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Increasing Electoral Turnout Among the Young: Compulsory Voting or Financial Incentives?

by Thomas Tozer

Abstract: Low electoral turnout has led to a vicious circle for which the young do not vote and vote-seeking politicians ignore their needs. A powerful method is needed to address this in both the short-term and long-term. I consider two such methods: compulsory voting and a scheme of financial incentives for young voters. The financial incentive scheme that I consider would pay young people £30 if they attend an hour-long information session on the election, an hour-long discussion session, and then vote. I argue that my proposed financial incentive scheme is preferable to compulsory voting because it is more likely to lead young people to deliver reasoned, quality votes than compulsory voting, and it does not violate individual liberty.

Introduction

In many different ways young people today are underrepresented by politics.¹ One important element of this underrepresentation, and the element with which this essay is concerned, is the low electoral turnout among the young. It is important to note from the start that there is no simple solution that could boost youth engagement in a single stroke,² and I aver that many different short-term and long-term strategies should be employed to increase electoral engagement among the young.³

However, this essay focuses on two contrasting strategies: a disincentive scheme for non-voters (i.e., compulsory voting), and a scheme of financial incentives for which young people receive a payment of £30 if they attend an hour-long information session on the election, an hour-long discussion session, and then vote. I argue that respect for liberty⁴ and an understanding of the importance of a reasoned and engaged vote imply that, of these two, my proposed financial incentive scheme is preferable. It will, I contend, improve both the short-term and long-term political engagement of young people and lead to a virtuous circle for which they are better politically represented and more electorally engaged as a result.

The essay begins by analysing the effects of electoral turnout among the young in terms of vicious and virtuous circles. I then consider the merits of compulsory voting as a method to boost turnout and argue that compulsory voting infringes unacceptably upon our liberty and would not deliver reasoned votes. Hence, I introduce my proposed scheme of financial incentives for young people and argue that it is preferable to compulsory voting in both these respects: it violates no one's liberty and is more likely to deliver well-reasoned votes. Finally, I reply to some possible objections to the implementation of this scheme.

Why should my proposed scheme not be extended to all generations? There are four reasons. First, the electoral turnout among the young is significantly worse than that of other age-cohorts, so in the short-term there is more of a pressing need to raise electoral turnout among the young than among other age groups. Second, I hope that the benefits of the scheme, and in particular the force of habit, will lead young people to continue to vote as they get older, and thus in the long-term the benefits of the scheme will begin to influence the older generations too. Third, the expense of the scheme is significantly reduced by virtue of its applying only to young people, making it a more economically viable option.

"I argue that respect for liberty and an understanding of the importance of a reasoned and engaged vote imply that [...] my proposed financial incentive scheme is preferable."

Fourth, if the scheme applied to everyone then this would seem to suggest that the government always needs to bribe its populace to vote: the scheme would no longer seem merely like a means by which to boost the electoral engagement of the populace in response to their current level of engagement, since there would be no time when the payment scheme would cease to apply to the voter. The message that I intend for the government to send out to young people is rather: "We want to incentivise you

to develop a habit of and engagement with voting now, so that you are motivated to continue voting in the future even when this incentive scheme ceases for you." Now, I have no objection to the information and discussion sessions themselves (without any payment for attendance) being arranged for older generations too, if the government were happy to fund these. However, that is a different proposal and I cannot comment on it any further here.

Finally, I should note that in terms of background statistics and details such as the level of payment that I propose for my financial incentive scheme, this essay focuses principally on UK politics. However, the general arguments that I make are in no sense restricted to the UK, and the reasoning that I employ to arrive at this payment figure, for example, can easily be applied *mutatis mutandis* to other countries that are interested in increasing electoral turnout among the young.

Young people's low electoral turnout: vicious and virtuous circles

Concerningly, the past decade has witnessed young people becoming increasingly disengaged with the political process and institutions, especially with formal politics such as voting.⁵ In the 2010 British general election, the average turnout was 65%; of those aged 65 or above, the turnout averaged 76%; but of those aged 18-24, the average turnout was just 44%.⁶ There is a similar comparative difference between the numbers of young and older people voting in America and Indonesia, with the comparative difference only slightly better in Japan.⁷

Yet before I continue I should respond to an objection that, if true, could invalidate the goals of this essay before it has even begun. This objection runs as follows: even if many young people do not vote at present, as they move into their middle age, finding themselves more affected by government policies and reaching a more mature stage of their political life-cycle, they will start to vote in greater numbers. It follows, so the objection

goes, that there is no need to worry about their low turnout now – this is something that will naturally be addressed over time. There are two reasons why this objection is fallacious. First, there is limited empirical evidence of this ageing effect, whereas there is strong evidence to suggest that in large part voting is a result of habit that is learnt in one's first few elections.⁸ Second, even if it were the case that people will tend to vote in greater numbers as they get older, it is still of concern that many young people today do not vote, because voting helps to close the democratic deficit and ensure that representatives are accountable to the groups that they represent – self-interested vote-seeking politicians will not be motivated to represent the views of young people if the youth vote has only a very minimal impact on the politicians' election prospects.⁹ Empirical analysis of government policies in recent years seems to confirm that politicians are more interested in the needs of young people's parents' generation than those of young people themselves.¹⁰ This seems to have become something of a vicious circle whereby young people do not vote, politicians thus ignore the interests of young people, young people feel alienated from the political process so choose not to vote; and so forth. Young people not participating in electoral politics thus becomes self-reinforcing.¹¹

“The past decade has witnessed young people becoming increasingly disengaged with the political process and institutions, especially with formal politics such as voting.”

To a large extent, the reasons why young people do not vote can be understood as a consequence of this vicious circle. For example, many young people may not vote due to disillusionment (a feeling that the outcome of an election does not matter); feeling that they lack political efficacy (thinking, for example, that an individual vote will not make any difference); or believing that they do not have enough knowledge to vote.¹² In a study quoted by Henn and Foard, 61% of the young people surveyed felt that the influence they had on decisions made on their behalf by politicians was little or none, and 64% of the young people surveyed said that they did not believe they had enough knowledge to vote.¹³ If politicians were to take the needs and interests of young people seriously, however, then this would start to address and resolve their

feelings of disillusionment and lacking political efficacy. And if young people became more engaged in the political process then they would naturally develop more political knowledge, too. Indeed, if young people are encouraged to vote in great enough numbers then it is possible that a virtuous circle will result: politicians will jump to try to win over the now significant “youth vote” and so will listen to the views and concerns of young people, young people will feel represented by the political process and so will be motivated to vote for the politician who best represents their views and concerns, politicians will try to represent the needs of young people in order to win their vote; and so forth.

“It is not enough for young people only to vote: they must also take the time to engage with the election so that their vote constitutes a reasoned expression of their political will.”

However, there is little point in young people voting unless some degree of conscious decision-making underpins their vote. If self-interested vote-seeking politicians were to think that the votes of young people were somewhat random, perhaps because young people lacked interest in electoral politics and were voting only due to the threat of punishment under a system of compulsory voting, then they might continue to ignore the votes of young people since there would be no point in trying to win over the youth vote. Hence, the virtuous circle could not result. Therefore it is not enough for young people only to vote: they must also take the time to engage with the election so that their vote constitutes a reasoned expression of their political will.

Voting or not voting is also influenced by habit. A study by Gerber et al. involving 25,200 voters revealed that if considered in isolation the effect of habit, *ceteris paribus*, meant that a person's voting in one election would substantially increase the likelihood that that person would vote in the future.¹⁴ Abstention, too, was found to be habit-forming: a person's tendency both to vote, and to not vote, is not merely the function of similar choices being made in similar circumstances. Thus, elections that do not stimulate high turnout among the young cause a “footprint” of low turnout in the electorate's age structure – many people who do not utilise their first opportunity to vote go on to fail to vote in subsequent elections too.¹⁵ Hence, if young people are

persuaded to vote in their first few elections, the effect of habit suggests that that age cohort will continue to vote in large numbers as they get older, too.¹⁶

How to increase electoral participation among the young

A short-term boost to the electoral turnout of young people may be all that is needed to start the virtuous circle rolling so that a more long-term solution to the low electoral turnout among the young also begins to emerge. A powerful and immediately impactful scheme is therefore required to encourage young people to vote. One obvious candidate is a disincentive scheme for not voting – this is the method of compulsory voting according to which people are legally required to vote and a failure to do so will (in theory) result in some form of penalty, such as a fine. However, while compulsory voting is common and its drawbacks and merits have been widely discussed, its opposite, a scheme that *encourages* people to vote by means of financial incentives, has received much less academic attention (although there do exist other propositions of a similar nature, such as Ackerman and Fishkin's proposal of paying people \$150 to take part in a day of deliberation two weeks before election day¹⁷). As far as I am aware, a scheme that pays people to vote has not been practiced anywhere in the world apart from Ancient Athens where, in the 4th century BCE, payment was introduced in order to boost electoral turnout.¹⁸ Aristotle specifically connected the introduction of state payment with the difficulties of attaining a reasonable level of attendance at the Assembly.¹⁹

I compare compulsory voting with a financial incentive scheme as a method to encourage young people to vote in part to fill this academic gap, but also because it appears to offer a particularly powerful way to address the low electoral turnout of young people; or so I will argue. Furthermore, because compulsory voting is widely practiced and is already established as an effective means of raising turnout, it would undoubtedly be a powerful contender for addressing the low electoral turnout among the young. I therefore hope that if I can show my financial incentive scheme to be preferable to compulsory voting as a way to boost turnout, then it follows that my scheme merits serious consideration.

Compulsory voting has also been proposed as a strategy that could be applied only to

first-time voters, with the express intention of improving the political representation of young people. Birch et al. have proposed making voting compulsory for first time voters, and fining young people about £12 if they do not vote in their first election.²⁰ My arguments against compulsory voting are mostly general, but can also be seen as challenging specifically this sister proposal.

“Research suggests that turnout of younger generations may be comparatively better under compulsory voting than when voting is voluntary, since the impact of age on turnout is reduced.”

Compulsory voting – a solution to young people’s low electoral turnout?

Compulsory voting is practiced in a number of countries all over the world including Cyprus, Belgium, Turkey, and Australia. The punishments for non-voters range from small fines to disenfranchisement, social sanctions and possible imprisonment, although the most common punishment is a small fine. In practice, however, enforcement is universally lax, despite the wide range of stated penalties; in Australia, perhaps 4% of non-voters actually incur a penalty of some type, and in Greece the penalty of jail time is apparently never imposed.²¹ Various studies have shown that compulsory voting is an effective way to raise voter turnout: on average it raises voting turnout by 7-16 percentage points, which is significant when we consider that the punishments for not voting are very rarely enforced and are usually minimal.²² When the Netherlands withdrew compulsory voting in 1967, turnout dropped by 10%; and it increased by 15% in Costa Rica when penalties for not voting were introduced.²³ Furthermore, research suggests that the comparative difference between the turnout of younger generations and average turnout may be better under compulsory voting than when voting is voluntary, because the impact of age on turnout is reduced.²⁴

Compulsory voting is also considered beneficial because it reduces the role of money in politics since voters do not need to be goaded to the polls; it may become an incentive for people to become better informed about the political options available to them; it forces parties to take seriously the vote of the poor, weak and marginalised who otherwise may not have voted; it produces policies more closely aligned to citizen prefer-

ences when rational citizens may otherwise have chosen to abstain; and it enables every adult to become an autonomous agent who makes as many decisions about their own life as any other adult.²⁵

In practice, only the first of these benefits holds much weight – it is quite possible that the cost of elections for campaigning parties would be reduced. However, it is hard to imagine that being forced to vote will motivate citizens to learn about politics; on the contrary, it may actually discourage people’s interest in political education as they react against perceived oppression.²⁶ The Australian case, where compulsory voting is long established and extremely popular, demonstrates that increasing turnout does not force parties to compete for the votes of the poor, weak and marginalised since it is clear that the parties in Australia focus primarily on winning the votes of the middle class.²⁷ Furthermore, far from supporting our autonomy in a way that legitimately addresses the problem of abstention, compulsory voting infringes unacceptably upon individual freedom. The great liberal writer Benjamin Constant wrote that “it is everyone’s right to exercise some influence on the administration of the government, either by electing all or particular officials, or through representations, petitions, demands to which the authorities are more or less compelled to pay heed”.²⁸ It is therefore crucial to our political liberty that we have the *right* to vote. However, it does not follow that we have a *duty* to vote.²⁹ And even if we were to have a duty to vote, it would not follow that this should be enforced by legal compulsion.³⁰ Furthermore, Mill explained that in order to defend our liberty, society should not interfere with someone unless what he is doing will cause harm to others (and, logically, that by interfering with him that harm will be reduced or prevented).³¹ Thus, infringing upon individual liberty by forcing people to vote could be justified only if it were very likely to prevent such harm.³² Otherwise, forcing someone to vote would constitute an unjustifiable violation of what Berlin described as our “negative freedom”³³ – our freedom not to be interfered with. Our liberty, or “negative freedom”, is intuitively valuable and so, to be justified, any proposal that will infringe upon it must be able to prove that it is of significant value.

Now, advocates of compulsory voting may take up this challenge, and argue that compulsory voting is able to prevent harm caused to others because, if no one were

to vote, this would lead to the collapse of democracy. However, as a defence of compulsory voting this seems somewhat implausible: electoral turnout may be low in a number of countries, but it is nowhere near low enough that enforcing compulsory voting would be required to prevent the collapse of democracy. Lijphart also defends compulsory voting, which he regards as a very small infringement upon our liberty, on the basis that many other problems of collective action are solved by government using obligations: jury service, paying taxes, school attendance and so forth – so why not voting too, which is far less burdensome than these?³⁴ Yet the answer to this objection is that it is precisely *because* voting is less burdensome than these other actions that the majority of people choose to vote without it having to be made compulsory. If paying taxes were not compulsory, then it is probable that very few people would pay them, and the country would incur serious problems as a result. Yet the same is not the case with voting: it is because the “cost” of voting is very minimal that many people choose to vote – there is no reason that it be made compulsory in the way that taxation and jury service are. Furthermore, it is because voting is not very burdensome that I believe my financial incentive scheme will be able to act as an effective incentive for people to vote despite the cost of voting.

The advocate of compulsory voting might object that I am responding here to a very thin concept of democracy that misses what is really at stake: perhaps it is true that absent a legal compulsion to vote there is minimal danger of an actual collapse of democracy, but there are nonetheless significant harms that a democratic society will incur as a result of individuals choosing not to vote. I have already argued that by virtue of the vicious circle the low electoral turnout on the part of a particular age cohort leads to political neglect; but if this is true, why should the importance of avoiding this vicious circle not trump an individual’s negative liberty not to be interfered with?

“It is clear that to some extent many young people choosing not to vote will harm others because it will lead self-interested politicians to neglect the needs and interests of young people.”

If the question were that clear cut (helping the individual and society versus protecting the individual’s negative liberty), then this

objection would undoubtedly have serious weight, for I do not pretend to defend an inviolable concern for liberty. However, the true picture is somewhat more nuanced. The virtuous circle of voting assumes that the voter casts a vote which represents a reasoned expression of her political will; otherwise, as argued above, politicians will still not be motivated to consider the interests of young people in an attempt to win over the “youth vote”. But the young people who vote only because it is compulsory (the group with whom we are primarily concerned here) will not vote in a way that gives a reasoned expression of their political will since it is not a reasoned view, but rather the threat of legal action, that motivates them to vote. Under compulsory voting, politicians will therefore be aware that young people are not delivering reasoned votes and so the virtuous circle will not result. The response that where compulsory voting is practiced there tend to be few blank votes, demonstrating that people are not unmotivated to deliver quality votes under a system compulsory voting,³⁵ misses the point: the fact that someone casts an actual, and not a blank, vote does not suffice to show that they have put any thought into it. Hence, neither the individual nor the society will benefit from infringing upon the individual’s liberty and legally requiring him to vote. Given that this is the case, the individual’s negative liberty not to be interfered with holds greater weight than a concern for the welfare of the individual and society.

Moreover, as John Rawls argued in his *Theory of Justice*, if a citizen is to vote then it is necessary for that citizen to first develop a willingness and aptitude for forming political opinions that will appeal to others, what he calls “education to public spirit”, before she can then “acquire an affirmative sense of political duty and obligation, that is, one that goes beyond the mere willingness to submit to law and government”.³⁶ Thus, affirmative political obligations cannot suffice as a justification for compulsory voting.³⁷ Rather, a sense of political duty arises in part from the way in which elections require citizens to develop political opinions that accord with public spirit – it cannot just be imposed upon citizens who are unwilling to engage in this process, and the legal enforcement of such an imposition is surely unjustifiable.

One final defence of compulsory voting is that the ability to cast a blank vote – or indeed to be able to choose an option that de-

notes one’s dissatisfaction with the political system or its available options, which seems to me a sensible way to allow voters who are dissatisfied with their political options to express this opinion – implies that compulsory voting does not violate autonomy in a strong paternalistic way.³⁸ Individuals are not being made to act in a way that will “protect” them, or “benefit” them from an informed choice of action. In fact, compulsory voting, according to Lacroix, does not even impose a “very minor restriction” on individual freedom,³⁹ (contrary to what Lijphart argued⁴⁰). Rather, it is actually legitimated by autonomy and equal liberty – the very principles of political liberalism.⁴¹ That is a misleading diagnosis. Compulsory voting violates our negative freedom not to be interfered with – the only question is whether this violation can be justified by the benefit that results from legally compelling people to vote, a position that I have argued against. In response to my worry about the quality of votes that compulsory voting will deliver, the advocate of compulsory voting could claim that under compulsory voting, people are *required* to develop well-informed political opinions; but this response, as well as being practically quite vacuous (how could this requirement be enforced?) this seems incompatible with the liberal perspective of respect for all attitudes in the world – attitudes that may value, perhaps, spontaneity, spiritual quest, or even a scepticism towards organised activity, all of which could lead someone to choose not to vote.⁴² Clearly, I am not arguing that the choice not to vote should be encouraged. But a liberal respect for different opinions surely implies that people should be free to think in ways that may lead them not to want to vote, or indeed to want not to vote. Furthermore, the argument that the ability to cast a blank vote means that compulsory voting does not violate our autonomy is like saying that being forced to attend church but not to pray would not violate our conscience, which is clearly absurd.⁴³ Lacroix’s argument amounts to the proposition that forcing someone to turn up to a polling booth is an acceptable infringement upon someone’s liberty, but requiring them to vote once there is not. In saying this, Lacroix is prioritising the voter’s “freedom of thought”, and saying that as long as this particular freedom is not violated (which it is not, since the voter may choose not to vote), the voter’s “liberal rights” are not breached. But the voter’s liberal rights

extend beyond merely her freedom of thought, and her freedom of movement (or of non-movement, i.e. her freedom to stay at home that day) is a case in point. Thus, Lacroix’s argument implies that the value of the vote in supporting the principle of equal liberty⁴⁴ outweighs someone’s freedom (of (non-)movement) to stay at home, but does not outweigh that person’s freedom (of thought) not to vote.

“Compulsory voting violates our negative freedom not to be interfered with – the only question is whether this violation can be justified [...]”

However, this argument assumes that legally compelling people to vote will bring about valuable electoral outcomes that support principle of equal liberty but, as I argued above, it is not at all clear that such benefits of voting will accrue under a system of compulsory voting. Some people might not be interested or motivated to vote, but after having been forced to the polls, they may decide that they “might as well vote now”, and even though they will not cast a blank vote they nonetheless have no actual interest in voting and their vote will not constitute a reasoned expression of their political will. Thus, their vote will be of little or no value, and it will surely be of less value than the vote of someone who has freely chosen to turn up to vote, as I argue below. Therefore, since it seems unlikely that the benefits of voting will hold for those who vote only as a consequence of compulsory voting, a concern for people’s liberty (in this case the freedom of (non-)movement, and not of thought) trumps compulsory voting’s vacuous attempt to further “liberal equality” by forcing people to vote; the ability to cast a blank vote merely reduces, but certainly does not eliminate, the extent to which individual liberty is violated.

In sum, the violation of liberty that occurs under compulsory voting is motivated by a dubious attempt to bring about the benefits of voting – and I have argued that a concern for liberty outweighs these benefits because it seems unlikely that valuable, reasoned votes will be cast by the people who vote only because voting is compulsory (the very people whom the practice of compulsory voting primarily seeks to affect), and so the virtuous circle of voting will not hold. However, even if the reader objects to this claim, for my central thesis to go through all that I need to establish is the weaker claim that the benefits of voting are *more likely* to ac-

crue under my proposed incentive scheme than under compulsory voting. Ultimately, I am arguing that my proposed incentive scheme offers a better way to improve electoral turnout among the young than compulsory voting, and this argument does not hinge upon whether compulsory voting is unjustifiable (though my arguments tend to point in this direction).

“The contrasting alternative approach to boosting electoral turnout among the young [...] [is] an incentive scheme that will pay young people between the ages of 18 and 28 a small amount, I suggest £30 [...]”

Encouraging young people to vote by financial inducement

I have argued that boosting electoral turnout by means of legal compulsion, which functions by giving people a disincentive for not voting, constitutes an unjustifiable violation of individual liberty. The contrasting alternative approach to boosting electoral turnout among the young that I consider now is an incentive system for young voters. I argue for an incentive scheme that will pay young people between the ages of 18 and 28 a small amount, I suggest £30, if they attend an hour's information session on the election, partake in an hour's discussion session on the election, both of which are arranged by an independent body without any political affiliations, and then cast their vote.

To be confident of the appropriate level of payment for this scheme, empirical research could be carried out into the minimum payment sufficient to act as an effective incentive for young voters, making a trade-off between maximising the chance of incentivizing young people to vote while minimizing expense. However, I suggest £30 because it is significantly more than the equivalent minimum wage payment for doing three hours of work (approximating the voting process to take about an hour), and therefore it would presumably make for an effective incentive for young people to vote. If it were much less than this then, especially if we also consider the time and expense that young people will require for getting to the sessions and to the election, it would surely fail to incentivise those young people who would prefer to spend this time engaged in leisure activities, or working in their normal job. But the payment is less than double the equivalent minimum wage

payment for three hours of work, so it would not constitute a huge expense. If anything, my suspicion is that to be an effective incentive for most young people (and, crucially, not just the young people who are already electorally motivated) to attend the sessions and vote, the payment would have to be at least £30; research might reveal that it would have to be more, perhaps £40. However, since £30 is significantly more than the equivalent minimum-wage payment for three hours of work, I assume for the remainder of this essay that it is enough to act as an effective incentive for the young people.

Of course, it is possible that the information and discussion sessions which I propose could be made a compulsory part of a scheme of compulsory voting in order to make it more likely that citizens cast a well-reasoned vote. But even if this happened, as well as constituting a larger violation of individual liberty (since now the person is forced not just to vote, but also to attend these two sessions), I do not believe that these sessions would lead to as much benefit as they would under my incentive scheme. People tend to be more interested in what they choose for themselves than what they are forced to do under threat of legal compulsion. Someone who freely chooses to work for the military, for example, is much more likely to be interested and engaged in his job than someone who does so only as a consequence of conscription. Therefore, even though I hope that the sessions will increase the attendees' political knowledge and engagement, it is likely to do so more effectively when the attendees are present at the sessions as a result of free choice than when they attend merely as a result of legal compulsion.

It could also be suggested that under compulsory voting these information and discussion sessions could nonetheless be offered without attendance being financially incentivised or legally enforced. Now, regardless of whether or not compulsory voting is in place, I agree that these sessions would be of value. However, by attracting people to the sessions who would not otherwise come, and incentivizing people to engage with the sessions by making payment conditional upon such engagement as my scheme proposes, the sessions are likely to be of more benefit under my scheme of financial incentives than under any other scheme.

It is perfectly possible that there will also be other relevant electoral events happening

between elections, such as referenda, begging the question of whether my scheme should, if applied to everyone aged 18-28, be extended to these events as well. Since, in the UK at least, such events are still quite rare, my answer would be yes: the total expense of my financial incentive scheme when it is extended to these events would still constitute a tiny fraction of government expenditure. For the expense to even amount to just 0.5% of government expenditure, there would have to be about 70 such events between every election⁴⁵ – this would still be a small expense even though the regularity of these events would be far more than the current frequency of electoral events in the UK.

Therefore, it seems entirely justifiable that for the near future this scheme should apply to all electoral events aside from the party elections – the expense will continue to be minimal. Only if referenda started to occur much more frequently than they do at present could the resultant level of expenditure justify the government's being selective about the events for which it offers financial inducement for the young people's attendance. However, even if, for whatever reason, policymakers were reluctant to extend the financial incentive scheme to other electoral events, and happy only to apply the scheme to the main election every four or five years, this would be of significant benefit; and it is very possible that the increased electoral engagement and force of habit that results from the scheme being applied with regards to young people voting in the party elections would spillover to their engagement in other electoral events anyway, even if the scheme did not also apply to these other electoral events.

Some objections

Now, it could be objected that those who attend the sessions under my incentive scheme do not make an entirely “free choice” to do so, since many will be there only because of the financial incentive. However, although that is to some extent true, the attendees are nonetheless likely to have more interest in the sessions under my scheme than under compulsory voting, for two reasons. First, although they may be primarily financially motivated, those who attend the sessions are nonetheless making a conscious choice to spend their time and make their money in this way, rather than by doing anything else. Thus, their choice implies that they are at least relatively hap-

py to attend the sessions, having weighed up the value of their attendance against the value of doing otherwise – I am sure that far fewer people would turn up if similar levels of payment were offered to those prepared to clean the town's sewerage system, for example.⁴⁶ This would not be implied if the sessions were an obligatory part of a system of compulsory voting because attendees would have no choice as to whether they should attend the sessions.

“It is very possible that the [...] force of habit that results from the scheme being applied with regards to young people voting in the party elections would spillover to their engagement in other electoral events.”

Second, the payment, as I explain below, is conditional upon the young people demonstrating their engagement with the issues under discussion, thus motivating them to listen to and engage with the sessions. This extra motivation to engage that someone will experience once they are at the session could not apply without such an incentive scheme (unless, of course, the disturbing option of fining people who were not engaged in the sessions were to be used – but surely no one would accept the level of liberty-violation implied by this).

The benefits of such a scheme are plain. Providing the selective benefit of financial payment to voters is much more pleasing than fining non-voters, and this would be especially true for young people who want and need money, but this scheme also offers a powerful method by which to overcome abstention and reduce the democratic deficit, bringing government policies into closer alignment with citizen preferences.⁴⁷ It could accomplish the same function as compulsory voting without infringing upon individual freedom.⁴⁸

Why would it offer such a powerful incentive for young people to vote? Very simply: because young people want, and need, money. Of course, this is true of everyone, and so if it were applied to all eligible voters then it would offer an effective incentive scheme for them too. But, plainly, young people tend to have and to earn less than older people. Also, for young people earning money may still have some novelty factor that has long since disappeared for the older generations. Furthermore, while the young people who work will tend to earn less than older generations, there are also many young people who are unable

to sustain a regular job because they are in full-time education or because they are suffering from the high level of youth unemployment. Therefore for both employed and unemployed young people even more than for the general voting population, the opportunity to earn a relatively significant sum of money quickly, and with relatively little effort, will surely be an enticing prospect and will offer a powerful incentive for attending these sessions and voting.

The most common objection to such a system is that it will incur the cost of incentivizing people to vote who would have voted anyway, a deadweight loss. Conversely, so the argument goes, “Fines for abstention would circumvent this problem and produce the same result – high turnout – more efficiently”, because fines would only apply to those who would not vote; rewarding people when turnout is already high will, for the most part, simply give rise to an unnecessary expense.⁴⁹

Even though this is a legitimate objection to a scheme that pays all citizens to vote, its weight is minimal in the case of the scheme that I propose because, for this scheme, the expense of paying people to vote is limited to young people between the ages of 18 and 28, and will only arise once every few years when there is a general election. By limiting the scope of payment to people aged 18-28, the cost of this scheme is significantly reduced – at £30 per voter, with this expense arising once every five years, the cost of such a scheme would make up approximately 0.007% of British government expenditure over those five years,⁵⁰ a negligible price to pay for improving the electoral turnout of young people and reducing the democratic deficit.

Of course, arranging the information and discussion sessions might also constitute a significant expense – I make no attempt to estimate how much that could be. However, when we remember that elections occur just once every four or five years, and if we bear in mind the value of these sessions as a means by which to engage the political will of young people, and enable them to activate their virtuous circle of voting – hence improving democracy and reducing intergenerational injustice – such an expense seems entirely worthwhile. Furthermore, it might be possible that this expense could be avoided, or at least significantly reduced, by finding volunteers to run these sessions or requiring local authorities (run by people who would not expect to have their incomes “topped-up” upon helping with such a scheme) to hold them.

Effects of implementing incentives

The reason that I propose payment for people between the ages of 18 and 28 (i.e., anyone below the age of 29 who is eligible to vote) is that with elections occurring once every four to five years, such a scheme guarantees that young people will be paid to vote in at least two elections. I hope that this will be sufficient to generate in young people the *habit* of voting, thus ensuring that they will continue to vote from the age of 29 onwards even after this incentive system ceases for them. The study cited above noted the significant effect on habit of voting in just one election, so voting in two (or three) elections will logically make this habit even stronger. Also, this age group makes up quite a significant portion of the population – it is, I hope, big enough to affect politicians' electoral prospects and so will be sufficient to begin to activate the virtuous circle of young people's political representation.

“The opportunity to earn a relatively significant sum of money quickly, and with relatively little effort, will surely be an enticing prospect and will offer a powerful incentive for [...] voting.”

However, I should note that if the government were particularly concerned about the cost of the scheme, or if it seemed as though being paid to vote in two or three elections would make the young person more likely to develop a habit of voting only when paid, rather than developing a general voting habit (an objection that I respond to below), then my scheme could perhaps be modified so as to apply only to first-time voters. Even though I argue in this essay for the scheme to apply to all those aged 18-28, it would certainly be preferable for the scheme to apply only to first-time voters than not to apply at all; and most of the arguments that I make for the scheme would apply equally to this alternative.

How exactly the information and discussion sessions should be arranged, the size of the group that should attend, and precisely what the sessions should consist of are questions that I make no attempt to address here. The basic principles that I would suggest for the sessions are very straightforward, however: the sessions should be arranged by an independent body with no political affiliations; the information session should be made simple and balanced, yet as informative and interesting as possible, offering a summary of what each party offers

but with an emphasis on how their policies differ, particularly with respect to what they offer young people; and the discussion session must be made simple and yet as engaging as possible, involving questions that unambiguously test the extent to which the individuals are engaged with the political issues at stake. It would probably be logical for the hour-long information session to be followed immediately by the hour-long discussion session so that the young people still have the information fresh in their minds for the discussion session, and so that traveling to and from the sessions is reduced.

Hasen argues in favour of compulsory voting over financial inducement as a method for raising electoral turnout because, so he suggests, a law implies moral authority or social consensus, as opposed to his analogous equivalent to financial incentives of half a dozen Yum-Yum doughnuts which “inspires an outcome-orientated calculus”, i.e. an election in which people vote because of the reward and not because they are actually electorally engaged.⁵¹ It might, Hasen could continue, make people even less likely to vote after the rewards cease, because the voter will never have developed an attitude of engagement but rather will have voted only due to the financial incentive on offer. This is similar to the objection that paying people to vote might increase votes but these votes will not be of value because young people will vote only in order to receive money – they will not actually be electorally engaged and will not take the time to think seriously about whom to vote for. Indeed, it seems conceivable that young people, often having mastered in school the art of pretending to be engaged when really they are not, may not actually be engaged by the information and discussion sessions at all. They may, the objection might run, be entirely uninterested in the election and turn up only in order to receive payment. After two (or three) elections when this payment ceases for the young person, she may be even less inclined to vote than she was initially because now she expects to receive financial payment in return for voting and without this financial inducement she is unmotivated to engage in the election. Perhaps, it might be said, the “habit” of voting that the young people develop would simply be a habit of voting only when there is payment on offer.

Yet preventing this apathetical response to the sessions is precisely the task of the

discussion session: the young people must be asked questions which reveal whether they have indeed listened to what was presented in the information session, and they must be asked to respond to what they heard, and to each other’s responses to what was heard, in order to earn the £30. Whether they qualify as having been actively involved should be at the discretion of those running the sessions. The expectation of engagement should not be especially high, of course – I do not suggest this in order to reduce the number of people who qualify for payment. Rather, I suggest this simply to ensure that young people do not think that they can turn up and attempt to disrupt the sessions, or make no effort to engage with the discussion, and still get paid. As long as the young person has clearly tried his or her best to follow the information presented and to reflect on it, and on the opinions of others, that should be sufficient for payment.

“It seems conceivable that young people, often having mastered in school the art of pretending to be engaged when really they are not, may not actually be engaged by the information and discussion sessions at all.”

This then takes the bite out of the above objection, because even though it is plausible that a young person who sat in silence could pretend to be interested when really he is not, if engagement is judged by his verbal responses to particular questions and to others then he could not pretend to be engaged when really he is not – holding a face that looks half-interested when really we feel bored is one thing, but responding to questions about what is being discussed when we have not been listening to or thinking about what is being said is quite another.

Moreover, by virtue of the information and discussion sessions, the political engagement of the young people who attended the sessions will have increased, and they will have developed a taste for what Riker and Ordeshook describe as the psychic satisfaction that comes from voting.⁵² This is significant: a citizen participation survey by Schlozman et al. revealed that it was the feeling of civic gratification (i.e., feeling good about doing one’s duty for society or helping the community, a feeling closely related to the “psychic satisfaction” that Riker and Ordeshook discuss) that voters

most commonly gained from voting (given in 93% of cases), above other gratifications such as social benefits or policy gratification.⁵³ Furthermore, political interest and civic skills will both be enhanced by the information and discussion sessions, and the study of Brady et al. indicates that these are the key drivers behind people voting.⁵⁴ These sessions will also make the young people more likely to continue to participate in the political process because they also offer a form of civic education, albeit a minimal one, that will enhance the political knowledge of young people.⁵⁵

Furthermore, because the young people never expected the payment to continue beyond their first two or three elections, it seems implausible that their habit of voting will have been skewed into a habit of voting only when payment is on offer. Imagine a child whose mother says to him “I’m going to give you some extra pocket money if you go to the homework club on Friday after school, but I’m only going to do this for two weeks because I can’t afford more than that.” Knowing that the payment will soon stop but that the sessions are valuable for him, he is likely to develop the habit of attending the sessions for their own sake rather than for the sake of the pocket money (even if they seem slightly less fun than going straight home) because he knows that the extra pocket money is only a temporary bonus. However, if his mother had instead said “I will give you extra pocket money every week that you go to the homework club,” then it seems plausible that, if this payment were suddenly to stop, the child might also stop attending the sessions, having got used to the idea that attending the sessions was his way of getting more money. In the same way, if the young people know from the start that the payment will be given only for their first two or three elections, and they find the sessions interesting and engaging, then they are more likely to develop a habit of attendance than a habit of attending in the expectation of getting paid.

In sum, the young people’s increased electoral interest, civic skills and political engagement, the psychic satisfaction and civic gratification that they obtain from voting, and the habit that they develop of voting (not merely of getting paid), having known all along that the payment would cease for them once they reached the age of 29, all make it likely that the young people will continue to vote after the payment stops for them.

A further objection might be that encouraging young people to vote by financial inducement is effectively a bribe: it implies the wrong attitude on the part of the government. My answer to this objection is that while more young people voting of their own volition would undoubtedly be a preferable solution, we need to be realistic about our situation. Indeed, empirical tests that reveal the influence of financial incentives on voters suggest that we should reconsider our normative bias against an incentive system, realizing that the result will be a more politically engaged and democratically representative government.⁵⁶ Perhaps there might come a time in the future when the political representation of the youth has improved as a result of the virtuous circle, and the democratic deficit reduced, to the extent that this scheme is no longer required in order to boost electoral turnout among the young. Be that as it may, in the present political environment with its worryingly low levels of electoral engagement among young people, there is no doubt that such a scheme would be of immense short-term and long-term value for improving the electoral turnout of the young and consequently improving their political representation, thereby also improving the quality of democracy and inter-generational justice.

“While more young people voting of their own volition would undoubtedly be a preferable solution, we need to be realistic about our situation.”

Indeed, I suggest that this scheme, in the same spirit as quotas, should ultimately intend to „make itself redundant“. For in addition to boosting young people’s electoral turnout in the short-term, it also aims to tackle the root causes of young people’s low electoral engagement. It will probably have spillover effects that improve the political representation of young people in other ways, too, although I do not have space to defend this further claim here. Furthermore, if my analysis so far has been sound, this scheme would be more likely than compulsory voting to bring about the benefits of voting. Therefore, if compulsory voting is taken to be a powerful possible method for boosting young people’s electoral turnout and producing the benefits of voting then it follows that my proposed scheme offers an especially compelling method by which to achieve this.

Conclusion

Thus, encouraging young people to vote by financial inducement offers a powerful way to boost electoral turnout among the young without infringing upon their liberty, as compulsory voting would do. It would, I have argued, also be more likely to deliver reasoned, quality votes than compulsory voting. Given that it applies only to young people aged 18-28 at the time of the election, the expense of such a scheme will be negligible. The expense of arranging information and discussion sessions for young people might also require considerable cost, but this seems entirely worthwhile considering the effects it will have of boosting the political engagement levels of young people and reducing the democratic deficit. Furthermore, it might be possible to avoid this cost by finding volunteers who can run the sessions. By virtue of the virtuous circle, the information and discussion sessions, and the force of habit, as well as offering a short-term solution to the low level of young people’s political engagement, my proposed scheme also offers a longer-term solution: politicians will start to heed the views and needs of young people as they begin to vote in greater numbers, thus motivating the young to be more electorally engaged; young people’s interest in, and engagement with, politics will increase; and the force of habit will therefore make it likely that the young people will then continue to vote as they get older, even after this payment ceases for them. Encouraging young people by financial inducement, in accordance with the scheme that I outlined, should therefore be seriously considered by academics and policymakers as a radical but effective method by which to address the current worryingly low level of electoral engagement among young people.

Notes

- 1 See Berry 2012: 44-65.
- 2 See Zukin et al. 2006.
- 3 For example, civic education, youth quotas in parliament, youth-led parties and, to boost electoral turnout, making voting more convenient for young people by developing a voting “app”.
- 4 Note that although useful distinctions can be made between them, this essay essentially treats liberty, autonomy and freedom as synonyms.
- 5 See Ministry of Justice 2007: 44, 54-56.
- 6 Ipsos MORI 2010.
- 7 The Economist 2016.

- 8 See Birch et al. 2013: 7; Dinas 2012; Gerber et al. 2003; Franklin 2004.
- 9 See Russell et al. 2002: 15.
- 10 See Howker/Malik 2013; Birch et al. 2013: 13-15; The Economist 2016.
- 11 See Sloam 2007: 565; Birch et al. 2013: 2, 16, 20.
- 12 See Whiteley et al. 2001; Russell et al. 2002: 6.
- 13 Henn/Foard 2012: 55.
- 14 Gerber et al. 2003.
- 15 See Franklin 2004; Dinas 2012.
- 16 This motivation for the scheme does not have to be in any way secretive: the government could explicitly tell young people that they are incentivizing them to vote because this will increase their likelihood of being well represented in politics both now and, through the force of habit and the virtuous circle, in the future.
- 17 Ackerman/Fishkin 2004.
- 18 See Hasen 1996: 2135, 2169, 2172; Stavely 1972: 78-82.
- 19 See Stavely 1972: 243 n.131.
- 20 Birch et al. 2013: 21-23.
- 21 See IDEA 2015; Hasen 1996: 2169-2170.
- 22 See Lijphart 1997: 8-10; Hasen 1996: 2170.
- 23 See Hasen 1996: 2172.
- 24 See Singh 2011: 104.
- 25 See Lijphart 1997: 10; Feeley 1974; Lacroix 2007: 192-193.
- 26 See IDEA 2015.
- 27 See Lever 2008: 63.
- 28 Constant 1988: 311.
- 29 See Jones 1974.
- 30 See Lever 2008: 62-63; Jones 1974.
- 30 Mill 1974: 141-163.
- 32 I set aside the classic problem of public choice theory that an individual vote is, in fact, incredibly unlikely to have any impact on the result of the election. For cogent attempts to explain and resolve this “paradox of participation” see Downs 1957; Riker/Ordeshook 1968; Verba et al. 2000.
- 33 Berlin 1969: 121-122.
- 34 Lijphart 1997: 11.
- 35 See Birch et al. 2013: 22.
- 36 Rawls 1999: 205-206.
- 37 See Lever 2008: 62.
- 38 See Lacroix 2007: 192-193.
- 39 Lacroix, 2007: 192-193.
- 40 Lijphart 1997: 11.
- 41 See Lacroix 2007: 192.
- 42 See Lever 2008: 62.
- 43 See Lever 2008: 64 n.4.
- 44 Lacroix 2007: 193-195.
- 45 Based on ONS (2015: 10) figures, the

population of people aged 18-28 in Britain can be roughly approximated at 9 million. If all these young people were to accept the incentive scheme, this would therefore cost the government about £270 million. Figures from 2014 give the government expenditure at £732 billion for that year (Inman/Arnett 2014). Based on these approximate figures, to arrive at the number of electoral events that could be funded by 0.5% of expenditure over five years, I divide 0.5% of government spending over five years (i.e., £732 billion x 5 x 0.5% = £18.3 billion) by the cost of the scheme, assuming that all young people use it (i.e., £270 million). The final calculation is therefore 18.3 billion divided by 270 million, which equals approximately 70.

46 Of course, for someone desperately short of money for the basic necessities of life and without any other way to get it, the choice may not be so “free” after all. But for most young people this would clearly not apply: some kind of cost-benefit calculation would be made before they decided to attend the sessions.

47 See Feeley 1974: 241.

48 See Feeley 1974: 241.

49 See Feeley 1974: 241.

50 Using the estimates given in footnote 45, I arrive at this figure by dividing the cost of the scheme, assuming that all young people use it (£270 million) by government spending over one year (£732 billion). Thus, I calculate: 270 million/732 billion, which equals approximately 0.00037. Thus, the cost of the scheme would constitute approximately 0.037% of government expenditure over one year: this is equivalent to roughly a 27th of a percentile, or one 2,700th of the expenditure. Hence, since elections occur only once every four or five years, over the course of an electoral term this expense would be much less again – it would constitute, over a five year term, approximately 0.007% of government spending.

51 Hasen 1996: 2172.

52 Riker/Ordeshook 1973.

53 Schlozman et al. 1995.

54 Brady et al. 1995.

55 See Galston 2001.

56 See La Raja/Schaffner 2013; Bassi et al. 2011; Ornstein 2012.

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