

Monkey Cage

Compulsory voting can actually weaken support for democracy

By Shane Singh April 1

Following President Obama's [mention of compulsory voting](#) at a town hall event in Cleveland a couple weeks ago, the topic has received a lot of attention in the popular media. While Obama did not clearly suggest that the U.S. should implement compulsory voting, countries including [Bulgaria](#), [Colombia](#), and [India](#) have actively considered its adoption in recent months.

Scholarly research [finds a robust correlation](#) between compulsory voting and turnout rates. So turnout in the U.S. would very likely increase if abstention became illegal — although, as John Sides [recently noted](#), election outcomes may not systematically change. Compulsory voting could also have other effects, such as [reducing income inequality](#) and [enhancing political sophistication](#) in the electorate.

But my [ongoing research](#) suggests that compulsory voting also has a more troubling effect: it sours attitudes toward the democratic system among those who prefer to not to vote.

The reasoning is straightforward: when people are forced to do something that they don't want to do, they often come to dislike whoever is making them do it. So those who don't want to vote may come to have less favorable attitudes toward the political system that forces them to vote.

The graph below shows this fact, drawing on [AmericasBarometer](#) survey data from Central America, North America, South America and the Caribbean. Fourteen of the countries included here have some form of mandatory voting. I classify compulsory voting laws as nonexistent (voluntary voting), weak, or strong, depending on the severity of the penalty for abstention and the likelihood of enforcement. The bars represent the percentage of people who report being dissatisfied with democracy in each type of voting system. Red bars are used for individuals who prefer to abstain, and blue bars are used for those who are inclined to vote.

Unsurprisingly, those who prefer to abstain are more dissatisfied with democracy than those who prefer to vote, regardless of whether there is compulsory voting. But those who prefer to abstain are more dissatisfied in countries with strong compulsory voting.

Of course, this correlation does not demonstrate that adopting (or abandoning) compulsory voting would

necessarily cause attitudes toward democracy to change. However, I can get some additional leverage from this fact: in a handful of Latin American countries, senior citizens are exempted from the requirement to turn out. And I have found that this gap in satisfaction with democracy between those who prefer to abstain and those who prefer to turn out dissipates once people reach the age when their participation becomes voluntary.

In India, the Law Commission [recently ruled out compulsory voting](#) on the grounds that, among other things, it is “undemocratic.” In addition, in the dozens of opinion pieces on compulsory voting that have emerged in the United States in response to Obama’s comments in Ohio, a common theme is that the right to vote also includes a right *not* to vote. Infringing on any right not to vote could decrease satisfaction with democracy among those who would prefer to exercise that right.

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