

Compulsory voting is not the answer, but fixing an archaic system is

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What lies behind voter disengagement? While some blame a crumbling political and electoral infrastructure, others lay the fault at the feet of voters themselves, and posit compulsory voting as the answer. The idea has an enduring appeal for many people, who look enviously at high turnouts in Australia, but is it suitable in the British context?

Bradley Allsop argues that it isn't, and suggests that policymakers look to tackle some of the deeper issues that blight the system.



Carrot or stick? (Credit: c0ts0d0, CC BY NC 2.0)

Political scientist Colin Hay divides remedies to the problem of political disengagement into two broad camps: those that lay the blame for poor voter turnout at the feet of the system (what he terms 'supply side' theories) and those that think the blame lies with the electorate ('demand side' theories). Hay warns against demand-side theories, because for him they are an easy way out for politicians. If we can dismiss poor turnout as the fault of an apathetic or lazy populace, then there's no incentive for the political system to change, nor for our officials to accept any of the responsibility.

Compulsory voting is an idea that appears to be gaining increasing support, but it falls foul of Hay's warnings. Whilst unlikely to be the deliberate intention of the majority of its advocates, it is an idea which implicitly blames the electorate for poor turnout. It prescribes a cure that comes straight out of the traditional conservative playbook – blame the individual for the problem, instead of assessing the many wider social and systemic problems that lurk behind it. What kind of message does it send that when we finally make some adjustments to a system that has largely remained unchanged since women were granted the right to vote, it is to force individuals into doing something that they'd clearly rather not do? Indeed, it is possible that such a move would serve to increase anger and disillusionment with the system, with the increased turnout serving only to mask a bitter disappointment with politics.

It certainly seems to have done little in the way of improving trust in political parties or government for Australia, with [their reported levels](#) barely different to other Western countries, suggesting that the deeper problems that lie behind the fragmented relationship between public and politics have been left untouched by this common example of compulsory voting. Indeed, in Belgium, where they have 'compulsory turnout' (forced to go to the ballot but not to actually cast a vote), a study found that removal of the coercion could see up to [a 20% decline in turnout](#). The author of the linked study seemed to think this a good reason to keep compulsory turnout, but surely it just highlights that it isn't doing a thing to foster genuine connection with the political system? Mere turnout seems to simply be too shallow a measure.

There are many better solutions that we can consider, ones that could have beneficial side effects too. Political parties seem to be half-heartedly seeking a kind of 'silver bullet' for engagement. The solution is bound to be more complex than this. The electorate aren't cattle that can be herded one way or the other by one simple change: political engagement is a complex phenomenon, and the unique values, beliefs and motivations of each voter must be respected if we are to understand it. So what can we do?

As Lord Malloch-Brown [recently highlighted](#), one place to start might be the way we vote, which needs to be rapidly modernised. The average time to announce a count has risen in recent years from less than 3 hours to over 5, there have been numerous issues around incorrect or completely non-existent postal ballots, and a significant number of people cite not being able to find their polling station or knowing how to register as a reason for not voting. Online voting would go some way to alleviating some of the practical barriers in the way of voting: whilst many fear its vulnerability to fraud, in the 21st century it is incredible we have yet to seriously explore this as an option.

Same-day registration has been shown [to increase voter turnout](#) in the US states that have it, and it also removes arbitrary deadlines that often stop people being able to register just as election campaigns gear up and grab their attention. It can also help alleviate the serious democratic deficit represented by the 1 in 5 individuals not even on the register to boot. A '[None of the Above](#)' option on the ballot (one that has the power to force another election if it secures the most votes) would also help, by giving those that currently do not vote or choose to spoil their ballot a more legitimate and powerful means of expressing their disappointment in the political offerings before them.

Electoral reform, a poignant issue in British politics at the moment, aside from ensuring a fairer result for those that do vote, will encourage more to join in. The biggest reason cited in [a poll by Survation](#) for not voting was that respondents felt like their vote 'wouldn't make any difference'. This could either be because parties were all perceived to 'be the same' (the second most frequent response) or because First Past the Post has led many to feel like they are wasting their votes in many seats, with their party of preference being unlikely to win. Some form of proportional representation would actually alleviate both of these problems, by ensuring there aren't any 'wasted votes' and by allowing a more diverse range of opinions prominence in Parliament. Research has also found that those electoral systems that lean more towards PR also enjoy higher turnouts during their elections.

Above all the most important thing we can be doing is giving people a sense of what is referred to in the literature as 'internal political efficacy'. We must be giving people a sense that they have the competence, the knowledge and the skill to participate in the political realm. This shouldn't be difficult: most people inherently know what they feel their local community needs more of and many have innovative solutions if allowed the time and freedom to express themselves. Unfortunately our media preaches consumer passivity instead of citizen activism, and our educational system misses countless opportunities to engage and nurture curiosity and debate. We must invest the time to reinvigorate a sense of citizenship in communities, and shift the focus of political rhetoric away from being obsessed with Westminster and an elite clique of politicians.

Even for those that are genuinely not voting out of idleness and apathy (rather than out of some more principled stance) we need to look deeper. Even for these people, does the blame truly lie with them? Politicians keen to wash their hands of guilt will tell us so, but how debased must a system be that it cannot offer people enough hope to force them out of their apathetic slumber? If our officials and system are so uninspiring and uninteresting to them, do we really think forcing them to vote anyway is the correct solution?

None of these proposals on their own will drastically change voter turnout, but together, they have the potential to really transform public attitudes and engagement with politics. Taking in all of this, compulsory voting begins to feel like a bit of a clumsy, heavy handed incursion into a complex and highly charged social situation. Electoral reform should always be done with the aim of empowering the electorate, but this does the opposite: it shackles them. It tells them that they have no choice but to give their support to a crop of politicians that they might well despise. Not voting, for some, is their way of sending a powerful political message. We may disagree with their method of doing so, but we have no right to deny them of it.

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