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Abstract

Low voter turnout has become a serious problem in most democracies, not only in the United States but also in many West European countries – and even in a traditionally high-turnout country like Austria where turnout has also been declining in recent years. There are five reasons why we should be concerned about this problem: 1. Low turnout means low participation by less privileged citizens, who are already at a disadvantage in terms of other forms of political participation. 2. Unequal participation means unequal influence. 3. Actual turnout tends to be lower than the official turnout figures suggest. 4. Turnout in elections other than those at the national level tends to be particularly low. 5. Turnout is declining in most countries. The problem of low and unequal turnout can be solved by a number of institutional mechanisms such as proportional representation, concurrent and infrequent elections, weekend instead of weekday voting, and compulsory voting. The last of these – mandatory voting – is especially strong and effective, and also morally justified.

Notes

Arend Lijphart was Visiting Professor at the Department of Political Science of the Institute for Advanced Studies in October 1997.

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1. Introduction

The subject of my lecture today is a subject about which I have become increasingly concerned and worried in recent years. Democracy entails, as a minimum requirement, that all citizens have the right to vote, and those who fought for the establishment of democracy and universal suffrage assumed that everyone, or almost everyone, who had the right to vote would make use of this precious democratic right. The reality of democracy has been otherwise: large numbers of citizens fail to participate in this most basic democratic process.

I have lectured on this problem and on how the problem can be solved – with a special emphasis on the merits of introducing compulsory or mandatory voting (Wahlpflicht) – both in the United States, my adopted country, and in the Netherlands, my native country (see Lijphart 1995; Lijphart 1997; the latter publication contains an extensive list of references). Low turnout in elections has long been a big problem in the United States, but many American and European observers have tended to believe that this was an exclusive American concern, and not much of a reason for worry in the European democracies. However, it has become a considerable problem in some European countries as well. The Netherlands can serve as a good example: voter turnout has fallen dramatically after – and as a result of – the abolition of compulsory voting in 1970. When I grew up in Holland, voter participation in elections at all levels – national, provincial, and local – was almost always well above 90 percent; now it is much lower at all levels, with a nadir of only 36 percent in the 1994 European elections.

It may seem like the proverbial "carrying coals to Newcastle" to lecture on this topic in Austria. In the last two elections of the Nationalrat, in 1994 and 1995, turnout was 82.5 and 86.0 percent respectively – percentages that are quite respectable by international standards. Moreover, Austrians do not have to be reminded of the possibility of mandatory voting: until 1992, the Länder had the right to impose this obligation and four of them (Tirol, Vorarlberg, Steiermark, and Kärnten) actually did so for longer or shorter periods of time. On the other hand, all elections before the 1990s, from 1945 on, had voter turnouts of more than 90 percent. In the 1940s and 1950s, the average turnout level was higher than 95 percent. This means that, in the thirty years from 1960 to 1990, turnout levels have gone down by about 10 percentage points, or – to use a different perspective – there are now about three times as many non-voters as there used to be. In any case, while the problem does not yet seem urgent in Austria, I would urge my fellow-democrats in Austria to think about the problem, and to take appropriate action, before it becomes truly urgent.

The turnout problem is part of a more general democratic dilemma, namely the conflict between two basic democratic ideals: political participation and political equality. Participation and equality are not incompatible in principle, but, in practice, as political scientists have known for long time, participation is highly unequal. It is systematically biased in favor of privileged citizens (those with better education, higher incomes, and greater wealth) and it is

biased against less privileged citizens. This systematic inequality is a serious problem because unequal participation spells unequal political influence. The inequality is especially strong for the more intensive forms of participation (like working in election campaigns, contacting government officials, giving money to parties and candidates, and taking part in demonstrations): the fewer people participate, the greater the inequality. But it is also true for voting, especially, as I have already emphasized, in the United States, but not only in the United States.

It is interesting to note that, around the turn of the century, when Western democracies adopted universal suffrage, it was generally assumed that the better educated (and more well-to-do) would make the "rational choice" to abstain from voting, because they would realize how little influence one vote would have in a mass election. But empirical work, already done in the 1920s, showed that it was the other way around: it is the less educated and poorer people who tend not to vote (Arneson 1925).

Can this democratic dilemma of unequal participation be solved? This is difficult, if not impossible, for the more intensive forms of participation. But there is a partial solution: make the most basic form of participation, namely voting, as equal as possible – both as an end in itself and also to provide a democratic counterweight to the inequality of other forms of participation. The obvious way to do this is to maximize voter turnout. Our democratic goal should be not just universal suffrage, but universal, or near-universal turnout.

We know a great deal about the institutional mechanisms that can improve turnout. There are a lot of excellent studies of this subject by political scientists – from the 1920s and 1930s to the 1980s and 1990s. I am thinking especially of the comparative analyses of the American political scientist Harold Gosnell (1930) and of the Swedish political scientist Herbert Tingsten (1937) in the early period, and of the recent work of Bingham Powell (1980; 1986), Robert Jackman (1987), and Mark Franklin (1996); the last three all live and work in the United States, but Jackman is a new Zealander and Franklin an Englishman. These studies show that easy and voter-friendly registration rules, proportional representation, weekend voting instead of weekday voting, and compulsory voting can all be very effective in raising turnout. Of all of these, compulsory or mandatory voting is especially effective – in spite of the low penalties that are imposed for failing to vote (usually similar to a fine for a parking violation), in spite of lax enforcement (usually much less stringent than parking rules are enforced), and in spite of the secret ballot, which means that an actual vote cannot be compelled in the first place. In fact, both the English term "compulsory voting" and the German term Wahlpflicht are misnomers: all that can be required in practice is that citizens show up at the polls. In the Netherlands, compulsory voting was very effective in spite of the fact that citizens had the right to refuse to accept a ballot when they arrived at the polling station; very few people made use of this right! Countries that currently have compulsory voting are Australia, Italy, Greece, Belgium, Luxembourg, and most of the Latin American democracies.

2. Five Reasons for Concern

Before turning to the various institutional mechanisms, including mandatory voting, let me first try to convince you in somewhat greater detail why low voter turnout is such a serious problem – a big problem that we should really be worried about, and a big problem for which we should try to find a solution. There are five reasons to be concerned:

1. First, low voter turnout means unequal and socio-economically biased turnout. This is an especially strong pattern in the United States, where voter participation is extremely low compared with most other countries. In fact, the U.S. is sometimes depicted as unique in this respect, but there is massive evidence that it is also a problem in higher-turnout countries. For instance, Powell (1986, 27–28) combined data for seven European nations (including Austria) and Canada and found a consistent effect of the level of education on turnout: a difference of 10 percentage points between the lowest and highest of five education levels and a consistent increase of 2 to 3 percentage points at each higher level. Another good illustration is the increase in class bias in the first election after the abolition of mandatory voting in the Netherlands in 1970: for five educational groups, the turnout rate was about 70 percent for the lowest two groups but 87 percent for the highest group. Compared with these unequal turnouts, the last parliamentary election still conducted under compulsory voting, in 1967, showed turnouts for all groups above 90 percent. But even here there was still a slight class bias: turnouts increased gradually from 93 percent in the lowest educational group to about 97 percent in the two groups with the most education (Verba, Nie, and Kim, 1978, 7; Irwin 1974). This shows how strong and persistent the class bias is, but also that the differences are minimized at very high turnout levels.

2. The second reason for worry is that who votes, and who doesn't, has important consequences for who gets elected and for public policies. Political scientists have found clear connections, not only between socio-economic status and turnout, but also between socio-economic status, party choice, and the outcome of elections, and between types of parties (parties of the left versus parties of the right) and progressive versus conservative policies that these parties pursue when they are in office. Some doubts have been raised about these connections by surveys, mainly in the United States, showing that non-voters are not all that different from voters with regard to policy preferences and partisan preferences (Teixeira 1992, 97–101). I think that the main explanation of these findings is the following: when you ask non-voters how they would have voted, you're asking a question of people who have not been politically mobilized – and who, if you pardon the old-fashioned expression, have not developed enough "class consciousness." To discover their true preferences, what is needed is not questions in the usual surveys, but something like the "deliberative opinion poll," proposed by James Fishkin (1991), or what Robert Dahl (1989, 340) calls a "mini-populus": a randomly selected group of people who deliberate together over an extended period of time.

The strongest evidence of direct link between turnout and support for left parties is a study by Alexander Pacek and Benjamin Radcliff (1995). They studied all elections from 1950 to 1990 in 19 industrial democracies. And they found that the left share of vote went up by almost one-third of a percentage point for every percentage point increase in turnout.

3. The turnout percentages that are usually quoted are based on the actual voters as a percentage of all registered voters. Because voter registration is far from completely accurate in many countries, the turnout percentages are often also inaccurate – and generally higher than the true turnout. The best way to solve this problem is to measure turnout as a percent of the voting-age population instead of as a percent of registered voters. The one disadvantage of this procedure is that the voting-age population also includes non-citizens. The consensus among the experts, however, is that the use of the voting-age population is still the better choice – and the only acceptable measure for comparing turnout levels in different countries. It was used by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (1997) in Stockholm in its recent world-wide study of voter turnout. According to this measure, turnout in the last three Nationalrat elections in Austria was 80.5, 76.0, and 78.6 percent, instead of the official turnout figures of 86.1, 82.5, and 86.0 percent – roughly 6 to 7 percentage points lower than the official figures.

   Powell (1980) already used this measure in his earlier and very well-known study of turnout in 30 democracies in the 1960s and 1970s – all of the democratic countries with populations over one million during this period. His figure for Austria is 89 percent, considerably higher than the median of only 76 percent among all 30 countries. The median of 76 percent means that in half of the countries fewer than about three of every four citizens turned out to vote. It is also worth pointing out that most of the larger countries were below the median: not just the United States, but also India, Japan, Great Britain and France.

4. These turnout figures are still deceptively favorable because they are the figures for national-level parliamentary or presidential elections. Political scientists often call these elections “first-order elections.” These are the most salient and hence the highest-turnout elections. But the vast majority of elections are second-order elections: they are lower-salience and hence lower-turnout elections. In the United States, only presidential elections get turnouts higher than 50 percent; turnout in midterm congressional elections has averaged only about 35 percent in recent years; local turnout has only been about 25 percent. Low turnout is typical for lower-level elections in other countries, too: local turnout in Britain is only about 40 percent. It is even lower in Australia (where there is no mandatory voting at the local level): about 35 percent (Goldsmith and Newton 1986). In European Parliament elections (which are also second-order elections), the average turnout in the 12 member countries in 1994 was only 58 percent – and it was only about 36 percent in Britain, Portugal, and the Netherlands. Here again, Austrian voters are still well above the average: turnout in the first European Parliament election in Austria almost exactly a year ago was almost 68 percent.

What we must remember is that second-order elections may be the less important elections, but that they are not unimportant elections.

5. Finally, voter turnout is not only low but also declining. This is a well-known and undisputed fact in the United States, but a more controversial question in other democracies. I read the comparative evidence as indicating a generally declining trend. One example is Russell Dalton's (1996, 44–45) comparison of the 1950s with the 1990s in 20 democracies: he finds an average decline of 5 percentage points – and 17 of the 20 countries with lower turnout in the 1990s as against only 3 countries with higher turnout. The same conclusion emerges from a recent study for the European Science Foundation (Borg 1995; Topf 1995). This decline is especially disturbing because levels of education and prosperity (factors that can be expected to increase turnout) have been going up dramatically in Europe, as they have in the United States.

In the United States, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1988, 869) have argued that burdensome registration requirements discriminate against less privileged citizens – and that they should be regarded as the functional equivalent of earlier property and literacy qualifications. Similarly, I would argue that the empirical link between turnout and inequality is the functional equivalent of these same property and literacy qualifications, and also of the plural voting scheme proposed by John Stuart Mill (1861). Mill wanted to give extra votes to the better-educated citizens – who are also the more well-to-do citizens. Both of these are now universally rejected as undemocratic. My question then is: why do we tolerate the functional equivalent of such rules?

3. Potential Remedies

Let me now turn to possible remedies. Voting participation depends on many factors, including the salience of the issues – one example is the 93 percent turnout in the 1995 independence referendum in Quebec – the attractiveness of parties and candidates, and political culture and attitudes. However, when we look for remedies for non-voting, the institutional mechanisms are especially important because they are more amenable to political engineering than the other factors.

First of all, American political scientists have paid a lot of attention to the effect of burdensome registration requirements; these are estimated to depress turnout by about 8 to 14 percentage points (Teixeira 1992, 122). This means that automatic or same-day registration could increase turnout by this amount. But this is only a partial remedy for the U.S.: it would still leave the U.S. well below the median turnout of other democracies. And it would leave turnout in second-order elections in the U.S. well below 50 percent. In most other Western democracies, voter registration is not a major problem because it is automatic or the government's responsibility – and registration reform is therefore not a relevant concern.

The electoral system makes a big difference: proportional representation (PR) tends to increase turnout by 9 to 12 percentage points (Blais and Carty 1990). The reasons are that voters have more choices, that there is less of a wasted-vote problem, and, most important, that parties have stronger incentives to mobilize voters in areas where they are weak. But the finding of high turnout in PR countries is based entirely on first-order elections. The picture is much less favorable for second-order elections. I have already mentioned the low turnout in European Parliament elections – in spite of PR. In 1994, 11 of the 12 member countries used PR. The 1995 provincial elections in the Netherlands – also conducted by PR – had only 50 percent turnout. In the 1996 school board elections in New York City – one of the few examples of PR in the United States – turnout was just 5 percent!

Turnout is seriously depressed by having very frequent elections. Richard Boyd (1981; 1989) has demonstrated this effect for the United States, where, on average, citizens are called to the polls 2 to 3 times per year. This factor can also account for the low turnout in Switzerland, where there are 6 to 7 voting days per year. The theoretical explanation is clear. Turnout is a collective-action problem: representative democracy is a collective good that requires people to vote and elect representatives, but each individual vote has only a minute chance to affect the outcome of an election, and costs some time and energy; hence it does not make rational, self-interested, sense for each individual to vote. Obviously, frequent elections increase the cost of voting a great deal.

According to this same explanation, concurrent elections should help turnout, especially in second-order elections when these are combined with first-order elections. The evidence we

have shows that this is indeed the case, both in the U.S. and in Europe. For instance, turnout in European Parliament elections have been much higher if they are held at the same time as national parliamentary elections (Niedermayer 1990).

Franklin (1996, 226–30) has found that weekend voting (instead of weekday voting) and also the availability of mail ballots can help. In fact, these have a surprisingly large impact: together they are worth about 10 percentage points.

4. Mandatory Voting

Finally, let us take a closer look at compulsory voting. All of the studies that I have mentioned earlier (from Gosnell and Tingsten to those by Powell, Jackman, and Franklin) have been impressed with the high turnout in countries with mandatory voting: it adds from 10 to 16 percentage points to turnout. Further work by Wolfgang Hirczy (1994) shows that mandatory voting is especially effective in what would otherwise be very low-turnout situations. For instance, the last Australian election before compulsory voting, in 1922, had a turnout of only 55 percent; the next one, with compulsory voting, had a turnout of 90 percent – a boost of 35 percentage points. When mandatory voting was abolished in Venezuela in 1993, turnout in the presidential elections fell 30 percent, from 90 to 60 percent (Molina Vega 1995, 164).

The pattern is the same for second-order elections, which tend to be low-turnout elections: We find very high turnout in Belgium and Italy in local elections and also in European Parliament elections with mandatory voting. The turnout in Dutch local and provincial elections was above 90 percent under compulsory voting, but dropped under voluntary voting to 50 percent in the 1995 provincial elections. In the four European Parliament elections held so far (from 1979 to 1994), the four countries with mandatory voting had an average turnout of 84 percent; the eight countries with voluntary voting had an average of 46 percent – a big difference of 38 percentage points.

The conclusion I draw is that, if we want to have high turnout in all elections, including second-order elections, we should make use of all of the above turnout-enhancing devices: automatic registration, proportional representation, infrequent elections, weekend voting, concurrent elections, and mandatory voting. Austria and many other continental European countries are already using all of these with the exception of concurrent elections and compulsory voting. It is therefore especially important to consider these two possibilities.

It is somewhat of a surprise that mandatory voting is so effective – in spite of the fact that penalties for non-voting are not severe and that they are difficult to enforce because of the large numbers involved; for instance, with a high turnout of say 95 percent in a country with 10 million eligible voters, there would still be half a million non-voters, and half a million people would have to be fined or at least investigated – something that is obviously not practically possible. The theoretical explanation for the effectiveness of mandatory voting is, as I mentioned earlier, that turnout is a collective-action problem but one that is rather unusual in the sense that the cost of voting is relatively low – much lower than the costs of most other collective actions. Because the cost of voting is relatively low, it is a barrier that can be surmounted relatively easily.

Collective-action theory also provides the basic moral justification for mandatory voting: as pointed out in two important articles, published more than 20 years ago, by Malcolm Feeley

(1974) and Alan Wertheimer (1975), the general remedy for collective-action problems is to counteract free riding by means of legal sanctions and enforcement. For the collective-action problem of turnout, this means that citizens should not be allowed to be free riders, and that voting should therefore be a legal obligation.

The biggest advantage of compulsory voting is its contribution to high and relatively equal voter turnout. Three additional, more speculative, advantages can be cited:

First, the increase in voting participation may stimulate stronger participation and interest in other political activities: people who participate in politics in one way are likely to do so in another (Berelson and Steiner 1964, 422). There is also considerable evidence of a spillover effect from participation in the workplace, churches, and voluntary organizations to political participation (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963, 300–74).

Second, mandatory voting can reduce the role of money in politics, because it is no longer necessary to spend much money on getting voters to the polls.

Third, mandatory voting may also discourage so-called attack advertising – and may therefore lessen the political cynicism and distrust that it arouses. Attack advertising works mainly by selectively depressing turnout among those not likely to vote for the attacker (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). When almost everybody votes, such negative tactics are no longer worth using.

Let me also take a quick look at the most important arguments against mandatory voting:

First there is the frequently cited Weimar precedent. It suggests that high turnout can be a danger: high turnout in the last years of the Weimar Republic coincided with election successes for the Nazi Party. The danger is that sudden jumps in turnout, in periods of crisis, bring to the polls many previously uninterested and uninvolved citizens, who may support extremist parties (Tingsten 1937, 225; Lipset 1960, 140–52, 218–19). It seems to me, however, that this is an argument <u>for</u> compulsory voting, not <u>against</u> it: instead of trying to keep turnout at steady low levels, it is better to safeguard against the danger of sudden sharp increases by maintaining steady high levels.

A practical argument against compulsory voting is that it is difficult, or even impossible, to introduce it. “Impossible” is wrong, of course, because many countries have mandatory voting right now. “Difficult” is true, and one special difficulty is that proposals for compulsory voting are likely to be opposed by conservative parties: mandatory voting is clearly not in their partisan self-interest. But remember that most conservative parties were also opposed to universal suffrage – and universal suffrage was eventually accepted anyway. The need for high and

relatively equal voting participation is not just a political and partisan question but, ultimately, a moral issue.

The final and most serious argument against mandatory voting is that it may solve, at least partially, the conflict between the democratic ideals of participation and equality, but that it violates a third democratic ideal: individual freedom. This is really not a strong argument either – for three reasons:

First, remember that the term compulsory voting is a misleading misnomer: it does not entail an obligation to actually vote – especially if the law is written in such a way, as it was in the Netherlands, that citizens have the right to refuse to accept a ballot. However, even under more restrictive rules, the secret ballot guarantees that the right not to vote remains intact.

Second, mandatory voting entails a truly very small decrease in freedom compared with lots of other collective-action problems which democracies solve by imposing legal obligations, such as jury duty, the obligation to pay taxes, military service, and compulsory school attendance.

Thirdly, before we put the right not to vote on too high a pedestal, let us also remember that non-voting is a form of free riding – taking advantage of the benefits of democracy without contributing to it – and that free riding of any kind may be rational, but that it is also selfish and immoral.

My conclusion is that none of the arguments against compulsory voting are convincing. On the contrary, compulsory voting has strong merit and promise as a method to counteract the growing problem of low voter participation and the serious problem of inequality that this creates.

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