**Of course compulsory voting is a good thing**

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I'm not here to tell you to vote, I'm here to remind you that other people can't. Compulsory voting is the guarantee of voter freedom, not its opposite

Australia is one of only 10 countries in the world that enforce compulsory voting, and one of only two majority-English-speaking countries to do so, alongside our neighbour Singapore.

It's a policy that activates loud bleating of complaint from the neo-libertarian crowd. Their opposition to compulsory voting is usually expressed in the identical vocabulary of waaaaaaaaaaah as their resistance to wearing seatbelts, educating their children with other people's children and being told they really shouldn't smoke in front of a baby.

Compulsory voting is also opposed by politicians keen to attack it for partisan advantage. Liberals of have realpolitik reasons to campaign against compulsory voting. In the vast majority of countries where voting is optional – especially the liberal democratic states of the West most demographically similar to our own – it's a long established fact that voting turnout is massively concentrated amongst those communities with higher levels of education, urbanity, wealth, health, control of their own time and the other privileges of inherited social capital.

The voters [who tend to vanish](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voter_turnout#Socio-economic_factors) are, of course, poor, isolated, minimally educated, sick, low-paid, casualised or vulnerable. In other words, those with the least to gain from a party like Minchin's liberals, which has an electoral appeal focused on the connected rich and those believing they may yet will be so.

Compulsory voting was in response to low voter turnout in the 1922 election, in which only slightly less than 60% of eligible Australians cast a vote. It was voted up unanimously by all members in both houses in less than an hour, and made into law within a fortnight. Australia has maintained a 90%+ voter turnout ever since.

What made the early parliament of this country unanimous in its support of compulsory voting wasn't that it lacked a right-wing libertarian fraction opposed to any state regulation. It was the understanding that compulsory voting isn't so much about the state making the people vote, but the people making the state accountable for enabling universal access to the vote.

While voting remains compulsory, that the whole nation is obliged to go to the polls, so must the polls go – physically and practically – to the whole nation. This is why, unlike other countries, we have simple electoral enrolment procedures, voting on weekends, easily-organised postal-voting, ballot boxes in nursing homes and hospitals, an independent electoral commission, and a system that must consistently identify and remove obstacles to voting.

In countries where voting is optional, even a democratic state has no such obligation to enfranchise its citizenry. That "not having enough time" to vote is the single biggest reason citizens of other Western democracies don't make it to the polls is exactly why voting is held on working days in some countries, with districts potentially hostile to a ruling party's electoral fortunes subject to extraordinary suppression efforts.

In the year 2000, for example, thousands of citizens living in a democracy – most of them belonging to a racial minority – were wrongly added to a "scrub list" and [were never added to voting rolls](http://www.salon.com/2000/12/04/voter_file/). This was in the US state of Florida during the Bush v Gore election. The controversy is rumbling on: Florida's current Republican governor has recently asked to resume a fiercely contested "[voter purge](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/06/rick-scott-voter-purge_n_3710323.html)" – a move which has been described as a [partisan attack on Hispanic and Democratic voters](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/08/us/ruling-revives-florida-review-of-voting-rolls.html?pagewanted=all).

In the same vein, this week the US state of North Carolina passed "[the mother of all voter suppression bills](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2013/08/north_carolina_s_speedy_vote_suppression_tactics_show_exactly_why_the_voting.html)". Amongst myriad active disenfranchisements to voting, ID checks have become stricter, the early voting used by up to 70% of African-American voters in 2012 has been cut off a week early, local election boards have lost their power to keep polls open to deal with crowds, and any voter who by accident votes in the wrong precinct will have their whole vote discounted.

Compulsory voting is the Australian guarantee of voter freedom, not its opposite. The law is only that you have to place a collected piece of paper into an envelope or box. You are not obliged to vote for a political party or candidate – one wag whose vote I scrutineered in an election once wrote "all the candidates are dickheads" with a big tick and walked away, fine-free. That you have the right to this is yearned for even in other democracies where mere access to a polling place is not ensured.

**Voting Should Be Mandatory**

**By Waleed Aly**

MELBOURNE, Australia — When you survey the wreckage of 2016, it’s easy to forget that the most seismic democratic events were brought about by minorities.

Only 37 percent of eligible Britons voted to leave the European Union. The case is even clearer in the American election, which Donald J. Trump won despite having persuaded only a quarter of the American electorate to support him. Mr. Trump triumphed in a [low-turnout election](http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/11/10/13587462/trump-election-2016-voter-turnout).

It’s time for democracies to adopt compulsory voting. I say this from Australia, one of about a dozen countries where people can be penalized for not voting (about a dozen more have compulsory voting on the books but don’t enforce it). We’ve done so at the federal level since [1924](http://www.aec.gov.au/About_Aec/Publications/voting/index.htm), following a drop in voter turnout. We’re now required by law to enroll at 18 years old (though this isn’t strictly monitored), and we’re fined if we fail to vote. Around three-quarters of Australians have consistently supported compulsory voting, and there is no meaningful movement for change.

The evidence is mixed on whether compulsory voting favors parties of the right or the left, and some [studies](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2008.02659.x/abstract;jsessionid=93CA034DAAF623586A78E6B7C7E0110F.f03t01) suggest that most United States federal election results would be unchanged. But all that misses the point because it overlooks that compulsory voting changes more than the number of voters: It changes who runs for office and the policy proposals they support.

In a compulsory election, it does not pay to energize your base to the exclusion of all other voters. Since elections cannot be determined by turnout, they are decided by swing voters and won in the center. Australia has its share of xenophobic politicians, but they tend to dwell in minor parties that do not even pretend they can form a government.

That is one reason Australia’s version of the far right lacks anything like the power of its European or American counterparts. Australia has had some bad governments, but it hasn’t had any truly extreme ones and it isn’t nearly as vulnerable to demagogues.

None of this means Australian politics is impervious to shock. Like much of the West, we’re in our own anti-incumbent, anti-system cycle. But compulsory voting means this movement is more gradual: a slow-motion accumulation of developments rather than the rapid agitation of an energized minority storming the barricades. Major parties will have time to adjust, and if not, minor parties will have time to mature.

But to my Australian eyes, the strongest case for compulsory voting came in the final stages of the recent American presidential campaign, when the candidates became obsessed with turnout.

On the Democratic side, this meant that President Obama was typically surrounded by pop stars while racing between rallies for Hillary Clinton. For the Republicans, it devolved into a bizarrely anti-democratic spectacle: efforts by Republican state officials to suppress the minority vote; Mr. Trump’s exhorting his supporters to monitor selected communities for “voter fraud.” Such actions — especially [suppression of the black vote](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2016/10/republicans_are_already_suppressing_minority_votes_all_over_america.html) — should be enough reason to mandate voting, consigning this sordid gaming to history.

This isn’t particularly revolutionary if you see voting not merely as a right, but as a civic obligation. That might sound un-American, but Americans already have many such obligations, including more onerous ones like paying taxes or jury duty.

Even the most persuasive argument — that compulsory voting violates free speech ideals that include the right to silence — misunderstands how compulsory voting works. Voters are not compelled to support a candidate or even to cast a valid ballot. They are obliged to turn up.

Leave your form blank if the options are so uninspiring. Draw pictures on it. Even this is useful: By tracking the growth of these “informal” votes we can gauge voter dissatisfaction.

Yes, there are cons. There’s the risk elections are turned by the least engaged and least informed voters. This, however, is difficult to prove, because even if less engaged voters tend to stay away when given the choice, there is also [evidence](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/01/08/compulsory-voting-results-in-more-evenly-distributed-political-knowledge/) that compulsory voting lifts civic engagement over all.

It’s also clear that voluntary voting hasn’t helped the United States avoid a serious [uninformed-voter problem](http://view2.fdu.edu/publicmind/2015/151014/). That might seem especially acute after a Trump campaign that offered up copious servings of fiction and conspiracy, but it is a [much deeper phenomenon](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2014/09/18/annenberg-public-policy-center-survey-provides-new-evidence-of-widespread-political-ignorance/?utm_term=.6039e41ae8b9) than that.

Compulsory voting would deliver a broader, more representative sample of voters. That’s true in Australia. It’s also demonstrated by the Netherlands, which abandoned compulsory voting in 1970: The result was not merely a fall in turnout, but a disproportionate decline in the turnout of socially and economically marginalized groups.

On balance, the overriding result of compulsory voting is a more complete democracy. One that includes the voices of those most easily discouraged from turning up: poorer people and minority communities, for instance. One that refuses to hand power to someone whose plan is to keep turnout low, hoping to appeal to an impassioned minority rather than a nation at large.

And after all that, if there is to be wreckage, at least it will be inflicted by a majority of the population.