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Vote



Research conducted by Newpoll for the Institute of Public Affairs indicates that there is only moderate community support for a change to voluntary voting, but that doesn't mean it shouldn't be seriously considered.

The poll, which was conducted from the 8-10 October 2010 and featured 1200 adults, showed 27 per cent of voters support voluntary voting, whilst 70 per cent prefer the status quo. Support was moderately higher among Coalition voters (30 per cent) and voters aged between 18-24 years (31 per cent).

But it would be wrong to read the results of this survey as the definitive answer in this debate. Whilst it is certainly true that Australia is a democracy where majority rules, Australia is also a liberal democracy that respects individual rights. And the fact that nearly one third of voters would like the option of not voting should not be overlooked.

The reality is that there are good reasons why Australia should consider embracing voluntary voting, and why democratic coercion is not only an oxymoron, but also a potentially negative force in Australian politics.

Supporters of compulsory voting typically argue that compulsory voting 'encourages' civic engagement and that a move to voluntary voting would lead to widespread disengagement from politics, with low turnout at elections, and a community disinterested in its own governance.

There is limited international evidence to support this. It's easy for supporters of compulsion to point to the United States—where voter turnout has rarely exceeded 60 per cent in modern presidential elections—and declare that voluntary voting would automatically lead to a dra-

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- voluntary voting

By James Paterson

matic drop in voter participation. But the United States isn't the only democracy to feature voluntary voting. In fact, of the 33 OECD members, only six countries have compulsory voting and actively enforce it. The other 27 either explicitly support voluntary voting (the overwhelming majority) or nominally have compulsory voting laws but rarely enforce them.

Turnout amongst these OECD countries with voluntary voting is much higher than one might expect, averaging almost 80 per cent. The two member countries most culturally similar to Australia—New Zealand and Canada—average 88 and 76 per cent turnout respectively.

It is important to also remember that compulsory voting does not guarantee 100 per cent turnout. For example, at the most recent federal election in Australia, an estimated 93 per cent of enrolled voters actually turned up on polling day to vote. Of those, more than five per cent either intentionally or accidentally cast an invalid vote. Furthermore, 'enrolled voters' is a subset of all eligible voters, as many adults fail to register to vote. So in practice, it is likely that Australia's turnout under compulsory voting is below 90 per cent.

There is little evidence that compulsory voting encourages civic engagement as opposed to simply forcing Australians with the threat of a fine to attend a polling booth on election day, and have their name marked off the electoral roll. Commentators have been quick to declare the result of the last federal election as a 'pox on both your houses' message from voters, and there have been an endless stream of critics who bemoaned the uninspiring offerings from both major parties. Indeed, the 'neither party deserves to win' catch-cry was all the rage among academics and the political commentariat during and after the election. Julia Gillard and the

Labor Party have been accused of an over-reliance on focus groups and polling to develop their policies, while Tony Abbott was criticised for his risk-averse campaign. Both parties also supposedly failed to deliver big-ticket, inspiring policy ideas and allegedly pandered to the lowest common denominator on a range of hot political issues.

Though it may seem counter-intuitive to some, adopting voluntary voting may be the cure for these widely perceived electoral ills. Compulsory voting entrenches a mentality in political parties that they must offend the least number of voters (or special interests) as possible, and it reduces political contests to an effort to appear as the 'least worst' option. That's because elections are decided by the most disengaged voters living in marginal seats, who are the most likely demographic to change their vote from the previous election. Almost all political activity is geared towards this small group of voters, who live in a clutch of mostly suburban and outer-suburban marginal seats in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. These voters wield disproportionately significant political influence, because it is their votes that actually change governments.

Voluntary voting would force both major parties to appeal to the most engaged, interested voters. Each political party would have to appeal to many middle ground voters, as they do now, but also voters in their own political base. Voters previously neglected in safe seats would be re-empowered by the threat of 'staying home' and not turning out to vote for their formerly safely-encrusted member of parliament. Parties would have to offer bold policies and reforms to energise their political base, rather than just adopt a small-target mentality that has been the dominant political orthodoxy for decades. It also empowers a class of voters who are typically taken for granted by political

parties—their base. Politicians often believe they have no obligation to heed the concerns of their most loyal supporters, because 'they can't vote for anyone else'—these voters are as deserving of a political voice as any other, but the current system, particularly with compulsory preferential voting, acts to disenfranchise them. And so a left-wing supporter of the ALP who is angry about its policies can cast a protest vote for the Greens, but ALP hard-heads know that in 142 out of 150 seats (where the top two candidates are ALP and Liberal) that vote will ultimately return to the Labor Party.

There's also reason to believe that compulsory voting entrenches larger and more spendthrift governments. Because political parties vigorously contest the most disengaged voters, they resort to tactics they believe will be most persuasive—typically appeals to the hip-pocket in the form of pork-barrel spending that might not otherwise pass the national interest test. And so we see many a regional road paved despite infrequent use, big cash handouts with little scrutiny to politically powerful local groups and even national tax policy set to win over swinging voters—Exhibit A: Family Tax Benefit A and B.

That's not to say we don't see pork-barrelling in countries with voluntary voting, it's just that the influence of voters most likely to be persuaded by this style of politics would be diluted under a voluntary voting model.

Finally, when voters are dissatisfied and disengaged with the offerings from major parties, voluntary voting enables an entirely legitimate and powerful form of political self expression—failing to vote. Nothing could send a clearer message to political parties that they are expected to clean up their act than scores of voters opting for 'none of the above'. It's about time Australia seriously considered voluntary voting.

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