receiving majority support. At the same time, there is a strong case to be made for the attractiveness of mandatory electoral participation for those new to the electorate. There are many aspects of contemporary life that are mandatory for young adults, such as education, jury service, and electoral registration. There are good reasons for believing that obliging young people to 'try' elections at least once would not be overly offensive to liberal sensibilities, and it could well have a dramatic impact on rates of electoral participation. (Birch et al 2013).

Birch drew the overall conclusion:

The longer participation falls, the less of a norm it will become, and the more difficult it will be to alter. Although there is currently a worrying trend toward opting out of electoral participation among the young, a significant majority of the British public still believe in the duty to vote. Now is the time to lock in this view through a series of changes to our institutions.

This study also referenced articles on the habit of voting to back up the argument for first time compulsion.<sup>49, 50</sup>

## 4.3 Economic and Social Research Council

A team led by Professor Matt Henn, Nottingham Trent University, conducted research on a survey of 18 year olds in 2011 and 2012, based on voting behaviour at the 2010 General Election. Their research was published in 2014.<sup>51</sup> It included the finding that, of those 18 year

<sup>47</sup> [Labour may force young people to vote, says Sadiq Khan](#), Huffington Post.com, 24 January 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Lodge and Gottfried (eds), [Democracy in Britain: Essays in honour of James Cornford](#), IPPR, 2014

<sup>49</sup> J H Aldrich et al, "Turnout as a habit", *Political Behaviour* Vol 33 no 4 2011, p535

<sup>50</sup> E Dinas, "[The formation of voting habits](#)", *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, vol. 22 no4, 2012, p431

<sup>51</sup> M Henn, [Young people and politics in Britain](#), ESRC, 2013.

## 21 Compulsory voting

olds who declared they were unlikely to vote at the next General Election, 58% said compulsory voting would make little or no difference to their decision or would make them even less likely to vote. Professor Henn concluded:

From this we can infer that the introduction of compulsory voting would merely serve to reinforce existing feelings of resentment - perhaps even make young people more susceptible to parties with anti-democratic tendencies - especially those of the far-right.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> ESRC News Release, [Compulsory voting won't fix young people's disenchantment with mainstream politics](#), 24 April 2014.

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