Challenging Compulsory Voting

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Challenging the Perceived Benefits of Compulsory Voting: An Experimental Case Study in Australia

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Abstract

The rise of populism is seen as a threat to the viability of liberal democracies. Low voter turnout is viewed as an avenue whereby extreme political groups can mobilise their constituencies to attain substantial representation with a relatively small proportion of the vote. High turnout is believed to counter such outcomes and in turn, compulsion to vote, to ensure high turnout, may contribute to stability of government. However, compulsory voting conflicts with the broader value of freedom of action and may induce voting without an understanding of the values which underpin democracy. We report an experimental case study to create conflict within voters in a country, Australia, in which voting is compulsory. We use the process of indirect persuasion (McGuire, 1960b), where an appeal to an underlying value can circumvent resistance to an explicit appeal, to effect belief change. Australian undergraduates of voting age either received an indirect attack appealing to values related to freedom, or a direct attack, to endorse a non-compulsory voting system. Belief in the practice of compulsory voting remained strong, but the indirect attack resulted in greater agreement with attitudes to dispose of the current system, thereby challenging compulsion. The introduction of compulsory voting brings with it a need to appreciate fundamental issues to ensure that benefits outweigh the threats.

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Recent political events in western liberal democracies have led to concerns about the rise of authoritarian populist movements. Drache and Froese (2022) list the many threats to the operation of liberal democracies
which can result from the emergence of populist parties. They point to the effect of voter turnout, with “undecided voters”, who look to alternatives and consider different arguments, deciding not to vote, failing therefore to moderate the influence of the more extremist voters who are more motivated to cast their ballot. With voluntary systems of voting, the success of extremist movements may be a function of relatively low level of turnout of voters. Voter turnout in the Presidential election in the United States of America in 2016 was 54% of those eligible and in 2020 62%, while in the general election in the United Kingdom in 2015 it was 66% and in 2019 it was 67%. Higher turnout is seen as a means whereby greater numbers of moderate voters may act to dampen the effect of extreme positions (MacCallum, 2013). Arguments to enlarge the turnout have suggested that the suffrage be extended to citizens under the age of eighteen (Oosterhoff, Wray-Lake & Hart, 2022) and in the United Kingdom to under the age of sixteen. Another solution, practiced in very few democratic countries, is to make voting compulsory.

Australia has had a compulsory voting system for over a century, celebrated as a central feature of the democratic process, setting it apart from other democracies (Brett, 2019) with its existence cited as a factor supporting the health of democracy (Khalil, 2022). Australia is also the sole Western democracy where voters can be fined for failure to vote when they cannot account satisfactorily to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) for that failure. Failure to vote initially brings a notification, followed by a fine of 20AUD if an explanation is deemed by the AEC not to be acceptable. Failure to pay the fine can lead to an appearance in court, a fine of 220AUD (plus court fees) and the further threat of a court record of a civil offence. These are not trivial consequences. The system is accepted by the population and Australians express surprise that other countries practice voluntary voting (Kent, 2012; MacCallum, 2013; Taylor, 2012). It is a frequently expressed that voting is a responsibility of citizenship and failure to do so is frowned upon.

Compulsion to attend a ballot, however, does not require compulsion to register a valid vote. It is entirely legal, in a secret ballot, to submit a blank or spoiled ballot paper (the “informal vote”). However, there is no advice provided by Australian governments that a person may render a non-vote or abstain. Even the term “informal” carries the pejorative sense that the process of voting has not been thought through or that the person making such a vote did not understand the system. In Australia, there are no instructions in the electoral process to explain that the casting of an invalid ballot carries with it no penalty (McGuinness, 2011) and amendments to the electoral law in 1992 made it illegal to advocate an informal vote. The actual rate of “informal” voting in Australia is typically around 5%.

The system in Australia, therefore, creates a sense that compulsion requires the registration of a valid vote even if the voter may not have engaged with the policies presented by the contesting parties and may have an incomplete conception of what are the consequences of voting. It may thus fail pragmatically to induce a sense of engagement in the political system which it was designed to enhance. Recent commentary has questioned the use of compulsion. A senior Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey, for example, has stated that “the custom makes light of democracy” (quoted in The Australian newspaper, 2nd August, 2019) on the grounds that being forced to vote (and register a valid vote) can carry with it an ignorance of the issues upon which voters are asked to decide.

If we compare the voter turnout in recent elections in Australia with that in a comparable country with the Westminster system of representation in a lower house of the parliament, namely the United Kingdom, we can calculate the probable effect of the compulsion to vote on the actual valid turnout. The last two elections in the United Kingdom for representation in the House of Commons saw an average turnout of 66.5%. In Australia the last two Federal elections for the House of Representatives, saw an average turnout, reported by the AEC, of 90.9%. This can be reduced for Australian data to 85.5% by considering the proportion of “informal” votes cast. This shows a likely effect of compulsion to vote to affect 19% of the electorate, possibly undecided voters who were required to vote. That is, approximately one-fifth of the Australian electorate voted who in other less restricted circumstances would not have voted and who, yet, cast a valid vote.

The practice of compulsory voting raises philosophical concerns at a deep level, in the ostensible relationship between the concepts of voting and freedom. The Australian political system places two concepts, freedom
of expression to vote and compulsion to cast a vote, side by side and serves to contrast them. The right to freedom of expression is recognised as a human right in international human rights law in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 19 of the ICCPR states that "everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference" and "everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice". By making voting compulsory, the doctrine itself is infringed. Almost twenty percent of Australian voters are casting their ballot where otherwise they may have abstained. How valid are the votes in these circumstances? Valid and well considered or unconsidered and less valid a representation of their response to the arguments advanced by all political parties?

The current research examined how the presentation of a conflict between freedom of expression and compulsion to vote may act to induce a re-examination of the value of compulsory voting. Eligible voters in Australia were presented with an expression of the conflict between a general value of freedom, explicit in Australian culture, and the specific rule that a vote must be exercised at the ballot box, to examine how voters may be induced to think about and act upon the values of freedom and the right to vote and, therefore, consider the possibility of change in the electoral system.

Note on the Conceptual Nature of Case Study

We use the case of Australia as a study in the way advocated by Campbell (1975), namely that a case study can provide a strong foundation to test a hypothesis, when the variables are clear and the boundary conditions are relevant and explicit and enables an ability to draw out the factors most effective to understand the phenomenon (Yin, 2002; Markova, 2014). Many case studies present hypothetical cases to identify putative cause and effect relationships. This may result in lesser engagement with the choice required to be made. In the case of Australia, compulsory voting is neither a hypothetical nor an insignificant variable; it is the law to which all those eligible to vote must ascribe. Therefore, it is a test case to examine conflict between beliefs that have real consequences for the beliefs of the voters.

Direct and Indirect Persuasion

A factor in the effectiveness of persuasion lies in the degree to which a persuasive attempt is made explicitly or implicitly. McGuire (1960b) showed that when a person is presented with a message with an explicit agenda, the person may act to reduce any resultant dissonance in two ways. A direct attack upon a value is likely to encounter the most resistance and be least effective, due to an automatic propensity to reject arguments that are novel (McGuire, 1960b; McGuire 1964) and may also result in counter-arguing if sufficient thought has been given to the creation of counterarguments (Blankenship et. al, 2012, Maio & Olson, 1998). If, however, an implicit, but logically related issue, is attached to the message, this can provoke change. McGuire’s technique, illustrating ‘Socratic’ reasoning, exposes the person’s opinions on logically related issues, sensitising them to inconsistencies, to result in deeper cognitive processing of the message and produce a subsequent change towards consistency (cf. McGuire, 1960a; McGuire & McGuire, 1991). Subsequently, less resistance to the message is generated as the recipient may believe that they are arriving at their own conclusions.

McGuire (1960b) relates direct and indirect appeals to another feature of beliefs, namely the extent to which they may be held without valid support, referring to them as ‘cultural truisms’. A truism can be defined as an ingrained idea that is cognitively unchallenged; individuals have a high agreement with them, but they have minimal cognitive support (Maio & Olson, 1998). A lack of questioning prevents an individual from building arguments to support their views; they exist in a state susceptible to change. Watts (2018) makes a similar argument for the usage of the term “commonsense” in a political context. John Stuart Mill stated over 160 years ago, “He who knows only his own case knows little of that” (On Liberty).

Maio and Olson (1998) proposed that the concept of truisms is ‘a valid metaphor for values’ (pg. 294). They suggest that central values may be widely shared and rarely questioned and therefore are empty of cognitive and social support; they function like truisms and motivate behaviour unthinkingly. Schwartz (1996) also
suggested that values serve basic universal human needs, and people may rarely be placed in situations that require them to question them.

Such a void in arguments supporting beliefs may render beliefs susceptible to attack as people cannot counter-argue effectively (McGuire, 1964). This research has become highly salient in recent times in association with general concerns with the politics and effects of “misinformation” and the consequent suggestion of the value that “pre-bunking” of information, rather than “debunking”, may be especially effective in preventing the spread of incorrect “facts” (Basol, Rozenbeek & van der Linden, 2020). McGuire tested the vulnerability of common health beliefs, using the analogy of providing weak versions of counterarguments to participants (hosts), as a form of “immunisation” to later viral attack. The participants’ endorsement of a proposed change in belief was changed dramatically after a full-scale attack on their previously unchallenged beliefs. The effects of the arguments were eliminated, however, if participants had received prior messages that motivated and enabled counterarguments to be generated (McGuire, 1964).

McGuire acknowledged that the beliefs used in this research were of relatively minor importance and changing them would be much easier than more important ego relevant beliefs. Maio and Olson (1998) also suggest that ego-relevant beliefs may be less susceptible to attack, even if still bereft of cognitive support. We take the case of compulsory voting, a fundamental right of participation in democracy in Australia, as a case of a central belief that is also, in effect, a truism in that it is not challenged in political debate. A test of the ability of an indirect appeal to produce change in such a central belief is therefore a powerful one. Does the centrality of the belief constitute a defence? Or may a central belief still be susceptible to change through attack from novel arguments? Recent work has explored the role of argumentation and counter-argumentation in the case of contested “truisms” (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Pfau, 1997), but in this case we are concerned with a belief which is consensually held across large segments of the voting population and barely ever challenged.

Method

Ethics and consent

Ethics approval was obtained from the Internal Ethics Committee of the Australian College of Applied Psychology. Participants were informed that they were free to leave at any time during the procedure and they were given advice about whom they could contact if they felt uncomfortable at any time during the procedures.

Participants

A sample of 105 first year, under-graduate psychology students completed the online survey for course credit. All were over the age of 18 and therefore eligible to vote (M_age = 31 years). A total of 81 females and 24 males were recruited.

Materials

Participants were led to question their values associated with the central belief of the value of compulsory voting. They received either a passage which directly attacked a value in support of change or an indirect passage which attacked a different, but related value. The direct message was an explicit appeal to dispense with compulsory voting or endorse a less punitive approach, using strong statements and facts which highlight Australia’s minority position, globally, on the policy. This attack highlighted the uniqueness and virtues of the Australian system to increase reactance and resistance to the message. The indirect attack did not explicitly refer to compulsory voting but emphasised the virtue of freedom as a fundamental value within the Australian constitution.

A post stimulus persuasion measure consisted of 3 questions on a 7-point Likert-type scale. For ‘Works well’ participants indicated their agreement that the current system works well. This item was reverse scored with higher numbers indicating a greater degree of dissatisfaction with the current electoral system. For ‘Lesser
sanctions’ participants indicated their agreement on a statement endorsing lesser sanctions on failing to vote. Higher numbers indicated greater persuasion. For ‘Dispose of’ participants indicated their agreement on a statement on the disposal of the compulsory voting system.

Measures of participants’ confidence levels were also gauged for each question using a 5-point Likert type scale following each question. Participants reported the extent to which they were confident (1 = not at all confident, 5 = highly confident) in their attitude towards each of the statements.

**Design and Analysis**

The resulting design compared the nature of the attack (either direct or indirect) on the 99 remaining participants after outliers were removed.

**Procedure**

Participants read a brief introduction regarding the contents of the survey identified online as a survey regarding voting and values amongst a number of other experiments. By agreeing to participate, participants were directed to an external site to begin. Participants then read another disclaimer regarding rights to privacy and right to withdraw. No participants withdrew after reading these instructions. All participants read a brief introduction regarding the topic of interest being voting and values.

Participants moved on to a passage taken from the Australian Electoral Commission explaining the nature of compulsory voting. Participants were then randomly subjected either to a direct or indirect passage. Half received an indirect attack and were made to contemplate higher values of freedom and voting and participants and then allowed at their own discretion, to move on to the next stimuli. The other half of participants received an argument that Australia was an outlier within western democracies whereby voting was compulsory and argued for a change in the law to bring the country into line with others. Participants were allowed to navigate back and forward through pages at their own discretion. They were then informed they would be asked questions regarding their opinions on voting in Australia. All participants received the same post stimuli questionnaire indicating their opinions and confidence ratings. The survey was designed to make a response necessary for each question, including confidence, to progress and complete the survey. Finally, participants were thanked, provided contact details for any query or to facilitate a withdrawal of their data.

**Results**

Generally low means on the ‘dispose of’ and ‘system discontent’ scale indicate that despite the appeal, there remained some apprehension about and resistance towards a non-compulsory voting system. A mean of 3.2 for indirect attack on the ‘dispose of’ scale, indicates on average, participants ‘slightly disagree’ that there should be a disposal of compulsory voting altogether, moving up from ‘strongly disagree’ if directly attacked. This position may be generally reflective of society’s consensus position.

**Correlation Analyses**

Correlations were computed between items. A strong positive correlation, \( r = .73, \ n=99, \ p < .001 \) was found between the two items, ‘dispose of’ and ‘works well’ (reverse scored). As participants expressed discontentment with the current system, they were in favour of disposing of it. The items were combined into a single scale, named the ‘system discontent’ score. Higher scores on the scale indicated greater dissatisfaction with the current electoral system. The correlation between ‘Dispose of’ and ‘Lesser sanctions’ was not significant \( r = .08, \ n = 99, \ ns \) and the correlation between ‘Works well’ (Reversed) and ‘Lesser sanctions’ was also non-significant \( r = .12, \ n = 99, \ ns \). Univariate analyses of variance were carried out on the ‘lesser sanctions’ and the ‘system discontent’ scale.
Pearson correlations were also computed for each item and its respective confidence level. A weak yet significant correlation \( (r = .29, n = 99, p < .001) \) between attitude on ‘works well’ and the confidence in response suggests that as participants agree with the statement that the current system did not work well, they are more confident.

Results of an (attack type, direct or indirect) ANOVA on the measure ‘dispose of the system’ demonstrated a main effect for attack type \( F (1, 91) = 4.30, p = .041, n^2 = .045, \text{obs. power} = .53, \text{consistent with hypothesis} \). The mean for the indirect attack group was 3.38 and for the direct attack group was 2.61. Analysis of the effects on the measure of ‘lesser sanctions’ revealed no significant effects.

**Discussion**

Results confirmed the hypothesis that an attack on an underlying related variable will produce an attitude more in favour of the appeal (McGuire, 1960b). The ‘system discontent’ scale measured participants’ agreement on statements that the current electoral system is dysfunctional and a proposal to scrap the current electoral system in favour of one with a non-compulsory voting protocol. A significantly higher mean for the indirect attack condition indicates that when presented with an appeal targeted at the virtue of the value of freedom, participants were more in favour of disposing of the system in comparison to those directly attacked, consistent with McGuire (1960b). Participants in the direct attack group were presented a case including statistical figures, a case scenario and stronger, more direct statements in favour of removing the system. The direct, confrontational nature of the case is hypothesised to encounter the most resistance (McGuire, 1960b) and this was found with significantly lower means on the scale.

This study demonstrates the power of an indirect attack upon a feature of Australian life, namely compulsory voting, to affect a belief that is neither peripheral nor transient. The inherent paradox of compulsory voting in a society dedicated to freedom of expression provides an especially interesting site for the exploration of political persuasion and change and the interplay of values, beliefs, and actions. The data show that the participants were generally in favour of a system of compulsory voting; the indirect attack moved the respondents on average more towards the middle of the scale. That a single persuasive attack could result in this, however, even with a complex belief system associated with the system of voting, suggests that with further exposure to the importance of the value “freedom” respondents would be likely to further endorse a system away from compulsion to vote.

The study highlights a need to examine the cultural values upon which the democratic system is built. While compulsory voting may be regarded as desirable to maintain a stable democracy, the emphasis on compulsion, without education to relate to a system of values, may render it disconnected from reflection about its meaning. The reliance on compulsion to vote, without the provision of understanding of the reasons for voting in a democracy and its essential relationship to the value of freedom, may render the belief vulnerable to challenge and this may spread to other challenges about the arguments and beliefs that underlie the beliefs in the democratic process.

The induction of challenges to central values may be seen as a democratic pathway to belief change than that advocated by the idea of “nudging” citizens in what governments believe are “desirable” behaviour (Halpern, 2015), to demonstrate the power of what has been described as a “booster”, as opposed to a “nudge” (Hertwig & Grune-Yanoff, 2017) and to enable a person to think critically, and non-paternalistically about their behaviour as citizens (Barton & Grune-Yanoff, 2015). Possibly 20% of voters are indecisive in their voting intentions. They may be more liable to be influenced by arguments that can influence their vote and may be affected by arguments designed to emphasise indecision and possible lack of trust with mainstream politics, the basis of “populist” political parties.

Two final points should be made with respect to the degree to which we may generalise from this study. First, all participants were over eighteen years of age and therefore are required to vote: the issue connected directly with an action that occurs regularly in their lives. Second, while the participants were university students, in Australia the proportion of citizens in this age group in higher education is more than fifty per cent. There can be little concern that these results would not generalise to the general community within
Australia.

These results are limited to Australia; generalisation to countries without compulsory voting cannot be made. We tested the ability to create inconsistency in belief structures to influence central beliefs, within a particular society. These beliefs are, within Australia, non-trivial and the observed effects are therefore themselves not trivial. Compulsion to vote is not a necessarily a mechanism to enhance moderation. The compulsion to vote carries with it the possibility of insufficient appreciation of the issues at stake in an election. Voluntary voting, for those who do vote, may result in a greater understanding of the contrasting arguments in an election. Compulsory voting, which may appear to reduce volatility in voting patterns, does require that the citizenry be educated about the processes of democracy. A lack of understanding may be absent, however, due to a failure of voters to think actively about the process, and a lack of education in civics. Compulsion to vote need not result in immunity from the effects of “disinformation” portrayed on social media. Compulsory voting may not be the bulwark against populism in Australia that it is proclaimed to be. This study can stand as a warning about the importance of education of the electorate rather than the imposition of compulsion with the unmet expectation of benefits for the electoral process.

References


