

Compulsory Voting

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Abstract

Compulsory voting (CV) is a system of laws and/or norms mandating that enfranchised citizens turn out to vote, often accompanied by (a) a system of compulsory voter registration and (b) penalties for non-compliance, usually fines or the denial of state-provided benefits. CV is widespread throughout Latin America, but somewhat rarer among industrialized democracies. Cross-national studies find CV to be an effective mechanism for increasing turnout, by between seven to sixteen percentage points; within-country comparisons also generally find that CV boosts turnout. CV is commonly thought to advantage parties of the left (based on social-structural and demographic patterns of turnout in countries without CV), and hence shift public policy in that direction also. But these conjectures are difficult to verify, since other political and institutional variables intervene between voter turnout, election outcomes and policy outputs. It is often overlooked that fines and sanctions are just one aspect of CV: states employing CV usually reciprocate by reducing the costs of turnout for its citizens, via weekend voting, simple registration procedures, and the creation of a centralized, professional bureaucracy concerned with all aspects of election administration.

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Compulsory voting (CV) is a system of laws and/or norms, mandating that enfranchised citizens turn out to vote, and usually specifying penalties for non-compliance. The number of countries using CV in at least some of their elections is greater than commonly recognized. One recent estimate is that twenty-four countries constituting roughly 17% of the world's democracies employ compulsory voting to some extent ([Australia 2000](#), 170).

CV raises questions that strike at the heart of democratic theory. For example, is it “democratic” to compel citizens to turn out to vote via the threat of financial or social sanction? In what sense are elections conducted under such circumstances “free and fair”? On the other hand, what legitimacy attaches to elected representatives and their policies when large proportions of the electorate abstain? Responding to this latter question, political scientists have long considered CV an effective means for increasing voter turnout (e.g., [Gosnell 1930](#)) with Arend Lijphart's 1996 Presidential Address to the American Political Science Association a recent, prominent, and compelling scholarly intervention in support of CV ([Lijphart 1997](#)). Normative questions aside, CV raises numerous issues for students and practitioners of electoral politics, which are the focus in this article. Real-world implementations of CV are first considered, followed by an assessment of the consequences of CV for the conduct of electoral politics, public policy, campaigning and the administration of elections.

I Implementations

Western-style democracies utilizing CV for at least some of their elections include Australia, Austria (in two provinces), Belgium, Greece, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, and Switzerland (just one canton). The Netherlands also had CV up until 1970. In almost all of these Western democracies CV was instituted in the early 20th century, shortly after the expansion of voter suffrage and the political organization of labor movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the same time there were some experiments with CV in the American states: North

Dakota (1898) and Massachusetts (1918) actually amended their constitutions to permit CV, but their respective legislatures did not implement CV in their statutes ([Gosnell 1930](#), 206-7). CV is widespread throughout Latin America; for instance, Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela have CV. Cyprus, Egypt, Fiji, Turkey, Thailand, Singapore and the Phillipines also have CV.

1.1 Inducing Compliance

Compliance with CV is most commonly induced with a system of small to moderate fines (e.g., Australia and Belgium), although a substantial number of countries with CV do not rely on fines. Other penalties include ineligibility for elected office for a prescribed period (e.g., Argentina), ineligibility for certain types of government employment (e.g., Venezuela), and disenfranchisement (e.g., Thailand). In other countries CV operates as a norm, with social embarrassment an important sanction for non-compliance (e.g., Italy). Sometimes CV appears as a constitutional provision or in statute, but with no mention of penalties for non-compliance (e.g., Bolivia, Chile, Liechtenstein, Egypt). Many countries also have large classes of exemptions. For instance, Australia's federal CV statute exempts non-voters with "valid and sufficient" reasons for not turning out; Australia's courts have rigorously denied non-voters' claims of indifference between the candidates or alienation from politics as valid and sufficient reasons ([AEC 1999](#)). Age exemptions are also common: for instance, Brazil makes voting optional for citizens between the ages of 16 and 18, citizens over the age of 70, and for illiterates.

2 Consequences

CV has a direct impact on voter turnout, evident in both aggregate and individual-level analyses. The underlying logic is extremely simple. CV's non-compliance penalties offset the costs of electoral participation, effectively attaching a cost to

not turning out and thereby overcoming the fact that turnout is a low benefit activity for many citizens (Lijphart 1997, 9). A number of indirect consequences of CV are also discussed.

2.1 Voter Turnout: Cross-National Evidence

Even a casual inspection of compendiums of aggregate turnout statistics reveals higher turnout among countries with CV. For instance, a recent collection of data on voter turnout in 171 countries finds turnout about six or seven percentage points higher in 24 countries with some form of CV than in countries without CV (IDEA 1997, 32). Multivariate statistical analyses typically find CV to have larger impacts on turnout, controlling for other institutional and political variables that affect turnout. Lijphart's (1997) review finds CV associated with a boost in turnout rates of seven to sixteen percentage points; for examples of the studies reviewed, see Powell (1981), Jackman (1987), Jackman and Miller (1995), and Franklin (1999), the latter study being distinctive for including an individual-level analysis, exploiting survey data from European Union countries. Among Latin American countries, the estimated turnout boost associated with CV is roughly eleven to seventeen percentage points (Fornos 1996). These results are striking considering (a) large cross-national differences in institutional and political characteristics of these countries that impact turnout (e.g., Jackman's 1987 study considered competitiveness of elections, electoral disproportionality, number of political parties, unicameralism vs bicameralism, but found CV to have the largest impact on turnout of all these institutional features) and (b) considerable variability in the enforcement of CV among those countries that ostensibly have CV.

2.2 Voter Turnout: Within-Country Comparisons

Hirczy (1994, 65) makes a compelling argument that cross-national analyses provide "no causal proof that mandatory voting actually produces high turnout",

and indeed, the causal arrow may be reversed; i.e., a country that adheres to a norm of high turnout simply “enshrines its civic norm in law”. A research design that overcomes this threat is to compare turnout within countries, before and after the implementation or repeal of CV, or across sub-national units with and without CV. An additional strength of this design is that within countries many of the factors affecting turnout remain constant even while CV comes or goes.

Studies of this type find CV to have large effects on aggregate turnout. Prior to the implementation of CV in 1924, turnout in the nine elections for Australia’s House of Representatives averaged 64.2%; in the nine elections following the introduction of CV turnout averaged 94.6%, an increase of 30.4 percentage points ($t = 8.7$; author’s calculations, using data in [Hughes and Graham \(1968\)](#)). In the Netherlands, the abolition of CV in 1970 was followed by a drop of roughly 10 percentage points to roughly 84% ([Irwin 1974](#); [Hirczy 1994](#)). In addition, the removal of fines for non-voting in Venezuela in 1993 saw turnout fall by roughly 30 percentage points ([Lijphart 1997](#), 9). In Austria, cross-provincial and longitudinal variation in the use of CV permits a powerful assessment of the impact of CV. Turnout in eleven federal parliamentary elections between 1953 and 1987 averaged 92.7% in provinces without CV; among provinces with CV turnout averaged 95.7%, to yield a treatment effect of 3.0 percentage points ($t=3.4$), this smaller but statistically significant effect reflecting a “ceiling effect” (turnout rates are bounded at 100%). A reasonable conclusion of these studies is that CV’s effects are conditional on baseline levels of electoral participation; i.e., CV is likely to have bigger impacts on turnout when other factors predispose a country to low turnout, and vice-versa ([Hirczy 1994](#)). This insight can be applied in cross-national studies of voter turnout, using interaction terms or multi-level statistical models to make the effects of CV conditional on other variables.

Public opinion surveys have also been used as proxies for the “natural experiment” of removing CV. For instance, researchers in a number of countries with CV have asked respondents to report their likely behavior in a counter-factual scenario of voluntary turnout. Results from studies of this type suggest

modest falls in voter turnout in Australia --- to about 88% from the current 96% figure (Mackerras and McAllister 1996) --- but larger falls in Belgium (Hooghe and Pelleriaux 1998), Brazil (Power and Roberts 1995), and Venezuela, all on the order of around thirty percentage points. Jackman (1999) urges caution in interpreting these estimates, arguing that (at least in the Australian case) survey response bias produces an overestimate of voluntary voter turnout, since hypothetical non-voters are less likely to respond to a survey on politics in the first place.

2.3 Political Consequences

To gauge the political consequences of CV, we start with the near universal association between political participation and socio-economic status. Noting that “low voter turnout means unequal and socioeconomically biased turnout” (Lijphart 1997, 2), many scholars see CV as going a long way towards removing this “bias”. Comparative studies of turnout note that the relationship between socioeconomic status and voter turnout weakens as turnout increases (e.g., Powell 1986). Thus, to the extent CV increases turnout, CV also removes socioeconomic differences in electoral participation. Quite simply, when everyone votes, there can be no socioeconomic “biases” in turnout.

It also follows that the high turnout rates engendered by CV also have partisan and ideological implications. Since support for parties of the left is correlated with socioeconomic status (notwithstanding a decline in “class voting”), as socioeconomic based differentials in turnout diminish, support for parties of the left increases (Pacek and Radcliff 1995; Nagel 1988; McAllister and Mughan 1986). In turn, increased support for parties of the left results in higher welfare spending and more state interventions in the macro-economy and labor markets (Hicks and Swank 1992; Castles and McKinlay 1979). So again, to the extent that CV increases turnout, and turnout increases support for left parties and their policy agendas, then CV can be shown to have policy implications. Put differently, CV helps mobilize voters who would otherwise abstain, and whose preferences

are (on average) to the left of center. CV thus shifts the distribution of voters' policy preferences further to the left than would otherwise result, pulling party competition and policy in that direction also.

But note that in this argument CV is quite causally remote from outcomes such as left-party success or social-democratic policy outcomes, with other features of the electoral system and political variables more causally proximate to these particular outcomes. Indeed, even this indirect causal link could be backwards: i.e., it is only in countries with commitments to social democratic outcomes that CV is adopted, and in fact, this conjecture is broadly consistent with the pattern of adoption of CV in the early 20th century.

2.4 Other Consequences

One criticism of CV is that it compels the participation of disinterested and hence poorly informed citizens who would otherwise abstain. A higher rate of invalid ballots (e.g., [Tingsten 1937](#)) and “donkey ballots” (where voters simply select the candidate at the top of the ballot) are some of the few consequences attributable to the mobilization of citizens with low levels of political interest or sophistication. Moreover, some instances of these phenomena are protests against CV itself. [Lijphart's \(1997, 10\)](#) takes a contrary position, suggesting that CV “may serve as an incentive [for voters] to become better informed.” A cross-national study by [Gordon and Segura \(1997\)](#) finds a small though statistically significant increase in political sophistication in countries with CV, but otherwise, the evidence for CV promoting greater civic awareness is scant.

Another untested argument along these lines is that CV leads to “higher quality” political campaigns; i.e., under CV parties are less concerned with mobilizing partisans and more with the conversion of voters. [Lijphart \(1997, 10\)](#) speculates that this diminishes (a) the role of money in political campaigns, and (b) incentives for candidates to use attack advertising.

Students of Australian politics have speculated whether CV leads to higher levels of party identification than might otherwise result ([Mackerras and McAl-](#)

lister 1996), consistent with a view of voters as “cognitive misers”, looking for heuristics to help them deal with a forced choice among parties. On the other hand, Australia’s minor parties are obvious beneficiaries and keen supporters of CV, since they provide an alternative for voters dissatisfied with Australia’s major parties, but nonetheless legally compelled to vote. Another long-standing feature of CV is a higher rate of invalid ballots

CV does place an onus on citizens, but states with CV typically reciprocate with institutional mechanisms reducing compliance costs (e.g., weekend voting, ease of registration, widespread use of absentee and postal ballots). According to Gosnell (1930, 209) “fines and penalties under a system of compulsory voting are a minor matter. The important feature of the system is that voting is regarded as a civic duty and the government does everything to impress upon voters this point of view.” And as a practical matter, the more serious the commitment to CV, the more bureaucratic resources are required to maintain registration records and ensure compliance. For instance, in Australia, these two sides of CV -- the “carrot and stick” -- are administered by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), a large and highly professional bureaucracy responsible for all aspects of Australian federal elections. Ensuring compliance with CV is just one of many AEC functions, and the bulk of its activities are to do with other aspects of election administration (e.g., redistricting, voter registration, public financing of campaigns, ballot design, location and staffing of polling stations, vote tallying). Thus one (perhaps unintended) consequence of CV is the centralization and professionalization of election administration. In turn this may mitigate the dangers that accompany decentralized and non-professional election administration, clearly evident in the aftermath of the 2000 U.S. presidential election.

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