

Compulsory Vote

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Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, let me thank you for the opportunity you give to a non-academic person to ventilate some thoughts on the compulsory vote. That will explain also why I will not speak in academic, but rather in polemic terms. Some even doubt if they can qualify me as an intellectual. But those who do, describe me generally as being left of centre. A lot of liberal party members think of me as a socialist, and a lot of socialists think of me as a liberal. And they are both quite right.

Left of centre, there is a rather absolute ‘*communis opinio*’ about the compulsory vote. Everyone is for.

Well, I’m not, and I’ll try to explain why.

As stated by Justine Lacroix, the first argument for compulsory voting hinges on the principle that individual liberty should not prevail over other democratic ideals such as equality and participation. I find this a rather strange argument, because it presumes a causal and direct negative link between individual liberty and equality, in the sense that greater individual liberty would result automatically in less equality. I don’t buy that.

I don’t get that the abolishment of the compulsory vote would be hurtful to the principle of equality. Even without compulsory vote, every voter still has the right to decide whether or not he will participate in the elections. That choice may be individual, but that choice it is just as equally given to every individual as the present obligation to vote is imposed on everyone. The equality of the compulsory vote is therefore simply replaced by another equality: the right of choice that every individual has to participate in the elections or not. So the question of equality is not really at stake here.

Remains the point of participation. The great fear of those who advocate

compulsory voting is that the turnover among voters with high levels of education will be much higher than the one for low-educated voters, and that this effect will reduce not only the legitimacy of a democratic society, but would also lead to policies which do not take into account the interests of lower-educated voters, thus creating a more unequal society and a greater divide between the rich and the poor.

However, there is a very little empirical data to sustain this hypothesis.

Professor Mark Hooghe followed a sample of about 2500 people during the last regional elections. He not only asked who they voted for, but also if they would have showed up if they're would not have been a compulsory vote.

His survey showed that participation levels would have dropped to 60 procent. And indeed, only 35 procent of low-educated voters would show-up, where as higher-educated voters would reach a participation level of around 75 present.

However, and this is the point to be taken into account, the results of the elections would have been practically the same. Traditional parties would gain a percent or two, populist parties would lose a few percent. A result, by the way, I could live with. But, in fact, nothing very drastic would happen, and we wouldn't wake up in a whole new political landscape.

That leaves us only one argument: the low participation of low-educated voters would lead to a policy in which their interests are not fully taken into account.

Ok, sounds logical. But every social scientist will agree that the most social countries in the world are the Scandinavian. Nowhere else you will find a greater social redistribution of wealth through high taxes, no where else income is more evenly and rather equally organised, no where else there is such a vast array of social services, health, elderly and child care. The Scandinavian countries are by far leading the way in the realisation of the social welfare state, taking care of those who cannot follow the capitalist rat-race, imposing a heavy tax burden on the wealthy higher-educated voters to support the needs of the low-educated voters. Yet, there is no compulsory vote in the Scandinavian countries. Do I need to elaborate the point?

Isn't this an overwhelming piece of evidence that compulsory vote or not doesn't 'an sich' influence the policy choices that are made?

I think also there is one more logical error in the participation argument. The lower educated, even if they are less inclined to vote, still remain potential voters.

Very often reference is made to the United States where politicians, due to the absence of the compulsory vote, only have eye for the rich and the middle-class.

In reality, the United States is a prime example of the power of the people who don't vote, but could if they wanted to.

People who don't vote, but could be mobilised to do so, play an important role in the electoral competition, and even stronger than that, often play a decisive role in electoral dynamics.

The growing numbers of Spanish-speaking voters in the US don't belong to the higher-educated segment of the population. Following the logic of those who support compulsory voting, this would mean that politicians wouldn't bother to look after their interests.

Yet, this didn't happen. Just because they are potential voters, who could make the difference between gaining and losing the elections, all candidates went out of their way to please them.

Even president Bush went against his conservative supporters with a number of proposals to soften up immigration laws and even proposing amnesty measures for illegal immigrants, just in the hope to motivate the Spanish-speaking segment not only to participate in the elections, but to vote for him.

The election of Barack Obama was more than partly due to a higher participation than average of the lower-educated, who he could motivate to vote, promising them a real opportunity for a change of policy.

Competitive politics do not only take into account those who go voting, but perhaps even more so those who can be persuaded to participate, because often they will constitute the swing-vote that constitutes for winning or losing the elections.

Compulsory vote only creates the illusion of an overall political awareness, even obscuring the real problem of political apathy. High participation figures provide the perfect alibi for government and political parties not having to worry about the turn-up of voters.

Why should they bother?

Wouldn't it be better if political actors were obliged to put more effort in motivating people to vote, wouldn't they be obliged to give them a quid pro quo for their vote?

Another empirical fact is that in reality the compulsory vote already doesn't exist any more. More than 12 percent of voters don't show up on Election Day and that number is growing at each new election. We're talking here of around 700.000 people. That's not even counting the 10 percent who vote blanco.

Today, in a regime of compulsory vote, one out of five voters doesn't participate. They get away with it too. Since 2003, the justice department no longer prosecutes a no-show on Election Day. Breaching the election laws is simply tolerated, and therefore the legal obligation doesn't exist any more.

If a state cannot uphold his own laws, regulations and obligations, it shows there is no social basis for public support. Not by those who violate the rule, and not by those who are supposed to uphold them. What you get then, is something that best can be described as hypocrisy.

Often I sense, because it is seldom outspoken, a sentiment of moral superiority amongst the defenders of the compulsory vote. By obliging everyone to vote, they think they guarantee a higher level of democracy and participation, and therefore advocate a system that, on a moral and ethical ground, is superior to others. This is a rather pretentious argument, since by far most of the existing democracies have a right to vote, and not the obligation to.

Therefore, this argument rather sounds pretentious.

Ladies and gentlemen,

So far I've only attempted to counter the arguments of the fans of the compulsory vote. Now let me try to explain why I am an advocate of the right to vote instead of the obligation to vote.

The first is a simple ethical rule. I don't believe that people should be made happy against their will. If people willingly choose not to participate in politics and society, if they voluntarily forfeit their democratic rights, it's not my role nor duty to convince them to do otherwise. Nor should society

as a whole oblige them to participate in the democratic progress.

The second reason is not ethical, but purely selfish. It was Winston Churchill who once commented that the best argument against democracy was a five-minute conversation with an average voter. Now, more than ever, this seems to be true.

Everywhere in Europe we see the rise of populist politics. Everywhere, politicians stand up who work following the basic rhetoric rules of populism. They, and only they, are the spokesperson for the will of the people, which only they represent.

Everyone who is against them, is in the best case a member of the elite, who doesn't know what the real concerns of the real people are.

Instead of playing the real democratic process, which is the organising of dissenting opinions, populists claim there's only one opinion, namely theirs, which is shared by a vast majority, where as all dissenting voices are either misled by an establishment, and if not that, those opinions must be surely foreign to the people or to the identity of the nation.

Even if they themselves are part of the democratic process, and as politician as their non-populist counterparts, they claim nevertheless to be the only safe keepers of the truth and the majority opinion, labelling their opponents as non-democratic, elitist and illiterate about the real problems of society.

They promise their voters that once elected, they will immediately set everything straight, resolve all major conflicts of interest in society, and do so by simply giving everyone what he or she wishes for.

In this, modern populism differentiates itself from autocratic predecessors in history. Modern populism doesn't put the people or the community or the nation before the individual, but it equates the individual wishes of every individual voter with the interest of society.

Everything will be all right if you get what you want. This rhetoric is brilliant, since it promises that blatant egoism is the way to the perfect society.

This leads to situations as in Holland, where a minority cabinet of liberals and christian-democrats, supported by an extreme-right anti-islamist party, holds a majority of no mote than one vote, but nevertheless claims to be the only representative voice for the public opinion, even for the existential

identity of Holland.

Maybe the right to vote instead of the compulsory vote favours the political impact of those who are higher educated, who tend to think at least a little bit more rational about politics instead of emotional.

Maybe it tends to favour those voters who understand and grant the fact politics is a matter of time, of long-term evolution, not of instant-solutions.

Maybe it favours voters who understand that politics is a question of us, rather than of me.

Who understand that in a democracy, truth and power should belong to no one, and cannot be claimed by any one. Who understand that those who claim they are the only representatives of that truth, simply lie.

So if those rational, high-educated, long-term thinking citizens would gain a tiny little bit of political power against the forces of populism by abolishing the compulsory vote, I really wouldn't mind that a bit.