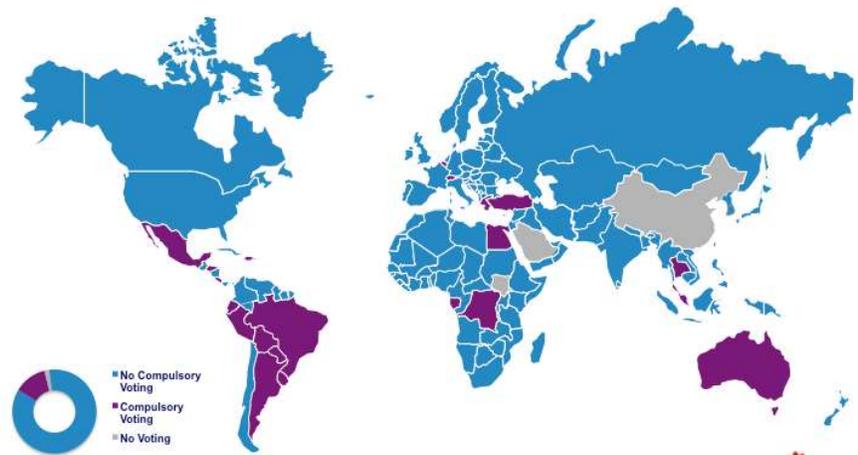


Should Voting Be Mandatory?

By Stephanie Kraus,
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COUNTRIES WHERE VOTING IS COMPULSORY



A voter casts a vote at a ballot box. In the United States, about 40% of eligible voters do not vote in presidential elections.

More than 30 countries, including Belgium, Brazil and Australia, have some form of mandatory voting. In 1924, Australia started issuing fines to citizens who didn't show up to vote. Turnout increased from 47% of eligible voters to over 95%. On top of that, perhaps because more people are involved in choosing their representatives, Australians report high levels of trust in government and satisfaction with the way democracy works. By comparison, a recent poll by the Pew Research Center found that just 24 percent of Americans trust the federal government.

Supporters of mandatory voting say a true democracy needs to hear from all citizens. Democracy doesn't work if a large portion of the population doesn't participate. Mandatory voting is the best way to encourage politicians to focus their attention on all Americans, not just the middle and upper classes. A study by Pew Research Center found that the eligible voters most likely to avoid the polls are younger, poorer, less educated, and more racially diverse. This means those groups are less likely to have their voices heard. Because wealthier Americans are more likely to vote, government policies are disproportionately geared toward their interests. If voting were mandatory in the U.S., people would be inspired to pay more attention to campaigns—and current events. Compulsory voting would also allow candidates to spend less time and money on getting voters to the polls, and more on explaining where they stand on key issues. Voting is more than a right—it's a responsibility. If Americans want their government to truly be of the people, by the people, and for the people, everyone has to go to the polls on Election Day.

Dr. Peter John Chen of the International Relations at the University of Sydney, in Australia, believes mandatory voting would help the current U.S. system. "Democracy provides both rights, as well as responsibilities. Requiring people to vote communicates

our responsibilities as citizens, like jury service or paying taxes,” he told TFK. “It says to us: ‘You are part of this society and have a stake and say in its government’.

But critics say enforced participation goes against ideals of freedom. Some worry it may lead to uninformed votes. Some Americans know a lot about politics, economics, foreign affairs, and current events. Others know hardly anything. Forcing them to vote could result in a worse government as a result. Elections have high stakes. Our votes help influence matters of war and peace, poverty and prosperity, justice and injustice—not just in the U.S., but all over the world. Bad decisions at the polls can result in devastating wars, damaging laws, and disastrous economic policies. Requiring uninformed people to vote would be like forcing them to fly an airplane or perform surgery without training.

Some people argue that voting is a civic responsibility. In my view, Americans who choose not to vote can exercise their civic duties in other ways, such as volunteering to help their communities or serving on a jury. But if they do vote, they owe it to themselves—and others—to be informed about the issues on the ballot. Furthermore, having a right to do something doesn’t mean you should be required to do it. For instance, we have the right to write novels or do science experiments, but it would be a violation of our individual freedom if the government forced us to do those things. Why should voting be any different?

There are better ways to fix low voter turnout in the U.S. Ari Ratner, CEO of Inside Revolution, and a former Obama political appointee believes voting should remain optional, but should be made easier for people. Getting to the polls during the week is difficult for many working adults. “Right now, we create lots of obstacles for people trying to vote,” he says. “I think registration should be automatic when you turn 18—so that you are automatically able to vote as an adult—and that voting day should be a national holiday.” We could also lengthen the hours the polls are open or have Election Day on a weekend instead of a Tuesday. Such changes would be more effective—and more democratic—than forcing people to vote whether they want to or not.

In the U.S., a citizen must be at least 18 years old to vote. But people of all ages can follow the election and weigh in on voting issues.

Here, two Kid Reporters share their views.

YES

Sarah-Blessing Tetedje, 11, Chicago, Illinois

If voting were mandatory, more people would be forced to pay close attention to the election. A mandatory vote might inspire citizens, especially young voters, to learn about the issues facing our country. If voting were the law, politicians would hear from all those eligible, not just the 60% who cast ballots. The country would have a president that more people personally supported. In addition, it would strengthen our democracy to hear from more citizens. Every vote counts!

NO

Robert Gardner, 12, Haddon Heights, New Jersey

In the U.S., voting is a right, not a requirement. Americans should understand that their voice matters and that their vote can make a difference. However, no one in the country should be forced to exercise that right. Voting would be difficult for citizens who objected to all the candidates. These citizens might feel that the candidates' views were contrary to their beliefs. How could they vote for someone they didn't think was right for the job? Just as we have the freedom to vote, we also have the freedom not to vote.

What do you think? Should the U.S. make voting mandatory? Explain your answer with 3 reasons.