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**From:** [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Saturday, 12 January 2013 2:46 PM  
**To:** Electoral Reform  
**Subject:** Feedback on Compulsory Voting

Hi,

I would like to provide feedback on the Electoral Reform discussion paper, particularly the issue of compulsory voting. I would like to address each of the arguments against compulsory voting listed in the discussion paper.

***1) It is undemocratic to force people to vote – in democracies such as the United States, Britain, Canada and New Zealand, voters have the choice***

Voting is a civic responsibility of citizens in democratic countries. The democratic political system requires active participation by its citizens, otherwise it is simply a puppet system for special interest groups. Just like civic duties in other political systems (e.g. forgoing property rights in communism, submission to Lese-majesty laws in monarchies) voting is a civic duty of the democratic system. "Freedom to vote" isn't really freedom - it is an anarchic concept where nobody cares about citizenship or the community. The country thus falls into the hands of special interest groups and the powerful because the political system isn't functioning as it was designed to.

Whilst many mainstream democracies such as the ones you have listed have voluntary voting systems, it can be argued that Australia is actually more democratic than those countries, as voter turnout is higher and the elected politicians are more truly representative of the people. It is not undemocratic to force people to vote, in fact it is more democratic as each citizen is able to have their say in political affairs and one person truly equals one vote.

***2) The ill-informed and those with little interest in politics are forced to the polls***

The democratic system is the most equal of all political systems because it gives power to ALL the people. Compulsory voting is designed to ensure that the will of ALL citizens are heard, not just those who are interested in politics. Countries with compulsory voting are more democratic than those with voluntary voting as the government truly represents the will of ALL the people. Compulsory voting also encourages active participation in the political process resulting in engaged citizens and a more healthy and stable democracy.

With voluntary voting, it is those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds that are less likely to vote as they are less likely to have an interest in politics. This unintentionally leads to class warfare and entrenches aristocratic authority. It also creates a paternalistic society where those who are "more educated" and "politically involved" are able to dictate to minority and non-voters how to vote and create policies that affect their lives. This throws us back to the monarch systems of the 1700s which was what resulted in the US and French Revolutions in the first place. Voluntary voting goes against the very essence of a democratic society which is to empower all citizens, not just those who vote.

***3) It may increase both the number of informal votes and "donkey votes"***

Voter turnout in an electorate with compulsory voting will always be higher than voluntary voting systems and therefore this is technically an illegitimate argument. In fact, Voluntary Voting actually increases the likelihood of corruption in the political process. Voters who would not have cast a vote can be more easily bought and voters who wanted to vote can be suppressed by family, friends and special interest groups into not voting.

***4) It increases the number of safe, single-member electorates – political parties then concentrate on***

*the more marginal electorates*

This issue is actually more extreme in voluntary voting systems as voters who feel they are a minority don't end up voting, entrenching already "safe" seats. In the 2012 US Federal Elections, only 8 of the 50 states were considered marginal meaning that the two political parties concentrated all of their efforts in these states.

In contrast, compulsory voting mitigates this as every eligible voter in the electorate is required to vote. Thus, the profile of the electorate changes over time as the demographics/policy priorities of voters change. This was prominent in the 2011 NSW State elections where a number of safe Labor Party seats changed hands to the Liberal Party. It also means that political parties do not have to work on "convincing people to vote" and can spend more time on more crucial issues facing the electorate.

**5) *Resources must be allocated to determine whether those who failed to vote have "valid and sufficient" reasons***

This is a very weak argument and the amount of "wasted resources" would be nominal at best considering the income received from voters who were fined. In contrast, consider the amount of resources wasted in voluntary voting systems where the electoral commission must try and estimate the amount of polling booths and ballot papers for an election. Consider the wasted resources when lawsuits are pursued owing to long voting lines and inadequate number of polling booths (as has been the case in the US elections). And finally consider the wasted resources by political parties and the government on producing information cards encouraging people to vote instead of focusing on policies for the country.

**6) *The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in its report on the conduct of the 1996 federal election recommended that 'if Australia is to consider itself a mature democracy' compulsory voting should be abolished'. It argued that voting could not truly be considered a 'right' if people could not exercise a 'right' not to vote. The committee did not make this recommendation in its reports on subsequent federal elections***

This to the most naive statement in the discussion paper and make no regards to the Australian context, compulsory voting culture or our way of life. Who determines what a "mature democracy" is? Why do we have to copy other countries? Why can't we follow our own destiny? Why is it a "right" to vote and not a "responsibility"?

In light of this immature comment, I would simply make two points here:

- 1) Many would agree that a mature democracy is one that is inclusive of the whole population. Compulsory voting achieves this objective and encourages active political participation by all citizens. Many would consider Australia a far more mature democracy than other countries with a voluntary voting system and embarrassingly low turnout rates.
- 2) Voting has always been a civic duty and was never intended to be considered a "right" that may or may not be exercised. If you look historically at the first two democracies in modern history: America and France, the early politicians of those countries didn't want to "impose" a compulsory voting system because the country had just come out of an absolute monarchy where subjects were constantly imposed with new laws they have no say in.

In order to promote the democratic system (which was a completely new and radical ideology at the time) they wanted the people to have the freedom to choose this political system over the former absolute monarchy. That was an early design of the voting system that was never intended to remain as democracy became more popular, which didn't really occur until post WWII. As a democracy matures and when there is no threat of another political system, voting then becomes a civic responsibility and duty in order to ensure that all citizens continue to have their say, just like jury duty. The early design of the voting system is where the misconception of the "right" to vote came about. The founders of democracy wanted to give the people the "right" to choose a democratic

system, which is completely different from the "right" to vote. Once the people have chosen the democratic system, it becomes incumbent on them to participate in that system i.e. the responsibility to vote.

In conclusion, it should be noted that removing compulsory voting as a civic duty is threatening a fundamental pillar of democracy. It opens our system to corruption and submits our country to powerful interest groups who are able to influence voter turnout and voting results. A mature democracy is one that is inclusive of all its citizens, and countries that have been considered mature democracies, such as the US and UK, in reality have a long way to go to fully include minority groups such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and immigrants into their political processes. Our elected government is truly legitimate as it has been elected by all the people. Compulsory voting encourages active political participation by all. It creates a more harmonised society and disbands class divisions of those who are "politically informed" and those that are not. Changing this would disadvantage and hurt those who democracy is meant to empower: the working class and those from lower socio economic backgrounds

Australia should be very proud of its high voter turnout rate and its 100 year long tradition of compulsory voting. I object to any changes to the current compulsory voting system.

Darrell Weeks