

Compulsory voting is our last line of defence against right-wing populism

Compulsory voting would have seen Clinton voted into office instead of Trump, and stopped Brexit from going ahead. Australian politics is not in a good place, but it could certainly be worse.

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There are two theories about what stands between Australia and the resurgent right-wing populism currently enveloping the world's formerly sane democracies. The first is that Australia is protected by our latent common sense, the understated wisdom of the bush cocky and the netball mum. That we see bullshit before it comes around the corner, and we discard the fools who spout it.

The other, less romantic theory is that our last line of defence is the compulsory vote. It's also the correct one.

So why are we one of the only countries with compulsory voting, and what difference does it really make?

Alternative history

Trump won the 2016 presidential election with 3 million fewer votes than Hillary Clinton. The voter turnout was 61% nationwide. There were, however, enormous demographic differences in that statistic. For older people, the turnout rate was around 70%, compared to 62% for gen X and 51% for millennials. 65% of white voters turned out, but 60% of black, 49% of Asian and 47% of Hispanic voters did. The simple mathematical reality is that voting turnout was materially lower among groups who would be considered more likely to vote against Trump, if they voted at all.

As for Brexit, which succeeded by a margin of 52% to 48%, the age-based gulf was enormous. The youngest cohort, aged 18-24, voted 73% to Remain; however, only 43% of them voted. The oldest group, 65 years plus, voted 60% to Leave, with a 78% turnout rate. In fact there was a direct opposite correlation through all age groups such that, the older voters were, the more likely they were to vote, and the more likely to vote for Leave.

The point is clear enough: the two most seismic global victories for right-wing populism in recent history would have been reversed if voting had been compulsory.

How did we get here?

It was in 1924 that a bill was presented to Parliament to introduce compulsory voting to Australia, passing with bipartisan support. The states followed suit subsequently. The background was that voters had been rapidly losing their will to vote, with the turnout dropping below 60% at the 1922 federal election. Senator Herbert Payne was appalled and put up his private member's bill to prevent what he called "a travesty on democratic government".

The senator put the case for compulsory voting in terms on which it would be difficult to improve:

Parliament is supposed to be a reflex of the mind of the people. If the people exhibit no interest in the selection of their representatives, it must necessarily follow, in the course of time, that there must be considerable deterioration in the nature of the laws governing the social and economic development of this country.

In other words, you get what you vote for; and, if you don't vote at all, you can expect a pretty crap result.

Much of the debate at the time and since has centred around the nature of privilege and rights: whether voting is an optional privilege or a civic duty; whether the rights which our democratic system guarantees imply a concomitant duty to participate in that system.

These are interesting questions of abstract philosophy. There is a more urgent practicality however, which Payne nailed, regarding what really happens when people do or don't vote.

In a system of voluntary voting, the key question is not how people vote but whether they vote at all. A passing familiarity with US democracy is enough to know that, over there, most of the effort that the Republicans and Democrats expend is on “getting out the vote”. Meaning, their vote. Every election in America is essentially determined by the raw statistic of which side was more successful in motivating their “base” to vote. There are lots of complicating factors including voter suppression and outrageous gerrymandering of districts (almost all in favour of the Republican Party), but the central proposition holds.

Australian politics is hardly in a good place, and the current election campaign is just embarrassing. Most voters haven’t tuned in and don’t want to. The broad exceptions to this are older conservative voters, younger progressive (and vengeful) voters, and all the variants of the lunatic fringe including our adorably revived white supremacists. They’ll all be marking their ballot papers with angry pencils.

If that mythical Aussie common sense lives anywhere, then it is among the masses of the politically disengaged, who would nevertheless rather not be governed by anyone who froths at the mouth. If not forced to vote, a lot of them won’t. We are protected by the rule that they must.