

Voting Rights and Compulsory Voting

Sam Crawley - POLS232
Lecture 9.2

**BALLOT
BOX**



Democracies and who votes

Who has the *right* to vote?

Can they *actually* do so?

Should voting be *required*?

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Notes

- The answers to these questions have a significant impact on elections and democracy as a whole
- There have been very different answers to these questions across time and across different countries

A brief history of the franchise

Property owners only

18th–19th century. Voting as a privilege of the propertied class.

All men

Mid–late 19th century. NZ: all men from 1879; Māori men from 1867.

Women

NZ — 1893 (first). UK: 1918/1928. USA: 1920. Won after sustained, sometimes violent campaigns.

Youth (under 21s)

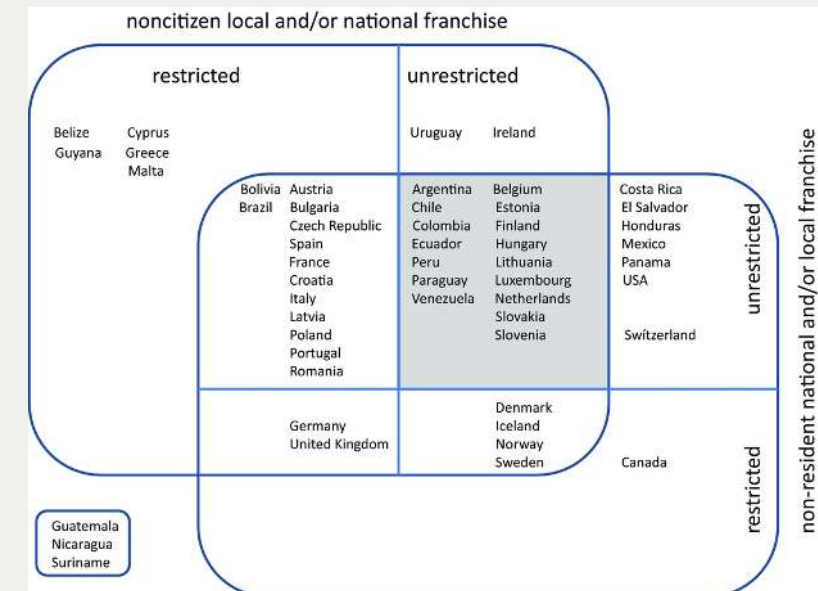
Voting age lowered to 18 across most democracies in the 1960s–70s. NZ: 1974.

Notes

- Each expansion of the franchise was contested, although some more than others (e.g. Suffragette movement in the UK involved violence by both activists and authorities)
- Even when women had the right to vote, they were not always allowed to stand for parliament. e.g. women did not gain that right in NZ until 1919
- Debates about the franchise continue today, especially over age (i.e. Make it 16 campaigns)

Citizens or residents?

- Most democracies restrict voting to citizens
- Most democracies now allow citizens who are not residents to vote in national elections
- Arrigoni & Bauböck (2017) – differences between national and state-level elections



Source: Arrigoni & Bauböck (2017)

Notes

- NZ an exception to the general rule of restricting voting to citizens - permanent residents can also vote (reflecting our history of immigration)
- Arrigoni & Bauböck (2017) find 82.1% of the countries they include extend the franchise to non-resident citizens in national elections, and 79.3% allow non-citizen residents to vote in state elections
- However, 83% of countries require voters in national elections to be citizens, and only 1 country allows non-resident citizens to vote in local level elections
- Voting rights & citizenship has become a salient issue in many countries, due to rise in nationalism/nativism

Should the voting age be lowered?

For

- 16-year-olds pay taxes, work, and are directly affected by policy
- Voting habits form early — starting at 16 may increase lifelong turnout
- Evidence from Scotland and Austria: 16–17 year olds vote at comparable rates to young adults

Against

- Limited life experience and exposure to political issues
- Risk of parental influence on vote choice
- 18 is a meaningful threshold for adult legal responsibilities

Notes

- NZ's "Make it 16" campaign reached the Supreme Court in 2022 — the court ruled the 18-year voting age was inconsistent with the Bill of Rights Act, but Parliament has yet to act
- Scotland lowered the voting age to 16 for the 2014 independence referendum and retained it for Scottish Parliament elections; Wales followed in 2021
- Runciman (2021) takes the argument further — he argues for lowering the voting age to 16, on the grounds that any principled reason to exclude children would, if applied consistently, also disqualify many adults. Raises an interesting question: where do you draw the line, and why?

Should prisoners vote? The NZ case

2010

National government —
blanket ban on all
prisoners voting

2020

Labour government —
voting restored for
prisoners serving under 3
years

2025

National government —
blanket ban reinstated

Notes

- NZ courts found the blanket ban inconsistent with the Bill of Rights Act (right to vote for all citizens over 18)
- The Waitangi Tribunal (2019) found the ban breached the Treaty of Waitangi — Māori make up around 51% of the prison population, so disenfranchisement falls disproportionately on them
- The "social contract" argument (current govt's justification) holds that breaking the law forfeits civic rights; critics argue this makes disenfranchisement an extra punishment layered on top of sentencing, and one that falls hardest on already marginalised groups

Māori and the vote

- 1867** Māori Representation Act creates 4 dedicated Māori seats (lower ratio to population compared to European seats)
- 1870** Secret ballot introduced for general electorates — Māori voted by "show of hands" until 1938
- 1949** Electoral roll introduced for Māori
- 1951** Māori elections held on the same day as general elections for the first time
- 1967** Māori able to stand in general electorates; non-Māori able to stand in Māori electorates
- 1975** Voter option to choose between the general and Māori roll

Notes

- The 4 dedicated Māori seats were originally intended to be a temporary measure to encourage Māori to "assimilate" with the European electoral system
- There have been periodic calls to abolish Māori seats, generally from the right. National did not stand candidates in the Māori seats between 2005-2020
- See Te Ara and NZ History for more info

Who chooses the Māori roll?

Māori
language use

Iwi
knowledge

Spiritual
connection to
land

Comfort in
Māori social
settings

Household &
family context

Generational
socialisation

Vowles & Gibbons (2023); Greaves et al. (2023)

Notes

- Vowles & Gibbons (2023) use electoral roll data to show that Māori language context has the strongest effect on roll choice — but also finds other factors (generational socialisation, household context, occupational mobility) that offset identity's impact on the total number of Māori electorates
- Greaves et al. (2023) focus on rangatahi (aged 13–18): those who also identify as Pākehā are less likely to opt for the Māori roll; those with stronger cultural identity markers (Iwi knowledge, spiritual connection to land, comfort in Māori social settings) are more likely to choose it

Having the right to vote \neq being able to vote

The formal right

Legal entitlement to vote — enshrined in law, applies equally to all eligible citizens

The practical ability

Whether you can actually exercise that right — shaped by registration rules, polling access, ID requirements, and more

Notes

- Assuming you have the right to vote, what determines whether you can exercise it? And do reforms that aimed at expanding access actually change turnout?
- Some barriers (e.g. literary tests) are clearly designed to limit access to people who have the legal right to vote. Others (e.g. voting on weekdays) may still create barriers, even if that was not the intention

Voter suppression

"Millions of Americans are denied the right to vote because of their color. This law will ensure them the right to vote... This right to vote is the basic right without which all others are meaningless."

— President Lyndon B. Johnson, signing the Voting Rights Act, 1965

Notes

- Suppression tactics after the 15th Amendment (1870) included poll taxes, literacy tests deliberately designed for failure, and violence
- The 1965 Voting Rights Act substantially reduced a lot of this suppression, although many provisions have been weakened over time
- Even though people of colour already had the right to vote after the 15th Amendment, the language in 1965 was about "rights" (not suppression)

Voter ID laws

- Requirement to show photo ID at the polls — used in some US states, recently adopted in the UK
- Instituted to prevent fraud (in-person voter fraud does exist, but is rare in most countries)
- Creates barriers, especially for minority, low-income, and young voters
- Hajnal et al. (2017): strict ID laws associated with substantially larger turnout gaps between white and minority voters



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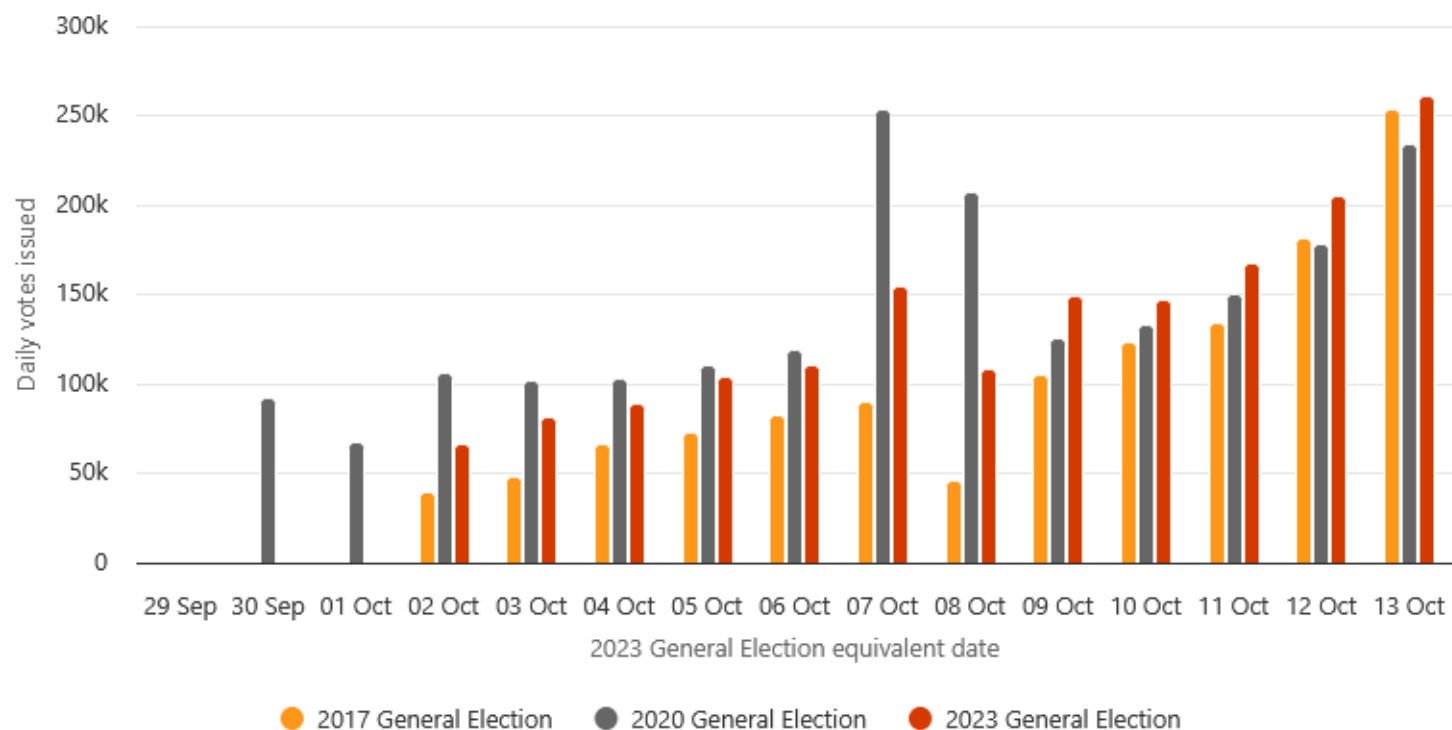
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Notes

- Reasonable debate to be had about whether Voter ID is necessary to prevent fraud - but there is clear evidence that it creates barriers for some people
- Hajnal, Lajevardi & Nielson (2017) find large effects on minority turnout gaps — the precise magnitude is debated, but the direction of the effect (disproportionate impact on minority voters) is broadly accepted
- This connects directly to Rome's (2022) account of poll taxes and literacy tests — the mechanism is different but the effect is the same: formally neutral rules that fall disproportionately on marginalised groups

Making voting accessible: early voting

Daily votes



>50% of NZ votes now cast before election day

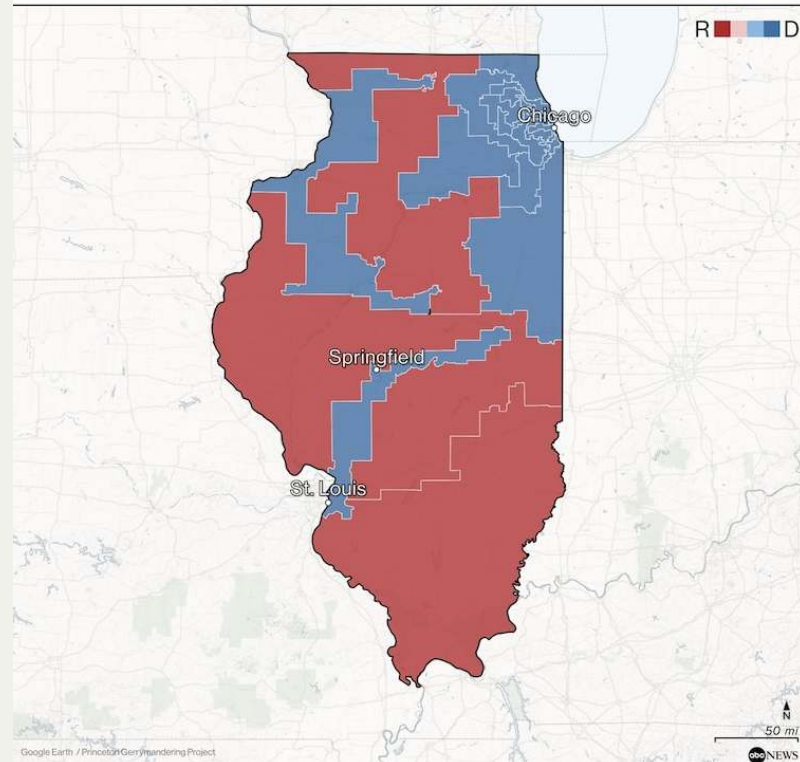
But: little evidence it raises overall turnout — mostly shifts *when* existing voters vote

Notes

- The 2014 NZ election saw a major expansion of advance voting options
- Research on early voting consistently finds it is convenient for people who would have voted anyway; less evidence that it converts non-voters into voters
- Early voters in NZ typically vote more for the major parties, although that may be a selection effect

Gerrymandering

Illinois 2021 Congressional – Enacted

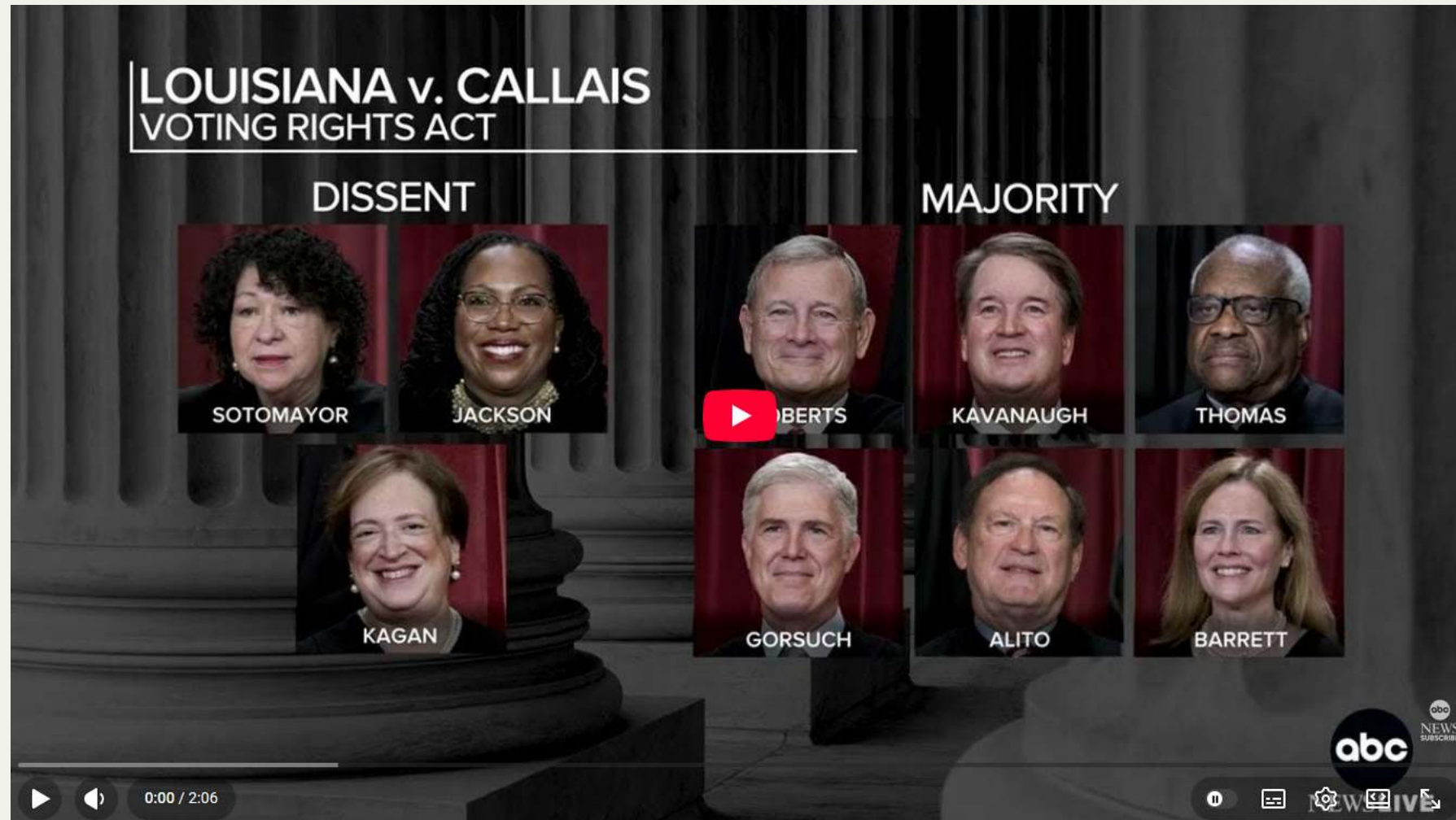


- Drawing electoral district boundaries to favour a party or group – named after Governor Elbridge Gerry (1812)
- Can be challenging to prove when redistricting is gerrymandering
- When done for partisan reasons, can mean some people's votes count for more

Notes

- Classic gerrymandering tactics: "packing" (concentrating opposition voters into a few districts) and "cracking" (splitting opposition voters across many districts so they never form a majority)
- Gerrymandering is a major problem in the US, where districts are mostly drawn up by state legislatures - drawing boundaries often become political
- However, it can be a very complex process to prove in court that districts have been drawn unfairly
- NZ's independent boundary-setting process means it's less of a concern here. Proportional representation also means individual seats take on less importance in the overall result
- Gerrymandering can be a form of voter suppression - it tends to result in a lot more "safe" districts, disincentivising people to vote

Gerrymandering: Louisiana



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Notes

- This was a recent US Supreme Court ruling, which limits the powers of the Voting Rights Act in relation to considering race when drawing the electoral maps
- Both sides of the argument claim that they are trying to stop gerrymandering - showing how complex the situation can be
- However, it will most likely weaken the electoral influence of minorities

Compulsory voting

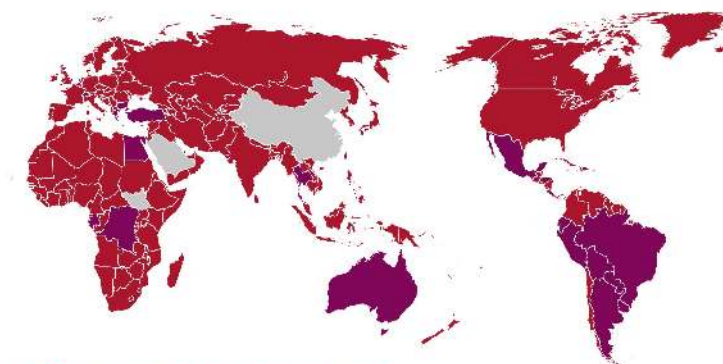
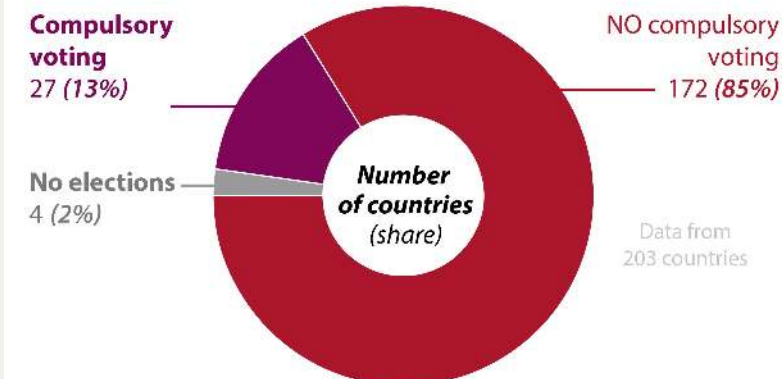
What it is

A legal requirement to vote — or at least attend a polling place. Non-compliance might result in a fine.

Where it exists

~25 countries, including Australia, Belgium, Brazil, and Argentina. Enforcement and penalties vary widely.

COMPULSORY VOTING IN THE WORLD



Source: IDEA

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Notes

- Australia introduced compulsory voting in 1924 for federal elections, with a ~\$20 AUD fine for non-compliance; turnout is consistently around 90%+
- Some countries have CV laws on the books but do not enforce them — the meaningful distinction is between enforced and unenforced compulsory voting

Compulsory voting: Belgium

- First country to adopt CV in 1892:
universal male suffrage and compulsory
voting within a few months
- Impetus mainly came from conservatives
worried about expanding franchise

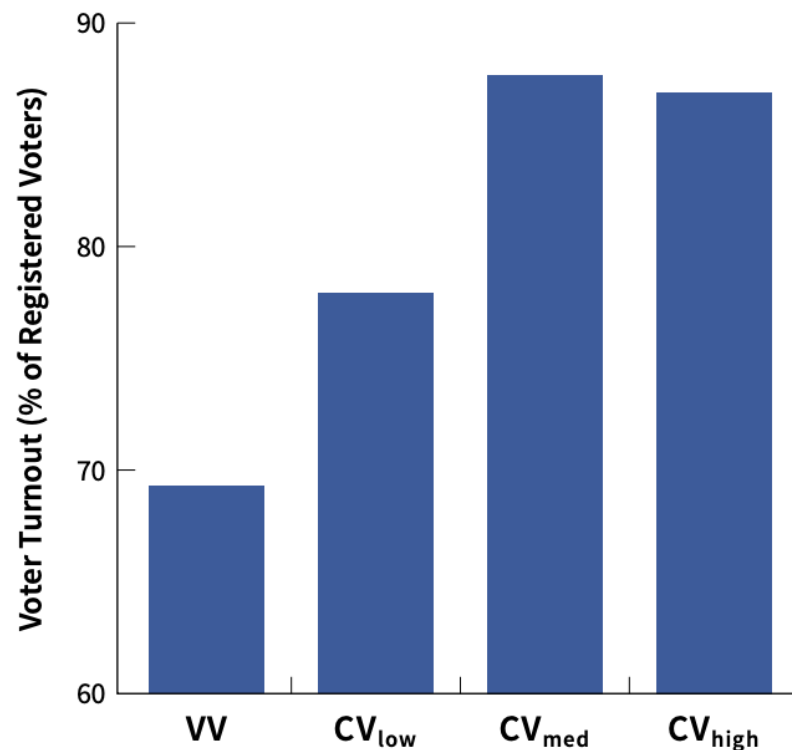


Notes

- The adoption of compulsory voting in Belgium was primarily supported by conservatives. The franchise had been expanded to all adult men, and conservatives were worried that would lead to a surge in left/socialist support
- Classic debate is about whether voting is a right vs duty
- Conservatives in Belgium also argued it helped to prevent corruption (e.g. people being prevented from voting by employers)

Does compulsory voting raise turnout?

FIGURE 1: Civic Duty Voting and Turnout across Countries



Note: Data and classification of civic duty voting rule severity taken from Version 8 of the Varieties of Democracy Project. The classifications are as follows: VV (Voluntary voting); CV_{low} (Civic duty voting without sanctions or with sanctions but no enforcement); CV_{med} (Civic duty voting with enforced sanctions but that impose minimal costs upon abstainers); CV_{high} (Civic duty voting with enforced sanctions that impose considerable costs upon abstainers). Included elections are from 1945–2017 in countries considered “Free” by Freedom House.

Wang (2024)

~80% vs ~65%
CV vs voluntary systems

Increases among men
more?
Singh (2025)

Notes

- Turnout is higher in systems with compulsory voting, even in systems with weak enforcement
- Singh (2025) finds CV disproportionately increases men's turnout, narrowing the gender gap in some contexts

Compulsory voting effects

- **Bechtel et al. (2015):** Compulsory voting increases support for left-wing policies in referendums
- **Sheppard (2015):** People in countries with compulsory voting have better political knowledge
- **Cepaluni & Hidalgo (2016):** Inequality of turnout increased (Brazil)

Notes

- Cepaluni & Hidalgo (2016) use Brazil's CV system to show that compulsion increases turnout among more educated people more than less educated people, due to penalties which include restrictions on accessing state services

The compulsory voting debate

For CV

- Elections lack legitimacy when large numbers don't vote (turnout in decline)
- Voting is a civic duty — like jury service
- Produces more representative electorates

Against CV

- Freedom to vote implies the freedom *not* to
- Reluctant voters may cast uninformed ballots
- Penalties unfairly affect poorer people

Notes

- There's also an interesting discussion in the podcast linked in the reading list about how democracies that get "stuck" often move on by adding more voters (usually through expanding the franchise). Adopting compulsory voting has potential to add many more voters due to the low turnout in most countries

Key takeaways

Franchise design is political

Who gets to vote is a choice about whose voices shape power

Access \neq participation

Formal legal equality doesn't guarantee equal participation — institutional barriers can persist

CV raises turnout — but still debated

Compulsory voting reliably increases turnout, but strong normative arguments exist on both sides

Group Discussion

Choose *one* of the following questions:

1. Should prisoners be allowed to vote?
2. Should the voting age be lowered to 16?

In groups, choose a position and make your best case.