

Research report, June 2006

The
Electoral
Commission

Compulsory voting around the world



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The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Our mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.

Compulsory voting around the world
Research report

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Foreword

The Electoral Commission is committed to increasing participation in the democratic process in the UK. Encouraging voting at elections is a central part of this agenda. Since our establishment in 2000, we have actively promoted debate and research into the reasons why people choose to vote or not vote.

As part of this process, we believe there is merit in opening up the question of compulsory voting for wider debate in the UK, as one of a series of options which may facilitate higher rates of electoral participation. International experience is often referred to by both advocates and opponents of compulsory reform in the UK. Yet until now there has been no single reference source analysing the international experience. This report has been prepared by the Commission in the belief that access to objective and up-to-date information about international experience of compulsory voting can only assist future debates in the UK.

The principal aim of this research was to provide factual information about how compulsory voting operates in different countries. This report analyses the historical background to the introduction of compulsory voting in several countries across the world (and its abolition in others). We have also looked at current legislation and enforcement, sought to identify common features of compulsory voting systems and reviewed academic studies into the impact of compulsory voting on turnout and political engagement.

Finally, two important caveats. This report does not consider the merits or otherwise of compulsory voting for the UK, and the Commission makes no recommendation in this regard. Additionally, this report is not an exhaustive global survey, but aims instead to take an analytical approach to understanding the issues involved.

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We hope that the information provided here will stimulate further debate.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Younger". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'S' and 'Y'.

Sam Younger
Chairman
June 2006

Executive summary

This research looks at compulsory voting systems around the world. It analyses the historical background to the introduction of compulsory voting in several countries across the world (and its abolition in others). We have also looked at current legislation and enforcement, sought to identify common features of compulsory voting systems and reviewed academic studies into the impact of compulsory voting on turnout and political engagement.

Background to research

Turnouts of 59.4% and 61.4% at the last two UK Parliamentary general elections¹ have prompted some discussion of compulsory voting. Although compulsory voting has never been part of the UK electoral system, mandatory participation in elections is a feature in a diverse range of countries across the world – in Western Europe, South East Asia, Australasia and Central and South America.

The principal aim of this research was to provide factual information about how compulsory voting operates in different countries and, where possible, to assess the efficacy of penalties for non-voting and the impact of compulsory voting on turnout rates.

The research has drawn on evidence supplied to us by British embassies and electoral authorities in a range of countries across the world where there is, or has been, compulsory voting. We have also drawn on academic research and analysis, but this report does not represent an exhaustive survey of compulsory voting systems or the literature about them.

Introducing compulsory voting

Countries with very different types of political systems, from newly established democracies through to emerging democracies, have legislated to introduce compulsory voting. The reasons behind its introduction are more complex than might, at first, be assumed and are not simply concerned with a desire to boost participation rates. Country-specific political

¹ Hereafter referred to as 'general elections'.

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and historical events and factors are overwhelmingly the prompt for a move to compulsion.

Compulsory voting has been introduced for a number of reasons and often at times of constitutional and political change, but the desire to maximise turnout among all sections of society seems to have been a common objective. It has often been implemented as a result of wider political reform such as a change in a country's political system, as in Chile, or alongside the introduction of universal suffrage, as in Belgium and Luxembourg.

Compulsory voting systems

Our research has found considerable diversity in the different compulsory voting systems across the world. Some are perhaps better described as compulsory attendance systems since they do not require electors to actually cast a vote; some are underpinned by compulsory registration, others are not; while some systems are strictly enforced by the authorities and some utilise significant sanctions (see Table 1 on the next page for a summary of compulsory voting systems and their sanctions). By contrast, in some countries it appears that the existence of compulsory voting in law is enough to ensure public compliance, even without the application of sanctions.

Impact of compulsory voting on political engagement

While higher turnouts in countries with some form of compulsory voting are not solely the

product of such arrangements, it is clear from the available evidence that compulsory voting both increases aggregate turnout and reduces the variation in turnout rates among different groups. Less clear is the effect compulsory voting has on political engagement more generally, encompassing political interest, knowledge and participation. The available evidence does suggest that compulsion is less effective in promoting better public knowledge of politics or in increasing political engagement.

We have been mindful that, while there is much to be gained from international comparisons, the compulsory voting systems currently in place across the world reflect the unique political and electoral systems and cultures of the individual countries involved. The practicability of effective imposition of compulsory voting also depends significantly on the extent to which registration is mandatory (and is enforced) or automatic.

The only obvious example where an **established** democracy appears to have introduced compulsory voting **solely** in response to low voter turnouts is Australia. However, the academic Lisa Hill argues that the greatest obstacles to the introduction of an Australian-style system of compulsory voting elsewhere may be 'psychological, or at least, cultural'.²

2 Cited in L. Hill, 'Democratic assistance: A compulsory voting template', paper presented to the Jubilee conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association, Canberra (2002).

In those countries in Western Europe where compulsory voting has been introduced, this typically followed the introduction of universal suffrage in the early twentieth century, sometimes combined with the introduction of proportional representation. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

(International IDEA) suggests that it is probably due to the long history of compulsory voting in some Western European democracies that it is still practised – this history has helped to make the practice a more ‘commonly accepted or tolerated’ tradition than it would otherwise be if introduced today.

Table 1: Summary of compulsory voting systems and their sanctions

Level of enforcement/ country	Brief description of sanctions against non-voters
Very strict	
Brazil	Sanctions include a fine corresponding to a small percentage of the minimum wage of the region where the individual was registered to vote. The non-voter is banned from taking professional exams, or from obtaining a loan or a passport. Failure to vote in three consecutive elections, non-payment of fines or failure to justify absence within six months can lead to registration being cancelled.
Australia	Inability to provide a sufficient reason for non-attendance triggers a \$20 fine. In the event of court proceedings being required, the fine can be increased to \$50 and the non-voter is liable for court costs. On some occasions, if the fine is still not paid, defaulters have been imprisoned as being in contempt of court.
Singapore	The names of absent voters are removed from the register of electors. Those who failed to vote without sufficient reason have to make a payment of S\$5 to the Registration Officer for their names to be reinstated on the register.
Peru	According to the Peruvian law, those who do not vote are restricted from making banking or other public administrative transactions and face a financial penalty.
Strict	
Bolivia	Citizens cannot make bank transactions up to three months after polling day if they fail to provide proof of voting. A monetary fine determined by the National Electoral Court at the time of each election may also be applied.
Nauru	A fine is imposed if no legitimate reason can be given.
Thailand	The absent voter may lose certain political rights, e.g. the right to propose legislation, impeach ministers or hold political positions.
Schaffhausen (Swiss canton)	A small fine (3 Swiss francs, approximately equal to £1.40) is payable by non-voters to the police who come to re-collect each citizen’s voter legitimization card. Sanctions are enforced against everyone who has not voted, unless they are exempt.

Table 1 (continued): Summary of compulsory voting systems and their sanctions

Level of enforcement/ country	Brief description of sanctions against non-voters
Moderate	
Belgium	Fines for not voting are up to 50 euros for a first offence and 125 euros for a second offence.
Luxembourg	According to electoral legislation sanctions include fines and imprisonment but none have ever been enforced.
Turkey	A small fine is imposed if no legitimate reason is given.
Cyprus	The punitive sanctions are fines of up to £200 and/or a prison sentence of up to six months for failing to vote or register. There have been very few prosecutions and none since the 2001 general election.
Chile	Registration is voluntary, making compulsory voting difficult to enforce. In theory, a fine is applied to those who do not vote, with names picked at random from a list of people who have not voted. However, in practice very few are fined.
Liechtenstein	Non-voters may be fined if they do not give an approved reason for not voting. As at September 2003 the fine will never exceed 20 Swiss francs (approximately equal to £8–9).
Fiji	No-one has been prosecuted since the introduction of compulsory voting in 1997.
Ecuador	A fine is imposed. Voting is voluntary for those with certified illiteracy and those aged 65+.
Paraguay	A small fine can be imposed on non-voters.
Very moderate	
Panama	There is legal provision for compulsory voting but no penalties are applied.
Greece	There are no specified sanctions enforcing the compulsory system – the relevant passage was omitted from the 2001 revision of the constitution.
Argentina	A small fine is imposed if no legitimate reason is given.
None	
Egypt	There are no penalties.
Honduras	There is no enforcement.
El Salvador	There is no enforcement.
Costa Rica	There are no penalties for non-voting.
Dominican Republic	There is no enforcement.
Venezuela	Although compulsory voting exists in law, it has, in effect, not been implemented. There are no specified sanctions, and thus no prosecutions.
Mexico	Mexican electoral legislation does not establish any sanctions against non-voters.

Notes: This table lists countries and systems we have been able to find material on and information is correct as at the time we undertook our research in February 2006. The 'very strict' – 'very moderate/none' classifications are derived from analysis by International IDEA.

Source: Various, including British embassies, electoral authorities, International IDEA (1997, 2003, 2004 reports).

1 Background

This chapter reviews the incidence of compulsory voting across the world. It briefly summarises past debates in the UK and reviews of compulsory voting, and considers some of the main issues and arguments put forward by supporters and opponents.

The incidence of compulsory voting

1.1 Strictly defined, compulsory voting consists of several components: 'a system of laws mandating that enfranchised citizens turn out to vote, which is usually, though not always, accompanied by a system of compulsory voter registration.' However, in many countries, penalties for non-compliance are stipulated in law but often not enforced. Because compulsory voting seems to be strictly enforced in very few cases, in many instances the systems would perhaps more accurately be called compulsory attendance.

1.2 As a result, identifying the number of countries that have 'compulsory voting' is far from straightforward. According to International IDEA in 2004, 30 countries around the world operated compulsory voting in some form or other at either a national or regional level. However, this figure also includes those countries that do not enforce compulsory voting and those that do not specify sanctions.³ A different study published in 2000 estimated that 24 countries operated a form of compulsory voting. Australian academics Lisa Hill and Jonathon Louth argue that, in reality, no more than 14 regimes can properly be described as being in any way compulsory because it is rare to see the practice enforced with institutional support. They identify only four established democracies – Australia, Belgium, Luxembourg

³ International IDEA, *Voter turnout in Western Europe since 1945: A regional report* (2004).

and Cyprus – which have had a history of systematically administered and enforced compulsory voting.⁴

1.3 Most systems of compulsory voting allow for some form of voter abstention. At the same time, there are currently few instances across the world of voting systems that allow positive abstention, which allows someone to select a ‘none of the above’ option on the ballot paper and, thus, record the decision that they did not want to vote for any of the available candidates.⁵

1.4 The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled in 1971 that the practice of compulsory voting is not in violation of fundamental freedoms because it is invariably, in reality, a misnomer, particularly in Western Europe. This is because many compulsory voting systems do not require people actually to vote and it is attendance at a polling station that is compulsory. In *X v Austria* in 1971, the ECHR ruled that compulsory voting did not amount to a violation of the right to ‘freedom of thought, conscience and religion’ (Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights), provided that only attendance is compulsory and that voters are free to submit a blank or spoiled ballot.⁶

4 J. Louth and L. Hill, ‘Compulsory voting in Australia: Turnout with and without it’, *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, Volume 6, Number 1: November 2005, 25–37.

5 Ibid.

6 The Electoral Reform Society, *Turning out or turning off – An analysis of political disengagement and what can be done about it* (2004).

Compulsory voting and the debate in the UK

1.5 Discussion about the merits of introducing compulsory voting in the UK has been revived recently by the relatively low turnouts at the 2001 and 2005 general elections. But the issue was the subject of parliamentary debate as long ago as the 1920s and 1930s, and Private Members’ Bills were introduced on several occasions between 1921 and 2001.⁷ Inevitably, political and public interest in the subject has reflected contemporary levels of voluntary participation. At the time of the 1950 general election, for example, percentage turnout was typically in the high 70s and 80s (it was approaching a post-war high of 84% in 1950), and the issue of compulsory voting faded from political discourse.

1.6 The last major parliamentary review of the issue in the UK was undertaken by the Home Affairs Select Committee, as part of a wider examination of electoral issues. In its 1998 report *Electoral law and administration*, the Select Committee concluded that, while it might not be desirable to have any form of compulsory voting, ‘there has never been a serious debate about compulsory participation in the UK’ and recommended that there should, at least, be a public debate on the subject, particularly given higher turnouts in countries with compulsory voting systems.⁸

7 House of Commons Library, *Standard note on compulsory voting* (2003).

8 Home Affairs Select Committee, *Electoral law and administration* (1998).

1.7 The Select Committee noted that compulsory voting is normally discussed in the context of national parliamentary elections but that it would potentially have more impact in local elections – given higher rates of non-voting at such elections – perhaps raising more difficult questions of enforcement. However, in evidence to the Committee, the Local Government Association reported that the introduction of compulsory voting was ‘not generally supported by local authorities’ and some local authority Chief Executives cautioned that any discussion of compulsory voting would need to carefully consider sanctions, policing methods and enforcement agencies.⁹

1.8 In 2001, Gareth Thomas MP (Harrow West) introduced a Private Member’s Bill – the Compulsory Voting Bill – which did not progress beyond its first reading.¹⁰ More recently, immediately following the 2005 general election, ippr’s Ben Rogers identified compulsory voting as a possible remedy for differential turnout among different social classes, arguing that ‘the time has come to give serious consideration to compulsory voting – or at least compulsory attendance at the polling stations or compulsory filling out of a postal form (the act of voting itself would remain voluntary).’

1.9 More recently, the subject of compulsory voting has resurfaced in the media and political discourse. In July 2005 Geoff Hoon MP, speaking in a personal capacity, endorsed the

introduction of compulsory voting as a way of addressing political alienation, restoring community and confronting the issue of serial non-voters. In response, Oliver Heald MP said, ‘There is little support to make it a criminal offence not to vote... the police have better things to do. The challenge for politicians is to excite electors with their ideas.’¹¹

1.10 Polls of public opinion conducted over the last two decades in the UK suggest that the public is largely undecided on the issue, with responses seemingly conditional on the specific question asked. A 1991 MORI/Joseph Rowntree Trust survey found 49% in favour of the introduction of compulsory voting and 41% against. In 2000, 30% were in favour, 49% against. In 2001, a MORI/Electoral Commission survey immediately after the general election found 49% in favour and 47% opposed. At the last general election, a MORI poll found one-third of the public (36%) supporting voting being made compulsory with fines for people who don’t take part, and the majority (57%) opposing this.

1.11 In our 2003 factsheet on compulsory voting, we summarised a number of the arguments put forward by advocates and opponents of compulsory voting (see Table 2, next page). This research has used these arguments as a reference point in looking at the evidence available from other countries.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ House of Commons Library, *Standard note on compulsory voting* (2003).

¹¹ B. Rogers, ‘Turnout is really about class’, *The Guardian*, 5 May 2005; P. Wintour, ‘Hoon calls for compulsory voting’, *The Guardian*, 4 July 2005, and ‘Hoon backs compulsory voting’, politics.co.uk, 4 July 2005.

Table 2: Pro- and anti-compulsory voting arguments

Pro-compulsory voting	Anti-compulsory voting
Voting is a duty and not simply a right.	It would run counter to the UK's current political culture.
The legitimacy of a government's mandate is weakened by low turnout.	It would undermine the freedom associated with democracy – some argue that the right to vote implies the right not to.
Unequal turnout among different socio-economic groups risks unequal political influence.	It would be difficult and expensive to enforce.
Political parties and candidates can shift time and resources from mobilising turnout to promoting policies.	Reluctant voters would deliberately spoil their votes or cast ill-considered votes.
Compulsion can increase political awareness and facilitate more informed debate.	
Increased voting can promote participation in other political activities.	
Source: The Electoral Commission, <i>Compulsory voting</i> (factsheet, 2003) available to download at www.electoralcommission.org.uk .	

1.12 Our research has also examined the international experience of compulsory voting in administrative and legal terms. The wide variations in practice make it clear that any informed debate on the subject in the UK should extend to consideration of the detailed operation of compulsory voting, including the sanctions involved, the elections it might apply to and the interface between the system of registration and the operation of compulsory voting.

2 Introducing compulsory voting

Compulsory voting is often introduced at moments of significant constitutional and structural reform. In this chapter we look at the events leading to the introduction of compulsory voting in a number of different countries around the world.

Overview

2.1 Countries with very different types of political systems, from newly established democracies through to emerging democracies, have legislated to introduce compulsory voting. The reasons behind its introduction are more complex than might, at first, be assumed. In particular, they are not simply concerned with a desire to boost participation rates. Country-specific political events and factors are overwhelmingly the prompt for a move to compulsion.

2.2 In some countries, compulsory voting was introduced alongside the implementation of other major political or electoral reforms. It has often been implemented as a result of wider political reform, such as a change in a country's political system, as in Chile, or alongside the introduction of universal suffrage, as in Belgium and Luxembourg. In the Netherlands in 1917 compulsory voting was introduced when the extension of the franchise was combined with the introduction of proportional representation.¹²

Western Europe

2.3 The majority of countries in Western Europe which still use compulsory voting in some form have done so for between 50 and 100 years: Belgium, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, Switzerland (more specifically, the Swiss canton of Schaffhausen), Cyprus and Greece (although, as we discuss later, compulsory voting is not actually enforced in Greece).

¹² M. Gratschew, *Voter turnout in Western Europe: Compulsory voting in Western Europe* (International IDEA, 2004).

2.4 The report ‘Compulsory voting’ in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences* indicates that, in almost all of these Western democracies, compulsory voting was introduced in the early twentieth century, shortly after the expansion of voter suffrage and the political organisation of the labour movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹³ The first country in the world to introduce a compulsion to vote was Belgium in 1893 following the introduction of universal suffrage there.

2.5 Compulsory voting was introduced in **Greece** via a constitutional provision in 1975 and during a major change in the country’s political system. The British Embassy reports that, ‘with Greece’s turbulent political history, the constitutional provision... voted in immediately after the fall of a seven-year dictatorial regime, was regarded as a guarantee of, rather than a hindrance to, civil rights.’

2.6 In **Italy**, a major historical event – the end of Italian fascism by 1946 – led to the creation of a new republican constitution establishing representative democracy and a system of proportional representation based on multi-member constituencies and the extension of the franchise to include women.¹⁴ The new constitution described voting as ‘personal and equal, free and secret’. Though not explicitly

making voting compulsory, the constitution did emphasise that voting ‘is a civic duty’.¹⁵ Voter turnout in Italy has always been very high, with an average of over 90% in parliamentary elections since 1946 (81% in the last general election). The constitution has been subsequently revised and this stipulation was removed.

Non-European countries

2.7 In *Democratic Phoenix*, Professor Pippa Norris speculates that it may be the case that newer democracies characterised by low electoral turnout are more likely to introduce laws in an attempt to mobilise the public.¹⁶ Certainly, compulsory voting legislation exists in some form in most countries of **Central and South America** with varying degrees of enforcement. In the majority of cases, compulsory voting has been introduced relatively recently here in comparison with Western Europe. This is probably partly due to the fact that there has been significant and extensive political transformation in the region in the last two decades.¹⁷ For example, compulsory voting in Chile was first put into practice when the transition to democracy began in 1988.¹⁸

15 Information from the British Embassy in Italy, 2006.

16 P. Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing political activism* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

17 F. Adams, *Deepening democracy: Global governance and political reform in Latin America* (Praeger Publishers, USA, 2003).

18 Advised by Professor T. Chuaqui at the Institute of Political Science at the Catholic University in Chile, September 2004.

13 S. Jackman, ‘Compulsory voting’ in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences* (2001).

14 P. Ginsborg, *A history of contemporary Italy: Society and politics 1943–1988* (Penguin Books, 1990).

2.8 The Commonwealth first introduced compulsory enrolment in **Australia** in 1911 via the Commonwealth Electoral Act, but compulsory voting was not introduced until 1924, principally as a response to low voter turnout. In the event, turnout rose dramatically from 59% at the 1922 federal elections to 91% in 1925 at the first federal election to be held under the new system.

2.9 In **Singapore**, compulsory voting was introduced in 1959, prior to the country gaining independence from Malaysia in 1965.¹⁹ While in contrast with most other countries with compulsory voting, **Fiji** and **Thailand** introduced it very recently, in 1997.

Current issues and debates

2.10 One consequence of compulsory voting having been introduced several decades ago in many countries is that some people argue that such systems are no longer fit for changed circumstances. For example, the Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten party (VLD) in **Belgium** has argued that the rationale applied at the time of its introduction is no longer applicable to Belgium today and the challenges now faced by the political system. Similarly, Belgium's Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform has pointed out that, at the time when voting rights were extended to all citizens for the first time, there were fears that

the richest people in society would try to 'buy' the votes of abstainers and that compulsory voting was a way to address this.²⁰

2.11 In 2005, the VLD introduced a bill into the Belgian Senate proposing the abolition of compulsory voting, and this prompted a Senate debate on the subject.²¹ According to Thibaut Cardon of the Belgian Senate, the VLD has been unable to secure sufficient support from other political parties including opposition parties who had already expressed their support for compulsory voting in Belgium. Similarly, Pascal Delwit of the Université Libre de Bruxelles advised us that several parties proposed the abolition of compulsory voting during the Parliament of 1995–9 but failed to generate wider debate in Belgium.

2.12 Debate about the future of compulsory voting is also evident elsewhere. The **Fiji** Electoral Commission commented in late 2005 that debate has recently tended to focus on the potential reform of the system, and the political community is said to be planning a review of the constitution and the Electoral Act in the near future.²² In **Chile** the debate is, in part, based on the recognition that the voluntary nature of registration and the costs involved can make enforcement of

²⁰ The Parliamentary Committee on Political/Electoral Reform of the Belgian Parliament *Chambre 3e session de la 50e legislature: Le vote obligatoire: Aspects juridiques* (2001), pp. 83.

²¹ Advised through correspondence with Thibaut Cardon of the Belgian Senate, 31 August 2004.

²² Conversation with a representative from the Fiji Electoral Commission during a visit to the UK Electoral Commission in 2005.

¹⁹ Singapore High Commission in London, 2005.

compulsory voting almost impossible. The Chilean government put forward several options for reform in 2004 including: automatic registration with voluntary voting; automatic registration coupled with compulsory voting and enforced penalties for non-voting; and automatic registration alongside a legal reference to compulsory voting but no legal penalties.²³

2.13 International IDEA suggest that it is probably due to the long history of compulsory voting in some Western European democracies that it is still practised – that its long history has helped to make the practice a more ‘commonly accepted or tolerated’ tradition than it would otherwise be if introduced today. The evidence seems to suggest that, even in those European democracies where compulsory voting is currently operating, the culture that exists today might well resist compulsory voting if it were to be introduced now.²⁴

²³ We are grateful to the following for providing information and advice: Roberto Espindola (University of Bradford), Prof. Tomas Chuaqui (Institute of Political Science at the Catholic University, Chile), Prof. Alan Angell (Oxford University) and the Institute of Latin American Studies, London.

²⁴ M. Gratschew, *Voter turnout in Western Europe: Compulsory voting in Western Europe* (International IDEA, 2004).

3 Compulsory voting systems

This chapter looks in more detail at how compulsory voting systems operate in a selection of countries around the world. It reviews the sanctions used by different countries and the provisions, if any, for 'positive abstention'.

Overview

3.1 As we have already seen, a number of countries around the world operate compulsory voting systems but there is considerable variation among these in terms of the level of enforcement applied. International IDEA reports, 'Some laws are created to merely state the government's position regarding what the citizen's responsibility should be. Mandatory voting laws that do not include sanctions may fall into this category... not all laws are created to be enforced.' Consequently, to truly understand the extent to which compulsory voting is actually practised, it is important to consider the level of enforcement.²⁵ In this chapter we look at the nature of the systems, and their sanctions, on a country-by-country basis.

3.2 Sanctions range from penalty fines in Australia, Cyprus and Chile, to prohibition from making banking or other public administrative transactions for three months, allied to financial penalties, in Peru. In Singapore, non-voters risk removal from the electoral register. In Brazil, they might be barred from taking professional examinations, receiving wages, or renewing enrolment in official schools or universities (inspected by government), while in Cyprus they could potentially serve jail sentences.

²⁵ M. Gratschew, *Voter turnout in Western Europe: Compulsory voting in Western Europe* (International IDEA, 2004).

3.3 In reality, such sanctions are very rarely enforced. This is important because, according to Lijphart and Hirczy, where sanctions are applied turnout is routinely in the 90% range.²⁶ As a result, at least one academic specialist in this area has argued that for compulsory voting to be effective and to achieve higher turnout, the application of penalties is a vital precondition.²⁷

3.4 There is also considerable variation between countries with compulsory voting in terms of the type of registration system that they use. Many countries with compulsory voting have comprehensive registration where registration is automatic and some have compulsory registration. In the UK it is estimated that 8–9% of those eligible to be on the register are not registered.²⁸ Registration in itself is not compulsory. Moreover, although it is a legal requirement to comply with an Electoral Registration Officer's requests for information (thereby enabling them to fulfil their duties of maintaining a complete and accurate register), failures to comply are rarely penalised.

Western Europe

3.5 Within the Western European region, five countries currently have some form of compulsory voting legislation: Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Liechtenstein and Luxembourg

²⁶ Cited in L. Hill, 'Democratic assistance: A compulsory voting template', paper presented to the Jubilee conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association, Canberra (2002).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ The Electoral Commission, *Understanding electoral registration* (2005).

(additionally, it operates in one canton in Switzerland). In addition, some European countries once had compulsory voting before abolishing it. **Austria** had compulsory voting in all regions from 1949–82 and the **Netherlands** used it from 1917–67.²⁹

3.6 Austria enforced nationwide compulsory voting for presidential and Nationalrat (Lower Houses of Parliament) elections until 1982. The nationwide legislation was abolished, but four provinces – Styria, Carinthia, Tyrol and Vorarlberg – maintained compulsory voting on their provincial statute books. All four provinces have since repealed their compulsory voting legislation.

3.7 According to officials at the Austrian Interior Ministry, compulsory voting was unpopular and administrators found it 'almost impossible to enforce' – Vorarlberg was the last province to try to enforce the penalties back in 1988, some 16 years before abolishing it. Additionally, the legal exemptions to compulsory voting – illness or frailty, urgent family matters (for example illness of a relative) or urgent professional business – undermined the efficacy of compulsory voting. Electors were also excused from voting if they no longer lived permanently in the province in which they were registered, absolving many thousands who moved from their home province to Vienna to work.

²⁹ M. Gratschew, *Voter turnout in Western Europe: Compulsory voting in Western Europe* (International IDEA, 2004).

3.8 The Austrian Interior Ministry explains that there was little difference in the turnouts recorded during the compulsory voting period and the period since, and also between turnouts in regions which maintained compulsory voting beyond 1979 and those which did not. Also, despite the abolition of compulsory voting some years ago, turnouts at presidential and general elections in Austria have been relatively healthy in recent years – for example, general election turnouts were 80% in 1999 and 84% in 2002. While there is some concern about turnout for future Austrian elections, there is ‘little pressure to introduce new measures to encourage voting and none at all to make it compulsory again.’

3.9 Compulsory voting was introduced in **Belgium** in 1893 and remains in force for all elections. Under the Belgian system, voters are obliged to enter the polling booth but do not have to mark their ballot paper(s). The names of electors who do not attend polling stations are sent to the Office of the Public Prosecutor. Electors may give an explanation for non-attendance to a local judge, who will usually accept medically certified illness or a documented absence abroad. A first offence receives a small fine and this can be increased up to a maximum of 125 euros for repeat offenders, while repeat offenders are barred from the electoral list for 10 years and deemed ineligible during that period for any nomination, distinction of promotion by a public authority.

3.10 International IDEA argues that compulsory voting was a much debated issue in the **Netherlands** during the 50 years it operated,

and the legal framework underpinning it was amended many times.³⁰ Compulsion was introduced in 1917 and lasted until 1967 when it was abolished on the recommendation of a government committee, meaning that the 1971 Dutch parliamentary election was the first to be held without compulsory voting. The main arguments put forward at the time for the abolition of compulsory voting, included the following:³¹

- The right to vote is each citizen’s individual right, which he or she should be free to exercise or not.
- It is difficult to effectively enforce sanctions against non-voters.
- The political parties might be more dynamic if the parties had to attract the voters’ attention.
- Voter turnout under a compulsory voting system does not necessarily reflect actual interest in politics.

3.11 Compulsory voting was introduced in **Luxembourg** in 1919 and is still practised, but it is only compulsory for those who are on the electoral register. Electoral registration is not compulsory and those over the age of 70 are exempted from compulsory voting. Typically, electors receive a letter from the authorities several weeks prior to elections inviting them to vote and turnouts are high: 87% and 92% of the registered electors at the 1999 and 2004 parliamentary elections respectively.

30 M. Gratschew, *Voter turnout in Western Europe: Compulsory voting in Western Europe* (International IDEA, 2004).

31 Ibid.

3.12 The British Embassy has reported that sanctions have never been enforced in Luxembourg. International IDEA reports that for a first offence the fines will range from around 99 to 991 euros but, in practice, a non-voter tends to only receive a written warning for the first offence. If they fail to vote a second time within six years, a larger fine is imposed. However, the reality is somewhat different. International IDEA reports that the case might be taken to court for further decision and that non-voters are not automatically awarded fines.³²

3.13 Compulsory voting was introduced in **Cyprus** in 1959 and is still practised there although, according to International IDEA, its future is uncertain. Currently, voting is compulsory for parliamentary and presidential elections. Non-voters are given an opportunity to explain why they did not vote and if a court considers the reason to be valid, the non-voter will not face fines.

3.14 Electoral registration, attendance at a polling station and voting are all compulsory in **Greece** (and currently, whenever required, citizens are awarded paid time off work to vote). However, compulsory voting has, in effect, been symbolic since 2001 due to a revision of the constitution. Prior to 2001 there were penal and administrative sanctions, for example imprisonment for between one month and a year and losing the right to receive or renew a passport. The provision to enforce these sanctions was omitted from the revised constitution with the result that

compulsory voting has been, in the words of the British Embassy in Greece, 'a ghost in the constitution'. Despite this, recent turnouts in Greece have remained stable – 75% in 2000 and 76% in 2004 – and public awareness of the legal requirement appears to be sufficient in itself to secure general compliance.

3.15 In **Italy** the 1975 constitution identified voting as a civic duty and there are advantages associated with voting, including being legally allowed three hours off work on receipt of a stamped polling card. In **Switzerland**, Schaffhausen is the only one of the 26 cantons where compulsory voting remains, despite periodic referendums on the subject. By 1971 all the Swiss cantons had abolished compulsory voting with the exception of Schaffhausen, where a majority of voters consistently rejected proposals to do so. At elections, turnout in this canton has been on average 20 percentage points higher than it has been in others.

3.16 Compulsory voting has been practised continuously in **Liechtenstein** since 1922, although the current law underpinning compulsory voting originated in 1973. Liechtenstein is an example of a country where penalty fines were enforced but then phased out after it became apparent that the cost of enforcement exceeded total receipts from the fines. Without an exemption for voting, non-voters were charged a fine of one guilder. In the 1950s and 1960s the municipal police imposed fines but this practice became less common

³² Ibid.

when authorities realised how costly it was. Nowadays the sanction is rarely enforced.³³

3.17 In its 2004 report *Voter turnout in Western Europe*, International IDEA concluded that it may be due to its long history that compulsory voting in some Western European democracies it is still practised – this history had helped to make the practice a tradition and ‘commonly accepted or tolerated’. By comparison, International IDEA speculates that the introduction of compulsory voting in today’s European democracies might be very controversial.

3.18 International IDEA has also suggested that the level of enforcement of compulsory voting is lower than it used to be in Western Europe, leading it to question whether compulsory voting could perhaps become, if it is not already, a ‘dying phenomenon’ in Western Europe. International IDEA explained that ‘... at the present stage it is impossible to tell which direction the phenomenon and practice of compulsory voting will take... since some countries aim to enforce it strictly and others do not, for different reasons of principle – political, economic, social or other.’³⁴

Australia

3.19 Australia is widely considered to be, and is often identified as, the leading example of an effectively functioning compulsory voting

system with compulsory registration. Voting has been compulsory at federal elections since 1924.³⁵ The Electoral Act specifies that the elector ‘must’ mark the ballot. However, only the elector’s attendance at the polling station can be verified due to the secret ballot system. It is compulsory to vote at all state and territory elections; however, at local government elections there are some differences between the states. In South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania, voting or attendance remains voluntary at local government elections while in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and the Northern Territory it is compulsory. This has led to calls by some to standardise voting rules across the states.³⁶

3.20 Non-voters are required to provide a valid explanation: most do and this is usually accepted. Valid explanations might include being overseas, trying to vote but failing for some reason, or belonging to a religious order which prohibits voting.³⁷ The Australian academic Lisa Hill (University of Adelaide) comments that ‘Australians have not looked upon the compulsion to vote as particularly objectionable or onerous. In addition, few have questioned its paradoxical status in relation to liberal democratic principles... It is seen as a normal part of Australian political culture and has wide support among the Australian electorate.’³⁸

33 M. Gratschew, *Voter turnout in Western Europe: Compulsory voting in Western Europe* (International IDEA, 2004).

34 Ibid.

35 Australian Electoral Commission: www.aec.gov.au/_content/What/voting/compulsory_voting.htm.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

3.21 A national survey carried out by Newspoll Market Research on 3 March 1996 found 74% of adults supporting compulsory voting at federal elections and Lisa Hill believes that 'people comply, not for fear of sanctions but out of respect for the law itself and a belief that it is a reasonable one.'³⁹ However, the effective use of sanctions certainly appears to keep voter turnout high. After the 1993 election, half a million cases of apparent failure to vote were investigated. Of these, 23,320 (5% of non-voters) chose to pay the fine for non-attendance. The vast majority, 94%, gave valid explanations for non-voting, with less than 1% taken to court. This meant that around 0.2% of the electorate were fined in 1993 and Lisa Hill has used such figures to show that the cost of conducting an entire election with the cost of enforcement in Australia is approximately five dollars per vote.⁴⁰

3.22 The electoral system used in the Australian lower house is the Alternative Vote (AV) which requires electors to complete all preferences for their vote to be valid. One possible consequence of this form of compulsory voting has sometimes been referred to as the 'donkey vote' – voters giving their first preference vote to the top name on a ballot paper and then completing their vote by simply voting down the

ballot paper randomly.⁴¹ At the 2001 general election, 95.4% of the electorate voted and 4.8% of ballot papers were invalid, whether intentionally or not.

3.23 Lisa Hill argues that high turnouts in Australia and the low level of non-compliance to compulsory voting is not simply a product of the system and its sanctions, but is also the result of the convenience of voting in Australia:

Wherever voting is compulsory, it is reasonable to expect the state to make voting a relatively painless experience, not only because of equity considerations, but in order to ensure a high rate of compliance.⁴²

3.24 Similarly, Mackerras and McAllister have described Australia as 'probably the most voter-friendly country in the world'.⁴³ Election day is a Saturday, postal and early voting is available for those who require it due to distance, ill health or employment, and at federal elections electors can vote at any polling station in the state or Northern Territory or at mobile polling stations (for example for remote indigenous communities). There is also overseas voting, including provision for people to vote on cruise ships, at embassies and high commissions around the world.

39 L. Hill, *Compulsory voting as a democratic innovation* (2002).

40 L. Hill, 'Democratic assistance: A compulsory voting template', paper presented to the Jubilee conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association, Canberra (2002).

41 House of Commons Library, *Standard note on compulsory voting* (2003).

42 Cited in L. Hill, 'Democratic assistance: A compulsory voting template', paper presented to the Jubilee conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association, Canberra (2002).

43 Ibid.

3.25 A recent research briefing written by the Australian Parliament's Library argues that significant alterations to national voting systems are rarely made because of uncertainty about the consequences of such changes: 'Australia may well rid itself of compulsory voting for national elections in the near future, but if it does so, some aspects of its politics may alter.'⁴⁴ The analysis notes that voluntary and compulsory voting is likely to become a major issue for public debate within the next two years, reflecting the fact that the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters recommended in 2005 that it should itself conduct an inquiry into voluntary and compulsory voting in the future.⁴⁵ Furthermore, some Ministers in the Australian Government, including the Special Minister of State, have recently publicly indicated a preference for a change to a voluntary voting system.⁴⁶

South East Asia and the Pacific

3.26 Compulsory voting is practised in some form in Thailand, Singapore and Fiji. However, as is the trend across the globe, sanctions are enforced to a varying degree. In **Thailand**, compulsory voting was introduced via the 1997

constitution. Under the Thai system, if a person fails to vote, they will lose their political rights, for example the right to propose legislation, impeach ministers or hold political positions. However, the British Embassy reports that there is low public awareness of what political rights people risk losing if they fail to vote.

3.27 Compulsory voting is strictly enforced in **Singapore**, where electors who fail to vote are removed from the register. The non-voting elector must write to their registration officer with a sufficient reason for their behaviour in order to have their name restored on the register without penalty.⁴⁷

3.28 Compulsory registration and compulsory voting were introduced in **Fiji** in 1997. However, voter turnout at the polls in 2001 was only 78.9% compared with 90.2% in 1999. The authorities have found it difficult to enforce compulsory voting due to limited resources and no one has been prosecuted since the introduction of compulsory voting in 1997. The British High Commission in Fiji advises that a general election is scheduled to be held in 2006 and the Elections Office is said to have begun a 'vigorous' voter registration and voter education campaign to encourage higher voter turnout at the election.

Central and South America

3.29 The political histories, cultures and systems of the countries of Central and South America with compulsory voting are very

44 Australian Parliament Library, Parliamentary Library Research Brief, *Compulsory voting in Australian national elections* (2005).

45 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *The 2004 Federal Election: Report of the Inquiry into the conduct of the 2004 Federal Election and matters related thereto*, Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, Canberra (2005).

46 Advised by a representative of The Australian Electoral Commission, 2006.

47 Advised by the Singapore High Commission in London, 2005.

different from those elsewhere. Compulsory voting legislation exists in some form in most countries in this region, including Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Peru and Mexico, again with varying levels of enforcement.⁴⁸ Some systems are relatively punitive – non-voters in Peru and Bolivia may be denied public services and public sector employment – while other systems include incentive components.

3.30 The **Brazilian** Embassy in London advises that the system combines some incentives – for example, polling day is a national holiday or held on a Sunday – with some strict compulsory elements, including a fine corresponding to 3–10% of the minimum wage of the region. Non-voters risk being barred from taking professional exams, being banned from receiving a wage and being unable to enrol in official schools or universities (rolls are inspected by government bodies). However, despite a relatively long history of compulsory voting, some citizens choose to abstain from voting or cast blank or spoiled ballots (there is not a specific ‘none of the above’ option on the ballot paper).⁴⁹

3.31 In **Costa Rica**, the constitution of 1959 states: ‘Suffrage is a primary and compulsory civic function and is exercised before Election Boards through direct and secret vote by the

citizens registered in the Civil Registry.’ However, according to the Electoral Authority in Costa Rica, there are no penalties for non-voting. While there has been some discussion about establishing some form of punishment for non-compliance, there is currently insufficient political support for a change in the law to introduce sanctions.

3.32 In **Mexico**, although voting is constitutionally compulsory, Mexican electoral legislation has not established any sanctions. Perhaps as a consequence, turnout is relatively low in comparison with other countries with compulsory voting – 64% at the 2000 presidential elections and 63% at the 2000 parliamentary elections. Many people obtain their Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) credential as a means of securing identification, as it is the most widely accepted proof of identity by banks and all official transactions. This automatically gets people on the electoral list allowing them to vote at any election (local or federal) during the period of validity, which is nine years.

3.33 In **Peru**, registering to vote and turning out to vote are compulsory for all elections according to the Peruvian constitution, although voting is not compulsory for those over the age of 70. The British Embassy in Peru reports that, since the introduction of compulsory voting in 1933, there have never been any significant problems relating to the implementation of compulsory voting. Yet turnout was 82% at the 2001 parliamentary and presidential elections in Peru.

3.34 In **Chile**, a system of voluntary registration was introduced in 1925 and now operates alongside compulsory voting with sanctions

48 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Democracy in Latin America – Towards a citizens’ democracy* (2004).

49 S. Deposato and B. Norrander, *The participation gap: Systemic and individual influences on gender differences in political participation* (2005).

that are rarely, if ever, enforced. This has prompted debate about whether the system is workable in its present form. Professor Angell from the Latin American Centre at the University of Oxford points out that turnouts have declined in Chile in line with a global trend but remain comparatively high (87% at the 2001 parliamentary elections).⁵⁰

3.35 Voting is also compulsory in **Uruguay** where it was introduced by a constitutional amendment in 1934 following the re-establishment of democracy after a *coup d'état* in 1933. The British Embassy told us that compulsory voting was probably seen as a mechanism to introduce greater stability to the political system. Both voter registration and voting are currently compulsory in Uruguay and sanctions, introduced in 1971, take the form of financial penalties, and the lengthy proceedings involved in paying the fee are also a big deterrent to non-voting.

Positive abstention

3.36 Countries with compulsory voting usually require voters to attend a polling station but, once there, they can spoil their ballot paper, abstain or refuse to put the paper in the ballot box. Rarely, however, is there an explicit opportunity formally to register a positive abstention.

3.37 Some critics of compulsory voting argue that citizens ought to have the right not to vote as much as the right to vote. Others have

suggested that there should be a 'none of the above' option on the ballot paper allowing voters to abstain positively, rather than spoiling their papers. Graeme Orr and Lisa Hill have pointed to the case of 'conscientious objectors' with Orr arguing that there should be greater ballot choice permitting political dissent.⁵¹

3.38 There are very few precedents for such an initiative in either voluntary or compulsory voting countries. In Chile and Brazil, where compulsory voting operates, there is a positive abstention box – none of the above (NOTA) – on the ballot paper. The British Embassy in Cyprus advised us that blank ballot papers are counted as a clear political option for statistical purposes, and more common is the practice in Mexico where the voter is advised to cross the ballot in a certain way if they wish for it to be counted as a void vote.

3.39 There are some further precedents at elections in voluntary voting countries. The 2000 Russian presidential elections offered voters the opportunity to vote 'against all' candidates, and 1.88% chose this, although voting was not compulsory at this election.⁵² In Nevada

51 G. Orr, 'Australian electoral systems: How well do they serve political equality?' in *The Democratic Audit of Australia Report No. 2* and L. Hill, 'Democratic assistance: A compulsory voting template', paper presented to the Jubilee conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association, Canberra (2002).

52 L. Hill, 'Democratic assistance: A compulsory voting template', paper presented to the Jubilee conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association, Canberra (2002).

50 Advised by Professor Angell at the University of Oxford, September 2004.

and Washington in the USA, non-binding positive abstention is practised meaning that if 'NOTA' wins the election, it does nothing more than potentially undermine the legitimacy of the winning candidate. In Massachusetts, a binding form of NOTA exists whereby if NOTA is the winner then a re-run of the election is organised, but NOTA is not allowed to win the second election, in part to avoid perpetual re-runs.

3.40 Past research has indicated that there would be some support for NOTA among some non-voters⁵³ although less clear, and very difficult to research without piloting such arrangements, is whether this would actually have a positive impact on participation rates. More recently, a survey for *The Independent on Sunday* by Communicate Research in April 2005 found public backing for the introduction of extra space on ballot papers, for people to indicate that they were deliberately abstaining, by a margin of 2:1 (62% to 29%).⁵⁴

53 The Hansard Society, *None of the above: Non-voters and the 2001 General Election* (2001).

54 The survey was undertaken for *The Independent on Sunday* by Communicate Research and involved a sample of 1,000 British adults interviewed from 11–15 April 2005.

4 The impact of compulsory voting

This chapter looks at the impact of compulsory voting on turnout and political engagement, looking specifically at the substantial evidence base from Australia before going on to review evidence from different regions of the world.

The impact of compulsory voting on turnout

4.1 Compulsory voting is one of several possible innovations which have been put forward to address declining electoral turnout and public disengagement with politics and elections. Some of these, for example electronic voting, are administrative reforms aimed at increasing the convenience and attractiveness of voting, while others, such as compulsory voting, require more fundamental changes to the political system and voting habits.⁵⁵

4.2 Discussions about the merits of compulsory voting across the world are, at least in part, a response to the trend towards lower election turnouts, with democratic inclusiveness and broad participation widely considered to be essential elements of healthy and fully functioning democracies. However, whether compulsory voting can provide sufficient quality of engagement and participation is arguable, and widely debated by academics and government officials in countries with compulsory voting as well as those without it.

4.3 Below we look at the impact compulsory voting has had on turnout in Australia, Western Europe and Central and South America. The overall finding is clear: where compulsory voting legislation is introduced, especially where it is actually enforced, it does typically increase turnout to levels above those recorded in

⁵⁵ G. Smith, *Power beyond the ballot: 57 democratic innovations from around the world*. Report prepared for the POWER Inquiry (2005).

countries with voluntary voting (see, for example, the case of Uruguay on page 31). Professor Mark Franklin's study of turnout in 31 countries around the world indicates that compulsory voting 'increases turnout by about 6–7%'. His analysis has also found that voluntary voter registration does not seem to reduce turnout.⁵⁶

4.4 A study by Professor Galen Irwin found that compulsory voting legislation has a positive impact on the 'development of habitual voting' in the electorate.⁵⁷ Irwin argues that the existence of compulsory voting does leave a lasting 'imprint' on political culture and people's propensity to vote. By contrast, in Britain there is some evidence of a growing habit of non-voting: our general election research identified the emergence of a 'Generation no-X' with younger people apparently carrying forward their habit of non-voting into older age.⁵⁸

4.5 Levels of turnout are, of course, determined by a number of factors beyond administrative or systemic initiatives such as compulsory voting (or weekend voting or postal voting 'on demand'). Mark Franklin explains that:

It is true that the stick of compulsory voting and the carrot of postal votes do lead more people to vote than otherwise would do so,

56 M. Franklin, 'The dynamics of electoral participation', in L. LeDuc, R. Niemi and P. Norris (eds.) *Comparing democracies 2* (2002).

57 G. Irwin, 'Compulsory voting legislation – Impact on voter turnout in the Netherlands', *Comparative political studies* 7, no.3 (1974).

58 The Electoral Commission, *Election 2005: Turnout* (2005).

but the major factors determining turnout – the importance of the electoral contest... and the likelihood that one's vote will make a difference... – could only operate if people were motivated to use their votes to achieve a political goal.⁵⁹

4.6 Some countries have chosen to abolish compulsory voting but have often maintained high voter turnout following its abolition. International IDEA suggests that such turnouts could be the product of what they call 'innocuous social sanctions' and it could be that the experience of enforced compulsory voting has engrained voting as a habit.⁶⁰ This leads some to argue that compulsory voting might help to 'socialise' people politically, preparing them for political 'life'.

Turnout in Australia

4.7 Turnouts among the registered electorate in Australian general elections were in the region of 94–96% between 1983 and 1998. At the same time, when the total number of votes cast is expressed as a percentage of the voting age population (those aged 18 or over), turnouts were 81–84%.⁶¹ Young people are likely to be disproportionately represented in the non-voting population. In 2004, the Australian

59 M. Franklin 'The dynamics of electoral participation' in L. LeDuc, R. Niemi and P. Norris (eds.) *Comparing democracies 2* (2002).

60 M. Gratschew, *Voter turnout in Western Europe: Compulsory voting in Western Europe* (International IDEA, 2004).

61 These differences are likely to be the product of non-registration (although some of those unregistered might not be eligible to vote).

Electoral Commission estimated that up to a quarter of people aged 25 and under were not enrolled to vote, compared with just 5% among the wider population.⁶²

4.8 Part of the explanation for such trends lies in findings identified by the Youth Electoral Study (YES) research which found that a strong bond between the idea of voting in a democracy and a citizen's duty to vote does not exist for most young Australians.⁶³ Such findings, allied to lower registration rates and higher political disengagement among young age groups, is a matter of concern to many. Melbourne-based political scientist Sally Young explains that:

Australia still acts as if it has the population participating in the democratic process. The fact is if you don't have a citizenry engaged in politics, you don't really live in a democracy... We have compulsory voting, so the figures of people turning up on polling day make it look pretty good, but it is not good if they are not involved in the issues they are voting about.⁶⁴

4.9 Leading Australian academics Jonathan Louth and Lisa Hill have argued that without compulsory voting Australia would be subject to the same 'crises of [electoral] participation' that many industrialised, voluntary-voting Western democracies are experiencing, particularly

among the young and marginalized of society (including the UK where recent low turnouts at general elections have prompted much debate and enquiry).⁶⁵ At the same time, they have identified compulsory voting, particularly where it is 'properly administered in a congenial setting' such as Australia, as being the best means of guaranteeing high and socio-demographically equal rates of voting participation.

Turnout in Western Europe

4.10 Table 3 (next page) shows International IDEA's analysis of turnout among registered and voting-age populations in three periods of compulsory voting spanning seven elections in **Belgium** and the **Netherlands**. These figures compare with general election turnouts in the UK of 83.9% in 1950, 77.1% in 1964, 75.3% in 1987, 71.4% in 1997 and 59.4% in 2001.⁶⁶

4.11 Although a decline in turnout is evident in **Belgium** during the period 1979–1999, the most recent election in 2003 saw a turnout of 96.4% among the registered electorate, representing the highest turnout in the post-Second World War era (we have been unable to obtain voting-age turnout statistics among the voting-age population for that election). A study by the University of Liege found that one in four

62 M. Print, L. Saha and K. Edwards, *Youth electoral study – report 1: Enrolment and voting* (2004).

63 Ibid.

64 Full source: www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/09/13/1094927508487.html, accessed on 14 September 2004.

65 J. Louth and L. Hill, 'Compulsory voting in Australia: Turnout with and without it', *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, Volume 6, Number 1: November 2005, 25–37.

66 For a full list of UK Parliamentary general election turnouts see the Electoral Commission, *Election 2005: Turnout* (2005), p.20.

Table 3: Percentage turnouts in two strictly enforced compulsory voting systems

Elections	Belgium 1978–1999		Netherlands 1946–1967	
	RE (%)	VAP (%)	RE (%)	VAP (%)
1	94.9	87.8	93.1	85.5
2	94.6	94.3	93.7	85.1
3	93.6	86.3	95.0	86.9
4	93.4	86.5	95.5	88.1
5	92.7	85.1	95.6	88.8
6	91.2	83.2	95.1	88.0
7	90.6	83.2	95.0	92.1
Average	93.0	86.6	94.7	87.8

Note: RE = turnout among registered electors, VAP = turnout among voting-age population.

Source: Adapted from J. Louth and L. Hill, 'Compulsory voting in Australia: Turnout with and without it', *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, Volume 6, Number 1: November 2005, 25–37.

French-speaking Belgians would choose not to turn out if voting were no longer compulsory.⁶⁷

4.12 Cyprus is an example of a country which strictly enforces compulsory voting and consequently has high turnout levels: 92% at the parliamentary elections in 2001 and 91% at the 2003 presidential elections in 2003. In the **Netherlands** voting was compulsory from 1917 until 1967. During this period, voter turnout was consistently above 90%. However, following its abolition, turnout dropped to 79.1% and 82.9% in the parliamentary elections of 1971 and 1972 – the first elections to be held under voluntary voting. While lower than it once was, turnout remained higher than many other voluntary-

voting Western European countries (turnout was 79% at the 2002 general election and 80% at the 2003 general election).⁶⁸

4.13 Such trends underline that there are many factors affecting turnout beyond the practice of compulsory voting, including the prominence of the election in question, the type of electoral system, the 'contestability' of the election and local political dynamics. For example, **Malta** does not have compulsory voting but has consistently high turnout at elections.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Journal La Libre Belgique, *Un belge sur quatre aimerait ne pas devoir voter* (2004).

⁶⁸ G. Irwin, 'Compulsory voting legislation – Impact on voter turnout in the Netherlands', *Comparative political studies*, 7, no. 3 (1974).

⁶⁹ J. Louth and L. Hill, 'Compulsory voting in Australia: Turnout with and without it', *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, Volume 6, Number 1: November 2005, 25–37.

4.14 By contrast, Lisa Hill argues that turnout in Australia would almost inevitably drop if compulsory voting were to be abolished because elections are potentially less 'visible' in the Australian federal, bicameral system, with numerous elections held for different institutions. Turnout was substantially higher in Malta during the 1990s than in Australia: around 96.7% against 82.7%. At a Maltese referendum in 2003 on membership of the European Union voter turnout was 97%.⁷⁰

Turnout in Central and South America

4.15 A comparison of turnout across Central American countries between 1989 and 1991 conducted as part of the Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) project found turnout to be highest in **Nicaragua** (86%) where voting was voluntary and lowest in **El Salvador** (52%) where it was compulsory but where sanctions were not enforced.⁷¹ However, turnout levels ranged from 65% to 77% in **Uruguay** prior to the introduction of the sanctions for non-voting in 1971. Following their introduction and subsequent enforcement, turnout has been consistently high: 89% for the presidential elections in 1971, 92% in 1999 and 88% in 2004.⁷²

4.16 In her study of modern **Brazil**, Maria D'Alva Kinzo observes that rapid industrialisation and urbanisation created a situation where a large number of dispossessed people were not entirely integrated into society but because of compulsory voting were part of the electoral arena. Due to the strict enforcement of compulsory voting such a group has, at least potentially, considerable weight in elections.⁷³

4.17 Clearly, turnouts are determined by more than institutional or structural factors such as compulsory voting. Academic analysis by Carolina Fornos, Timothy Power and James Garard suggests that political variables (such as the nature of electoral contests and political freedoms) as well as institutional variables (including unicameralism,⁷⁴ compulsory voting, and concurrent legislative and executive elections) have had the most influence on determining turnout levels in Latin America. They also found these variables to probably have more impact on turnout levels than socio-economic factors which traditionally have had a strong effect on turnout in Western Europe.⁷⁵

4.18 In explaining voter turnout in Central and South America, Fornos, Power and Garard emphasise the importance of cultural factors. For example, they conclude that countries

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Sourced from the Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) project. For more details see www.aceproject.org.

⁷² www.idea.int/vt/country, website accessed 24 November 2005 and www.electionguide.org.uk, website accessed 24 November 2005.

⁷³ M. D'Alva Kinzo and J. Dunkerley (eds.), *Brazil since 1985 – Economy, polity and society* (2003).

⁷⁴ Unicameralism is the practice of having only one legislative or parliamentary chamber.

⁷⁵ C. Fornos, T. Power and J. Garard, 'Explaining voter turnout in Latin America, 1980 to 2000', *Comparative political studies*, 37 no.8 (2004).

characterised by strong adherence to the democratic principles of protecting political rights and civil liberties have higher rates of turnout than those lacking such strong democratic tendencies.⁷⁶ They also highlight the pattern in turnouts among emerging democracies in the region, observing that inaugural elections tend to produce significantly higher turnout. Many transitions away from authoritarian rule in the region were built around a popular demand for direct elections, and this provided an impetus to political participation.

4.19 Looking ahead, there has been significant political transformation in Central and South America within the last two decades. Academic Francis Adams argues that the Latin American democracies face the challenge of deepening their democratic institutions and practices.⁷⁷ International IDEA has identified the need for 'a wealth of work ahead to reform electoral systems, processes, to develop more inclusive political systems and to improve democratic governance.'⁷⁸

The impact on differential turnout

4.20 Compulsory voting can have an impact on turnout at the aggregate level but also among certain socio-demographic groups. Hill and Louth argue that the Australian experience of

compulsory voting proves that the system is the most effective means to guarantee high turnout across all socio-demographic groups. Irwin has shown that while compulsory voting was in force in the **Netherlands** turnout was above 90% for all socio-demographic groups and an immediate consequence of its removal was an increase in turnout variations between subgroups.⁷⁹

4.21 Ben Rogers of ippr argues that prior to the abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands, there was only a 4% difference between the voting levels of the 'top' and 'bottom' classes. After abolition the difference in turnout among different social groups jumped to 21%.⁸⁰ A study by the University of Liege found that those indicating a low likelihood to vote in a voluntary voting scenario in **Belgium** tended to come from the disadvantaged sections of society, including women on low incomes and the unemployed.⁸¹

4.22 One of the arguments put forward by some proponents of compulsory voting in Britain is that it would equalise turnout rates among different socio-economic groups. Supporters cite the considerable variations in turnout among different socio-economic groups. Our own research estimates a 39%

76 C. Fornos, T. Power and J. Garard, 'Explaining voter turnout in Latin America, 1980 to 2000', *Comparative political studies*, 37 no.8 (2004).

77 F. Adams, *Deepening democracy: Global governance and political reform in Latin America*, Praeger Publishers, USA (2003).

78 International IDEA, *Report on Latin America* (2003).

79 G. Irwin, 'Compulsory voting legislation – Impact on voter turnout in the Netherlands', *Comparative political studies*, 7 no.3 (1974).

80 B. Rogers, 'Turnout is really about class', (ippr, 2005) www.ippr.org.uk/articles/archive

81 Journal La Libre Belgique, *Un belge sur quatre aimerait ne pas devoir voter* (2004).

turnout at the 2005 general election among 18–24-year-olds, 70% among those aged 65+ and significant variations among different social classes and the range of different minority ethnic groups.⁸² Similar patterns persist for electoral registration: research published by the Commission in 2005 found higher rates of non-registration among the young, those living more mobile, transient lives and those in urban, deprived areas.⁸³

4.23 Such trends are not unique to Britain and the pattern of young people voting less than older citizens that is prevalent in the UK is a common one across the voluntary-voting democratic world. However, Professor Martin Wattenberg's international comparative study on turnout and political engagement among young people has shown that the 'new generation gap' in turnout is greater in the UK than among several other industrialised democracies.⁸⁴

4.24 The 2004 United Nations Development Programme's report *Democracy in Latin America* suggests that 'citizen participation in the electoral process in Latin America is generally of a good level, although there are significant differences among countries.' Research by Tomas Chuaqui from the Institute of Political Science at the Catholic University in

Chile estimated that 75–85% of those of voting age who are not registered are from younger age groups. He has argued that at the end of the Pinochet regime in 1988, citizens registered en masse in order to participate in the yes/no plebiscite in support of Pinochet but since then, those who reach 18 simply tend to not register. Also, there are high levels of invalid voting among those who are registered and who do vote – one million people, more than 15%, either deliberately spoilt their ballot paper or left it blank at the 1999 elections.⁸⁵

The impact of compulsory voting on political engagement

4.25 While higher turnouts in countries with some form of compulsory voting are not solely the product of such arrangements, it is clear from the available evidence that compulsory voting both increases aggregate turnout and reduces the variation in turnout rates among different groups. Less clear is the effect compulsory voting has on political engagement more generally, encompassing political interest, knowledge and participation.

4.26 In **Australia**, some academics have raised questions about whether compulsory voting actually has any impact on improving the quality of political participation and, thus, democratic engagement more generally. Studies suggest that compulsory voting legislation and enforcement have not necessarily successfully increased political

82 The Electoral Commission, *Election 2005: Turnout* (2005).

83 The Electoral Commission, *Understanding electoral registration* (2005).

84 M. Wattenberg, 'Electoral turnout: The new generation gap' in *British Elections & Parties Review* Vol.13 (MPG Books Ltd, 2003).

85 Advised through correspondence with Tomas Chuaqui at the Institute of Political Science at the Catholic University in Chile in 2005.

engagement among the general public, and particularly among younger people, who are the age group least likely to participate in the electoral process.⁸⁶ It would seem that young people in established democracies are not immune from the trend towards declining interest in politics and disillusionment with the governing and political class.⁸⁷

4.27 Data from the National Australian Election Study (NAES), an established and regular survey of political interest and attitudes, indicates that under-25s in Australia are increasingly turning away from politics. Disillusionment has risen steadily since the general election in 2001⁸⁸ and young people's interest in party politics has decreased substantially over the past few years. In the first NAES in 1987, a third of those aged 18–24 said they had 'not much' or 'no interest' in politics. By 2001, this had increased substantially to half, 51%. Also, an increasing number of 18 to 24-year-olds say that they would not vote given the choice.

4.28 Other studies, such as the Youth Electoral Study (YES) among 17 to 24-year-olds, point to growing political disengagement and disinterest among young people in Australia.⁸⁹ Professor Print of Sydney University comments, 'Traditionally, as people get older and settle

down... they have more of a vested interest in the political scene... But this younger generation is not settling down at anywhere near the same rate as previous generations.' Professor Print has argued that such trends are 'partly masked' in Australia by compulsory voting.

4.29 Similarly, there is political disengagement among segments of the population in countries in **Central and South America**. The report *Democracy in Latin America* published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2004 indicates that roughly one in five people (19%) can be identified as 'participative democrats', around one-third (35%) are 'ambivalent or unmobilised non-democrats', and one in five (21.6%) were identified as those people who 'have doubts about democracy or are opposed to it, and are politically active'.

4.30 Writing in 1997, Lijphart took the view that compulsory voting ensured that voters would make themselves better informed but a study by Gordon and Segura (1997) found only 'a small, though statistically significant, increase in political sophistication in countries with compulsory voting, but otherwise, the evidence for compulsory voting promoting greater civic awareness is scant'.⁹⁰ Some students

86 M. Print, L. Saha and K. Edwards, *Youth electoral study – report 1: Enrolment and voting* (2004).

87 Ibid.

88 Australian National University, *National Australian Election Study* (2001).

89 M. Print, L. Saha and K. Edwards, *Youth electoral study – report 1: Enrolment and voting* (2004).

90 S. Jackman 'Compulsory voting' in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences* (2001).

of compulsory voting have also pointed to the possibility that it risks making political parties less energetic in their efforts to communicate with the public in general, and young people in particular – parties tend to focus less on ‘getting out the vote’ and more on persuading the persuadable.⁹¹

4.31 As discussed in this report, compulsory voting is just one of several possible innovations which have been put forward to address declining electoral turnout and public disengagement with politics and elections. It is clear from the available evidence that compulsory voting both increases aggregate turnout and reduces the variation in turnout rates among different groups. However, whether compulsory voting can provide sufficient quality of engagement and participation is arguable and this is widely debated by academics and government officials in countries with compulsory voting, as well as those without it. The available evidence does suggest that compulsion is less effective in promoting better public knowledge of politics or in increasing political engagement.

91 G. Orr, ‘Australian electoral systems: How well do they serve political equality?’ in *The Democratic Audit of Australia Report No. 2* (2004).



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Appendix

Research methodology

This research draws on findings from questionnaires originally sent in 2004 to British embassies and electoral authorities in a range of countries across the world where there is, or has been, compulsory voting. We received a 65% response rate in 2004 and approached our respondents again in September 2005 in order to update our evidence base. We also consulted with leading academics in the UK and abroad, and have drawn on their experience and findings.

This paper is not intended as an exhaustive survey of the literature on compulsory voting or an in-depth analysis of the precise situation in specific countries. We have been very much dependent on what has been brought to our attention, summarising the main features of different systems of compulsory voting at the time of our research in autumn 2005.

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