

### **Compulsory Voting**

Voting is key to civic participation in a democratic society. Elections are a vital way for people to express their views and promote change. Elections are also seen as affirming a country's commitment to democracy. However, in democracies across the world, many eligible adults choose not to vote. For example, in the 2004 American national elections fewer than 60% of the eligible voters cast ballots. Because of the importance attached to voting, some people who are concerned about low voter turnout have proposed making voting mandatory. This practice is called compulsory voting. Advocates of compulsory voting believe voting is more than just a right, it is a civic responsibility.

**Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper in which you discuss whether you think voting should be compulsory and why. You may use the following information, your own experiences, observations, and/or readings.**

#### **Arguments in favor of compulsory voting:**

- Most democratic nations require citizens to do many things that are in the public interest, such as paying taxes, sending children to school, and serving as jurors. Voting is just as important.
- Democracy is based on the idea that everyone participates and is responsible for the common good. If democracy means government by the people, then being a good citizen means actively selecting who will represent you.
- There is consistent evidence that compulsory voting increase voter participation, particularly among the poor and less educated.
- Democratically elected governments are more legitimate when a high proportion of the population votes.
- If people know they will be penalized for not voting, they will pay closer attention to the issues and stances of candidates and go to the polls more informed.
- Political parties can focus more on education people about their ideas and candidates instead of trying to convince them to vote.

#### **Arguments against compulsory voting:**

- People should have the right to refuse to participate in politics. Just as the right of free speech includes the right to be silent, the right to vote should include the right NOT to vote.
- Forcing people to vote in what they believe are fraudulent or meaningless elections breeds cynicism about democratic processes and betrays core democratic principles.
- Compulsory voting requires extensive and centralized databases of citizen information. In today's world, where computers and information databases can reveal so much about a person, the decentralized control of election information is an important way to protect citizens from an increasingly powerful national government.
- Low voter turnout may indicate that voters are satisfied with the current system and see no need to change it.
- People who are required to vote will not be wise or informed voters. Also, people who are voting against their will may simply vote for a candidate at random.
- High rates of voter participation do not mean that people have freedom or support the government. Totalitarian governments often force people to vote.

“Requiring citizens to vote is no more restrictive than requiring them to register for the draft. An it is far less restrictive that requiring us, for example, to attend school; to serve on juries, possibly for weeks or

months at a time; to pay taxes; or to serve in the military when drafted... Voting is the least a citizen can do for his or her country.”

*-Source: John Dean, American legal commentator*

“One of the worst features of totalitarian or oppressive regimes is that it is necessary to take an interest in politics under them, either as a result of coercion into official demonstrations and so on or in order to contest their power. Surely it is a fundamental human right to be left alone, to be allowed to live one's own life within the law but otherwise unmolested, and to take no interest in policies at all except by choice. Compulsory voting, by imposing participation in the election of politicians and governments, infringes the right to be apolitical.”

*-Source: Padraic M<sup>c</sup>Guinness, columnist with The Sydney Morning Herald*

**As you write, remember to:**

- Consider the purpose, audience, and context of your letter
- Organize your letter so that your ideas progress logically
- Include relevant details that clearly develop your letter
- Edit your letter for standard grammar and language usage