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Mandatory voting: balancing civic duty and individual freedom

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Preface

This compilation of essays reflects my experience with the argumentative writing component of Academic English 3. I have studied a variety of subjects in this course, improved my critical thinking abilities, and sharpened my ability to make well-reasoned, fact-based arguments. The integration of research, analysis, and writing strategies necessary for successful academic communication is evident in every work. Beyond academic borders, argumentative writing is an essential ability that gives people the means to engage in meaningful discourse and effectively express their opinions. I have gained a deeper knowledge of the complexities present in both academic and real-world disputes thanks to this course, which has taught me how to critically assess opposing ideas in addition to crafting strong arguments.

I want to express my appreciation to my teacher, Dr. Douglas Atkinson, and fellow students for their advice and criticism during this course. Their assistance has greatly influenced the way I write and improved my capacity to communicate concepts with conviction and clarity.

Abstract

The legitimacy and inclusivity of democratic governance are called into question by declining voter turnout. The controversy over mandatory voting is examined in this paper. Supporters point out that it can increase civic engagement, political equality, and turnout (Lijphart, 1997), while opponents contend that it violates people's rights (Brennan, 2011; Hill, 2006), reduces the quality of participation, and ignores structural obstacles (Birch, 2009). By combining these viewpoints, the paper suggests hybrid strategies to increase participation while upholding individual liberty, including voter education, voting incentives, and accessibility changes. By being inclusive and sensitive to the various demands of society, this well-rounded approach aims to improve democracy.

Introduction

In recent decades, democracies around the world have faced a troubling trend: declining voter turnout. From established democracies like the United States to emerging ones in various parts of the globe, fewer citizens are participating in elections, the cornerstone of representative government (Franklin, 2004). The efficacy of contemporary democracies and the state of their institutions are seriously called into question by this occurrence. Because administrations formed with low voter turnout may not accurately reflect the will of the people, low voter turnout jeopardizes the credibility of election results (Lijphart, 1997). Furthermore, policymaking runs the risk of being skewed, favoring groups with greater turnout rates and ignoring the demands of vulnerable people when particular demographics are routinely underrepresented at the polls (Hill, 2006).

Voter indifference has sparked an intense discussion about how to guarantee widespread participation in the democratic process and revitalize civic engagement. Mandatory voting has become one of the most divisive of the suggested remedies. Many of the issues raised by low turnout, including unequal representation and weakened democratic legitimacy, are allegedly resolved by mandatory voting, according to proponents (Lijphart, 1997). They argue that making voting a civic obligation, similar to paying taxes or sitting on a jury, promotes political equality (Hill, 2006), builds public confidence in democratic institutions (Birch, 2009), and cultivates an engaged society (Brennan, 2011). However, the idea that required voting is a cure-all for democratic disenchantment is contested by critics. They contend that requiring people to cast ballots violates their right to personal freedom, which is a fundamental component of democracy (Brennan, 2011; Lever, 2010). Opponents also warn that requiring voting could have unforeseen repercussions, such as disenchanted or ignorant voters casting arbitrary ballots, which could skew election results (Birch, 2009; Selb & Lachat, 2009). Additionally, they stress that rather than just requiring involvement, it is critical to overcome systemic

obstacles to it, such as socioeconomic disparities and political disenfranchisement (Franklin, 2004; Hill, 2006).

This essay aims to investigate the controversy surrounding mandatory voting, looking at both its inherent difficulties and its potential to rekindle political engagement. This analysis attempts to provide a balanced viewpoint that strikes a balance between the concepts of individual freedom and social responsibility by combining the arguments from both sides. In the end, it seeks to provide a course of action that preserves the honesty and inclusivity of democratic governance while honoring the independence of its people.

The role of elections in democracy

The foundation of democratic regimes is elections, which represent the idea of popular government. They offer a means by which people can voice their opinions, hold elected officials responsible, and shape public policy (Dahl, 1998). Elections have deep symbolic meaning in addition to their practical use in choosing representatives. They uphold the equality of all citizens, giving everyone the same chance to influence politics irrespective of differences in socioeconomic background, ethnicity, or other characteristics (Beetham, 1994; Lijphart, 1997).

Both proponents and critics of mandatory voting agree on the foundational importance of elections in sustaining democratic legitimacy. High voter turnout is widely seen as a reflection of a healthy democracy, signaling that citizens are engaged and invested in the political process (Franklin, 2004; Lijphart, 1997). Conversely, low turnout can erode public trust in institutions, weaken the mandate of elected officials, and exacerbate perceptions of disenfranchisement among underrepresented groups (Beetham, 1994; Solijonov, 2016).

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Mandatory voting proponents contend that in order to maintain elections' special status as occasions for group democratic action, it is imperative that citizens be forced to cast ballots. They argue that elections fulfill their intended function as inclusive, representative events that reflect the wide range of viewpoints held by the public when there is a high turnout (Hill, 2006; Birch, 2009). They caution that in the absence of broad involvement, the democratic process could be seized by a small group of people, resulting in governance that puts the interests of a select few ahead of those of the majority (Lijphart, 1997). Proponents of mandatory voting also stress how important elections are for expression. This point of view holds that voting is a reaffirmation of civic togetherness and shared responsibility rather than just a transactional act (Birch, 2009). Societies emphasize the value of elections as public goods that benefit all citizens by mandating participation. According to this viewpoint, low turnout is a result of a collective failure to respect democratic standards, which may be fixed by implementing laws that guarantee widespread involvement (Franklin, 2004).

On the other hand, detractors contend that the voluntary character of participation is what gives elections their validity. They warn that voting requirements run the danger of compromising the legitimacy of election results since forced participation might not accurately represent sincere political activity (Lever, 2010; Quirk, 2014). According to this viewpoint, low turnout may indicate discontent with the political system or its candidates rather than being an issue in and of itself (Brennan, 2011; Howe, 2006). Critics contend that systemic adjustments, not coercion, are necessary to address this underlying disappointment (Franklin, 2004; Solijonov, 2016).

Opponents of mandatory voting further point out that if participation is required, elections may lose their symbolic meaning. They argue that the idea of free will, which includes the option to abstain, is essential to democracy (Lever, 2010). According to these opponents, rather than enforcing a one-size-fits-all approach, low turnout should spur efforts to identify

and solve the obstacles and disincentives that discourage voluntary involvement (Beetham, 1994; Solijonov, 2016).

Deeper philosophical differences on the essence of democracy itself are reflected in the differences between these methods. Opponents of required voting place more importance on individual liberty and the necessity of meaningful, voluntary participation (Brennan, 2011; Lever, 2010), while supporters see elections as collective duties vital to the well-being of the polity (Birch, 2009; Lijphart, 1997). Both viewpoints emphasize how important elections are to democratic life, but they offer radically different solutions to the problems caused by falling turnout. In the quest for a more inclusive and representative political system, this tension emphasizes how difficult it is to strike a balance between individual liberties and collective democratic aspirations (Dahl, 1998; Solijonov, 2016).

Arguments in favor of mandatory voting

Mandatory voting is often presented as a solution to the challenges posed by declining voter turnout and unequal political representation. Advocates contend that it strengthens democratic legitimacy, encourages political equality, and stimulates civic involvement (Lijphart, 1997; Birch, 2009). Empirical data from nations like Australia and Belgium, where mandatory voting has been successfully enacted, supports these claims (Hill, 2006; Fowler, 2013). Research indicates that mandatory voting systems significantly increase turnout rates and reduce socioeconomic disparities in voter participation, enhancing the overall inclusivity of the electoral process (Blais et al., 2003; Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998).

The capacity of mandatory voting to promote civic engagement is one of its main advantages. Societies create a baseline expectation of participation in the democratic process by mandating that citizens vote. A culture of civic knowledge and accountability may develop

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as a result of this mandated involvement over time (Birch, 2009; Fowler, 2013). People who are forced to cast a ballot are more inclined to look for political information, learn more about public concerns, and participate in other political activities, according to studies (Blais, 2000; Singh, 2011). As residents grow more involved in local administration, proponents contend that this enhanced engagement fortifies the democratic fabric (Hooghe & Marien, 2013).

Mandatory voting has the ability to advance political equality, which is another important benefit (Lijphart, 1997). Voter turnout is disproportionately low among marginalized groups, including minorities, young people, and those with low incomes, in many democracies. This discrepancy, often called the "responsiveness gap," tilts political representation and governance in favor of regular voters (Hill, 2006; Brady et al., 1995). By guaranteeing a high and steady attendance across all demographic groupings, mandatory voting solves this problem. For instance, Australian empirical data shows that mandatory voting dramatically lowers socioeconomic differences in turnout, resulting in more fair representation and policy outcomes that better meet the interests of underserved groups (Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998; Jackman, 2001). By guaranteeing that election results represent the will of a wide and diverse population, mandatory voting also strengthens democratic legitimacy. A high turnout encourages public confidence in democratic institutions by demonstrating that governments are empowered by a mandate that is truly representative (Franklin, 2004; Blais & Achen, 2019). Nations that have made voting essential frequently express stronger trust in their political systems and better levels of satisfaction with democracy (Fowler, 2013; Singh, 2011). Advocates contend that this enhanced legitimacy contributes to political stability and efficient governance by fortifying the social compact between the people and the government (Birch, 2009; Lijphart, 1997).

Even among those who agree with its objectives, mandatory voting has its detractors notwithstanding these advantages. One prevalent worry is that by making people engage in a

process they might not support or appreciate, it violates their right to individual liberty (Lever, 2010; Brennan, 2011). In response to this criticism, proponents stress that voting requirements do not force people to back certain politicians or laws. Rather, it forces them to participate in the process, enabling them to symbolically abstain by casting blank or illegitimate votes (Lijphart, 1997; Engelen, 2007). This balance maintains individual liberty while highlighting the advantages of widespread involvement for all. Mandatory voting is also criticized for having the ability to skew election results by encouraging illiterate or distracted voters to cast random ballots (Selb & Lachat, 2009). Proponents argue that voter education programs and easily accessible information about candidates and policies can help reduce such dangers (Birch, 2009; Singh, 2011). Furthermore, they contend that the advantages of a large turnout and greater representation exceed any possible disadvantages of voting without sufficient knowledge (Hill, 2006; Fowler, 2013).

In conclusion, mandatory voting presents a convincing framework for tackling the issues of inequality, weakened legitimacy, and political disengagement. Proponents contend that careful policy design and public education can allay legitimate worries about individual liberty and the quality of participation (Blais, 2000; Birch, 2009). Mandatory voting has the ability to improve democracy and guarantee that it continues to be responsive to all citizens by addressing voting as both a right and a responsibility (Lijphart, 1997; Hill, 2006). Empirical evidence from countries like Australia and Belgium supports the notion that mandatory voting reduces inequalities in turnout, enhances democratic legitimacy, and fosters political stability (Fowler, 2013; Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998).

Arguments against mandatory voting

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Significant concerns are raised by opponents of compelled voting over its effects on democratic values, the caliber of voter turnout, and its inability to address more fundamental structural problems. These arguments highlight how difficult it is to strike a balance between individual liberties and civic duty in democracies.

Mandatory voting is frequently criticized for allegedly violating people's right to personal freedom. The idea of personal autonomy, which encompasses the freedom to choose whether and how to participate in the political process, is fundamental to democracy (Brennan, 2011; Lever, 2010). Opponents contend that forcing people to cast ballots undermines the free aspect of democratic participation by imposing a moral obligation where none may exist (Hill, 2006). Some people may intentionally choose not to cast a ballot as a way of expressing their displeasure with the political system, the candidates, or the election procedure itself (Engelen, 2007). Governments run the risk of forcing people to do something that may not be consistent with their political beliefs or personal convictions by requiring participation (Lijphart, 1997).

The possible dilution of electoral quality is another major worry. Opponents argue that making disinterested or ignorant people cast ballots could result in arbitrary or careless decisions (Birch, 2009; Selb & Lachat, 2009). They contend that such involvement may actually obfuscate the preferences of more knowledgeable and involved voters rather than improving the democratic process. This concern has been brought to light by empirical research, which indicates that required voting procedures may increase the percentage of "random" votes, skewing election results (Singh, 2011; Jackman, 2001). Opponents also warn that requiring voting could encourage populist candidates who use straightforward rhetoric to win over voters who lack knowledge, thereby deepening political divisions and stifling thoughtful policy discussions (Huntington, 1996).

Opponents contend that mandatory voting ignores the structural obstacles that lead to low turnout, in addition to individual and participatory issues. Voter apathy is frequently caused

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by socioeconomic disparities, political disenfranchisement, and limited access to resources or education (Franklin, 2004; Brady et al., 1995). Voter pressure is viewed as a band-aid approach that hides more serious injustices if these systemic problems are not addressed. For instance, research indicates that differences in political engagement and understanding still exist, especially among excluded people, even when nations like Australia have achieved high turnout through required voting (Fowler, 2013; Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998). This data emphasizes the necessity of all-encompassing reforms that address the underlying reasons of disengagement without resorting to coercion (Hill, 2006).

Opponents of mandatory voting point to alternatives that prioritize systemic change and voluntary participation as a way to overcome its drawbacks. Implementing voter education initiatives to raise political knowledge and literacy is one such strategy (Milner, 2010; Galston, 2001). These programs can encourage sincere and informed engagement by equipping citizens with the information and abilities necessary to successfully navigate the political process. Enhancing voting accessibility through initiatives like same-day registration, more early voting options, and the use of digital platforms is another tactic (Griffin & Ebert, 2018). All citizens can participate more easily with these reforms, which can also lower logistical obstacles. Critics also stress the significance of tackling more general problems of inequality and political disenfranchisement (Norris, 2003).

By ensuring that minority views are better reflected in legislatures, for instance, proportional representation systems can raise the perceived importance of voting for underrepresented groups (Lundberg, 2018). In a similar vein, measures to improve social welfare and lessen economic inequality can foster a more just society where everyone feels encouraged to take part in the democratic process (Bartels, 2008; Brady et al., 1995).

In conclusion, proponents contend that mandatory voting runs the risk of eroding individual liberties, lowering the standard of elections, and failing to overcome structural

obstacles to participation (Lever, 2010; Brennan, 2011). Alternative strategies provide a means of revitalizing democracy while preserving its fundamental values of liberty and inclusivity by emphasizing voluntary participation, voter education, and structural change (Norris, 2003; Milner, 2010). These strategies focus on addressing systemic issues such as socioeconomic inequality and political disenfranchisement while fostering informed and engaged participation (Bartels, 2008; Griffin & Ebert, 2018).

Reconciling the perspectives

Notwithstanding the glaring disparities in their strategies, supporters and opponents of mandatory voting agree that strengthening democratic systems through more civic participation and guaranteeing that every person has a say in governance is their shared objective (Lijphart, 1997; Fowler, 2013). This common goal offers a chance to overcome differences and investigate hybrid solutions that include the best features of both viewpoints.

The need to increase political engagement is one area where everyone agrees. Both parties acknowledge that dwindling voter turnout is a sign of more serious problems, such as systematic obstacles to participation and political cynicism (Franklin, 2004; Norris, 2003). Reforms that transcend the dichotomy of required versus voluntary voting are necessary to address these underlying problems. For example, boosting funding for civic education can enable citizens to participate meaningfully and intelligently in politics by equipping them with the information and abilities they need to do so (Galston, 2001; Milner, 2010). A more politically literate electorate can be achieved via educational activities that start in schools and spread to community programs, closing engagement gaps across demographic and socioeconomic divides (Griffin & Ebert, 2018). There is also agreement on the significance of increasing voting accessibility. For a long time, opponents of mandatory voting have pushed

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for workable changes that remove administrative barriers, like extending early voting hours, establishing digital voting platforms, and allowing same-day registration (Bentele & O'Brien, 2013). By addressing many of the obstacles that prevent people from voting, these policies can guarantee that participation is easy and inclusive (Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998). These programs can be endorsed by proponents of mandatory voting as a supplement to their objective of raising voter turnout (Singh, 2011).

The use of hybrid strategies that encourage voluntary involvement presents a viable compromise. To promote voting without penalizing non-participation, governments could, for instance, implement positive incentives like tax credits, public recognition, or even modest financial awards (Birch, 2009; Lundberg, 2018). These actions encourage more participation while upholding individual sovereignty. A balance between inclusion and freedom can also be achieved by implementing systems that incorporate aspects of both required and voluntary voting, such as mandating participation in first elections but permitting abstention in subsequent rounds (Fowler, 2013). Another crucial area for cooperation is addressing systemic obstacles to participation. Both supporters and detractors concur that political disenfranchisement and socioeconomic disparities pose serious barriers to democratic participation (Brady et al., 1995; Bartels, 2008). All citizens can feel more empowered to engage in society if policies are implemented to improve social welfare, lessen economic inequality, and increase representation for minority groups (Norris, 2003; Griffin & Ebert, 2018). Proportional representation systems, for instance, can guarantee that a range of viewpoints are heard in legislatures, increasing the relevance and accessibility of the political process for marginalized people (Lundberg, 2018).

In the end, bringing disparate viewpoints on mandatory voting into harmony calls for a dedication to democratic principles that place an equal emphasis on freedom and inclusivity. Societies can create election systems that respect individual autonomy and solve dwindling

turnout by concentrating on common objectives and taking a practical approach (Lever, 2010; Galston, 2001). A route to reviving democracy that keeps it strong, just, and sensitive to the interests of all citizens is provided by hybrid solutions that integrate the best features of both viewpoints.

Conclusion

A larger battle to strike a balance between the conflicting principles of individual freedom and group responsibility within democratic regimes is embodied in the discussion around mandatory voting. Proponents point out that by guaranteeing a high and representative voter turnout, mandatory voting can strengthen democratic legitimacy, advance political equality, and improve civic engagement (Lijphart, 1997; Birch, 2009). Mandatory voting policies can address important issues, including socioeconomic gaps in turnout and waning public trust in democratic institutions, according to empirical evidence from nations with such systems (Fowler, 2013; Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998). However, detractors point out the dangers of violating people's rights, lowering the standard of voting, and ignoring the underlying reasons why people aren't voting (Lever, 2010; Brennan, 2011). They contend that tackling underlying obstacles like economic inequality and political disenfranchisement provides a more long-term solution to decreased turnout and that true democratic engagement cannot be forced (Bartels, 2008; Brady et al., 1995).

Combining the advantages of both viewpoints will lead to a balanced future. Increased turnout and equal representation can be attained without sacrificing individual liberty through hybrid strategies that improve accessibility, improve voter education, and provide incentives for volunteer involvement (Singh, 2011; Milner, 2010). Democratic institutions can be further strengthened and made resilient to contemporary challenges by implementing policies that

address systematic imbalances and promote a culture of civic duty (Franklin, 2004; Norris, 2003). Societies can create electoral systems that represent the individual liberties and group goals that characterize democracy by adopting these options. By reaffirming the fundamentals of democratic governance, such a strategy guarantees that it will continue to be inclusive, participative, and sensitive to the many needs of its constituents (Galston, 2001).

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