

Ending the vicious cycle: compulsory turn-out for first time voters

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*Democratic disengagement amongst young people is on the rise, with research in a [new Democratic Audit publication](#) showing the scale of the problem. Here, **Guy Lodge**, **Glenn Gottfried**, and **Sarah Birch** make the case for compulsory turnout amongst first-time eligible voters, which would help to redress the power gap between younger and older citizens.*



By far the most effective – albeit controversial – way of boosting participation is to make voting compulsory. Compulsory voting is more widespread than many realise, and is currently practiced in approximately a quarter of the world's democracies, including Belgium and Australia, though in no case is voting itself required by law; rather what is mandatory is attendance at the polls. In states that have adopted compulsory voting since the Second World War, there has been an average turnout increase of 14 per cent but its impact can often be considerably higher, increasing turnout rates by around 30 per cent. Turnout in Australia has averaged 95 per cent in the 24 elections since 1946. In Belgium turnout has averaged 93 per cent in nineteen elections since 1946.

Most importantly, however, compulsory voting drastically reduces turnout inequality by enhancing the representation of marginalised and apathetic groups. In Belgium – where compulsory voting is still law yet not enforced – the turnout rate for those under the age of 30 is 88 per cent.

Calls for compulsory voting are, however, commonly met with the objection that it is a citizen's right to choose not to vote and this is an argument that has long stuck in the collective gullet of the British public. To allay such fears, we propose a more limited approach which is to make electoral participation compulsory for first elections only.

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 should they not wish to

cast a vote for any of the candidates. To ensure high participation rates a small fine should be used to enforce the policy (we recommend a similar model to that used in Australia which issues fines of AU\$20 – the equivalent of about £12). This measure would place a small burden on young people, but its main effect would be to force politicians to pay attention to them.

What is the case for first-time compulsory voting? The first reason is that voting is *habitual*. As Mark Franklin's research shows if people vote in the first election for which they are eligible, they are far more likely to vote in subsequent elections. Therefore there is good reason to believe that if young people were obliged by law to give voting a try, this could well go a long way toward kick-starting a life-time habit of voting. In other words a small element of compulsion could have a substantial and lasting impact on turnout.

Secondly, first-time compulsory voting, is deliberately targeted on improving the representation of young people, where levels of turnout inequality are highest. Moreover, first-time compulsory voting could easily be combined with a number of other reforms designed to inculcate democratic participation among the young. Andrew Adonis has persuasively argued that young people should be registered to vote at their place of study with polling stations located in schools and colleges so allowing young people to share the experience of voting. Citizenship education, he writes, would not only lead to mock elections but real elections. This is right but we would add that this whole experience could be transformed further if it was known that young people *had* to cast their first vote.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, if politicians knew that young people would be voting in large numbers at their first election they could not afford, as is often the case now, to ignore their concerns and interests in favour of those of groups who already vote in large numbers. Critics of compulsory voting often fail to acknowledge how this element of compulsion – forcing politicians to engage with voters – can help address underlying causes of political disaffection, not just their symptoms.

Fourthly, if young people from poorer backgrounds were required to vote 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 objections to compulsory first-time voting are similar to those routinely launched against all forms of compulsory voting. The most politically damaging criticism is that it is undemocratic to oblige citizens to engage in political life. There are counterarguments to the position, however; civil liberties go hand in hand with civic duties, one of which is to take part in political decision-making. In fact, a strong version of the duty to vote is intimately bound up with the development of British theories of representation. Lord Bryce summarised this view succinctly when he wrote that 'as individual liberty consists in the exemption from political control, so political liberty consists in participation in legal control'; in other words, the protection of personal freedom is perfectly compatible with the legal obligation to take part in collective decision-making through the election of law-makers.

There are already many aspects of our lives that include an element of compulsion, from receiving education to annual MOTs to jury service to completion of the census. Electoral registration is effectively compulsory: under the current rules, all those resident in the UK are obliged to provide Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) with the information they are asked for, or face a £1,000 fine. Young people are required by the law to attend school. Adding just one more small task to this list would not represent an undue burden, and it could well help to reinvigorate democracy. And let's remember too that there would be a 'none of the above' option; no first-time elector would be obliged to vote for any particular candidate or party.

Another complaint levelled at compulsory voting is that while it might improve participation rates it does not improve the *quality* of democratic participation. Those forced to vote will not do so in a meaningful way. This is a serious point, but the claim seems overstated: in Australia, for instance, so-called 'donkey votes' – a form of spoilt ballot – accounts for well under 5 per cent of total votes cast. Additionally, states with compulsory voting tend to have higher levels of satisfaction with democracy. However, we fully appreciate that compulsory voting is not a silver bullet for ending political disaffection, the root causes of which are deep and complex. For these reasons we believe that first-

time compulsory voting is best combined with other reforms designed to overcome the barriers to participation (see the example of schools above). Indeed it might strengthen the impact of other reforms. An obvious example here is the call to lower the voting age to 16. There are strong normative reasons for votes at 16 but the evidence is mixed in terms of the potential impact such a move would have on participation rates. Combining the two policies would guarantee that reducing the voting age would not deepen levels of political inequality.

Would compulsory first-time voting *over-represent* the young? There are two counter-arguments to this objection: firstly, no individual voter would be disadvantaged by such a move, as no-one would be deprived of the franchise by the measure and all votes cast would still be equally weighted. Indeed, increased participation by the young might well spur members of other age groups to vote to right the balance. Secondly, over time all members of the electorate would at some point in their lives experience mandatory voting, such that all would be treated equally over the course of the life cycle. The exception would be those individuals who had already voted once at the time of the introduction of the measure, but again, there is nothing preventing aggrieved members of this group from exercising their franchise whenever they have the opportunity.

Table 1: Responses to the question: ‘Thinking for a moment about voting in British elections, we would like to know if you agree or disagree with the following statements: [...] People should be required by law to vote in the first election for which they are eligible’

Source: e British Election Study Continuous Monitoring Survey, fielded in July 2013. The survey was an online poll carried out by YouGov. The total number of survey respondents was 1,140

Strongly agree	18.1%
Agree	20.3%
Neither agree nor disagree	20.9%
Disagree	21.6%
Strongly disagree	13.1%
Don't know	6.1%

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. This is reflected in the only polling so far conducted, where a large number were undecided. However, the polling also revealed that the measure is supported by most of those who have made up their minds on the proposal. When asked if people should be required to vote in the first election for which they were eligible, 38 per cent of those surveyed in July 2013 agreed, with 35 per cent against the idea. (The remaining 27 per cent either said they did not know or they neither agreed nor disagreed – see table 1). When these figures are broken down by different groups in society, we find that young people themselves are, not surprisingly, somewhat ambivalent about the idea (see table 2). Only 21 per cent voiced support, while 38 per cent opposed, but there were actually far more – 47 per cent – who said they did not know or were neutral. Interestingly, the proposal was popular among older people (who have a stronger belief in the duty to vote).

Table 2: Support for first-time compulsory voting by age

Source: e British Election Study Continuous Monitoring Survey, fielded in July 2013. The survey was an online poll carried out by YouGov.

Introducing an obligation for new electors to turn out once would thus go a considerable way toward breaking the habit of non-voting that often gets passed from generation to generation. This measure would also right the balance of British electoral politics, which has tilted toward the grey vote in recent years, and it would oblige politicians to speak to new sections of the electorate and develop policies to suit the needs of those groups.

	18-24	25-54	55+
Strongly agree	9.8%	16.1%	23.0%
Agree	11.6%	19.9%	23.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	17.9%	21.3%	21.1%
Disagree	22.3%	21.8%	20.9%
Strongly disagree	13.4%	15.3%	10.1%
Don't know	25.0%	5.6%	1.9%

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Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It is an excerpt of a new Democratic Audit pamphlet by the authors entitled ‘the Political Inclusion of Young Citizens’. The full report can be found [here](#). Please read our comments policy before posting. The shortened URL for this post is: <http://buff.ly/LYJga1>
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