

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COMPULSORY VOTING:
EVIDENCE FROM BRAZIL, BELGIUM, AND BEYOND**

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

In a world where electoral reforms are frequently discussed, numerous countries have resorted to mandating citizen participation in elections. This electoral approach – commonly termed compulsory voting – has been adopted by democratic and authoritarian regimes alike. The majority of research on compulsory voting acknowledges that it successfully increases voter turnout. Other factors including the presence and severity of sanctions for abstention have been analyzed, but the existing literature fails to consider multiple components of compulsory voting. This research strives to bridge that gap through the use of preliminary data, a literature review of existing work, and case studies of Brazil and Belgium as it seeks to address the effectiveness of compulsory voting today. By considering various elements of past and present systems simultaneously, this research finds that compulsory voting is only as effective as a country's political, social and economic configurations allow. If implemented correctly, compulsory voting is effective in increasing voter turnout and has the potential to create more representative election results.

Keywords: Compulsory Voting, Voter Turnout, Election Systems, Voting Reform, Democratic Process

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Introduction

Experts in the United States have long debated how to create more representative election results. For some, the obvious solution is to abolish the outdated Electoral College that continues to undermine the popular will of the people. Others have suggested changing the electoral system to move away from plurality voting or to end gerrymandering. Regardless of the proposed solution, it is clear that many Americans are unsatisfied with the electoral status quo. According to an NPR/Marist poll for example, approximately 2 in 5 American voters believe that elections in the United States are not fair (Parks, 2018). Electoral inequality is not an issue unique to the United States, but political rhetoric demanding election reform becomes amplified in one of the largest democracies in the world. For example, Maine adopted ranked-choice voting in 2016, becoming the first state to implement the electoral practice statewide (Maine State Legislature, 2020). Similarly, ranked-choice voting was on the ballot in Massachusetts during the 2020 general election. The initiative was defeated in the Bay State, but rhetoric and legislative proposals advocating for ranked-choice voting and other electoral reforms continue to this day. While ranked-choice voting has received a considerable amount of attention in this area, a lesser discussed idea is that of compulsory voting.

Compulsory voting involves a government legally requiring its citizens to register to vote and cast ballots on election day. While the practice of compulsory voting in the United States is often analyzed by political scientists in academia, it is rarely mentioned or considered by politicians. Yet, the United States has long endured low voter turnout rates, with a current average turnout rate for national elections of 53.63% (IFES Election Guide). This is notably lower than rates seen in other democracies – especially those with compulsory systems in place – but the government has done relatively little to combat this issue. In contrast, numerous other

democracies have turned to compulsory voting in an effort to increase voter turnout and political participation among their citizens.

Therefore, the question I explore in this paper is whether compulsory voting is an effective tool to reform electoral systems and to secure more representative election results. I hypothesize that compulsory voting is an effective way to boost voter turnout and create more equal results because of an increased number of ballots cast. While there is already a significant amount of literature on compulsory voting, the bulk of the research has so far focused on one specific factor, such as turnout or severity of sanctions. My research strives to fill a gap by considering multiple factors of compulsory voting simultaneously. Specifically, I argue that the efficacy of compulsory voting can only be determined when several key factors are collectively considered.

In addition to a review of the literature published on the topic in the past twenty years, my methodology includes a quantitative analysis of basic political data on countries that have adopted compulsory voting, as well as two case studies.

The quantitative table lists relevant data for every country that currently uses (or once used) compulsory voting. I turned to Freedom House to assess the level of democracy in each of these countries. Data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems was included to provide a timeline of compulsory voting and average voter turnout rates for each country. This data collectively provides a global view of compulsory voting. In terms of my case studies, Brazil was chosen because it has the largest electorate required to vote (Power and Roberts, 1995). Belgium was examined because it has one of the oldest compulsory systems in existence and because of its consistently low abstention rates (Pilet, 2007).

I first review the relevant literature. Next, I provide a general overview of compulsory voting around the world, relying on my quantitative findings for evidence. This is followed by the two case studies describing the nature and circumstances of two prominent compulsory voting systems. Finally, I provide an analysis of my overall findings regarding the efficacy of compulsory voting.

Literature Review

Compulsory voting has been the subject of a substantial amount of political science research over the last two decades. This literature often starts from the idea that low turnout – which compulsory voting seeks to address – is a fundamental issue for many reasons. Chief among them is the fact that it is often synonymous with unequal turnout – defined as participation that is “systematically biased in favor of privileged citizens (those with better education, higher incomes, and greater wealth)” (Lijphart, 1998: 2). In a similar regard, Lever (2010: 900) found that while turnout has been on a steady decline in the majority of democracies since World War II, “those people who do least well in our societies are least likely to vote” and are consequently “least likely to attract sympathetic attention from politicians.” This research suggests that low voter turnout creates inequalities and explains why compulsory voting is perceived as an ideal remedy for this ongoing issue.

Thus, the logic behind compulsory voting is rather simple – legally requiring all citizens to vote will increase turnout. Empirical evidence reviewed by the literature suggests that compulsory voting does in fact increase voter participation. For example, an article in the *Harvard Law Review* (2007: 592) found that the practice increases “voter turnout by seven to sixteen percentage points.” Similarly, Pilet (2007) touches upon this in his research on Belgium,

citing turnout rates between 1981 and 2003 to show an abstention rate consistently below 10 percent. This data only includes the twenty-year period Pilet chose to consider, but it nonetheless shows a reliable, consistently high turnout among Belgians. Uruguay and Australia – with compulsory systems dating back to 1934 and 1924 respectively – also maintain abstention rates below 10 percent (IFES Election Guide).

The existing literature also demonstrates that penalties matter greatly in determining the success of compulsory voting. Penalties are only enforced in some of the countries with this electoral practice in place, but they speak volumes about the integrity of compulsory voting and its effects on eligible voters. For example, Singh (2011) found that penalties for abstention – and whether the government follows through with enforcement of these penalties – have an impact on turnout come election day. According to him: “while individual-level factors are critically important to turnout...the presence and severity of compulsory voting rules still boosts participation” (Singh 2011: 108).

Although monetary fines are the most common way for governments to enforce compulsory voting, the literature suggests that nonmonetary penalties serve as a more effective deterrent for abstention (Cepaluni and Hidalgo, 2016). Correspondingly, Dassonneville et al. (2019) found that monetary fines do not seem to have a drastic effect, at least in some countries. Perhaps penalties are less needed in countries that have had compulsory voting in effect for a while. For example, in Belgium, fines have not been levied since 2003, but turnout rates have remained “stable at a high level” (2019: 213). Yet, though generally more effective, nonmonetary fines can also lead to undesirable results by enticing certain citizens to vote more than others (Cepaluni and Hidalgo, 2016).

Additionally, several studies have underlined more problematic consequences of compulsory voting. For example, Dassonneville et al. (2019: 227) suggest that compulsory voting diminishes vote quality and “tends to weaken the impact of ideological proximity considerations on electoral behavior.” Dassonneville et al. (2019: 227) use the term *ideological proximity considerations* to refer to the political viewpoints of voters on what they refer to as the “left-right scale.” These considerations traditionally motivate an electorate to support certain candidates over others depending on their own political affiliation, but compulsory voting can alter the standard decision-making process through which people cast their ballots. In the same fashion, if reluctant voters do not cast a vote based on their individual political beliefs, “they will not succeed in having their priorities heard in the political decision-making process” (Dassonneville, 2019: 225). This research – basing its assessment on data from Australia, Brazil, Belgium and Switzerland – suggests that legally requiring the electorate to vote can create a resentment of sorts, resulting in election outcomes that are not truly representative. Increasing turnout is certainly beneficial, but it becomes problematic when it disengages voters.

Finally, compulsory voting can increase the frequency of invalid ballots, making it clear that forcing people to vote does not necessarily guarantee more representative election results. Though more votes are cast in compulsory systems, the submission of invalid ballots can undermine the integrity of election results. Similarly, Kouba and Mysicka (2019: 8-9) found that compulsory voting can “contribute to equalizing the political voice across income or education groups,” but that this progress is “effectively erased by the high share of...biased invalid votes.” Thus, it is evident that inequality can remain within a compulsory system even when a seemingly equal variety of voters cast ballots.

The literature has provided a solid foundation for my study of the effectiveness of compulsory voting. It is clear that compulsory voting does in fact increase voter turnout, but this increase is not necessarily created without forfeiting other elements of the democratic process — specifically the quality of the vote and electoral outcomes.

I turn next to my case studies to assess these findings. The analysis explores the extent to which compulsory voting is effective based in part on the successes of various compulsory systems.

A Global Perspective of Compulsory Voting

To better understand how prevalent compulsory voting is, I compiled data using the following sources: Freedom House, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, and CNN Philippines (see Table 1). The calculations that follow are approximate as I do not have all of the data; however, they offer interesting preliminary evidence on the prevalence and practices of compulsory voting.

Compulsory voting is more diverse and widespread than one might think. It is not an experiment being conducted in one specific country but is instead a democratic tool being employed throughout the world. The electoral practice spans several continents and dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. Since its inception, compulsory voting has been used by democracies and authoritarian regimes alike. While one might assume that only an oppressive regime would *force* its people to participate in the electoral process, this is simply not the case. Compulsory voting continues to be a well-respected system in numerous democracies. With a total of 17 countries maintaining compulsory voting laws to this day, it is clear that there remains a practical use for this electoral practice.

Of the 17 countries with compulsory voting laws currently in effect, 88 percent are consolidated or semi-consolidated democracies. This finding is expected as it is traditionally democratic systems that invite political participation via the ballot. Compulsory voting is favored by democracies looking to increase voter participation and ultimately voter turnout. The other type of government accounting for 12 percent of the countries with compulsory voting is that of a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime. Voter turnout is significantly higher in consolidated and semi-consolidated democracies, with a median voter turnout rate of 78.52%. Within semi-consolidated authoritarian regimes, the median voter turnout rate is 50.17%. The political, social, and electoral structures are quite different between these systems, but compulsory voting is statistically more effective in consolidated and semi-consolidated democracies.

As discussed above, sanctions for abstention are a defining characteristic of compulsory systems. Many of these countries explicitly define these sanctions in their electoral code, but only a portion follow through in penalizing abstaining voters. Only 59 percent of countries with compulsory voting enforce their sanctions, while the remaining 41 percent opt out of doing so. Data demonstrates that countries enforcing sanctions for abstention witness higher voter turnout rates than those that do not. The median turnout rate for countries that enforce sanctions is 82.27%, nearly twenty percentage points higher than the median turnout rate of 64.90% for countries not enforcing these penalties. This preliminary data suggests that the enforcement of sanctions decreases abstention rates to a significant extent. The administration of sanctions is certainly not the only effective deterrent for abstention, but it clearly leads to generally higher turnout rates.

Table 1:

Country	Introduced	Abolished	Sanctions Enforced	Government	GFS ¹	Freedom Status	Average Turnout Rate (%)
Argentina	1912	--	Yes	Consolidated Democracy	85	Free	70.42
Australia	1924	--	Yes	Consolidated Democracy	97	Free	92.22
Austria ²	1929	1992; 2004	Yes	Consolidated Democracy	93	Free	72.45
Belgium ³	1892;1949	--	Yes	Consolidated Democracy	96	Free	90.16
Bolivia	1952	--	Yes	Semi-Consolidated Democracy	63	Partly Free	82.26
Brazil	1932	--	Yes	Consolidated Democracy	75	Free	79.54
Bulgaria	2016	--	No	Consolidated Democracy	80	Free	49.25
Chile	1925	2012	Yes	Consolidated Democracy	90	Free	68.32
Costa Rica	1959	--	No	Consolidated Democracy	91	Free	64.90
Cyprus	1960	2017	Yes	Consolidated Democracy	94	Free	84.44
Dominican Republic	N/A	2010	No	Semi-Consolidated Democracy	67	Partly Free	60.85
Ecuador ⁴	1947; 1968	--	Yes	Semi-Consolidated Democracy	65	Partly Free	72.98
Egypt	1956	--	No	Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime	21	Not Free	33.41
Fiji ⁵	1992	2006	Yes	Semi-Consolidated Democracy	60	Partly Free	82.84
France ⁶	1950s/1960s	--	No	Consolidated Democracy	90	Free	70.46
Greece	1926	--	No	Consolidated Democracy	88	Free	78.52
Italy	1945	1993	No	Consolidated Democracy	89	Free	60.64
Mexico	1857	--	No	Semi-Consolidated Democracy	62	Partly Free	59.22
Nauru	1965	--	Yes	Consolidated Democracy	77	Free	89.52
Peru	1933		Yes	Consolidated Democracy	72	Free	82.27
Philippines ⁷	1972	1986	No	Semi-Consolidated Democracy	59	Partly Free	78.00
Spain	1907	1923	No	Consolidated Democracy	92	Free	69.98
Switzerland ⁸	1904	--	Yes	Consolidated Democracy	96	Free	46.58
Thailand	1997	--	No	Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regime	32	Partly Free	66.92
Uruguay	1934	--	Yes	Consolidated Democracy	98	Free	90.20
Venezuela	1958	1993	No	Consolidated Authoritarian Regime	16	Not Free	61.65

Data compiled from Freedom House, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

Average turnout rate for the Philippines compiled from CNN Philippines.

¹ Global Freedom Score (out of 100)

² Only in the regions of Tyrol, Vorarlberg, and Styria.

³ Men in 1892. Both sexes in 1949.

⁴ Men in 1947. Both sexes in 1968.

⁵ Formally abandoned in 2014.

⁶ Only for the Senate

⁷ Attempted under martial law.

⁸ Only in Schaffhausen

Two Case Studies of Compulsory Voting

Case Study – Brazil

Democratic government is a relatively new reality in Brazil. It was not until 1979 that Brazilian military forces began a measured transition to democracy in light of an economic crisis marked by rising interest rates and soaring debt (Pio, 2013) – though full democracy was not restored until 1988. Following the 1964 coup d'état, an authoritarian military regime gained power and took swift action to undermine civil liberties, including the abolition of the multiparty system (Power and Roberts, 1995). This shift in power marked the beginning of substantial change in Brazil. Power and Roberts (1995) assert that although elections continued to take place under authoritarian control, they were enshrouded by political purges, government intimidation, and violence. It was during this time that a substantial number of voters started to cast blank or spoiled ballots in protest against the oppressive regime. Hope returned once the multiparty system was reinstated and an indirect presidential election ushered in the transition to democratic rule (Power and Roberts, 1995). The complex and uncertain nature of elections prior to the return of democratic rule altered how many citizens perceived voting. Even with compulsory voting in place, some cast ballots in protest while others simply did not bother voting at all. This sentiment remains in Brazil to an extent even under democratic governance.

The composition of the Brazilian electorate has drastically changed over the last 80 years. According to Power and Roberts (1995), through advances in education levels, a rapid increase in population growth, the effects of urbanization, and the removal of voting barriers, tens of millions of Brazilians have been invited to participate in the democratic process. During the 1945 elections, there were approximately 7.5 million people who were eligible to vote. Only 50 years later this number had grown exponentially to an electorate of 95 million Brazilians (Power and

Roberts, 1995). In their analysis, Power and Roberts (1995) further explain how suffrage was extended even further in 1985, when illiterate citizens were enfranchised by the Brazilian government, which increased the overall size of the electorate by 30 percent.

The enfranchisement of illiterate citizens was significant because the majority of the country had lacked proper education, with less than a quarter of the population having received an education through the fourth grade (Power and Roberts, 1995). Though voting was entirely voluntary for illiterate Brazilians, extending suffrage made the electoral process far more inclusive and welcoming. Power and Roberts (1995) show that the ratification of the democratic constitution in 1988 is the most recent example of enfranchisement, as it lowered the voting age to 16 and extended suffrage to another 2 million citizens. Voting remains voluntary for illiterate citizens, individuals 16 or 17 years of age, and those over the age of 70 (International IDEA). These achievements taking place over the course of eight decades allowed the Brazilian electorate to become more diverse and representative of the population as a whole. This expanded suffrage has shaped the current electorate and influenced the electoral processes known today.

Today, Brazil is a pluralist democracy that holds competitive elections with approximately 35 political parties vying for seats in the national legislature (Freedom House). In the 2018 Election for the Chamber of Deputies, 30 parties – including the Workers' Party, Social Liberal Party, and the Progressive Party – won seats through an open-list proportional representation system to serve a four-year term (IFES Election Guide). Freedom House classifies Brazil as free, though democracy continues to be undermined by corruption at the highest levels of government and violence levied against journalists and activists alike.

It is important to consider the nature of Brazil's electoral system in assessing compulsory voting and its effects on factors including voter participation rates and election results. Brazil has an electoral system that is considered unusual when compared to other democracies throughout the world. The system contains elements of majoritarian and proportional representation. Elections determining positions in the upper house of the national legislature – the Federal Senate – are conducted by a plurality system, similar to that in the United States (Power and Roberts, 1995). Since 1978, as Power and Roberts (1995) explain, the citizens in each Brazilian state elect three senators. Elections for the lower house – the Chamber of Deputies – vary from that of the upper house and employ a system known as open-list proportional representation, allowing voters to rank-order their candidates with the political parties having no say in the decision (Power and Roberts, 1995). Electing members of the lower house in this fashion diminishes the influence of political parties and allows campaigns to focus on individual candidates rather than the ideology of a specific party (Power and Roberts, 1995).

Brazil is the largest country in the world to mandate compulsory voting for its citizens. Compulsory voting has been a part of the Electoral Code of Brazil since 1932 (International IDEA). According to Cepaluni and Hidalgo (2016), all literate citizens between the ages of eighteen and sixty-nine are required to register to vote and to cast a ballot — while voting remains optional for the relatively small number of illiterate citizens and the elderly. Only a portion of the electorate is obliged to vote and this certainly impacts the extent to which election results represent the will of the Brazilian people. Cepaluni and Hidalgo (2016) further assert that the only two exemptions to compulsory voting are illness and travel, provided the exemptions are formally requested from the appropriate governmental body. Barring these two

circumstances, citizens who qualify for compulsory voting are expected to register and vote in elections.

Penalties levied against abstaining voters provide necessary insight into the effectiveness of compulsory voting within a country and Brazil exemplifies this well. The monetary penalties for abstention in Brazil are quite clear – abstaining voters who fail to secure a formal exemption are required to pay a fee of three to ten percent of the regional hourly minimum wage at their local electoral judiciary office (Cepaluni and Hidalgo, 2016). As explained by Cepaluni and Hidalgo (2016), the minimum wage in Brazil is equal to approximately \$1.60 USD per hour, so the fee itself – which amounts to less than 0.4% of the average worker’s monthly income – is not substantially burdensome on the majority of the population. That being said, failure to pay the fee can further complicate the lives of Brazilian citizens. Those who do not pay the abstention fee are unable to obtain a passport, participate in civil service exams, hold a government job, enroll in a public university, or even receive loans from state banks (Cepaluni and Hidalgo, 2016). These subsequent consequences are certainly more restrictive than a small fine amounting to no more than an hour of minimum wage. It is understandable why nonmonetary penalties act as more of a deterrent than a fine having little impact on the average Brazilian’s income.

Though the penalties are uniform for the entire population, they do not impact citizens equally. As research by Cepaluni and Hidalgo (2016) demonstrates, the nonmonetary penalties for abstention primarily impact the middle and upper classes who make use of state services. This suggests that the decision to abstain from voting would impact the middle and upper classes far more than it would poorer Brazilians, and thereby only creates an incentive to vote for a portion of the electorate. Their research also indicates that the number of state services used is dependent upon the education level of citizens; the more educated a Brazilian citizen, the more

likely they are to use state services (Cepaluni and Hidalgo, 2016). It follows that the current electoral rules in place – which incentivize the middle and upper classes much more than poor and working-class citizens – indirectly undermine the integrity of election results. Compulsory voting cannot improve democracy within a state when only certain voices are being heard.

Finally, Brazil is still witnessing the casting of blank and spoiled ballots three decades after returning to democratic rule. According to Leslie Bethell (2018), within recent elections, between 10 and 20 percent of votes cast were either blank or voluntarily spoiled ballots. Despite the end of military rule and a decreasing amount of political involvement by the military, this practice continues among a substantial portion of the Brazilian electorate. In a 2014 election for the Chamber of Deputies, for example, approximately 15 percent of the electorate cast a blank or spoiled ballot, creating a combined total of 17.5 million invalid ballots (Bethell, 2018). Though eligible citizens are legally mandated to cast their ballots, it is clear that a significant portion of the electorate – for one reason or another – does not cast votes considered valid by the Brazilian government. This calls into question the effect of compulsory voting on the integrity of Brazilian elections.

As of the 2018 Presidential Election, Brazil had over 147 million registered voters. Of this population of eligible voters, 73% cast ballots in the first round of voting with a slightly smaller 71% participating in the second round (IFES Election Guide). This data demonstrates that roughly 40 million people abstained from voting in an election that would determine the head of government. According to DeSilver (2020), this turnout rate is actually quite high when compared to other democracies and falls just slightly behind the countries with the highest rates. Despite these impressive turnout rates, there remains a portion of the Brazilian electorate disillusioned by the country's current state of democracy. A poll conducted by Datafolha in June

of 2020 found that 75 percent of Brazilians support democracy, while 10 percent favor dictatorship (Reuters Staff, 2020). This poll is relevant and shows that although there is some political dissatisfaction, the vast majority of the electorate supports the democratic system in place — a reality that undoubtedly impacts electoral perception and outcomes.

Data demonstrates that many Brazilians continue to be critical of democracy. That being said, Brazilian democracy has garnered more support under the leadership of President Jair Bolsonaro and in light of his autocratic efforts (Reuters Staff, 2020). Within recent elections, more than a quarter of the Brazilian electorate has chosen not to participate in the democratic process. This is a substantial number of Brazilian voters who are not having their views influence elections. Whether or not they want to vote, their abstention impacts election outcomes. Brazil continues to call into question the effectiveness of compulsory voting and it shows that implementing compulsory voting is not an easy endeavor.

Case Study – Belgium

Belgium is another democracy in which compulsory voting is in effect and this has been the case for more than a century. Compulsory voting was officially implemented in Belgium in 1893 alongside the country enfranchising all men over the age of 21 (Pilet, 2007). Belgium is a federal parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarchy, with the latest constitution adopted in 1970 (Global EDGE). There are documented legal consequences for abstaining voters, but they are infrequently and irregularly enforced. According to Pilet (2007), it is evident that the Belgian government is quite selective in its execution of abstention penalties and rarely enforces the most restrictive ones. Irregular enforcement of sanctions is not uncommon in countries with compulsory voting laws in effect.

The Belgian monarchy itself is primarily ceremonial, as Freedom House explains, but the king does appoint the prime minister for approval by the legislature. The parliament in Belgium is comprised of two houses – the Senate and the Chamber of Representatives. Members of the Chamber are directly elected by proportional representation while Senate members are chosen by community and regional parliaments (Freedom House). Belgian citizens also elect 21 members of the European Parliament through a direct election every five years (European Union, 2020). Combined with local elections, Belgians have the ability to vote on several levels. As one of the oldest countries requiring its citizens to vote, Belgium is the focus of much research on compulsory voting.

Prior to the introduction of mandatory voting, the eligibility of voters was determined by a variety of factors including, but not limited to, the amount of taxes paid and one's performance on a formal electoral exam (Pilet, 2007). It is clear that these strict eligibility requirements only permitted a portion of Belgians to participate in the democratic process, a process that would look far different beginning in 1893. Jean-Benoit Pilet (2007) explains that it was at this time that the Belgian electorate grew from 136,755 to approximately 1,370,687. As was the case in Brazil, the enactment of compulsory voting in Belgium was accompanied by significant voter enfranchisement.

Compulsory voting was not met with wide approval when it was first enacted in Belgium. Many citizens opposed compulsory voting and the extension of suffrage, but factors such as the desire to reduce abstention overpowered this opposition. During the second half of the 19th century, an average of only 30 to 40 percent of all eligible voters cast ballots on election day (Pilet, 2007). Belgium's well-known abstention issue – as Pilet (2007) asserts – led many to believe that compulsory voting was the most efficient solution to the lack of political

participation. Beyond abstention concerns, the fear of the rise of radical parties – supported and enabled by voters often violently opposed to compulsory voting – served as motivation for many Belgians to support the concept of compulsory voting. This concern was vocalized by conservatives who feared that radical voters would turn out in higher numbers than moderate voters without an obligatory vote (Pilet, 2007). It is apparent that support for compulsory voting gradually increased over time and was motivated in part by concern for the future of political participation in the country. The manner in which the Belgian government approaches its electoral process makes it relatively simple for citizens to participate in their shared democracy. Its inclusive nature likely motivates more individuals to show up on election day.

The voting process in Belgium is rather straightforward. Every Belgian citizen age 18 or older is automatically registered to vote. Exactly fifteen days prior to the election, polling cards are disseminated to all registered voters explicitly stating that “voting is compulsory” (Pilet, 2007). This action, though seemingly small, demonstrates Belgium’s legitimate commitment to engaging voters and ultimately increasing voter participation. Since 1999, all European Union citizens residing in Belgium have retained the right to register and vote in local elections. However, voting is only compulsory for this demographic once they have registered to vote (Pilet, 2007). Belgium approaches voting rather uniquely compared to other countries with compulsory voting laws in effect.

As discussed above, consequences for abstention vary greatly depending on the individual country. Belgium’s response to abstention begins by sending letters to all citizens who failed to vote, asking them to provide a formal explanation for their nonparticipation. Belgian citizens are subjected to monetary fines if the offered justification is found invalid by the government. Fines for the first offense range from 25€ to 50€ while the second offense can cost

individuals anywhere from 50€ to 125€ (Pilet, 2007). The monetary penalties levied by the Belgian government are notably more costly than those of the Brazilian government and in part explain why Belgium continues to witness high voter turnout, with an average participation rate of 90.16% (IFES Election Guide). It is likely more convenient for Belgians to cast their ballots on election day than to go through the process of explaining their abstention and potentially paying a hefty fine.

While some countries may allow their citizens to pay a fine for abstention and maintain full voting eligibility, Belgium essentially has a four-strike system that could result in the temporary loss of suffrage. If a registered voter abstains from voting four times within a 15-year period, that individual – regardless of whether abstention fines were paid – can be stripped of their eligibility for the following 10 years (Pilet, 2007). This penalty is far stricter than some present in other countries where voters can repeatedly abstain provided that they pay the respective fine. The understanding that habitual abstention could result in one losing their ability to participate in the democratic process certainly incentivizes Belgians to participate on election day. Abstention also prevents individuals from applying for civil service positions, but as Pilet (2007) explains, these legal consequences are not consistently enforced, making compulsory voting more of a moral than legal obligation. The consistently high voter turnout rate in Belgium suggests that their version of compulsory voting is effective. Whether it be a moral commitment to their country or a fear of losing suffrage, it is clear that the majority of Belgian citizens are motivated to fulfill their civic duty.

Belgium has witnessed consistently high voter turnout rates over the course of the last seven decades. The highest documented voter turnout rate is associated with the 1977 parliamentary elections in which 95.1 percent of the electorate voted (Bittiger et al., 2004). Voter

participation has slightly fluctuated throughout this period of time, but it has never decreased in a substantial manner. In the latest parliamentary elections taking place in 2019, for example, approximately 88.38% of eligible voters took part in the democratic process (International IDEA). Data collected by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) also shows the number of invalid votes cast in Belgium is regularly very low. These figures demonstrate that compulsory voting has been extremely effective in increasing the amount of voter participation in Belgium. Invalid voting is not a major issue in Belgian democracy as it is in Brazil, and this is reflective of the generally positive sentiment that surrounds voting in Belgium. Belgium serves as a strong example of how compulsory voting can motivate people to actively participate in the electoral process and increase participation rates.

Analysis

My two case studies suggest that the overall efficacy of compulsory voting depends on the way it is implemented. Even though the vast majority of existing compulsory systems are consolidated democracies, no two democracies are exactly alike. Each state has its own social and economic factors, a unique political history, and varying levels of political engagement. These factors collectively impact how the electorate perceives the voting process, the extent to which voters participate on election day, and even the number of valid votes cast. Compulsory voting does increase voter turnout but – as data from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems confirms – turnout rates vary significantly even among consolidated democracies.

Brazil and Belgium exemplify how compulsory voting can have a varying impact on an electorate and their participation in the democratic process. Though both countries are consolidated democracies, they tell two different tales of compulsory voting. This is largely

because of the political and social factors at play in both countries. Brazil witnesses an average turnout of 79.54%, which is remarkable compared to many democracies, but still below countries like Belgium and Australia. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons for Brazil's abstention rate, it is clear that factors including its political history, sanction enforcement, and eligibility requirements influence this number. As mentioned above, Brazil's sanctions primarily impact and incentivize the middle and upper classes. This portion of the electorate has reason to vote, but poor and working-class Brazilians have little motivation to cast ballots of their own. Brazil has indirectly created an electoral system that disproportionately represents the views of its wealthier citizens. On the other hand, voting remains optional for a large portion of the population; these individuals face minor consequences about whether or not they vote, so there is little motivation to do so. Brazil's complicated political history marked in part by a military regime cannot be ignored either. The abuses of power that took place prior to Brazil's return to democracy certainly created a negative perception of the government and the electoral process that remains to this day. It is possible that a portion of spoiled ballots cast within each election may be due to voter error or ignorance, but the casting of blank ballots is undoubtedly a form of protest. Although Brazil maintains adequate voter turnout rates, it is clear that if implemented incorrectly, compulsory voting might increase electoral inequality.

Belgium's approach to compulsory voting is clearly effective as it pertains to mobilizing the electorate and achieving remarkably low abstention rates. Part of this success is due to the manner in which the Belgian government interacts with and regards its electorate. The dissemination of polling cards prior to election day not only reminds the electorate of their obligation to vote, but also indirectly unifies the electorate and creates a moral duty to vote. This approach is somewhat more inclusive than that in Brazil, which in part explains why Belgium

repeatedly sees a staggeringly low abstention rate. Belgium's turnout rate is especially interesting when considering that the government rarely enforces its sanctions. Belgians possess a more noticeable desire to vote than Brazilians, which is reflected in their average turnout rate of 90.16%. Belgium has been democratic for much longer than Brazil and is more developed both economically and socially — two factors that can partially explain the success of compulsory voting there. If a government were to look for an example of how to successfully implement and maintain compulsory voting, Belgium would be the model to follow.

Conclusion

Unlike previous literature on compulsory voting, this work has thoroughly analyzed the electoral practice through several elements at once. Instead of solely focusing on turnout rates or penalties, I have examined numerous factors in my assessment of the efficacy of compulsory voting. Due to the social, political, and economic differences of countries with compulsory systems, it is paramount that research takes a multifaceted approach. The electoral practice as a whole should not be judged based on one single factor and that is what distinguishes my work from existing studies on this topic.

Compulsory voting is an effective way to increase voter turnout. If implemented correctly, it has the potential to create more representative election results. That being said, it is only as effective as a country's political, social, and economic factors allow. If implemented in a manner that only amplifies the voice of part of the electorate, compulsory voting could increase inequality. Compulsory voting is not a perfect electoral system, but no system exists without flaws. It consistently increases voter turnout which is a crucial element of creating more representative and fair elections. Given the documented successes of compulsory systems

abroad, democratic countries with unwaveringly high abstention rates – including the United States – would be wise to consider implementing compulsory voting laws to increase turnout and overall representation. Compulsory voting is not strongly considered in the United States because electoral reform is a slow and complicated process. There is also the issue of other electoral reforms having priority over others and perhaps a reluctance of American voters to be *forced* to vote. Nonetheless, compulsory voting is a sensible solution to low voter turnout that has long plagued the United States electoral system. If the United States Congress were to work together to pursue and implement compulsory voting, Americans would reap the benefits of fairer, more inclusive election results.

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