

**For or Against: Compulsory Voting in Britain and Belgium.**

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## **1. Introduction**

In the UK and in Belgium there is a debate regarding compulsory voting. Belgium has had compulsory voting in place since 1893 but recently some commentators would wish to change this situation. In part, these voices are motivated by the fear of the rise of the right. In Britain, on the contrary, there are those who would wish to see the introduction of compulsory voting – their main argument being the low turnout in recent elections.

Starting from the literature on compulsory voting, this paper analyses the key arguments that are present in contemporary debates surrounding compulsory voting. After defining compulsory voting, the discussion moves to illuminate the fact that compulsory voting is used in various countries world-wide. Some of the countries that employ compulsory voting are highlighted. The debate moves to examine what happens to those who do not vote; sanctions and incentives are assessed. Next, the arguments for and against compulsory voting are described and we test their validity by confronting them with empirical research regarding the political strength of parties, the overall turnout and the turnout of specific socio-demographic groups in society.

In the next sections we analyse the key arguments for and against compulsory voting using empirical data from and Britain. We have questioned prominent politicians in Belgium and the United Kingdom concerning their views on the importance of the major arguments in contemporary politics for and against compulsory voting; namely, democratic values such as freedom, citizenship and equality, voicing the will of the people, legitimacy of representative institutions, education and information, and the financial aspects. The paper also deals with the practicalities involved in introducing or eliminating a system of compulsory voting.

## **2. What is CV?**

Compulsory voting is the duty to participate in the electoral process. As many commentators point out, compulsory voting is a misnomer because what it actually means is compulsory attendance at the polling station. With reference to Australia, Hill states that it ‘... is only registration and attendance at a polling place ... that is compulsory.’ (Hill, 2001:130). As Watson and Tami state, people are not forced ‘*to vote*’, they have ‘the option of spoiling their paper, abstaining, or even refusing to put the paper in the ballot box’ (2000: 14). Keaney and Rogers prefer the term ‘compulsory turnout’ (2006: 26) believing it to be a more accurate description than compulsory voting. Compulsory voting is often compared to other ways in which the state forces us to fulfill certain duties. These include ‘... jury duty, the obligation to pay taxes, military conscription, compulsory school attendance and many others. These obligations are more burdensome than the duty to appear at the polls on election days’ (Lijphart p11, cited Watson and Tami, *op. cit.*, p. 15). Likewise, Baston and Ritchie emphasise state compulsion in areas other than voting, ‘Jury service, a comparable obligation is some ways, is compulsory. Electoral registration is compulsory. Participation in the National Insurance and taxation system is compulsory. Issue of a self-assessment tax return imposes a compulsory duty to return it. Compliance with the decennial census is

compulsory. In many democratic countries the obligation to take part in military or social service is imposed by law and is permitted by the European Convention on Human Rights.’(2004: 35-36). The notion of compulsion, duty or obligation is not, therefore, unknown to citizens.

The question of whether voting should be compulsory has recently moved onto the political agenda. In Britain, the key factor that has prompted the current debate has been the low turnout experienced in recent general elections. In relation to turnout and declining levels of political participation, general elections have received the most media attention and highlighted the issue most significantly but declining turnout has also been an issue in other elections; such as local and European elections. The 1997 General Election saw turnout fall to 71.5 per cent (the lowest turnout in a British General Election since 1935) but it was the 2001 General Election that marked a real turning point as far as electoral participation is concerned. The turnout this time was 59.4 per cent – the lowest turnout in British General Election since the so-called Khaki Election of 1918. Turnout did increase marginally in 2005 (to 61.3 per cent) but not enough for the debate about measures to increase turnout in elections to cease.

Compulsory voting does not mean that people have to vote for one of the parties. You would also have the option of ticking a box stating ‘none of the above’. This could, in fact, give us more of an indication of levels of dissatisfaction with the current state of British politics than we have at the moment. As the Electoral Commission points out, ‘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.’(2006: 5). The introduction of compulsory voting has ‘...often been implemented as a result of wider political reform such as change in a country’s political system, as in Chile, or alongside the introduction of universal suffrage, as in Belgium and Luxembourg.’(*Ibid*: 6). Proponents of compulsory voting highlight the experience of other countries, primarily Australia and Belgium but also Luxembourg, Netherlands until 1971 and Italy until 1989<sup>1</sup>. As Ballinger points out, ‘Seventeen per cent of the world’s democracies compel their citizens to vote ... ten of the 30 OECD countries have compulsory voting.’(2006: 8). Many of these provide positive role models of how compulsory voting processes can work successfully in practice. As Hill explains, compulsion has never really bothered Australians, ‘... probably a function of the fact that our relationship to the state has normally been a friendly one, often characterised as either Benthamite, utilitarian or social democratic in nature. Most Australians regard voting as a fairly undemanding civic duty and tend to accept the compulsion to vote as both reasonable and legitimate.’(2001: 130). In addition, ‘On average countries with compulsory turnout have 15 per cent higher turnout than countries where voting is voluntary.’ (Keaney and Rogers, *op. cit*: 6). More specifically, ‘Turnout in Australia has averaged 94.5 per cent in the 24 elections since 1946. In Belgium turnout has averaged 92.7 per cent in 19 elections since 1946.’ (*Ibid*). If Britain looks to the experiences of these other nations, it may be that they decide to go down the route of compulsory voting. Australia and Belgium, in particular are flagged up as being two large, stable

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<sup>1</sup> See McAllister, and Studlar, 2002: 13 for further detail as to why Italy is no longer considered a compulsory voting country.

democracies. In both these countries, more than nine out of ten voters regularly go to the polls.

Other countries have operated a system of compulsory voting for some time now (see, for example, Australia and Belgium) and their systems operate in a democratic and inclusive manner. More than 30 countries operate a system of compulsory voting, Australia has had compulsory voting since 1924 (1915 in the state of Queensland). Australian voters have to explain their non-attendance at the polls or pay a fine of 20 Australian dollars (about £7). Belgium has had compulsory voting since 1893.

Proponents also highlight the fact that compulsory voting has been subject to legal challenge in 1971 where the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the case of *X v. Austria* that compulsory voting does not violate Article 9 of the Convention in relation to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Using this case as precedent, compulsory voting would not, therefore, violate the UK's Human Rights Act.

In relation to compulsory voting, part of the issue is what should the state do with those who still refrain from voting even where voting has been made compulsory? The 'carrot' or the 'stick' debate is relevant here. Should incentives be given to encourage people to vote or should punishments be metered out to those who fail to fulfil their civic duty? Generally, in countries that have compulsory voting, the state levies a fine upon those who fail to vote. This is usually a relatively small amount (e.g. 20 Australian dollars) and it is claimed that often the state fails to chase up non-payers. Others argue that, if Britain adopts a system of compulsory voting, the fine imposed (possibly as much as £40) may come to be regarded in the same light as speeding fines and parking tickets – as simply a revenue-raising exercise as opposed to constituting a real concern over the future of democracy. As Watson and Tami illustrate using the example of Australia, the numbers not voting is usually relatively small. After the 1993 Election, there were roughly half a million non-voters, of these 23,320 (4.7%) chose to pay a \$A20 (about £8) fine straight away. Of the rest, 94 per cent gave a valid reason why they did not vote (e.g. overseas, tried to vote but could not, belong to a religious order that prohibits voting) 'This leaves a small group – 4,412 in 1993 (0.9 per cent of non-voters) – who go to court, where the fine increases to \$A50 plus costs – if convicted.' (2000: 8). In Greece, according to Watson and Tami, '... the punishment for not voting can include up to a year's imprisonment' (*Ibid*) but they say that this is never imposed.

It could be, however, that the state ought to implement an incentive scheme as opposed to a punishment for non-voting. One suggestion is that tax-payers who do vote could see a small percentage reduction in the amount of taxation that they are eligible to pay. This more positive response may have a greater impact upon turnout levels than the imposition of a fine or other such punishment. Baston and Ritchie believe that a '... financial incentive is basically another way of looking at a fine – whichever way, voters are advantaged relative to non-voters.' (2004:38). They argue that incentive voting '...lacks some of the high-minded dignity of the case for compulsory voting...' but it does '... go with the grain of contemporary social attitudes and has a more market-oriented, libertarian flavour to it.' (*Ibid*: 39). Other suggestions include a '... constituency-based lottery [with] a prize of something in the order of £250,000, calculated perhaps at the rate of £5 per voter in that constituency.' (*Ibid*: 40). It is debatable as to whether these

incentive suggestions would work but they do offer an alternative to the ‘stick’ approach of fines for non-voting.

### 3. Argument pro and contra compulsory voting

#### 3.1. Six discussions evolving around compulsory voting

Table 1. Six discussions evolving around compulsory voting<sup>2</sup>

	<b>FOR</b>	<b>AGAINST</b>
<i>Democratic argument</i>	Representativeness	Freedom
<i>Legitimacy argument</i>	More people equals greater legitimacy	Non-informed, invalid and blank votes do not increase legitimacy
<i>Equality argument</i>	All groups in society participate	Weak stay potential voters and are addressed as such
<i>Voice argument</i>	Protest and dissenting voices are also heard	Makes apathetic and ill-informed voters structure political life
<i>Educational argument</i>	Spread of information and knowledge	People turn away from political system that forces them to participate
<i>Financial argument</i>	Resources not spent on getting out the vote	Expensive especially for poorer states

The main arguments for and against compulsory voting (summarised in table 1 above) evolve around issues of democracy, legitimacy, equality, voicing of concerns, educational and financial effects. The most central discussion weighs up two central democratic principles: the representativeness of assemblies on the one hand and freedom on the other. Representativeness of the legislative bodies that are central to democracy, necessitates that all the people choose their representatives and not just a self-selecting few. Voting, therefore, is a democratic duty of all citizens and compulsory voting increases the democratic degree of elections and elected assemblies. Those opposed to compulsory voting highlight the freedom of the individual as the cornerstone of liberal democratic practices. According to these people, voting encapsulates a tripartite notion of freedom; firstly, the right to vote; secondly, the right *not* to vote and thirdly, the right to vote for whom you want.

<sup>2</sup> Table en section based on Jackman, s.d.; Lijphart 1997; Franklin 1999; Maddens, s.d.; [http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory\\_voting.cfm](http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm)

The democratic argument is firmly linked with the legitimacy argument which claims that governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate in elections. Opponents object that legitimacy is not increased when apathetic and ill-informed citizens are forced to vote: non-informed, invalid and blank votes do not increase legitimacy. The increase in turnout, engineered by obliging people to vote, is therefore purely statistical and theoretical; it only creates the illusion of participation and hides political apathy.

Also linked to the democratic prerequisite that democratic institutions need to be representative is the equality argument. Proponents claim that compulsory voting ensures that the weak in society do not drop off the political radar. Generally speaking, these are women, younger and older people, the low educated, low social status, blue-collar workers, people without a profession, people with low interest in politics, negative feelings about politics and a belief that their vote will not make a difference. The exclusion of these groups, at the input side of the policy-making process, can have far-reaching consequences for the outputs of politics, namely, for policy. The mechanism behind this process is that political parties do not take the interests of these voters to heart if they feel they are unlikely to vote (for them). This results in a Catch-22 situation whereby certain voters do not vote because they feel that their interests will be ignored and where political parties ignore the interests because the parties feel that they will not receive electoral support from them anyway. In the light of the severe crisis politics is facing at the moment where people turn away from politics, this argument gains importance. The counter-argument here claims that the inverse is true. In the absence of compulsory voting, political parties are more inclined to encourage the electorate (especially certain under-represented groups, such as the less educated) to actually turn out. This mobilising effect might disappear when people have to vote anyway, thus parties may have a tendency to become apathetic themselves and take voters for granted.

The fourth discussion concerns the importance of political actors hearing distinct voices and receiving different signals from society. Compulsory voting manages to capture apathetic and protest votes which must be seen as relevant information about the will of the people. It might be better to channel these feelings, present in society, through democratic or parliamentary routes as opposed to letting them fester underneath the surface. These votes then function as a flashing light for democracy, illuminating problems in their early stages. But this also implies that apathetic and anti-political voters structure political life; opponents of compulsory voting stress that, in this case, compulsory voting is dysfunctional for democracy. In this line of reasoning, the voice of the people is distorted by compulsory voting and undermines one of the basic tenets of representative democracy, namely that expression is given to the voice of the people.

Two other arguments for and against compulsory voting point at educational and financial benefits. Elections are a conduit for spreading and gathering information, not only for an interested elite but for all. Therefore, compulsory voting fosters a minimal level of political knowledge amongst all citizens. But people might also turn away from a political system that forces them to do something against their will. In that case, people will not try to be better informed. They will stay as apathetic and anti-pathetic as they were before. Absence of compulsory voting might also have the opposite effect; it might lead to a more active spreading and gathering of political information compared to

elections with compulsory voting because in the absence of compulsory voting parties want and need to mobilise the voters.

Lastly, compulsory voting has financial implications. Some voices say that compulsory voting diminishes the importance of money during elections since politicians and political parties are not forced to spend resources trying to convince people to vote. Opponents stress the fact that there are also cost implications of compulsory voting due to the scale of elections which might be too heavy a burden for poorer states.

### **3.2. Testing the arguments for and against compulsory voting**

In this section, we test the above arguments. This is done in a twofold way. Firstly, we give a brief overview of some empirical research that looks at the effects of introducing or abolishing compulsory voting regarding 1) voter turnout; 2) power balance between political parties and 3) inclusion or exclusion of socio-demographic groups. Whether or not compulsory voting increases voter turnout is, of course, a fundamental element in the democratic discussion evolving around compulsory voting. It is evident that restricting the freedom of citizens by obliging them to vote should be compensated by a democratic gain such as increased representativeness and legitimacy of representative bodies. The second question is intertwined with the voice argument and points at the political effects of compulsory voting. The underlying question is whether having compulsory voting or not has an impact on the will of the people that is registered by means of elections. The third line of research is relevant for the equality argument for or against compulsory voting, the basic question being whether compulsory voting includes socially and politically marginalised groups.

#### *3.2.1. Voter turnout*

The effect on voter turnout is measured by comparing countries with and without compulsory voting, by comparing voter turnout within states before and after abolishing or introducing compulsory voting and by public opinion surveys that assess if voters would turn out in case voting would no longer be obligatory (Jackman, s.d.). These studies show that compulsory voting has a direct impact on voter turnout. A recent cross-country analysis of IDEA shows that the 24 nations that have compulsory voting have a higher voting turnout (69% of potential voters) compared to the 147 nations without (63% of potential voters). In sheer numerical terms studies have shown that compulsory voting does increase electoral turnout. According to Baston and Ritchie, cross-national studies have shown a 7 to 17 per cent increase in turnout where countries have compulsory voting (*op. cit.*: 35). Such comparisons should be treated with caution because also other political features impact on voter turnout. Most importantly, voter turnout is strongly affected by the salience of the elections; voter turnout will be higher for instance when votes are not wasted (majority electoral systems), when political discussions are polarised during electoral campaigns and a shift in power can be established (majority electoral systems), when important electoral bodies are chosen and when executive power is at stake (Franklin, 1999; Billiet 2001). This implies that compulsory voting has the most considerable effects in low salience elections (Franklin, 1999: 209; Jackman s.d.: 5 referring to Hirczy 1994). Furthermore one might ask whether these comparisons actually

capture the impact of mandatory voting and not 'civic norms enshrined in law' (Jackman, s.d.: 5). Indeed, one might expect states that consider voting as a civic duty to adopt compulsory voting. Evidence for this can be found in Australian public opinion surveys that show that voter turnout would stay rather high in case voting would no longer be compulsory (cfr. *infra*) and in the Belgian case where high turnout is not due to the state sanctions: there are hardly any actions against absentees. A feeling of moral obligation and tradition are the main explanations for high turnout in Belgium (Billiet 2001: 11).

Therefore within-country comparisons attribute more compelling proof regarding the impact of compulsory voting on voter turnout. Such studies show that in states that abolished compulsory voting such as the Netherlands in 1970, Swiss in 1974 and Venezuela in 1993 turnout decreased and that turnout increased when compulsory voting was introduced in Austria in 1924 (Billiet, 2001: 3; Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1997: 4-5; Jackman s.d.: 5).

To test the effect of compulsory voting public opinion surveys were conducted to verify the hypothesis that voter turnout would drop in case voting would become voluntary. The results show that voter turnout would decrease with 8% in Australia and circa 30% in Belgium, Brazil and Venezuela (Billiet 2001: 11; Jackman, s.d. referring to Mackerras and McAllister, 1996; Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1998; Power and Roberts, 1995). Again, these figures do not take political reality into account and make abstraction from the salience of the election at stake and effects of possible actions and campaigns to mobilise voters.

### *3.2.2. Political effects*

Compulsory voting would have political consequences. Elections are expected to have more polarised results: (extreme) left and extreme right would gain from voluntary voting because the discontent would vote and the most satisfied would stay at home. Research for Belgium has shown that making voting voluntary would not affect the strength of political parties and division of seats in parliament (Maddens, s.d.; Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1997). Nevertheless, Belgian polls show that indeed progressive parties would win, but also that extreme right would lose voters. The explanation for the latter finding is that extreme-right votes are protest votes by apolitical voters who would not be inclined to vote if the political system would leave them alone. But, again, this kind of research makes abstraction from eventual mobilising campaigns.

The findings regarding the electoral gain for Belgian leftist parties when voting would be voluntary contradict common expectation that the left would gain from compulsory voting. The rationale behind this hypothesis is that voluntary election are socio-economically biased; specifically groups that would benefit from leftist programmes tended towards a large welfare state are the ones to drop out in case of voluntary voting (Keany and Rogers 2006; Jackman, s.d. referring to Pacek and Radcliff, 1995; Nagel, 1988; McAllister and Mughan 1986; Hicks and Swank 1992; Castles and McKinlay 1979). This brings us to our third point.

### 3.2.3. *Social-demographic effects*

Election research in the US, Swiss, Germany, Denmark, Austria and Sweden (all countries with voluntary voting) show that the higher the social position of people, the higher the voter turnout (Lijphart, 1997). Decline in turnout means decline in political participation (and thus representation of the interests) of the social vulnerable groups in society (Billiet, 2002). Public opinion surveys for Belgium show that women, older people, the low educated, blue collar workers and people without a profession, the group of people with low interest in politics, negative feelings about politics and an low esteem of their political empowerment would drop out (De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2006; Billiet 2001<sup>3</sup>; Ackaert en De Winter, 1996<sup>4</sup>). Especially people with social capital (members of civic organizations, political parties, neighbourhood organisations, citizens that participate in hearings and consultancy) would still vote (De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2006; Billiet 2001). Furthermore, a rise in social inequality in the voting population was reported after abolishing compulsory voting in the Netherlands (Verba, Nie and Kim 1978).

But voluntary voting (resulting in lower voter turnouts) not always excludes the socio-economic weak. Electoral practices in the US show that less politicised groups such as the Spanish population receive a great deal of attention of political parties during campaigns because they can make a difference (Maddens s.d.).

## 3.3. **Weighing the arguments for and against compulsory voting**

Given this set of arguments for and against compulsory voting, what would be the most compelling argument(s) for making voting obligatory in countries without compulsory voting and voluntary in countries where voting is compulsory? Are there other arguments? This section of the paper weighs up the arguments of proponents and opponents of compulsory voting in Belgium and in the U.K. In Belgium, there is a debate regarding compulsory voting whereby some commentators would wish to change this situation. In Britain, on the contrary, confronted with the low turnout in recent elections there are those who would wish to see the introduction of compulsory voting. We questioned prominent politicians in Belgium (survey) and the United Kingdom (survey and interviews) concerning their views on the importance of the major arguments in contemporary politics for and against compulsory voting.

### 3.3.1. *Compulsory voting in Britain?*

In Britain, a number of prominent politicians have recently entered the debate about compulsory voting. These include, Neil Kinnock (Leader of the Labour Party from 1983 until 1992), and current cabinet members, Geoff Hoon and Peter Hain. Support from such

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<sup>3</sup> Billiets research shows no age effects.

<sup>4</sup> Ackaert and Dewinters research shows no gender effects.

eminent politicians lends weight to those who wish to see the introduction of compulsory voting into British politics. Discussion on the topic of compulsory voting has taken place in the past. Indeed, a Private Member's Bill was introduced on the topic as far back as 1921 (Electoral Commission, 2006: 10) and Winston Churchill declared his support for compulsion in 1948 (Watson and Tami, 2000: 10). But, to be fair, the topic has been very much on the back burner until relatively recently. The catalyst for the current debate appears to be the low turnout in recent elections.

Both Hoon and Kinnock stress the legitimacy and democratic argument in favour of compulsory voting. For Hoon, these arguments tie in seamlessly with the educational and voice argument. Since postal voting did not fundamentally increase voter turnout, Hoon concludes that, for democratic reasons, making voting compulsory is the only option left: "So, in the end, I suppose I come to compulsory voting having felt that the other initiatives have not had the kind of success that we might have hoped they would have. And, therefore, where else do you turn in order to try and get the turnout back to where it used to be. I think in a democracy the turnout is fundamental." According to Hoon, an increase in legitimacy is the main gain of compulsory voting; low turnout undermines the legitimacy of the party in power. The counter-argument referring to the freedom of people is not a valid one, says Hoon: "(...) I don't believe that that is a significant interference with civil liberty any more than being required to wear a seatbelt in a car is." He estimates that the majority of the people would easily accept voting as a civic duty: "(...) I rather think that, if you make it compulsory, then again there may be one or two fines but then I think that most people will then say 'Oh yes, this is something that I really have to do'. So, I think that it's overcoming the kind of inertia. So I don't think that people consciously don't vote. I think that people just get into the habit of not voting." Compulsory voting would break the vicious circle and, furthermore, would be a strong incentive to be better informed about politics, he states: "I think what making it compulsory does is, in effect, forces people to think about it (...) In a sense, compulsory voting might force people to think about the issues more than they do at the moment. In a way being allowed not to vote allows people to opt out. In a sense, back to legitimacy, if we are a democracy, then presumably we ought to represent the views of those who don't vote as much as those that do vote so."

When asked what convinced him that compulsory voting would be good for Britain, Neil Kinnock answers that currently democracy in Britain is in danger of losing its vitality. The low turnout in 2001 and 2005 is a symptom of a more general phenomenon: reduction in political participation. Low turnout "(...) feeds the other toxins that are at work like the contemptuous dismissal of engagement in politics (...)". According to Kinnock, the real danger is "not only that people don't use their vote, they don't think about not using their vote". He is convinced that improvements in accessibility to voting are not an alternative to compulsory voting. Only compulsory voting could "cut through the vicious circle": "(...) voting is so basic and the lack of use of the vote has become so problematic that I really don't feel that in any case we can rely on cajoling. We need a bit of a clunk and the clunk is compulsory voting." Like Hoon, he rejects the argument that compulsory voting is an infringement upon freedom: "(...) democracy is a state of responsibility. And voting is a responsibility of that and just as you've got a responsibility to get your child to school, you've got a responsibility not to park on

double yellow lines, you've got a responsibility not to burn smoky fuel in smokeless zones, you've got a responsibility to vote."

The second main advantage of compulsory voting, according to Kinnock, is linked with the legitimacy argument: "I think that the impact on policy would be the impact of clearer mandate. First of all, because, by definition, more people would be voting. The mandate given to the victorious parties and the mandate denied to the defeated parties would make things much clearer, that's the first effect. The second effect, I think parties in conditions of compulsory voting have to be much clearer themselves and more detailed in their policy appeal. In order to ensure that the exercise of the duty to vote becomes turned actively into the exercise of a preference." The latter part of this argument highlights an aspect of the educational argument that was not put at the forefront by the literature. Kinnock would only expect power shifts when compulsory voting is combined with the introduction of proportional representation. That would mobilise the broad centre and diminish extremist votes.

Hoon and Kinnock do not expect that compulsory voting will be introduced in Britain in the near future, but do expect that it will gain political salience if turnout continues to decrease. They also agree that it would be relatively easy to put it into effect.

It is striking that the equality aspect is absent from the arguments of these proponents of compulsory voting. They do not explicitly emphasise the idea that all groups participate under a system of compulsory voting. Whilst this is perhaps surprising, it is evident that the other issues – namely, the legitimacy and the democratic arguments - appear to be more important to the interviewees.

[Insert survey analysis here]

### 3.3.2. *Voluntary voting in Belgium?*

Since the beginning of the nineties, the extreme-right party Vlaams Belang (the former Vlaams Blok) won election after election in Flanders. This fed the discussion about compulsory voting in Flanders: the extreme-right votes were interpreted as anti-establishment, protest votes that could be eliminated by not forcing anti-political groups in society to vote (Billiet 2001). In general, the liberal, the nationalist, ecologist and, paradoxically, the extreme right parties are against compulsory voting in Flanders for strategic reasons (reducing the strength of the Vlaams Belang), to enlarge the freedom of the voter, to make voting more motivated and authentic and the voter better informed; the socialist and christian-democrats are in favour of compulsory voting for equality reasons (De Ceuninck et.al., 2006; De Ceuninck et.al., 2005). De Ceuninck *et al.* also conducted a survey amongst political scientists in Flanders: 20 were contacted, 13 are in favour of compulsory voting. The proponents argue that voting is civic duty, that it makes elections more equal and less socio-economically biased, increases legitimacy and functions as a flashing light for discontentment and extremism in society. The argumentation of the opponents of compulsory voting stress that it curtails freedom (political participation

should not be forced) and that voluntary voting would not result in social inequality nor in a less informed voter (De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2006; De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2005).

In order to weigh the arguments for and against compulsory voting, we complemented the research of De Ceuninck *et al.* with a survey amongst the members of the Flemish parliament.<sup>5</sup> By asking their opinion about arguments for and against compulsory voting, we wanted to shed light on what constitute the most compelling arguments. We also asked whether it is probable that compulsory voting would be abolished in Belgium in the near future. Most respondents do not exclude that possibility, but indicate that there is only a small chance that it would occur. Of the 55 respondents 48 assess that there is a small chance that voting will become voluntary in the near future; 3 indicate that it is impossible and 5 that it is likely.

Table 2: Proponents and opponents of compulsory voting in the Flemish Parliament (plus non response)

	For Compulsory Voting	Against Compulsory Voting	Did not participate in survey
Christian-democratic fraction (CD&V) <i>n</i> =29	/	/	29
Ecologist fraction (Groen!) <i>n</i> =6	1	/	5
Nationalist fraction (N-VA) <i>n</i> =6	0	6	
Socialist-progressive fraction (SP.a – spirit) <i>n</i> =25	14	1	10
Extreme-right fraction (Vlaams Belang) <i>n</i> =32	8	2	22
Liberal fraction (VLD - Vivant) <i>n</i> =24	5	18	1
Francophone fraction (UF) and independent parliamentarians <i>n</i> =2	/	/	2
Total – Member of the Flemish Parliament <i>n</i> =124	28	27	69

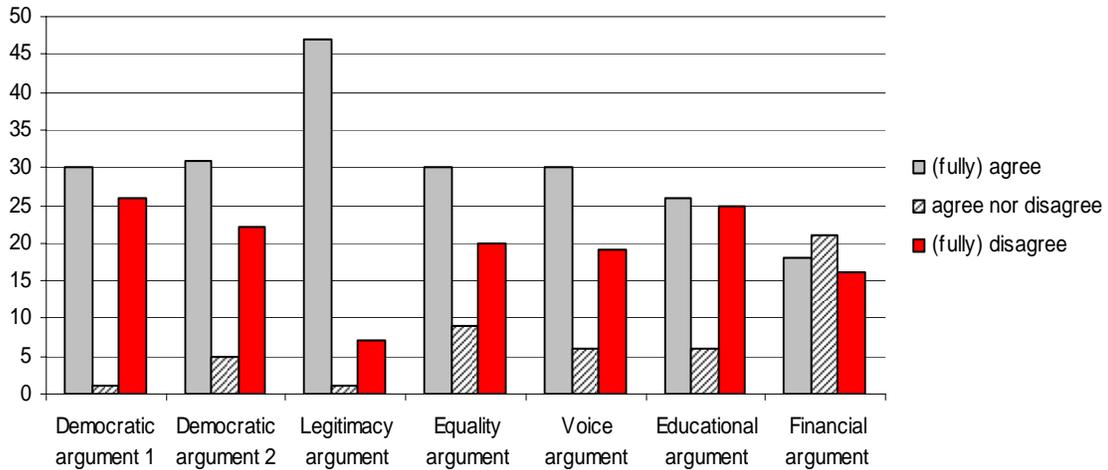
In contrast with the findings of Deceuninck *et al.*, the respondents of the ecologist and the extreme-right party are in favour of compulsory voting. Also, the respondents of the socialist party are amongst the proponents of compulsory voting. The nationalist and the majority of the liberal fraction are against. In sum, the respondents include a more or less equal number of opponents and proponents.

Given the rather small response rate, we can not extrapolate our findings to all the members of the Flemish Parliament, let alone to Flemish/Belgian politicians in general. Nevertheless, these data can give us insight into the support for arguments pro and contra compulsory voting of politicians who are to a certain degree interested in the topic. When

<sup>5</sup> Of the 6 political fractions of the Flemish parliament 5 participated in the research. The individual members of these fractions were free to participate in the survey. The nationalist party NVA (6 members) who opted for one coordinated response. The one member of the francophone fraction UF and the one independent parliamentarian did not participate. Taken together 56 of the 124 members of the Flemish parliament responded (response rate = 45,1 %). The Christian-democrat fraction (29 members) unfortunately refused to cooperate. The explanation for this is probably the ongoing discussion within the party about compulsory voting. Illustrative for this is an incident in 2005 whereby a member of the Christian-democratic fraction proposed to abolish compulsory voting for local elections; the party - that is officially in favour of compulsory voting- has blown the whistle on him (De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2006: 35).

discussing the findings, however, we should bear in mind that apparently the topic seems not important enough to a substantial part of the parliamentarians in order to participate in the survey. By comparing the support for arguments for and against, we want to gain insight in which arguments are the most compelling, the weakest and the most controversial.

**Figure 1: Arguments for compulsory voting (Flemish Parliament)**



**Figure 2: Arguments against compulsory voting (Flemish Parliament)**

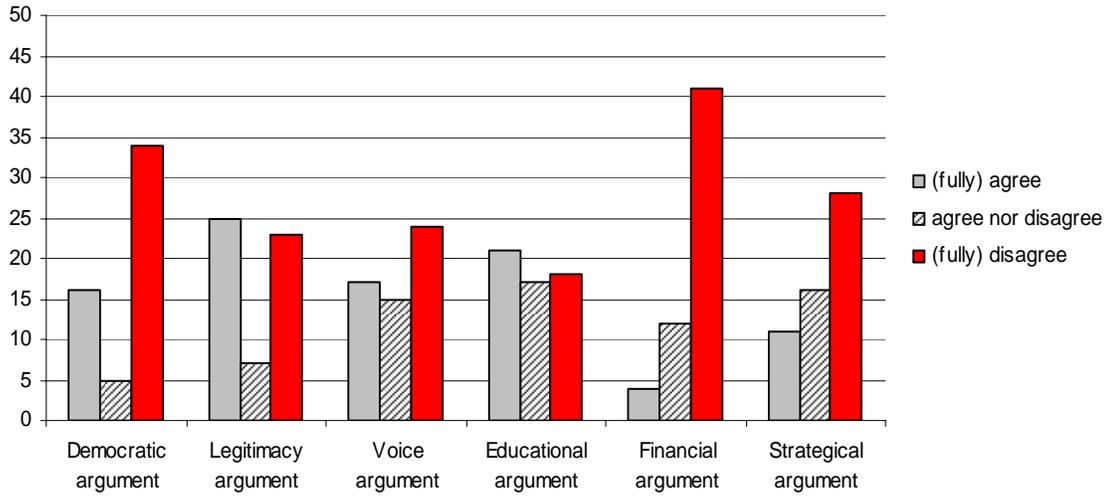


Figure 3: Arguments for compulsory voting of proponents (Flemish Parliament)

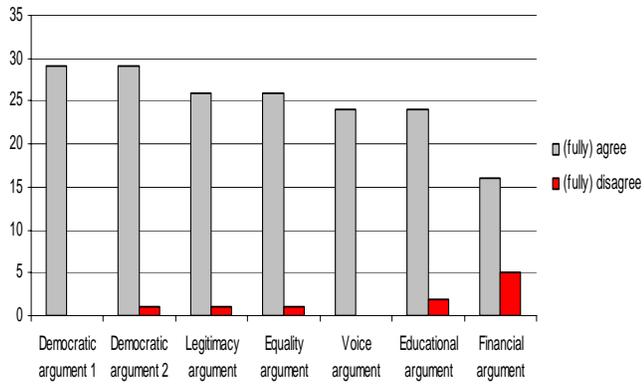


Figure 4: Arguments for compulsory voting of opponents (Flemish Parliament)

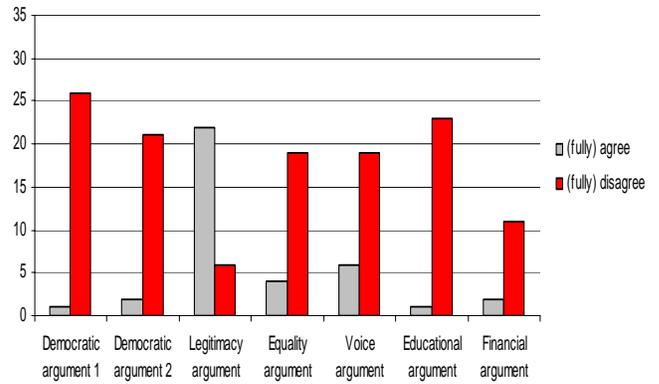


Figure 5: Arguments against compulsory voting of proponents (Flemish Parliament)

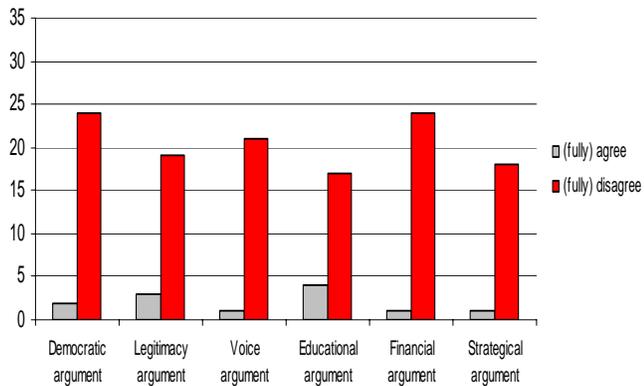
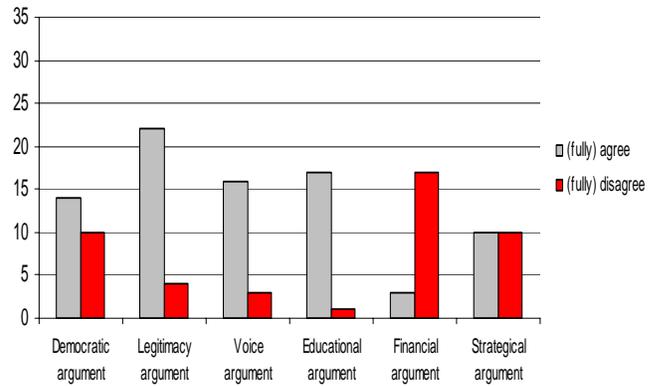


Figure 6: Arguments against compulsory voting of opponents (Flemish Parliament)



## Arguments underpinning the data

### Arguments for compulsory voting

Democratic argument 1: *“Voting is a civic duty; that is the reason why it should be compulsory”*

Democratic argument 2: *“That all the people choose their representatives is crucial, democratic necessity; that is the reason why it should be compulsory”*

Legitimacy argument: *“Governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate in elections; that is the reason why it should be compulsory”*

Equality argument: *“Compulsory voting avoids social and demographic bias in the votes and by extension in the political themes addressed by political parties and decision makers”*

Voice argument: *“Compulsory voting captures protest and anti-political votes; this functions as a flashing light for democracy”*

Educational argument: *“Compulsory voting forces the citizens to maintain a minimal level of political knowledge”*

Financial argument: *“Compulsory voting diminishes the importance of money during elections since politicians and political parties do not have to spend resources trying to convince people to vote”*

### Arguments against compulsory voting

Democratic argument: *“Compulsory voting is not consistent with freedom, the cornerstone of democratic government”*

Legitimacy argument: *“Compulsory voting hides political apathy and creates the illusion of high electoral participation”*

Voice argument: *“A vote without compulsion is a ‘better’ vote because the voters are self-selecting and more likely to be interested and informed”*

Educational argument: *“People will turn away from a political system that forces them to do something against their will”*

Financial argument: *“Compulsory voting makes elections unnecessary expensive”*

Strategical argument: *“Compulsory voting enforces extreme right parties and therefore should be abolished”*

Figure 1 illustrates the support for arguments for compulsory voting of the respondents. An overall conclusion from this figure is that all the arguments for compulsory voting are more strongly supported than they get rejected. Figure 2 presents the data about the arguments against and gives a less clear-cut image of the views on the arguments against compulsory voting of the respondents.

Figure 1 clearly shows that out of the arguments for compulsory voting the legitimacy argument gains the most support (and the least opposition): more than three fourths of the respondents are convinced that governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate in elections. But of the arguments against compulsory voting (see figure 2) the counter-argument that gets the most support also concerns legitimacy: the higher political participation that one obtains via compulsory voting is an illusion and hides political apathy. Whether or not compulsory voting really increases legitimacy is thus controversial.

Half of the respondents support the democratic arguments that voting is a civic duty and a democratic necessity and that compulsory voting avoids a socio-demographic bias in politics (equality argument) and functions as a flashing light for democracy by capturing protest votes (voice argument). The democratic argument is also supported by the high disagree score for the democratic argument against compulsory voting, notably that it is not consistent with freedom, the cornerstone of democratic government. Nevertheless, the

democratic arguments pro compulsory voting also receives high disagree scores which indicate that they are highly controversial. The equality and voice arguments do not seem to be controversial. The voice argument pro compulsory voting is further supported by a high disagree score for the argument that a vote without compulsion is a 'better' vote.

Like the legitimacy and the democratic arguments, the educational argument is controversial. We conclude this from the equally high agree and disagree scores for the statements that compulsory voting forces the citizens to maintain a minimal level of political knowledge and that it would make people turn away from politics and thus would have no educational advantage.

The financial objection against compulsory voting, notably that it makes elections unnecessary expensive, is strongly rejected (and receives the least support). Furthermore, of the arguments in favour of compulsory voting, the financial argument is the least convincing. From this, we conclude that the financial aspect is not central to the debate.

Abolishing compulsory voting for strategic reasons, notably to diminish the strength of the extreme-right party, does not gain much support. A substantive group (including respondents from the extreme-right party) is against this motivation for abolishing compulsory voting. From this, we conclude that this argument is also not convincing.

In figures 3 to 6 we distinguished the support for arguments for and against compulsory voting from proponents of compulsory voting from opponents. These figures support the conclusions based on figures 1 and 2, but also highlight two elements. Firstly, these figures illustrate more clearly that the democratic arguments involved in the discussion about compulsory voting are highly controversial. The democratic arguments pro compulsory voting are the most compelling arguments for the opponents, whereas they are situated in the top three of disagreement scores of the opponents. Furthermore, the democratic counter argument receives the highest disagree score of the proponents.

Secondly, these figures add weight to the conclusion that the legitimacy argument for compulsory voting is a compelling argument - also opponents of compulsory voting support this argument in a strong way- but, given the high agree score with the legitimacy argument against compulsory voting, also a controversial one.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper has examined the debate in the UK and Belgium regarding compulsory voting. Compulsory voting is well established in Belgium having been introduced in 1893 but we have seen how some commentators wish to change this situation, partly motivated by the fear of the rise of the right. In Britain, on the contrary, there are those who would wish to see the introduction of compulsory voting – their main argument being the low turnout in recent elections. Starting from the literature on compulsory voting, this paper has analysed the key arguments that are present in contemporary debates surrounding compulsory voting. After defining compulsory voting, the discussion moved to illuminate the fact that compulsory voting is used in various countries world-wide. The paper then examined what happens to those who do not vote; sanctions and incentives were highlighted. Next, the arguments for and against compulsory voting are described and we test their validity by confronting them with empirical research regarding the political

strength of parties, the overall turnout and the turnout of specific socio-demographic groups in society.

In the next sections, we analysed the key arguments for and against compulsory voting using empirical data from and Britain. We questioned prominent politicians in Belgium and the United Kingdom concerning their views on the importance of the major arguments in contemporary politics for and against compulsory voting; namely, democratic values such as freedom, citizenship and equality, voicing the will of the people, legitimacy of representative institutions, education and information, and the financial aspects. The paper also examined the practicalities involved in introducing or eliminating a system of compulsory voting. Certain groups are excluded *de facto* when they are not obliged to vote. This accords with other figures illustrating the exclusion of particular socio-demographic groups in society when voting is optional. Research has shown that turnout drops without compulsion and that, more specifically, certain groups drop out. Generally speaking, it is women, younger and older people, the low educated, low social status, blue-collar workers, people without a profession, people with low interest in politics, negative feelings about politics and a belief that their vote will not make a difference. The exclusion of these groups, at the input side of the policy-making process, can have far-reaching consequences for the outputs of politics; namely, for policy. The mechanism behind this process is that political parties do not take the interests of these voters to heart if they feel they are unlikely to vote (for them). This results in a Catch-22 situation whereby certain voters do not vote because they feel that their interests will be ignored but where political parties ignore the interests because the parties feel that they will not receive electoral support from them anyway. In the light of the severe crisis politics is facing at the moment where people turn away from politics, politics cannot afford risking excluding these people and their needs.

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