

Compulsory Voting

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN
COMPULSORY VOTING
ELECTORAL MATTERS & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Compulsory voting acts to reduce the social bias in voter turnout. For many Australians, it represents the only way they can have a say in who forms government and what government does. In voluntary voting systems, it is the underprivileged and marginalised who do not vote.

“Compulsory voting is an integral part of Australian democracy at work. It serves to protect important democratic values such as political equality, legitimacy and accountability.”

Senator Andrew Murray
Spokesperson on
Electoral Matters & Public
Administration

Democrats Action Plan

Continue to fully support the practice of compulsory voting and oppose any proposal to introduce voluntary voting in Australia.

Compulsory Voting and Participatory Democracy

Compulsory voting has been the accepted practice since 1924 in all Australian State and Federal parliamentary elections. When it was first introduced, average voter turnout increased from 57.9% in 1925 to 91.3% in 1992 and has not fallen below 90% since that time.

Compulsory voting helps to ensure the expression of choice at least by a majority of voters and to guard against the opportunities for improper or illegal electoral practices, such as multiple voting or vote bribing.

Removing the obligation to vote is not simply a matter of freeing people from a most important civic duty. It represents a devaluing of the act of voting and a corresponding devaluing of the people's role in the system of government.

Arguments for Compulsory Voting

- Voting is a civic responsibility of citizens in a democratic society. Each citizen must take responsibility for who governs them and how they are governed.
- It ensures the expression of choice by all those eligible to vote and ensures, as far as possible, that parliaments are elected according to the will of all their citizens.
- It helps legitimise the electoral process and the parliament chosen by it.
- Social and political cohesion is promoted and alienation from the political process by the disadvantaged is diminished.
- It contributes to civic education and the entrenchment of civic values.



Other ACTION PLANS are available online at
www.democrats.org.au

Last updated 8/06/2007

Compulsory Voting

- Election campaigns focus on the issues and choices before the voters rather than concentrating on mechanisms to get people to the polls.
- It diminishes the opportunities for the exercise of corrupt, illegal and improper practices during elections.
- The involvement of all citizens in an election provides some protection against domination by the economically powerful and other interest groups.

Compulsory Voting and Individual Liberty

Whereas supporters of voluntary voting essentially argue that forcing people to vote is an impingement on their democratic right to choose, supporters of compulsory voting view it as a positive duty owed by each citizen to their society.

Compulsory voting cannot be considered an unusual or especially onerous requirement of citizens. The reality is that the compulsion to vote is not unique as it is but one of many other citizenship responsibilities accepted by governments and citizens; these include jury duty, giving evidence in courts proceedings, the payment of taxes and compulsory education.

In the same way that the payment of taxes is accepted as a sacrifice citizens must make to obtain various social services provided by a democratic system of government, the obligation to vote is accepted as a necessary duty to be fulfilled so that our system of democracy can be maintained.

What do Voters Think?

Although some Australians do resent having to attend a polling place, opinion polls have long shown solid community support for compulsory voting. Well-known academic political researchers, Malcolm Mackerras and Professor Ian McAllister, have consistently shown that polls taken over the years reveal community support for compulsory voting of between 60 and 70 percent.

Furthermore, Adelaide University's Lisa Hill, who has researched and written extensively on this topic notes:

The majority of Australians endorse compulsory voting and could be said to consent to the obligation to vote, not merely because they feel bound to obey the laws of a relatively just society, but because they apparently regard this particular law and its entailed obligations as a reasonable imposition on personal autonomy (*Federal Law Review*, vol 32(3), no.3, 2004, p494).

Note: Strictly speaking, the compulsion is to attend the polling booth and to sign off attendance. There is no compulsion to register a vote for a candidate or candidates.