

Compulsory voting may reinforce the resentment young people feel toward the political class

By Democratic Audit

*With young people much less likely to vote than older generations, it has been proposed the UK follow other countries such as Belgium and Australia by introducing compulsory voting, with IPPR suggesting only first-time voters should be forced to participate. **Matt Henn** and **Nick Foard** consider the merits of this proposal using data from a recent survey of voting intentions, concluding it would risk increasing the disconnect between young people and democracy. This post is part of our [series on youth participation](#).*



With young people unenthusiastic or resentful about politics, is compulsory voting the answer? Credit: [Sueno](#), CC BY 2.0

What might be done to re-connect today's youth generation to the formal political process and to convert their broad democratic outlooks into attendance at the ballot booth? Is compulsory voting the way forward? Recently, a report from [Sarah Birch and IPPR](#) has suggested that one way to arrest the decline in youth voter turnout is to introduce a system of compulsory voting for first-time voters. This suggestion is not as radical as it might at first seem. There are several established democracies that have compulsory voting laws, including Belgium, Australia, Greece, Luxembourg – and several more which have all had such systems for at least a period during the modern era (such as Italy, Austria, and the Netherlands).

There would certainly appear to be some major advantages should voting be made compulsory for first time voters. At present, there is a momentum developing in Britain for the idea of extending the vote to 16 and 17 year olds; the Labour party are considering making this part of their platform for office at the next general election, while these younger groups will be granted the right to vote at the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014. It is also argued that compelling these young people to vote will help towards eliminating the generational electoral divide. In doing so, it will force professional politicians, the political parties and future governments to treat young people and their policy concerns more respectfully and on a par with those of their older contemporaries. Furthermore, evidence suggests that voting (and by implication, non-voting) is habit-forming (Franklin, 2004). Consequently, requiring young people to vote will help shape their commitment to voting in the future.

A major drawback of introducing such a compulsory voting scheme for young people is that it singles them out as ‘different’ from the rest of the adult population, helping to reinforce the stereotype of this current youth generation as apathetic and politically irresponsible. The implication being that it is the behaviour of young people that needs changing – rather than a reform of the political process and of democratic institutions to make the latter more accessible and meaningful for today’s youth generation. Furthermore, critics might argue that compelling any young person to vote who has only limited interest in mainstream electoral politics or who feels no affinity with the parties on offer, has serious negative implications for the health of our democratic system; by forcing them to vote, they may develop an attitude of entrenched disdain for the parties, or indeed become particularly susceptible to parties with antidemocratic tendencies – especially those of the far-right. However, offering the option to vote for ‘None of the above’ on the ballot paper may help militate against this latter point.



In our research study, we asked young people if the introduction of compulsory voting would make a difference to their turnout in future elections. Perhaps not surprisingly, the largest group (47 per cent) said it would, although a large minority (40 per cent) reported it would make no difference. Of particular note, Table 1 compares the views of those young people claiming to have voted at the 2010 General Election with those reporting that they had not. These ‘Voters’ and ‘non-voters’ were similar in stating that that they would be more likely to vote in the future if compulsory voting were introduced (46 per cent and 50 per cent respectively). However, 28 per cent of those who didn’t vote in 2010 said that compulsory voting would make no difference – and that they would continue not to vote. Furthermore, and perhaps worryingly, twice as many previous non-voters (12 per cent) than voters (6 per cent) stated that they’d actually be *less* inclined to vote in the future should compulsory voting be introduced.

Table 1: Compulsory voting by voting behaviour at the 2010 General Election (%)

Would you be more likely or less likely to vote in the future if voting was compulsory?	Voted at the 2010 General Election	Did not vote at the 2010 General Election
More likely	46	50
Make no difference	44	28
Less likely	6	12
Don’t know	4	10

Projecting forward, our results reveal important attitudinal differences between those already planning to vote at the next general election, and those intending to abstain. As Table 2 reveals, 58 per cent of those reporting that they were already very *unlikely* to vote felt that compulsory voting would make either no difference to this decision (38 per cent), or indeed make them even *less* likely to vote (20 per cent). From this we can infer that the introduction of compulsory voting would merely serve to reinforce existing feelings of resentment.

Table 2: Compulsory voting by likelihood to vote at the next General Election (%)

Would you be more likely or less likely to vote in the future if voting was compulsory?	All	Very likely to vote	Very unlikely to vote
More likely	47	50	32
Make no difference	39	42	38
Less likely	8	5	20
Don't know	6	2	10

Does compulsory voting represent a viable solution to the on-going disconnect between young people and the democratic process? It would seem that more young people would vote if such a system were introduced – not surprising if such a system were mandatory. However, whether or not this would mean that they would feel truly connected to the democratic process remains in question. Indeed, forcing young people to vote when they feel such a deep aversion to the political class may actually serve to reinforce a deepening resentment, rather than to engage them in a positive manner and bolster the democratic process.

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This post is part of a series on youth participation based on the Political Studies Association project, [Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission](#). For further details, please contact [Dr Andy Mycock](#). An electronic copy of the final report can be downloaded [here](#).

Note: This post represents the views of the author and does not give the position of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before responding. Shortlink for this post: buff.ly/1hWFM3Z

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