

JANUARY 2015

VOTING

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

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MOTION:

**“VOTING SHOULD BE
MADE COMPULSORY
IN THE UK”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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KEY TERMS

Ballot

Vote

Suffrage

INTRODUCTION

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In November 2014 the UK parliament’s Political and Constitutional Reform Committee submitted a report recommending that voting in national elections should be made compulsory [Ref: [Parliament.gov](#)], in addition to other recommendations such as developing online voting and extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds [Ref: [ITV News](#)]. These calls come in the wake of falling voter turnout at both local, national and European elections in the UK in the post-war period. Since the franchise was extended to all adults in the UK in 1928 (although modern suffrage of ‘one person, one vote’ only came into being in 1948 [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]) turnout reached an all-time low in 2001, with 59.4% of voters turning out, and has been in decline since an all-time high at the 1950 general election [Ref: [UK Political Info](#)]. In addition, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee estimates that approximately 7.5 million are not correctly registered to vote, with millions more UK citizens overseas not registered to vote at all, stating that: “These figures indicate a substantial lack of engagement of the public with elections in the UK” [Ref: [Parliament.gov](#)]. The UK situation reflects a broader trend across Western democracies, where voter turnout has been in decline. To counter this trend, some see mandatory voting as a way to stem the decline in voter engagement and this is being debated in other democracies around the world, including in the USA and India. In Australia, one of 22 countries to currently have compulsory attendance at polls [Ref: [PBS](#)], there is a contemporary debate about whether this process enhances or damages the democratic process. So what are the key issues at stake in the current debate in the UK and elsewhere about making voting mandatory? And what are the causes of a decline in voting amongst electorates in Western democracies? Will compulsory voting re-engage voters or are there more complicated issues to resolve?

THE VOTING DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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The arguments for compulsory voting

As voter turnout declines, established mainstream political parties are effectively appealing to smaller constituencies of the electorate. Many argue that this is a problem as it means a majority of the populous are not represented in their electoral bodies and as such: “...compulsory voting would have the salutary effect of forcing parties to appeal to all voters, not just the committed base they can motivate to get to the polls” [Ref: [Washington Post](#)]. Those who argue for compulsory voting say that it means governments would have a true democratic mandate, from a majority of the populous, and that people would be forced to engage with the political process and not simply reject it as unrepresentative: “People always complain about politicians not representing the people enough. So why not oblige them to do so, by forcing everyone to vote?” [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Advocates point out that where there is compulsory voting, such as in Australia, which has maintained a 90% plus turnout at elections, it’s not just compulsory to vote (or specifically to turn up at the polling booth and register, if not actually to mark your polling card) the democratic franchise is increased because the Australian state is required to compile an electoral role of every eligible citizen, meaning, say it’s supporters, that the state must: “...consistently identify and remove obstacles to voting...In countries where voting is optional, even a democratic state has no such obligation to enfranchise its citizenry” and as such: “Compulsory voting is the Australian guarantee of voter freedom, not it’s opposite” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Beyond the arguments about how to increase turnout percentages, and the practical ways and means this might be achieved, others argue that as citizens we actually have a duty to vote, regardless of the practical obstacles or possibly uninspiring politics. One hundred and one years after

the death of Emily Wilding, the Suffragette who stepped in front of King George V’s race horse in 1913 to protest for women’s votes [Ref: [BBC History](#)], some advocates of compulsory voting argue that many people have fought and died for the right to vote, and as such we should honour their sacrifice by participating in the democratic process: “...when people don’t bother, men or women, they are taking democracy for granted. It doesn’t matter that you may disagree with all the political parties. You may be thoroughly fed up with the whole political system. If so, then go and at least spoil your ballot paper - draw a silly cartoon on it. Do anything on it (well not quite anything). But at least go to the polling station” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)].

The arguments against compulsory voting

Although supporters of a more engaged electorate accept that there are practical solutions to increase voter turnout, they argue that compulsory voting would be both fundamentally undemocratic and, crucially, ignores the reason why modern electorates often seem so disengaged by politics. In the Indian state of Gujarat where compulsory voting, first proposed in 2009 and made law last year, critics of the move argue that such enforcements, although possibly increasing voter turnout: “...do not address the fundamental guiding principle at stake – whether a liberal democracy has any business herding its citizens into a voting booth and forcing them to vote even if it’s supposedly in their own interest” [Ref: [Firstpost India](#)]. Those worried with a move towards compulsory voting point out that it removes the right of people to not participate in the democratic process, which is in itself a contraction. One commentator states that: “Opinions may differ on whether greater voter turnout is a good thing, but no one should support policies

THE VOTING DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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designed to force people to be free” [Ref: [American Spectator](#)]. Another critic states that: “An individual’s decision to not vote is in itself a form of political participation. It does not matter if it based on a lack of political culture, a form of protest, or apathy toward the election’s outcome. The point is that, in a free society, an individual has the choice whether or not to participate in collective decisions” [Ref: [PanAm Post](#)]. In the instance of the Australian electoral system, some suggest that criminalising people does nothing to encourage democratic engagement: “Here we have a strange situation where people who are on the roll but don’t vote cop a fine, but those who avoid being on the roll suffer no penalty” [Ref: [Australian](#)]. And importantly, others worry that compulsory voting prioritises turnout figures over real political engagement - ignoring the issue of a potentially uniformed electorate: “Maybe the opinions of people who don’t know the first thing about how our system works aren’t the folks who should be driving our politics, just as people who don’t know how to drive shouldn’t have a driver’s license...Instead of making it easier to vote, maybe we should be making it harder” [Ref: [LA Times](#)].

Apathy or dissolution?

Some point to voter apathy as the reason for the decline in democratic participation, and so posit the need for a change in the way we vote to encourage more people to do so. Weekend voting, the use of new technology, easier methods of registration are all promoted, as is the extension of the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds across the UK for the first time. The Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) recently proposed a compromise on compulsory voting, recognising that enforced voting remains unpopular in the UK, and instead suggested: “...a more realistic approach which is to

make electoral participation compulsory for first-time voters only. Voters would be compelled only to turnout – and would be provided with a ‘none of the above’ option. The logic behind this proposal is that people who vote in the first election for which they are eligible are considerably more likely to vote throughout their lives” [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. But although it seems as if voter turnout is experiencing an ongoing, steady decline, fuelled by a disconnect with the process, there have been exceptional turnouts in some notable elections in recent years. The election of Barack Obama in 2008 saw 61.6% of eligible voters turnout, the highest in an American election since 1968 [Ref: [Washington Post](#)], and also saw an historic increase in the registration of and participation of voters who are traditionally marginalised in US elections [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. In last year’s Scottish independence referendum, high voter registration and turnout broke all known UK records since universal suffrage was introduced in 1918, with 84.5% of eligible voters doing so [Ref: [Sky News](#)]. Perhaps these examples and others point not to an apathetic citizenship, but something more fundamental. From this perspective, opponents of compulsory voting suggest that what matters is not ease or convenience of voting, but the need for politics to matter to people’s lives: “The main problem with compulsory voting...is that the problem is not the turnout in the first place; and boosting the turnout is not the solution. Britain’s democratic crisis is one that it shares with its European and North American neighbours: the isolation of the political class from an increasingly disengaged public. This is not a formal problem that can be solved by people ticking boxes, but a profound question of political legitimacy. Politicians might be elected; but increasingly, elections raise the question of what this actually means.” [Ref: [spiked](#)].

ESSENTIAL READING

Elections: Compulsory voting on UK polling days?

BBC news 22 May 2014

FOR

A case for compulsory voting

Ruth Marcus *Washington Post* 4 November 2014

The local election results prove why everyone should be forced to vote

Max Benwell *Independent* 24 May 2014

Of course compulsory voting is a good thing

Van Badham *Guardian* 21 August 2013

Voting should be compulsory 100 years after Emily Wilding Davison's death

Alice Arnold *Telegraph* 29 May 2013

AGAINST

Gujarat gets it wrong: Compulsory voting is patronising and undemocratic

Sandip Roy *FirstPost India* 11 November 2014

Compulsory Voting Serves the Colombian State, Not Constituents

Javier Garay *PanAm Post* 6 October 2014

A case against mandatory voting

Fred L Smith *American Spectator* 25 July 2011

Time to end compulsory voting

Peter Brent *The Australian* 30 September 2010

IN DEPTH

Is compulsory voting ever justified?

Dr Annabelle Lever *LSE* 21 August 2014

What's gone wrong with democracy?

Economist 1 March 2014

The Economist explains: where is it compulsory to vote?

Economist 19 September 2013

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BACKGROUNDEERS

Compulsory voting is not the answer

Richard Woods *Here is the city* 12 December 2014

Victorian election 2014: time to scrap the compulsory vote

Tom Elliott *Herald Sun* 29 November 2014

To engage young voters the system must reform

Kate Crowhurst *Telegraph* 21 November 2014

Where have all the voters gone?

Carolyn Lukensmeyer *Huffington Post* 12 November 2014

Voter engagement in the UK

House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee 10 November 2014

Low youth voter turnout in midterms has parties pondering new ways to engage

Guardian 5 November 2014

22 countries where voting is mandatory

PBS 3 November 2014

Young voters should be required to vote first time round

IPPR 29 April 2013

Voting is a Right, Not a Duty

Jeff Jacoby *TownHall.com* 29 October 2012

Vote 2012: Voting is a duty, not a right

Richard Darlington *Left Foot Forward* 3 May 2012

The case for compulsory voting

Guy Lodge & Sarah Birch *New Statesman* 28 April 2012

Is there such a thing as civic duty? And do we feel it?

Victoria King *BBC News* 24 November 2011

Telling Americans to Vote, or Else

William A Galston *New York Times* 5 November 2011

Compulsory Voting

Purba Dutt *Times of India* 17 July 2011

Too uninformed to vote?

Jonah Goldberg *Los Angeles Times* 31 July 2007

Compulsory voting: turnout is not the problem

Jennie Bristow *spiked* 16 June 2004

General Election turnout 1945-2010

UK Political Info

Emily Davison (1872-1913)

BBC History

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IN THE NEWS

MPs call for compulsory voting and a lower voting age

ITV News 14 November 2014

Gujarat first state to make voting must in local body elections

Times of India 10 November 2014

Online voting should be made mandatory, says Martha Lane Fox

Guardian 14 October 2014

'Astonishing' Turnout Breaks UK Voting Records

Sky News 19 September 2014

Make voting compulsory at elections, says Kevin Meagher

BBC News 12 March 2014

Labour May Force Young People To Vote, Says Sadiq Khan

Huffington Post 24 January 2014

Voting should be compulsory for young people at least once, says

Think Tank

Independent 26 August 2013

Plea to make voting compulsory

Scottish Express 6 May 2012

2008 Surge in Black Voters Nearly Erased Racial Gap

New York Times 20 July 2009

'08 Voter Turnout Rate Said to Be Highest in 40 Years

Washington Post 15 December 2008

Britain 'needs compulsory voting'

BBC News 1 May 2006

Hoon suggests compulsory voting

BBC News 4 July 2005

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ORGANISATIONS

Electoral Commission

Electoral Reform Society

Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Rock the Vote

AUDIO/VISUAL

Elections: Compulsory voting on UK polling days?

BBC News 22 May 2014

ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

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FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**