

The arguments for compulsory voting politics essay



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Using the definition of democracy as tied to the concepts of liberty, equality, legitimacy, and active citizenship, this paper analyzes whether or not compulsory voting is consistent with the fundamental principles of democracy.

The argument for liberty would suggest that compulsory voting is principally undemocratic because the freedom of choice must necessarily include the freedom not to choose (Lever 2009, 3). Because democracy highly values individual freedom, as de Tocqueville suggests, the act of forcing individuals to vote with corresponding sanction for non-compliance is clearly a violation of liberty. While the libertarian argument does not discount the benefits of compulsory voting per se, such as higher turnout rates (Lijphart, 1997, 10), these perceived advantages cannot justify government encroachment on individual liberties. A government that values democracy values individual freedom and cannot compel its citizens to vote when it is not in the latter's best interest to do so. The concept of voluntariness and the emphasis on individual freedom is a staple of American democracy (de Tocqueville 2003). Because voting is a political right, it must be left to the individual to choose to exercise or not to exercise. It eventually boils down to providing that option for the individual to voluntarily choose, free from government interference.

From the standpoint of civil liberties, the right not to vote is a form of speech that is protected under the First Amendment (Matsler 2003, 960). This has an accompanying right not to speak as well. Remaining silent when doing so is for your best interest is a statement by itself. Likewise, the choice not to vote is a form of political statement that is enshrined under the First

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Amendment and needs protection. Forcing an individual to vote would be likened to the state violating that individual's right to the First Amendment. Because the government is compelling the individual to be subject to an array of choices they face at the polling station, the government may be silencing "the more informative political statement" they intend to make by staying away from the polls and choosing not to participate (Evler 2009, 32). Compulsory voting then, not only violates a major civil liberty (the right to free speech and freedom of expression), the state also endangers its own representativeness because it fails to respect the rights of electors to choose not to participate.

From the philosophical standpoint, the issue of whether or not voting should be compelled among individuals is contrary to the aims of liberty, which according to Mill (1999, 34) prioritizes self-interest first, and self-government, second. Political participation goes hand in hand with these principles. The first relates to the power of the individual in a democratic society to unseat bad leaders. The second relates to the power of the individual to use his or her capacities toward collective responsibilities and upholding the public good. These interests all point to the citizen as having a moral duty to go out and participate in the electoral exercise. Nonetheless, moral and ethical considerations also necessitate the view that respecting the decision to abstain from electoral exercise is in keeping with democratic rights.

Drawing from Mill, individuals in a democratic society have the right to protect themselves from all things that demean, neglect, and intrude upon them. Because people cannot completely look after themselves, liberty

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entails the freedom of individuals to pursue self-protection in a democracy. They are also entitled to choose the extent of their political participation in forming, joining and leaving political parties, expressing their opinions on political issues, voicing out their sentiments against policies that are detrimental to their interest, and refusing to disclose their political identities or political beliefs. Democratic rights are founded upon the respect for people's capacity to make reasoned judgment. This goes against forcing people to exercise their rights or maximize their opportunities and liberties as citizens. We cannot generalize that people who do not exercise the right to vote are as the accusation goes, lazy, apathetic, or disinterested; rather informed judgments of people would make them conclude that voting will not lead to the pursuit of their self-interests. Intelligent people can argue that by not voting, they are pursuing their own self-interest - by making a statement that none of the candidates deserve to be in elective position. Because persons are rational and work toward their individual self-interest, compulsory voting cannot be justified because if voting is in their self-interest, there would be no need to force them to go out and vote. They would decide that voting would be good for them and they would cast their ballot of their own volition.

Compulsory voting does not necessarily uphold fairness or equality.

The case for compulsory voting is also argued on the issue of fairness and equality. Like Plato's disdain for apathetic citizens, proponents of compulsory voting stress that because all benefit from being citizens of a democratic society, every citizen has an obligation to participate in the electoral process.

By equality, is meant that no one should become a “ free rider” in a democracy – free riders meaning those that benefit off society without participating in elections. Supporters of compulsory voting suggest that it is a moral and political duty to vote and that in the interest of fairness, all should vote because all experience the consequences of electoral outcomes. Other strong arguments for compulsory voting include the fact, that voting on election day is much easier than other positive obligations of citizens such as paying taxes, doing jury duty, or performing military service. However, this argument must paint two groups. On the one hand, there are voters who are selflessly giving their time and effort to cast their ballot and contribute to the public good while on the other hand, there are non-voters who are selfishly abandoning their political duties but directly benefit from society’s benefits as the first group that cast their ballots. The point that Mill makes is that in a democracy, everyone, whether consciously or unconsciously, is acting in what they judge to be their own self-interest. Voters go out and vote because it is in their self-interest to vote for their preferred candidates and see them in office. Non-voters cannot be generalized to be selfish; it can only be fairly assumed that abstaining from the electoral process is judged by them to be in their best interest. Democratic principles value the individual’s rational judgment and capacity to make choices; hence, forcing a person to contradict his or her own rational choice is undemocratic. The problem with asserting that it is unfair that citizens vote while others do not is that dilutes the dynamism in a democracy.

Compulsory voting also does not guarantee equality in terms of encouraging equal participation from various gender or educational groups. While this is

asserted by proponents of compulsory voting, there is no empirical evidence to back this up. Studies however suggest that while compulsory voting has been observed to stimulate high voter turnout in some countries, it has not been observed to promote equal participation in those countries. A study (Quintelier, Hooghe, and Marien 2008) indicates that specific categories of potential voters refrain from voting, leading to the electoral dominance of more privileged groups within the population. The authors studied 36 countries that participated in the 2004 International Social Survey Programme. They found that while compulsory voting is associated with higher turnout rates, it has not led to a significant growth in electoral participation among gender or educational groups.

3. Compulsory voting cannot guarantee political legitimacy.

Perhaps the strongest argument for implementing compulsory voting in countries is that higher voter turnouts strengthen the political legitimacy of a government. Non-voting is seen to override legitimacy and make electoral outcomes vulnerable to coups or resistance. When you probe deeper into this argument, non-voting can be construed not as apathy but as contentment with all the running candidates so that whoever wins the electoral contest, is worthy of the non-voter's support. When citizens do not vote, this does not necessarily mean that they view any political outcome as illegitimate.

Still, supporters of compulsory voting are weary of low voter turnout because it undermines representativeness and political legitimacy. Lijphart said that “A political system with the universal right to vote but with only a tiny fraction of citizens exercising this right should be regarded as a democracy in merely <https://assignbuster.com/the-arguments-for-compulsory-voting-politics-essay/>

a... hollow sense of the term" (1997, 11). Proper democratic representation is strongly associated with the notion of free elections. By proper is usually meant that the outcome of the electoral contest was based on the sentiments of a majority of the population. Those that support this argument automatically assume that just because the elections were participated by majority of the population, that governments can assume perpetual legitimacy. This is a misled notion. Legitimacy is conferred not only through elections, but by the subsequent acts, policies, and decisions made by the government's leaders that pursue the general welfare of its population. Essentially, the votes cast in an election are only a first step toward a government's claim to legitimacy. The more substantial claim is to be derived from the manner in which it leads and represents the collective interests of its citizens. If legitimacy means that government was voted by a majority, then not all legitimate governments are democratic and not all democracies are legitimate. There are governments considered to be legitimate but have passed undemocratic policies, engaged in rampant corruption, or were simply incompetent. Democratic politics is not simply a numbers game. The more substantive view of democratic politics is that it is competitive and cooperative at the same time. Judging political legitimacy based on voter turnout makes a poor analogy.

Moreover, on the claims of representativeness, data show that compulsory voting is not a policy to be universalized. Figures from IDEA Show that while there are some countries that have shown impressive turnouts as a result of compulsory voting, the overall picture of voter turnout debunks the claim that countries enforcing compulsion have the highest voter turnouts. Since

1945, besides Italy, only 4 countries with compulsory voting made it to the top 50 countries arranged in terms of voter turnout: Belgium (84.9 per cent), Netherlands (84.8), Australia (84.4) and Greece (80.3). Forty five out of the 50 countries demonstrating a high voter turnout used voluntary voting. Other countries with compulsory voting have the lowest voter turnout in the world such as Egypt which only has a 24.6 per cent voter turnout, the second lowest in the world (IDEA 2010).

Compulsory voting cannot be equated to active citizenship.

Equating a high voter turnout to active citizenship is too simplistic. The Australian experience indicated that while voter turnout was high, the incidence of invalid ballots also increased (Australian Electoral Commission 2006, 4). The phenomenon of donkey voting is a natural consequence of compelling citizens to vote against their own volition. Compulsory voting formalizes the participation of underinformed or uninformed voters who participate in a politically significant process. Opponents of compulsory voting suggest that having uninformed voters cast their ballots is worse than having informed citizens abstain from the vote. The more substantive definition of citizenship is how much informed citizens are about their society and the ways they contribute into the democratic process. Their contribution should not be measured exclusively on voting alone. For instance, in the U. S., where voter turnout is relatively lower than in Australia, the strength of public opinion in the U. S. is higher and laws have been modified, passed, or rejected in deference to public opinion (Mastrel 2003, 960). It could be safe to say that political outcomes are worse if the citizenry is uninformed than if the citizenry does not wish to vote (Evler, 2009, 32).

Conclusion

There is no question that the electoral process is an important part of democratic society. There is also no question that voting is a moral duty of every citizen in a democracy. The question is whether or not a person can be compelled to vote against his own judgment in the interest of democracy. The discussion revealed the many advantages of compulsory voting as experienced in countries like Australia, Belgium, and Italy and how this has contributed to higher voter turnouts. Nonetheless, the reading of democracy must not be reduced to the level of electoral participation alone. Voting, however important it may be is only one form of political participation, and as experience shows, not a very conclusive one. Elected governments have been toppled down, leaders have been removed, or refused reelection despite claims to legitimacy because of democratic elections. Electoral participation is valuable because it enables citizens to choose from among candidates who are considered the best to lead the country. Democratic societies respect individual freedom, including the freedom not to vote. Voting is a rational choice that a citizen decides to exercise when it is in his or her best interest to do so. Compelling him or her to exercise such is undemocratic. The higher turnout rates in countries with compulsory voting may not be necessarily good. Experience has shown that countries with compulsory voting also have high invalid or protest votes. Democracy cannot be enhanced when citizens go out and vote just because they have to and in order to avoid sanctions. Only when citizens freely decide to participate in the electoral process can their votes be authentic and truly reflective of their preference. Democratic government is a complex system that values not

only electoral participation but providing avenues for people to express their choice, equality, freedom, and reasoned judgment.