

Does being told to vote impact who you vote for? Compulsory voting and incumbent re-election

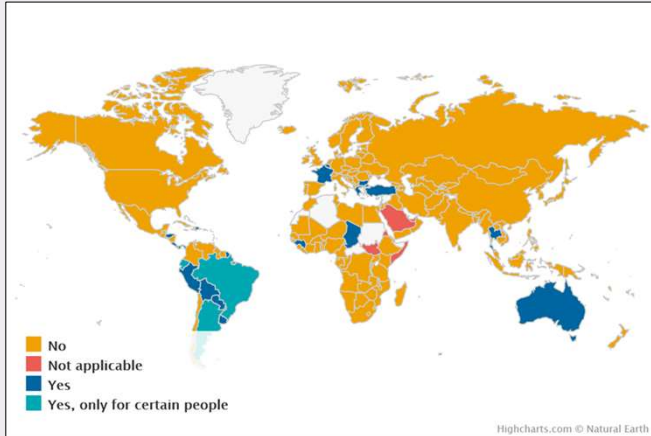


Fig. 1 The number of countries with compulsory voting is relatively small, but as compulsory voting is considered in other democracies these may provide valuable case studies. (Compulsory Voting data, Inter-Parliamentary Union)

Abstract

Around the world, democracies are faced with the challenge of a decline in voter turnout important for legitimizing election results. To combat this, some countries have chosen to adopt compulsory voting laws. In my research, I examined multiple countries who have implemented compulsory voting, measuring differences in election results over a set number of years before and after the change. Previous research has focused on the ideological impact increased voter turnout has on elections, but current literature does not address whether compulsory voting impacts incumbent party re-election. The potential advantage incumbent candidates receive in compulsory voting systems is important to consider as it may impact the perceived legitimacy of such systems. In the face of declining voter turnout, more countries are considering compulsory voting laws to boost voter turnout, but with this rise in interest there needs to be more research done on how such policies impact election results

Analysis

I used Australia and the Netherlands as samples for my analysis. Australia instituted federal compulsory voting in 1984, and the Netherlands repealed compulsory voting in 1970. To measure if there was a significant difference between the percent of the vote captured by the incumbent party under compulsory voting and under non-compulsory voting I took the results of three elections before the policy change and three elections after compulsory voting was enacted (Fig. 2) and conducted a difference of means test. For my purposes, incumbency was defined as the party that received the most seats in the previous election, this overcame challenges faced when no one party won a majority and there was a coalition government. By using data from the same countries under each policy I was able to control for cultural factors that may have influenced election results. My results for the two countries combined was not significant, with a P-Value of 0.157, however, the results for Australia were significant at a 0.10 level, with a P-Value of 0.079. This would indicate that more research should be done looking at a larger sample, including more elections and more countries.

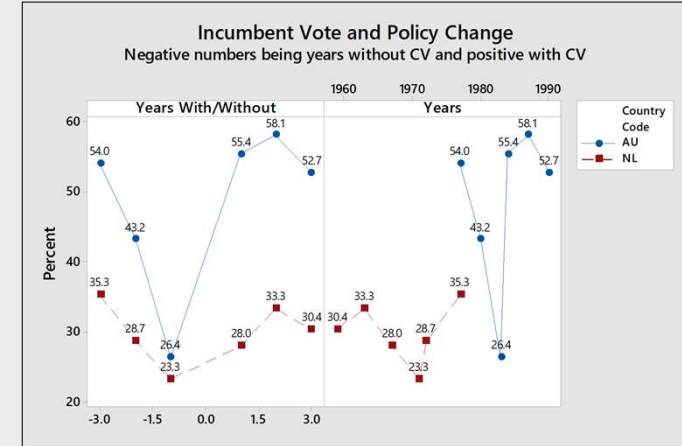


Figure 2 On the left, the percent of the vote captured by the incumbent party is organized by proximity to the change, on the right the data are organized by year (Brancati, nd; Gerard Newman Statistics Group, 1999)

Conclusions

Because of my small sample size and the use of a bivariate research design, my results cannot be used to definitively conclude that compulsory voting has an impact one way or another on election results. It does, however, indicate that this is an area where more research can be done using larger samples and a multivariate approach. The Australian example suggested that there may be some significant difference between the elections before and after instituting compulsory voting. As more countries are considering compulsory voting laws to increase voter turnout, there needs to be more research into how such policies effect election results.

Works Cited

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Background

A significant amount of research has gone into the question of whether compulsory voting increases voter turnout, and some research has been done on how compulsory voting effects electoral outcomes. The research primarily focuses on the ideological effects of increased voter turnout, with hypotheses suggesting that parties on the ideological left would have an advantage (Hill, 2014; Jensen and Spoon, 2011). The findings, however, seem to indicate that uninformed voting tends to muddle the vote and uninformed voters are unpredictable (Jensen and Spoon, 2011). There has also been research into the effects of compulsory voting on female representation, although it was not found to have a significant correlation (Birch, 2008). I have not found a study that focused specifically on the effect of compulsory voting on incumbent parties or candidates. This presents a gap in the literature and knowledge in the academic community on this topic. Studying the effect of compulsory voting on incumbent re-election would be both a valuable addition to the field of electoral research, and valuable information for political parties in countries with compulsory vote systems and countries considering compulsory voting. Currently, there are 21 countries that use compulsory voting and four that use compulsory voting for only certain people (see Fig. 1) (Compulsory voting, 2019). The number of countries is small when compared with the total number of democracies, but compulsory vote systems are being considered as other democracies struggle with fewer citizens voting. By studying countries that already have a system in place, policy makers and political leaders can come to better informed decisions. Understanding the effect of compulsory voting on incumbent re-election would provide valuable information for predicting and interpreting election results. Compulsory voting is used to increase voter turnout, and in turn increase government legitimacy (Hill, 2014). If there is a causal relationship between compulsory voting and higher rates of incumbent re-election it could call into question the motives and legitimacy of policy makers. By researching the statistical relationship between incumbent party re-election and the existence of compulsory voting laws in a country, lawmakers can make better informed decisions.