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Compulsory voting, party stability and electoral advantage in Australia¹

M. Mackerras^a, I. McAllister^{b,*}

^a*Department of Politics, University of NSW, Canberra, ACT 2600, Australia*

^b*Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia*

Abstract

Australia has the oldest and probably the most efficient system of compulsory voting among the established democracies. The main reason for its introduction in the 1920s was to increase turnout, a goal it has achieved without difficulty. Compulsory voting has also made a major contribution to the long-term stability of the party system. However, the compulsory voting system has had two disadvantages. As in other countries which have introduced compulsory voting, historically there has been a very high level of invalid votes, although the levels are now less than they were prior to 1984, as a result of various electoral reforms. Second, the system disadvantages rightwing parties and advantages leftwing and minor parties. Survey evidence from the 1996 federal election suggests compulsory voting reduced the Liberal–National coalition’s first preference vote by some 5 per cent, compared to the coalition’s expected vote under a voluntary system. If the system is ever removed, it is likely to be for this reason, rather than because of any difficulties in administering it, or because of any philosophical objection to compulsion among voters or politicians. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: + 61 2 6249 2340; Fax: + 61 2 6247 8522; E-mail: Ian.McAllister@anu.edu.au

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No modern democracy has shown greater readiness to experiment with various electoral methods than Australia. Voting is compulsory in State and Commonwealth elections, preferential voting is widely used, and proportional representation applies in the election of the Tasmanian Assembly and the Commonwealth Senate. The character of the party battle and the behaviour of the voters are affected by the compulsory franchise and preferential voting. Louise Overacker (1952).

The level of popular participation in national elections is usually regarded as a sensitive barometer of the health of democratic institutions. Political systems that attract high levels of participation are seen as more legitimate and more responsive to the needs of the electorate compared to systems with lower levels of participation. As a consequence, various electoral devices have been introduced to increase turnout, the most notable of which is mandatory or compulsory voting. Compulsory voting has been shown to increase turnout significantly, although it is not a necessary condition for high levels of participation, as the case of Malta, Sweden and other countries demonstrates (Powell, 1986; Hirczy, 1994, 1995). Nevertheless, compulsory voting is a cost-efficient institutional remedy to the problem of low turnout in the advanced democracies.

Comparatively little attention has been devoted to the circumstances surrounding the introduction of compulsory voting among the established democracies that have adopted it—Australia, Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg and parts of Austria—and the view of voters towards it.² Perhaps more surprisingly, few studies have examined the consequences of compulsory voting for the operation of the electoral system as a whole, or for the party system (but see McAllister and Makkai, 1993; Power and Timmons Roberts, 1995). In this paper, we examine compulsory voting in Australia, including the reasons that were given for introducing it, the debates about its utility, and the ways in which it is administered. We also analyse the consequences of compulsory voting for invalid votes, party advantage, and party stability.

Compulsory enrolment and compulsory voting

As much as any of the established democracies, Australia has represented a vast, democratic experiment. At the beginning of the 20th century, James Bryce commented that Australia had “travelled farthest and fastest along the road which leads to the unlimited rule of the multitude” (Bryce, 1921, 181). By the criteria of adult suffrage, Australia was the first truly democratic state, achieving that status in 1903,³ with New Zealand second in 1907, and the remaining contemporary liberal democracies following in the years after the First World War (Aitkin and Castles, 1989,

² In addition, compulsory voting is used extensively in Latin America, most notably in Brazil (Power and Timmons Roberts, 1995), but also in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru.

³ This date is subject to the caveat about the long delay in granting the vote to the Aboriginal population on the same basis as whites.

208). But perhaps more importantly, Australians have been more willing to experiment with democracy than many of their contemporaries: “in no other liberal democracy, it seems safe to say, have the permutations and combinations of electoral reform been as great” (Goot, 1985, 179). These experiments have ranged from the franchise and the methods used to weigh votes, to the use of compulsory voting to increase turnout. Despite many changes during the course of the century, the system of compulsory voting—once introduced—has remained relatively immune to change.

A system of compulsory enrolment for all eligible voters was introduced for Commonwealth elections in 1911. It had the intended effect of greatly increasing the size of the electorate: in April 1910 enrolment was 2 258 482; by the time of the May 1913 federal election it had risen to 2 760 216. The decision to make enrolment compulsory was taken on the recommendation of the Chief Electoral Officer, R.C. Oldham, who wanted to rationalise the electoral roll.⁴ Prior to that change the compiling of an up-to-date electoral roll was thought by Oldham to be too cumbersome and expensive as it occurred infrequently and did not operate effectively. This change, which established the principle of compulsion and opened the door to compulsory voting, was therefore driven by the bureaucracy, not by politicians. It was a means of improving the accuracy of the electoral rolls and was proposed as a simple ‘machinery measure’ for the benefit of electoral officials. The states quickly followed suit, beginning with Queensland in 1914.

Later, compulsory voting was argued to be the natural corollary of compulsory enrolment. Compulsory voting is, however, a different matter: several English-speaking countries have compulsory enrolment, but have stopped short of introducing compulsory voting. At present, the Australian compulsory enrolment provisions are as well-enforced as in other English speaking countries, although there appears to be less compliance in Australia. This seems to be due to the high number of immigrant non-citizens in Australia and also to a relatively high level of non-compliance among the young. Research conducted for the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has consistently found that young people are less likely to enrol (McAllister, 1985; Elliott and Shanahan Research, 1989). Recent surveys conducted for the AEC⁵ have found that just 78 per cent of the eligible population aged 18 to 24 are enrolled, compared to 93 per cent for the eligible population as a whole.⁶

At the state level, compulsory voting was first introduced in Queensland by the Denham Liberal government in time for the 1915 general election. The measure closely followed other major amendments to the electoral laws and appears to have

⁴ As Oldham (1911, 162) put it: “a thoroughly efficient roll can only be continually preserved under a system of compulsory enrolment, or by the employment of an army of electoral inspectors to continuously watch the movements of people throughout the Commonwealth”.

⁵ Monthly surveys conducted for the AEC since November 1997 have shown an average of 78.2 per cent of 18–24 year olds are not enrolled. Our thanks to Brien Hallett for providing this information.

⁶ These figures explain how the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (1997, 14) can show Australia as having a turnout of only 82.7 per cent during the 1990s, ranking it 20th in the world in terms of turnout. Estimating turnout based on enrolment rather than eligible population puts Australia in second place, having a turnout at federal elections during the 1990s of 96.2 per cent, just behind Malta with 96.7 per cent.

been the last desperate attempt of an unpopular government to save itself from defeat. In the event, the attempt was unsuccessful as Labor won a sweeping victory at the election. Over the next three decades the other states and the Commonwealth followed suit. The system was introduced to Commonwealth elections in 1924, following the report of the 1915 Royal Commission which viewed compulsory voting as a logical extension of compulsory enrolment; the delay in its introduction was caused by divisions within the Labor government, who could agree only on its application to referendums (Goot, 1985, 192). In the states, Victoria introduced compulsory voting in 1926, New South Wales and Tasmania in 1928, Western Australia in 1936 and South Australia in 1941. There was no agreement on the introduction of compulsion for local government elections and it has applied in only a few states, some of which have veered between voluntary and compulsory systems in the postwar years.

In all cases, the move to introduce compulsory voting was bipartisan. The new system suited the convenience of all parties and was opposed by none. Normally the bill to introduce compulsion was presented by a private member. This enabled the major parties to allow an important shift in the system to occur without the risk that any party machine would be blamed. In the case of the Commonwealth, the entire 1924 debate in both houses took less than 3 hours and 26 minutes in the Senate, and 52 minutes in the House of Representatives. While most of the arguments advanced in favour of the change were directed at increasing turnout, it was also suggested that imposing a fine of up to £2 would help to reduce the cost of mounting elections. One member also suggested that it would produce fairer election competition by reducing the National Party's advantage in car ownership among its members, which it exploited by driving voters to the polls in rural areas.

The effect on turnout of the introduction of compulsion was immediate and dramatic (Table 1). In the six states and the Commonwealth, turnout increased by an average of 23.2 per cent, ranging from 12.6 per cent in Queensland (where turnout was relatively high anyway under voluntary voting) to 37.8 per cent in South Australia. The average level of turnout under the system of compulsory voting was 91.6 per cent. In effect, the increase in turnout was significant, which was the goal of the politicians who introduced it. There was also a flow-on effect to turnout in state

Table 1
Federal and state turnout, before and after the introduction of compulsory voting

Year introduced	Jurisdiction	Election prior to compulsory voting	Election after compulsory voting	Increase (per cent)
1914	Queensland	75.5	88.1	12.6
1924	Commonwealth	58.0	91.3	33.4
1926	Victoria	59.2	91.8	32.6
1928	New South Wales	82.5	94.9	12.4
1928	Tasmania	81.9	95.0	13.1
1936	Western Australia	70.1	91.6	20.5
1941	South Australia	50.7	88.5	37.8

Source: McAllister et al. (1997).

elections, even where voting remained voluntary: in New South Wales, for example, state turnout rose from 69.1 per cent in May 1925 to 82.5 per cent in October 1927.⁷ In general, ordinary citizens accepted the new system with little complaint and there were comparatively few instances where voters were fined for not attending the polls without sufficient reason; as a consequence the system has been easy to administer ever since it was introduced.

By any standards, compulsory voting is popular among voters. Going back to the earliest opinion poll which asked voters' views on the topic, conducted in 1943, never less than six out of every 10 voters have supported compulsory voting (Fig. 1). Support for the system increased gradually during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, peaking at 76 per cent in a survey conducted in 1969. This gradual increase is probably a reflection of the large number of voters who have grown up under the system, together with the absence of any political debate concerning its advantages or disadvantages. Support declined slightly in the 1970s and early 1980s, but in recent years has strengthened. Surveys which permit the respondents to register the strength of their opinion for or against the system indicate that voters who favour compulsory voting have stronger views than those who oppose it (McAllister and Makkai, 1993, 28–29). As Aitkin (1982, 31) notes, compulsory voting “is in no sense seen as an imposition on the electorate and resented by it”.

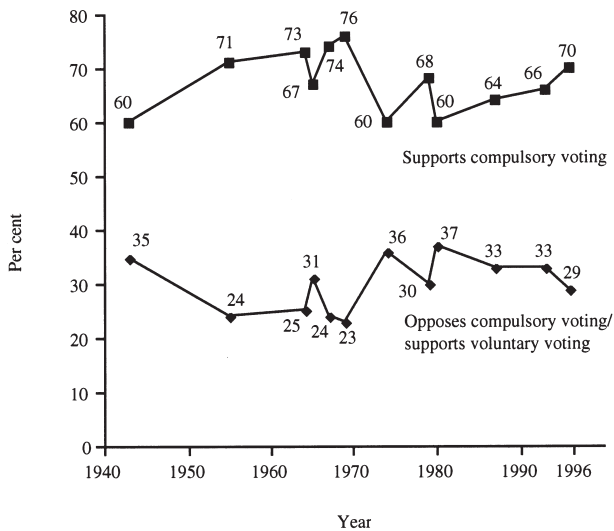


Fig. 1. Attitudes to compulsory voting, 1943–96. Question wordings differ slightly from survey to survey. Sources: Aitkin (1982, 31); 1979 Australian National Political Attitudes Survey; 1987–96 Australian Election Study Surveys.

⁷ In October 1930, the first NSW state election held under compulsory voting, turnout rose further, to 94.9 per cent.

Debates about compulsory voting

Colin Hughes, a long-standing scholar of Australian elections who was the Australian Electoral Commissioner from 1984 to 1989, studied all the parliamentary debates of the period when compulsory voting was introduced (Hughes, 1968). He listed 15 arguments used in favour which can be summarised as follows:

1. Democratic government means majority rule and the expression of an opinion by a majority of electors.
2. Voting is analogous to other duties society requires of citizens, such as giving evidence in court proceedings, jury service, paying rates, compulsory education or military service.
3. Voting is the most important civic duty, yet the burden is extremely light: once or twice every 3 years.
4. The voter is not compelled to vote for anybody; he or she can always spoil the ballot paper.
5. Compulsory voting is a necessary corollary of compulsory enrolment without which the experience and penalties of compulsory enrolment would be pointless.
6. Compulsory voting would stop the growing demand of voters who had 'got into a loose way of voting' for motor-car transport to the polls.
7. Social pressure applied by the trade union movement had already enforced compulsory voting on Labor supporters.
8. Turnout figures were too low.
9. The quality of legislation coming from legislatures elected by a minority vote would deteriorate.
10. Compulsion would enforce political education.
11. The franchise had been fought for, and therefore should be used.
12. As individual liberty consists in exemption from legal control, so political liberty consists in participation in legal control.
13. Those who most readily criticise legislation are the least zealous in exercising the franchise; they would be taught to be good democrats by becoming responsible for public acts.
14. Compulsory voting would help to cleanse the rolls by checking on non-voters.
15. Compulsion would emphasise the responsibilities of electors.

The arguments used against compulsory voting during the 1920s and 1930s mostly asserted that compulsion was wrong in principle and that it 'is not the democratic norm'. However, since the opponents of compulsion were defeated, their arguments were not widely aired within the electorate. More interesting is the fact that some Liberal politicians now advocate abandonment of the system and in recent years a significant number of liberal policymaking bodies have endorsed a return to voluntary voting, notably the party's highest forum, the Federal Council, which passed motions in 1988 and 1993 calling for a repeal of the current system (Jackman, 1997). While many Labor politicians argue that this is pure promotion of the electoral interests of the Liberal Party, it is worth noting that some 'general interest' arguments are currently used. The most important of these arguments is the belief that 'a growing

number of Australians now doubt' the integrity of the electoral system which (allegedly) is rife with fraud.

More recently, a minority report (consisting mainly of Liberal and National members) of a parliamentary committee charged with examining all aspects of the conduct of the March 1993 federal elections argued that compulsion did encourage electoral fraud. The minority report argued that because the law forces people to vote, minimal barriers to enrolment and voting exist. "Thus, in practice compulsory voting underpins a system which has very few checks in place to prevent and detect fraudulent enrolment and voting" (Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, 1994, 157). The report further went on to suggest that the way in which the system is applied was undermining popular trust in it, as well as "being used as part of a push for a *de facto* first-past-the-post voting system."

Because voting is compulsory, politicians and electoral officials have gone to considerable lengths to make the system voter friendly. Indeed, Australia probably is the most voter-friendly country in the world. If Australians felt more strongly about election results than they do then there probably would be more abuse of the system. Allegations of such abuse are frequent, but factual evidence is rare. The desire to ensure that the system is fair to voters (as distinct from political parties) has prompted judges (sitting in a Court of Disputed Returns) frequently to order fresh elections on the ground that the number of disenfranchised voters exceeds the majority of the winning candidate. Typically, a re-election for a constituency occurs about once every second year.

The most recent example of this phenomenon was the state seat of Mundingburra following the Queensland state election on 15 July 1995, when Labour was returned with a one seat majority.⁸ However, in Mundingburra the Labor candidate had won by just 16 votes over his Liberal opponent. The Liberal loser petitioned the Court of Disputed Returns which found that 22 postal votes had not been cast by soldiers serving as peace-keepers in Rwanda because ballot papers had not been received by them in time. A fresh election was ordered, the Liberal candidate won easily and the government of the state changed as a consequence.

The major issues of Australian compulsory voting involve the following questions. How seriously is the system enforced? Further, what level of fine does the elector pay who neglects the democratic duty to vote? The main answer is that the system *is* seriously enforced, contrary to the assertions of Jackman (1987). The federal Commonwealth Electoral Act outlines the administrative arrangements for compulsory voting,⁹ and section 245 deals with sanctions against non-voters: "(1) It shall be the duty of every elector to vote at each election. (2) The Electoral Commissioner must, after polling day at each election, prepare for each Division a list of the names and

⁸ The result in seats (in a Legislative Assembly of 89 members) was Labor 45, National 29, Liberal 14, with one Independent.

⁹ Each of the six states and both the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory have provisions the same in principle as the federal one. The terms 'Commonwealth electoral division' and 'State electoral district' are the Australian equivalents of the British constituency, the American congressional district and the Canadian riding.

addresses of the electors who appear to have failed to vote at the election. (3) Subject to subsection (4), within the period of three months after the polling day at each election, each Divisional Returning Officer must send by post to each elector whose name appears on the list prepared under subsection (2), at the address mentioned in that list, a penalty notice.” The section continues through 18 subsections. No person reading section 245 in full could doubt that compulsory voting really is enforced in Australia.

If a voter is recorded as not voting the AEC will send a ‘please explain’ letter. The voter is given an option to pay a \$A20 penalty in which case the matter rests. If what the AEC regards as a valid reason for non-voting is provided, then this will result in no further action. For example, valid reasons would be being overseas, tried to vote but failed, or membership of a religious order which prohibits voting.¹⁰ If the reason is disputed it will be taken to court where the fine increases to \$A50, in addition to legal costs, if the person is convicted. In practice, the proportion of voters required to pay penalties or taken to court never exceeds 1 per cent of the electorate and is normally much less. For example, following the 1993 federal election, the AEC investigated 490 230 cases of persons who appeared not to have voted, there being a total of 11 384 638 enrolled voters at that election. Of the 490 230, fines of \$A20 each were paid by 23 230 electors who had voted (or 4.7 per cent of all non-voters). The remainder gave valid reasons for not voting, save for 4412 who went to court (or 0.9 per cent of all non-voters). The AEC has no information on what happened thereafter to them.¹¹

The consequences of compulsory voting

Invalid voting

The most significant consequence of compulsory voting is a large proportion of invalid or spoiled votes at elections. Australia has one of the highest levels of invalid votes among the established liberal democracies. The level is comparable to what was found in the Netherlands in the two decades after the Second World War, which had a compulsory voting system until 1971 (Irwin, 1974), but substantially less than Brazil, where it has ranged as high as 40 per cent in recent elections (Power and Timmons Roberts, 1995). These votes (called ‘informal’ in Australia) are set out for

¹⁰ One curious example is the Governor-General, the head of state. Since the head of state cannot vote for him or herself, but voting is compulsory, the Governor-General receives a ‘please explain’ letter like other non-voters. By convention, the Governor-General informs the AEC that it is inappropriate for him or her to vote, and the matter rests.

¹¹ The figures following the 1996 federal election are similar. A total of 519 684 voters did not vote, of whom 29 129 paid a fine, and the remainder gave a valid reason for not voting, save for 8782 who were summoned to appear in court.

the two houses of the federal parliament in Table 2, grouped by the type of electoral system in operation at the time. The Senate results are the more striking. From 1901 to 1917 Senate informal voting was low, averaging just 5.6 per cent. However, that was during the period of voluntary voting with a simple ballot. The introduction of preferential, soon to be followed by compulsory, voting in the early 1920s raised informality to almost one in every 10 votes cast—until something was done about it.

In the early 1980s the federal politicians worked on a plan to simplify the preferential vote, involving a major change to the Senate ballot paper format. From the December 1984 election onwards the voter could cast an ‘above-the-line’ Senate vote with a single mark of approval. (This is the number ‘1’ but a tick or cross is accepted.) That would be deemed to be a full listing of preferences, as registered by the party within 24 hours of the close of nominations. Thus, the system would remain ‘ordinal’ in terms of the counting process while, inevitably, over 90 per cent of voters could be lazy and treat the Senate vote as though it were ‘categorical’. Meanwhile, the House of Representatives vote would continue to employ a fully preferential system. The effect of this change was substantially to reduce the number of informal votes at Senate elections. The Senate informal vote now averages 3.6 per cent.

The assertion that the design of the electoral system means that ‘over 90 per cent of voters could be lazy’ needs detailed justification. Voters can still mark their own

Table 2
Informal voting by house and electoral system

Electoral system		Informal votes (per cent)	
		Mean	Std Dev
Senate			
1901–17	First-past-the-post/voluntary voting	5.6	2.6
1919–22	Preferential block majority/voluntary voting/optional preferences	9.0	0.6
1925–31	Preferential block majority/compulsory voting/optional preferences	8.8	1.6
1934–46	Preferential block majority/compulsory voting/compulsory preferences	9.8	1.2
1949–83	Proportional representation/compulsory voting/compulsory preferences	8.9	1.9
1984–96	Proportional representation/compulsory voting/ticket preferences	3.6	0.8
Total		7.7	2.7
House of Representatives			
1901–17	First-past-the-post/voluntary voting	2.5	0.7
1919–22	Preferential/voluntary voting	4.0	0.7
1925–96	Preferential/voluntary voting	2.8	1.1
Total		2.8	1.0

Source: As for Table 1.

preferences for candidates ‘below the line’, although not many do so. In March 1993 ‘below the line’ votes were 599 527 or 5.6 per cent of the total formal vote. In March 1996 they were 615 472 or 5.7 per cent. The number of such votes only ever becomes significant in less populous states and where adverse publicity is given to party tickets. This can produce a reaction of sympathy for a candidate seen to be disadvantaged by the major parties, as occurred in Tasmania in 1996 when the Green candidate, Dr Bob Brown, was elected in a circumstance in which ‘below the line’ voting rose from 21.1 per cent in 1993 to 27.4 per cent in 1996.

The 1984 change to the Senate ballot paper has caused a number of observers to argue that the Australian Senate is now almost a party list system of proportional representation. This is incorrect: it remains (constitutionally and technically) a system of direct election by the single transferable vote. However, the change did create confusion at the first two elections under the new Senate ballot paper format, those held in December 1984 and July 1987. In both elections, for the first time in Australian electoral history, Senate informality was less than that for the House of Representatives. In the three most recent federal elections the system has stabilised, with an average informality level of 3.2 per cent for the Senate and 3.1 per cent for the House of Representatives, a level that is still high by world standards, but low in comparison with recent Australian elections.

The high levels of informal votes are also linked to four underlying factors which do not occur elsewhere. The first is the complex nature of Australia’s electoral system, at least judged against international standards. Table 2 shows, for example, that at the federal level the Senate has used six different systems during the century, while the House of Representatives has used three separate systems. By contrast, in Britain, apart from changes in the franchise and other more minor changes relating to the format of the ballot paper, the electoral system has remained the same over the period (Blackburn, 1995). Related to this complexity is the frequency of elections at the state and federal levels of government. Federal elections are held every 3 years, but usually more frequently, as are all state elections except New South Wales where they must be held every 4 years, a change introduced in 1981. In practice, this means that voters sometimes have to cast a ballot as often as once every 18 months.

A third factor increasing invalid votes is the increasing tendency to hold House of Representatives elections in conjunction with Senate elections and constitutional referendums, all of which have different rules for completing the ballot. For referendums the elector writes ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in the space provided, while the Senate ballot paper requires either one number above the line, or one or more numbers below the line. Finally, there are the differences in the rules for casting a formal vote between state and federal elections. Most Australians live in states with ‘optional preferences’ while the Commonwealth has ‘compulsory preferences’. When compulsory voting is combined with these factors and a high proportion of non-English speaking immigrants, it is not surprising that the net result is one of the highest levels of spoiled ballots found in any Western liberal democracy (McAllister and Makkai, 1993).

Party advantage

Levels of turnout have long been linked to different voting outcomes. High levels of turnout are thought to favour leftwing parties, since their supporters generally have lower socioeconomic status, which in turn leads to a reduced probability of voting. In a study of national voting in 19 democracies, Crewe (1981, 253) found “a connection between a country’s overall turnout and the electoral strength of those of its parties established to represent the working class.” By contrast, low turnout benefits rightwing parties, whose supporters are generally of higher socioeconomic status and more likely to turn out to vote. Empirical support for these propositions has been found in a variety of studies, though the net impact on the vote is usually only in the order of several percentage points (McAllister and Mughan, 1986). In Australia, compulsory voting has been shown to favour the Labor Party, since disproportionately more of its supporters would be expected to abstain under a voluntary voting system (McAllister, 1986).

Evidence to support these propositions can be found in the 1996 Australian Election Study Survey, which asked respondents if they would have still voted if voting had not been compulsory.¹² More than two out of every three voters said that they would definitely have voted, with a further 19 per cent saying that they probably would have voted (Table 3, first column). In total, then, the survey suggests that a shift to a voluntary system of voting could probably count on a turnout level of around 87 per cent. This is a level which is currently found only among the top

Table 3
Voting by self-reported turnout under a voluntary system^a

		(Column per cent) 1996 vote				
		Labor	Lib–Nat	Democrat/Green	Total	(n)
Definitely would have voted	(68)	36	53	11	100	(1156)
Probably would have voted	(19)	42	41	17	100	(315)
Might, might not	(5)	44	33	23	100	(92)
Probably not	(5)	52	25	23	100	(87)
Definitely not	(3)	45	28	27	100	(47)

^aThe question was: “Would you have voted in the election if voting had not been compulsory?” 1996 vote is first preference vote for the House of Representatives.

Source: 1996 Australian Election Study Survey.

¹² Survey estimates of expected turnout will, as Jackman (1997) notes, underestimate the decline in turnout due to voluntary voting. This is caused by the tendency of opinion surveys to under-sample disinterested voters who would be less likely to vote under a voluntary system. It is difficult to estimate the likely error caused by survey non-response in predicting turnout, but it is likely to be small. In any event, our interest here is in the broad patterns rather than in precise estimates.

quintile of established democracies (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 1997). A further 5 per cent said that they were unsure whether they would have voted, while a total of 8 per cent said that they either ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’ would not have voted under a voluntary system.

The second part of Table 3 shows the strong partisan bias that exists among these various groups of voters. The results confirm that the less likely the voter is to say that he or she would have voted, then the less likely he or she would be to support the Liberal–National coalition, and the more likely to support either Labor or the minor parties. For example, among those who definitely said that they would have voted, 53 per cent reported voting Liberal–National in the federal election; by contrast, Liberal–National support drops to just 25 per cent among those who said that they probably would not have voted if voting had been voluntary. Indeed, among the small group who said that they would definitely not have voted, minor party support almost exceeds support for the Liberals and Nationals.

These are substantial electoral effects, but what net impact would they have had on the outcome of the election, given the relative sizes of the various turnout groups? Table 4 suggests that the effect would have been significant, but not sufficient to change the outcome of the election which, in any event, saw the defeat of a Labor government which had ruled for 13 years. The first line of Table 4 shows voting among those who said that they definitely would have voted, and is therefore the same estimate as the first line in Table 3. The remaining lines of Table 4 re-estimate the vote adding in the other four turnout groups. The estimates suggest that Labor gained about 2.5 per cent of the first preference vote through compulsory voting, while the minor parties gained just under 3 per cent. However, the Liberal–National vote was particularly sensitive to turnout. If only those who were committed to turning out had voted, the Liberal–National coalition would have attracted over 52 per cent of the first preference vote; compulsory voting meant that they actually attracted just 47 per cent, a net loss of over 5 per cent.

Table 4
Party vote at different turnout levels^a

	1996 vote				<i>(n)</i>
	Labor	Lib–Nat	Democrat/Green	Total	
Definitely would have voted	36.1	52.6	11.3	100.0	(1156)
Adding:					
Probably would have voted	37.2	50.2	12.6	100.0	(1471)
Might, might not	37.7	49.2	13.1	100.0	(1563)
Probably not	38.4	47.9	13.7	100.0	(1650)
Definitely not	38.6	47.3	14.1	100.0	(1697)

^aEstimates are first preference vote for the House of Representatives.

Source: As for Table 3.

These are substantial effects, and while not large enough to change the outcome of the 1996 election, would have the potential to determine the result of a closely fought contest. The results also confirm other findings, which have suggested that it is the vote of rightwing parties that is most sensitive to changes in turnout, while the impact on the vote for leftwing parties is usually slight (McAllister and Mughan, 1986). The reason appears to be that higher levels of turnout benefit both leftwing parties and minor or protest parties. Leftwing parties benefit electorally because high turnout mobilises disproportionately more of their supporters, who might otherwise abstain. Minor or protest parties benefit because high turnout also mobilises disproportionately more swinging and uncommitted voters, who have usually defected from the major parties.

Party stability

A third consequence of compulsory voting is a high level of party stability. That is reflected in the large number of voters who identify with one or other of the major parties, and in the preponderance of representatives of the major parties in the federal and state parliaments. Australia has one of the highest levels of party identification in the world. While partisan dealignment in Britain, the United States and some other countries has seen many voters rejecting the major parties, and either abstaining or changing their party from one election to the next (Wattenberg, 1994; Dalton, 1996), Australia has largely been immune from these changes. Compulsory voting ensures that voters cast a ballot and the act of voting means that they are forced to think, however superficially, about the major parties. The frequency of elections at the state and federal levels further reinforces the high visibility that parties enjoy within the electorate. Although, as noted previously, compulsory voting also favours support for minor and protest parties, the advantage they gain is small compared to the overall impact on major party support.

A stronger likelihood of voting if the system were changed to voluntary voting is associated with the direction and strength of partisanship. Fig. 2 shows that among those who said they definitely would vote, just 12 per cent reported that they did not have a partisanship in 1996. By comparison, just over half of those who said that they definitely would not vote were non-partisans. Weak partisans are also more numerous among those with less commitment to voting under a voluntary system, the main difference being between those who were unequivocal about their intention to vote, and the other respondents. The system of compulsory voting is therefore one of the underpinnings of Australia's traditionally high level of partisanship.

A further indication of the system's impact on partisanship is the likelihood that a voter will use a 'how to vote' card when he or she visits the polls. Under Australia's system of preferential voting, voters may direct their second and subsequent preferences to the candidates of other parties. The political parties make use of the system by providing their supporters with 'how to vote' cards outside polling stations, which advise voters to direct their later preferences to specific candidates and parties. These are usually parties with whom reciprocal preference arrangements have been made, or with whom they are aligned on important issues. Around half of all voters report

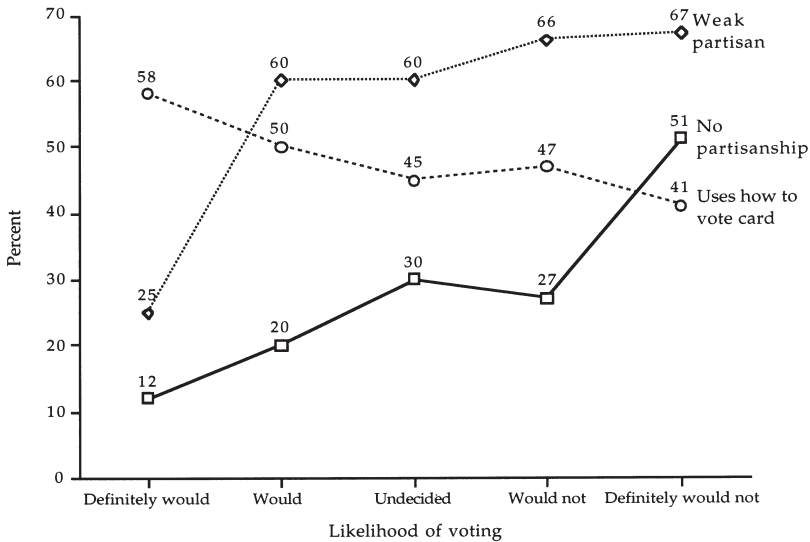


Fig. 2. Likelihood of voting and partisanship. See Table 3 for question wording. Use of the 'how to vote' cards is for House of Representatives. Source: As for Table 3.

making use of these 'how to vote' cards so their impact is substantial.¹³ Fig. 2 shows that the most committed voters are those who are most likely to make use of the cards and to follow their party's wishes. Among those who are least likely to vote only around four in every 10 say that they use the cards. Once again, the evidence suggests that compulsory voting is strongly linked to party factors.

Other evidence to support the proposition is the party composition of the federal House of Representatives, which illustrates party stability by virtue of the relative absence of minor party representatives. Of the 2096 contests for the federal lower house that have taken place between 1949 and 1996, only eight—or 0.4 per cent—have been won by independents. However, four of the eight independents had previously been elected under a party label, and for various reasons resigned or been expelled from their party; only four contests, then, have been won by independents without a prior party association in the electorate (McAllister, 1997). While the electoral system represents the major barrier for independents, compulsory voting fosters widespread loyalties towards the major parties across the electorate, thus making it much more difficult for independent and minor party candidates to attract the electoral support they require for successful election.

¹³ In the 1996 Australian Election Study, 56 per cent of voters reported using a 'how to vote' card to guide their vote in the House of Representatives.

Conclusion

The original purpose behind the introduction of compulsory voting in Australia was to increase turnout, and it has been particularly effective in meeting that goal. A comparative study of compulsory voting found that the Australian system had been substantially more effective in increasing electoral participation compared to Austria, where compulsory voting has operated for presidential elections since 1949 (Hirczy, 1994). Why has the system of compulsory voting been so effective and the electorate so compliant in supporting it? The answer lies in Australia's distinctive utilitarian political culture, which in turn has its origins in the Benthamite outlooks of the early white settlers (Collins, 1985). Hartz (1964) has argued that the cultural development of Anglo-American colonial societies is determined by the values and beliefs that were dominant during the period in which they 'split' from the host society, Britain. In each case, the new society bears the imprint of the values and beliefs of Britain at the time that the colonial 'fragment' was established as an independent entity.

In the United States the split from Britain occurred in the late 18th century and the fragment that took root was characterised by the libertarian ideals of the 18th century Enlightenment. By contrast, Australia's split occurred in the 19th century so that the colonial 'fragment' was imbued with the utilitarian ideas of Jeremy Bentham and his followers. As a result, Australian political culture has been avowedly utilitarian in its orientation. Based on the assumption that the goals of the society were more likely to be met by widespread participation in the electoral process, the logical corollary was to enforce voting legally. Within the utilitarian culture of Australia, compulsory voting represented a swift, pragmatic and effective solution to what was seen as a major political problem.¹⁴

Although it was less clearly articulated at the time, a further purpose for introducing compulsory voting was to ensure the survival of the major political parties by removing the need for them to mobilise the vote. This had the consequence of enabling them to devote their resources to persuasion and conversion, rather than to motivating a reluctant electorate to go to the polls, but compulsory voting also helped to foster the stability of the party system. This has occurred through sustaining high levels of partisanship, itself a result of frequent voting by the vast majority of the electorate who maintain a ready party identification. Party stability has also occurred by ensuring that the major parties dominate the legislatures. Frequent elections and the generational transmission of partisanship, driven by the engine of compulsory voting, have resulted in a remarkably high level of party stability.

The major disadvantages of compulsory voting, at least in the Australian system,

¹⁴ Although various attempts were made to introduce compulsory voting in the United States, none have succeeded. Three states (North Dakota in 1897, Massachusetts in 1918 and Oregon in 1919) passed constitutional amendments making obligatory voting possible, subject to enabling acts of the state legislatures. Popular referendums approved the North Dakota and Massachusetts amendments in 1899 and 1918, respectively, but Oregon rejected it in 1920 (Abraham, 1955). Our thanks to a reviewer for this journal for bringing these facts to our attention.

are the high levels of invalid votes, particularly in pre-1984 Senate elections, and the inherent advantage gained by the Labor Party and the minor parties. The high level of informal votes is now much reduced, although in the case of the Senate this has been accomplished by introducing ticket preferences, and this has inevitably begun to change the character of the Senate (Farrell and McAllister, 1995). Australia's level of spoiled votes now compares favourably with many other countries. For example, the level of spoiled votes in the 1996 House of Representatives election, at 3.2 per cent, was lower than in the most recent lower house elections in three of the four European countries with compulsory voting—Italy (7.8 per cent), Belgium (7.5 per cent) and Luxembourg (6.5 per cent)—but higher than Greece (2.0 per cent) (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 1997).

The partisan effects that result from the system of compulsory voting, particularly the inbuilt disadvantage that it accords the Liberal–National coalition, is more difficult to deal with. The potential electoral benefits of the system were undoubtedly a motivation in Labor's support for the introduction of compulsory voting in the 1920s. Equally, while the conservatives realised that they might be disadvantaged, they judged that by removing the need for voter mobilisation, more resources would be available to devote to voter conversion. While the contemporary debate about compulsory voting is couched in terms of moral principles such as choice, responsibility and obligation, partisan motives are never far from the surface. If the system of compulsory voting is ever removed in Australia, it is likely to be for partisan reasons, rather than for any philosophical objections to the system, either by voters or politicians.

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