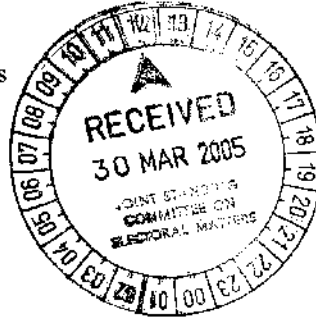# Compulsory Voting and Turnout.

Lisa Hill and Jonathon Louth.

Politics Discipline
School of History and Politics
University of Adelaide
Adelaide, SA
5005

Tel: 61 8 8303 4608
Fax: 61 8 8303 3443

Summary. This submission deals with the relationship between voting turnout levels and compulsory voting. Specifically, we show how the use of insufficiently broken down statistics can lead to under-estimations of the effectiveness of compulsory voting laws at raising and maintaining turnout.

In 1924 compulsory voting (CV) was introduced in Australia to address the problem of low voter turnout. It proved to be an extremely effective remedy. At the last Federal election immediately prior to the introduction of compulsory voting (1922) the average[1] turnout of registered voters (RV) was 58.67%. But turnout at the first federal election after 1924 (ie in 1925) surged dramatically to an average[2] of 91.35% (RV). In the post-war period the average turnout rate has been around 83% of voting age population (VAP) and 94.51% of registered voters.

Despite these impressive results the effectiveness of compulsory voting laws at raising and maintaining high turnout levels is sometimes put in doubt by the use of aggregate level data that is insufficiently broken down or disaggregated. Specifically, treating all compulsory voting regimes as a synthetic group can give rise to inaccurate perceptions of the performance of individual regimes like Australia's. We draw attention to the following example. Relying on aggregated statistics from the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) the JSCEM report on the conduct of

---

[1] Broken down by house: 57.95% for the Senate and 59.38% for the House of Representatives.
[2] Senate: 91.31%; House of Representatives: 91.38%.

1

the 2001 election noted only a 'small' improvement in VAP voting rates using the mandatory vote. The report, quoting from IDEA, noted:

> [A] somewhat surprising result of this study is that the 24 nations
>
> which have some element of compulsion associated with voting
>
> have only a small lead in turnout over the 147 nations without
>
> any compulsory voting (JSCEM, 2003, 5).

According to IDEA calculations, the mean VAP turnout for the compulsory voting group of nations stood at almost 70%, whilst the non-compulsory group was only 7 percentage points behind at 63%. In effect, the results are distorted because Australia and other well-established, systematically administered CV states are grouped with states that have only nominal elements of compulsory voting, such as a brief reference in the constitution to the requirement of citizens to vote (eg Venezuela). Many of the states identified as compulsory voting regimes either fail to enforce or lack the economic or institutional means to properly support compulsory voting. Some of these are new and semi-democracies in a state of economic development where good turnout levels may be hard to achieve at the best of times, while others impose suffrage restrictions that depress turnout regardless.[3] According to our own reckoning, no more than 17 regimes (out of a potential 30) can properly be described as being compulsory because it is rare to see the practice used with reasonable levels of enforcement and institutional support. This list can be further reduced to four (or five with the inclusion of the Netherlands prior to 1970) when restricted to developed states with a history of well-established democratic norms and systematic administration of CV.

---

[3] For example, in Egypt voting is compulsory only for men. Further, undischarged bankrupts are prohibited from voting. Turnout hovers in the 30% and below range. In Greece and Brazil voting is not compulsory for people over 70.

Table 1: Voter Turnout in Three Strictly Enforced Compulsory Voting Regimes [a]

Time Series Elections[b]	Australia (AV) [c] 1983-1998		Belgium (PR)[d] 1978-1999		Netherlands (PR) 1946-1967		Totals	
	RV	VAP	RV	VAP	RV	VAP	RV	VAP
1	94.63%	81.24%	94.87%	87.78%	93.12%	85.47%	94.21%	84.83%
2	94.19%	84.20%	94.56%	94.31%	93.67%	85.14%	94.14%	87.88%
3	93.84%	84.14%	93.59%	86.32%	94.98%	86.87%	94.14%	85.78%
4	95.31%	82.09%	93.38%	86.49%	95.50%	88.07%	94.73%	85.55%
5	95.75%	83.43%	92.71%	85.10%	95.57%	88.76%	94.68%	85.76%
6	95.83%	82.54%	91.15%	83.20%	95.13%	87.95%	94.04%	84.56%
7	95.19%	81.75%	90.58%	83.15%	94.95%	92.07%	93.57%	85.66%
Average	94.96%	82.77%	92.98%	86.62%	94.70%	87.76%	94.21%	85.72%

[a]   The three countries represent properly institutionalised and strictly enforced compulsory voting supported by well-administered automatic or compulsory registration methods. They are also wealthy states (ranked by GDP per capita) and are all of a significant population size. Just as small states like Malta and the Seychelles should not be used as exemplary of the potential of voluntary voting, compulsory regimes like Luxembourg, Uruguay, Liechtenstein and Cyprus (to a lesser degree) are not fully representative of the potential of compulsory voting laws. They have thus been excluded. Further, neither Uruguay nor Cyprus have enjoyed a long enough period of electoral stability to be included in a 7 election time series. Finally the integrity of Uruguay's registration system is questionable whilst that of Cyprus is voluntary

[b]   Time series are for the last seven election when both RV and VAP figures have been recorded.

[c]   AV – Alternative Vote based on a preferential majority system. Like the US, UK and Canada, Australia's electoral system employs single member districts. But it uses PR for its upper houses.

[d]   Although decline seems evident in Belgium the most recent election (2003) saw a RV turnout of 96.35%, representing the highest turnout in the post-World War II era. VAP statistics are not yet available for that election

Source: International IDEA, available at http://www.idea.int

Table 1 illustrates that when three democratically established CV countries (with

good institutional support and enforcement) are grouped together the average VAP

turnout is almost 86%, 23 percentage points higher than IDEA's voluntary figure of

63% and 16 points higher that its CV figure. The picture becomes even more clear

when three developing CV regimes (**Table 2**) with little or no enforcement are

grouped together. Here the VAP turnout rate is just over 57% - significantly *less* than

the voluntary voting average and despite the fact that all of them use some variation

of PR. Similarly, in semi-democratic compulsory voting regimes like Singapore levels

of voting are actually lower than for similar regimes without compulsion. This

highlights the pitfalls of using aggregate data from states that have vastly different

levels of institutional support and democratic development.

Table 2: Voter Turnout in Three Weak or No Enforcement Compulsory Voting Regimes

Time Series Elections [a]	Mexico (MMP) 1982-2000		Ecuador (PR) 1984-1998		Bolivia (MMP) [b] 1980-2002		Totals	
	RV	VAP	RV	VAP	RV	VAP	RV	VAP
1	72.56%	63.82%	71.15%	56.06%	~	~	71.86%	59.94%
2	51.82%	45.11%	74.02%	64.93%	74.32%	59.11%	66.72%	56.38%
3	49.43%	41.37%	77.65%	67.03%	81.97%	65.15%	69.68%	57.85%
4	61.11%	49.99%	69.42%	64.88%	73.66%	50.98%	68.06%	55.22%
5	77.73%	65.89%	65.49%	66.30%	72.16%	50.01%	71.79%	60.73%
6	57.69%	54.36%	67.87%	67.83%	71.36%	64.54%	65.64%	62.24%
7	57.24%	48.20%	47.25%	48.49%	72.06%	~	58.85%	48.35%
Average	61.08%	52.68%	67.55%	62.19%	74.26%	62.53%	67.52%	57.24%

[a] Time series are for the last seven election when both RV and VAP figures have been recorded.
[b] Election data for Bolivia prior to 1980 has not been used due to disturbances to the electoral process before that date.

Source: International IDEA, available at http://www.idea.int

Conclusion.

When it is as administered as well as it is in Australia, compulsory voting is the most efficient and effective means for raising and maintaining high voter turnout. In fact, as Arend Lijphart has noted, compulsory voting is the *only* institutional mechanism that can achieve turnout rates of 90% and above on its own (Lijphart, 2001, 74). Although the effectiveness of compulsory voting is subject to variation (Hirczy, 1994, 64) nevertheless, under the right conditions, its power to raise and maintain voting turnout is undeniable (Franklin, 1999, 206; Hirczy, 1994, 64 and Gordon and Segura, 1997, 132).

References.

Franklin, Mark N. 1999. 'Electoral Engineering and Cross-national Turnout Differences: What Role for Compulsory Voting' *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 29, pp. 205-224.

Gordon, Stacy B. and Segura, Gary M., 1997 'Cross-National Variation in the Political Sophistication of Individuals: Capabilities or Choice?", *Journal of Politics*, 59, no. 1, 1997, pp. 126-147

Hirczy, W. 1994. 'The Impact of Mandatory Voting Laws on Turnout: A Quasi-Experimental Approach', *Electoral Studies*, 13 (1), pp. 64-76

Jackman, S. 2001. 'Voting: Compulsory', *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Editors-in-chief, Neil J. Smelser, Paul B. Baltes Oxford : Elsevier Science.

JSCEM (Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters). 2003. 'The 2001 Federal Election: Report of the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2001 Federal Election, and Matters Related Thereto' The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, June, 2003

Lijphart, A. 2001. 'Compulsory Voting is the Best Way to Keep Democracy Strong', Chapter 5, in *Points of View*, 8th Ed., Edited by DiClerico, Robert E. and Hammock, Allan S., New York: McGraw-Hill.