

## **Is compulsory voting is the solution to increase the voter's turn out in India**

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### **Introduction**

Contrary to the common perception that compulsory voting is a curiosity. Compulsory voting has been successfully in many settings and over long period of time. Thirty democracies world wide claim to have compulsory voting, but a much smaller number use it with reasonable levels of support and enforcement. These regimes are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Luxemburg, Singapore, Switzerland, Uruguay etc. Although Australia is one of the few advanced democracies (and the only English speaking country) to compel the citizens to vote, a number of other established democracies have shown interest in the idea. The democratic regimes located at the peripheries like India and Jordan have entertained the possibility. Though declining voter turn out is nearly universal phenomenon in the industrialized world.

Voting behaviour is difficult to change because it appears to be a kind of habit. Voting behaviour does not seem to be adequately explained by utility calculations alone: specifically rational choice theory does not satisfactory explain why many people do, in fact vote. Since most studies of turnout have detected, correlation between being a member of particular social group and propensity to vote. Members of non voting minorities many indeed make the quite reasonable calculation that it would be irrational to be the only member of their social group to bother voting.

Compulsory voting laws appear to act as the most effective surrogate for the social norm of voting. Making voting mandatory has the best chance of raising turnout because the most politically excluded members of society are probably beyond the reach of piecemeal ergonomic. Many habitual abstainers appear to be so disconnected from the political system. That only a radical reform like compulsory voting seems capable of drawing them back into civic life. Further provided it is systematically administered in a congenial context, it seems to be the best guard against any posy materialistically induced decline in turn out but law alone is

not enough, appropriate sanctions must also be attached in order to ensure high turn out. Those democratic regimes which impose penalties for non voting have turn out of approximately ten to thirteen percentage higher on average than those which do not.

### **Positives of Compulsory Voting**

- It will be easier for political parties to campaign on issues, since they will no longer have to spend funds simply trying to encourage people to vote.
- Because the entire population –or at least, a vast majority –are voting, the resulting government would have a stronger mandate

### **Problems with Implementation**

- Many are also skeptical of how this law would be implemented. If the political establishment has a hard time getting their message out to the population today, how can they be sure they can inform the entire population of their new obligation to vote?
- If a million people fail to vote in upcoming elections, does the State Election Commission have the capacity to apply some punishment to each and every one of them?
- There are issues with the registration process and electoral rolls. Many rolls are still filled with errors. If the government can't even sort out who can vote, can they really sort out who must vote?
- The Bill is also silent on 'Samras' (the Government scheme whereby voting with consensus is encouraged at the Panchayat level)

## Penalties

- It may be possible that the punishment will be more severe.
- The state assembly could opt for a coercive scheme similar to the one used in **Peru**, where access to any government service is contingent on having voted
- The poorest in society are often those who depend the most on access to government services like BPL cards, free education or employment through schemes such as NREGA. Failing to vote –or choosing not to vote –could have a severe negative impact on lives of these people.
- Meanwhile, the wealthy and middle classes who can survive without government assistance would be hardly inconvenienced by such a punishment.
- We must ask ourselves if a slightly higher voter turnout is so important as to warrant such severe and potentially unjust methods.

### **Need for more debate**

- For the state government to make a responsible decision there must be informed discussion.
- The population and our elected politicians must carefully weigh the benefits and harms that could result from carrying through with this plan.
- Such decisions should not be made without serious deliberations and public input.
- There is a need for our politicians to actually debate legislation before worrying about forcing citizens to elect them.

### Examples from other countries

- Currently, compulsory voting is used in 29 countries.
- In **Australia**, voting has been legally mandatory since 1924, where non-voters must either explain their absence or pay a fine.
- In **Peru**, where voting has been compulsory since 1933, citizens must carry proof of their having voted in order to obtain certain social services provided by the state.
- In many more countries, voting is legally required but rarely enforced. These include Paraguay, Thailand, Egypt and Costa Rica, among others.
- In **Brazil**, voting is compulsory for everyone except the illiterates, who can still vote if they apply for a voter registration card which contains state benefits. Once registered, they have to vote in order to keep their card. • In **Belgium**, non-voters face a moderate fine, and if they fail to vote in at least 4 elections they lose the right to vote for 15 years. Another motivating factor is that non-voters have difficulties in obtaining jobs in the public sector.

### Suggestions

- 1) The Government must seriously pursue a **larger political reforms agenda** with comprehensive re-structuring of relevant facets such as inner-party democracy in political parties, decriminalisation of politics and more accountability from the elected representatives at all levels.
- 2) The Government must give **adequate emphasis to education and awareness campaigns**, or simply to creating better primary education for more people that stressed civic duties.
- 3) The Bill **needs clear guidelines about the 'none of the above' option** as it still remains under question as to what would be the consequences if 'none of the above' option secured more votes than any of the contesting candidates.

- 4) There must be **debates/discussions**, both in public as well as in the Legislative Assembly, on important legislations.
- 5) Technical issues such as **problems with the electoral rolls** still remain to be solved before compulsory voting can be implemented successfully.
- 6) Rather than punishing non-voters, the **Government could reward those who vote**. Two obvious suggestions are minor tax breaks or financial incentives. This way, it would not appear so coercive to the population and might actually be more effective at getting people out to vote.

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