

Compulsory voting is controversial, but would represent a move towards genuine democratic empowerment

By Democratic Audit UK

*Britain has been blighted by steadily declining turnout over a number of election cycles, with a competitive 2010 election being unusual in seeing turnout actually increase. **Vittorio Trevitt** argues that compulsory voting would increase engagement and actually empower voters, with criticisms of the notion generally missing the mark.*



In Australia, compulsory voting is an established part of the political landscape (Credit: Michael Coghlan, CC BY SA/NC 2.0)

One of the most worrying trends in British politics over the past decade or so has been the gradual decline in voter turnout, with only 65% of registered voters casting their ballots in the last general election, [compared to an average of 70%-80%](#) from 1945 to 1997. Although this represents an improvement over the last two elections (with only 61% [voting in 2005](#), and 59% in 2001), it is nevertheless the case that a smaller percentage of the population today exercises their right to vote. Many people feel disconnected from politics altogether, with a 2012 poll finding that 57% of respondents found politics too complicated to understand, [while only 60%](#) believed that voting “is the only way to have any say.”

I remember at school listening to my history teacher speak about those who fought for ordinary people in Britain to have the vote, such as the Chartists and Suffragettes, and many people today abstaining from their right to choose their representatives in government. The failure of many politicians to live up to expectations and keep their promises are arguably to blame for this sad state of affairs, and it is up to political parties to renew the public’s faith in politics by implementing policies that fulfil the aspirations of families and individuals for a better life. There does exist an additional option that could help to tackle political apathy and enable people to feel that their vote is a valuable one. That option is compulsory voting.

Various [criticisms](#) have been [levelled against](#) compulsory voting as a viable system, with a number of critics seeing it as representing an attack on civil liberties, while other critics have argued that it does not necessarily lead to [greater political engagement](#). An example of this can be found in the case of Chile, where after

compulsory voting was [abolished in 2011](#) less than 50% of registered voters participated in the [two rounds of the 2013 presidential election](#). A counter-argument, however, is that the introduction of such a system could have the positive effect of making people aware of the wide choice available to them, thereby leading to an increase in political awareness and participation. Over the years, a number of politicians have voiced their support for mandatory voting practices, such as the former government ministers [Geoff Hoon](#) and [Peter Hain](#), highlighting mainstream political support for such a system.

From my own personal experience, I have known many people who abstain from voting because they do not believe that politicians do anything for them, and adhere to the belief that casting a ballot will not change anything. By abstaining from the democratic process, however, people inadvertently allow politicians to come into office and make decisions that those potential voters may not necessarily support. There is also the question of the extent to which a government enjoys a popular mandate to implement its programme when a large proportion of the electorate fails to vote. In 2005, for instance, Labour won a third term in office with only 21.6% of eligible voters casting ballots for that party, and in 2010 only 23.5% of eligible voters ticked their ballot papers for [the Conservative Party](#).

Compulsory voting is a long standing practice in many countries, such as in Argentina (which has had mandatory voting in elections [since 1914](#)) and in Belgium (which introduced the practice as far [back as 1893](#)). In 2013, there were 38 countries worldwide that required their citizens (with certain exceptions) to vote by law. Although enforcement of this rule varies [between countries](#), the fact that voting is seen as a civic duty in those nation-states demonstrates the importance of compulsory voting as a means of increasing democratic participation within a society.

From an equity point of view, compulsory voting could empower the dispossessed here in Britain (where those in the highest income group have been found to be 43% more likely to vote than those in the [lowest income group](#)) by enabling them to feel that they have a stake in their country's future, and see for themselves the kinds of candidates they could vote for that may influence legislation leading to long-term improvements in their lives. In a country where mainstream politics has long been dominated by three parties, people do not seem to challenge the status quo by voting for other parties that may have a different approach to politics (the rise of UKIP, however, may be a sign that British politics is moving in this direction). There are over fifty parties to choose from in the [United Kingdom](#), with differing ideologies and beliefs on how Britain should be governed, demonstrating the large number of choices available. It is better to vote than not at all, because one person's vote could make a difference, however small it may be, on whatever changes politicians may bring about in British society.

Various countries with compulsory voting have also been credited with having lower levels of political corruption and inequalities of wealth, together with higher rates of satisfaction from people with the way democracy is functioning in their countries, compared with those nation-states where voting is voluntary. In Australia, where voting has been [mandatory since 1924](#), 70% of people support the long-enshrined principle of compulsory voting in [their democratic society](#).

There is, therefore, a strong case for voting in elections to be made compulsory in Britain. By requiring citizens of all income groups to have a say in who should make important decisions, and by potentially increasing the political education of the [population as a whole](#), the introduction of compulsory voting could prove itself to be one of the greatest democratic experiments in the history of our country, and set a precedent for other liberal democracies to follow in the years to come.

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