

#democracyusage

Voting in Australian culture and the 2016 election

Submission to the:

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters: Inquiry into and report on all aspects of the conduct of the 2016 Federal Election and matters related thereto

November 2016

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Summary and recommendations

Voting and electoral participation are part of Australia’s culture, expressed through our long history of electoral reform as well as modern trends such as the social media tag #democracyseausage. Ensuring that everyone’s vote is counted is consistent with our ethos that everyone gets a “fair go”.

Australia has among the highest electoral participation rates in the world, while electoral turnout has been falling for decades internationally. In Australia, a decline is apparent from the 2010 election – from an average of 95% turnout for the previous 85 years to 91%, a fall of 4 percentage points. In the rest of the OECD, turnout rates have fallen by some 17 percentage points since the 1960s.

We should still be concerned. The 91% turnout rate in the 2016 federal election was the lowest recorded since compulsory voting in federal elections was introduced in 1924.

Research consistently shows that ‘if you don’t vote, you don’t count’. For example:

- In Australia, compulsory voting lead to a dramatic increase in participation, and politicians responded by increasing the age pension, which reduced poverty among older people.
- After women got the vote in the US, there were ‘immediate shifts in legislative behaviour and large, sudden increases in local public health spending. This growth in public health spending fuelled large-scale door-to-door hygiene campaigns and child mortality declined by 8–15%’.
- When the US *Voting Rights Act* (1965) fully extended the right to vote to African Americans, these communities saw improved public services, such as fire stations, recreational facilities, paved streets and garbage collection.

The Australia Institute recommends three measures to strengthen compulsory voting in Australia.

- 1. We recommend that the AEC adopt more innovative marketing and education by activating other motivations to encourage Australians to enrol, to vote and to vote validly.**

We encourage the AEC to emphasise voting as a part of Australian tradition and culture through measures such as:

- Promotion of our history of electoral reform and our world-leading participation rates.

- Working with social media trends such as the hashtag #democracyusage. Some ideas include:
 - AEC guide to preparing the perfect sausage and a valid vote
 - AEC #democracyusage awards, either in person or via social media
 - Engagement with voting place organisations to promote electoral participation as an important and potentially fun part of Australian culture.
- Engagement with Australians who come from other countries, where voting is not well practised or doesn't happen, to help them communicate their experiences with voting.

2. We recommend a review of fines for not voting

The AEC should conduct behavioural economic studies as to what if any change in fines would encourage greater participation and the socio-economic impacts of its imposition and enforcement. The fine for not voting was last increased in 1984, when it was increased to \$20. Average wage earnings have increased roughly 3.5 times since 1984. A fine of \$70 would restore it to the equivalent of what it was in 1984.

3. The Australian Electoral Commission adopt a 95/95/95 goal for federal elections:

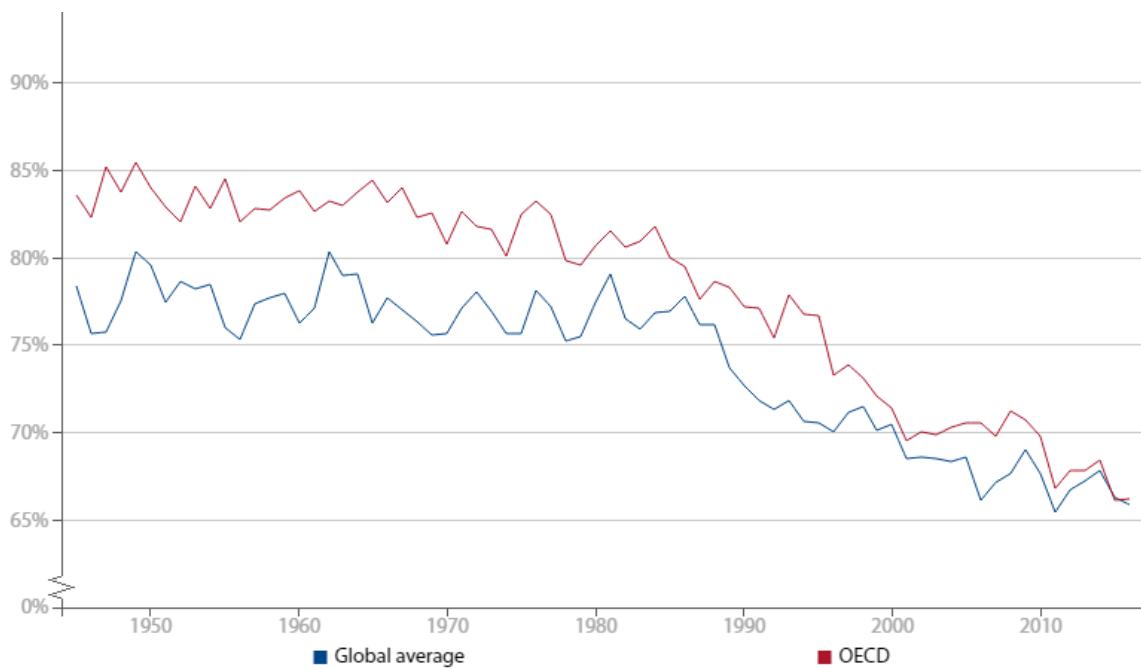
- 95% enrolment rate – 95% of adults eligible to be enrolled are enrolled
- 95% turnout rate – 95% of eligible voters attend a polling booth to vote
- 95% valid vote – 5% or less of votes are invalid

Introduction

AUSTRALIA'S HIGH VOTING RATES

Australia's voting rates are among the highest in the world. This achievement should not be taken for granted and we should be aware of trends internationally. Voting turnout has declined around the world and particularly in OECD countries, as shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Voter turnout in parliamentary elections



Source: IDEA (2016), www.idea.int/vt/

Figure 1 shows that turnout rates have fallen by some 17 percentage points since the mid-1960s in OECD countries, with similar falls across the global average. Figure 1 and others below use data from the International Institute for Elections and Democracy (IDEA) which maintains an international database on elections.

Countries to which Australia is often compared – the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Canada – have all experienced falling voter turnout, as shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Voter Turnout in Parliamentary Elections



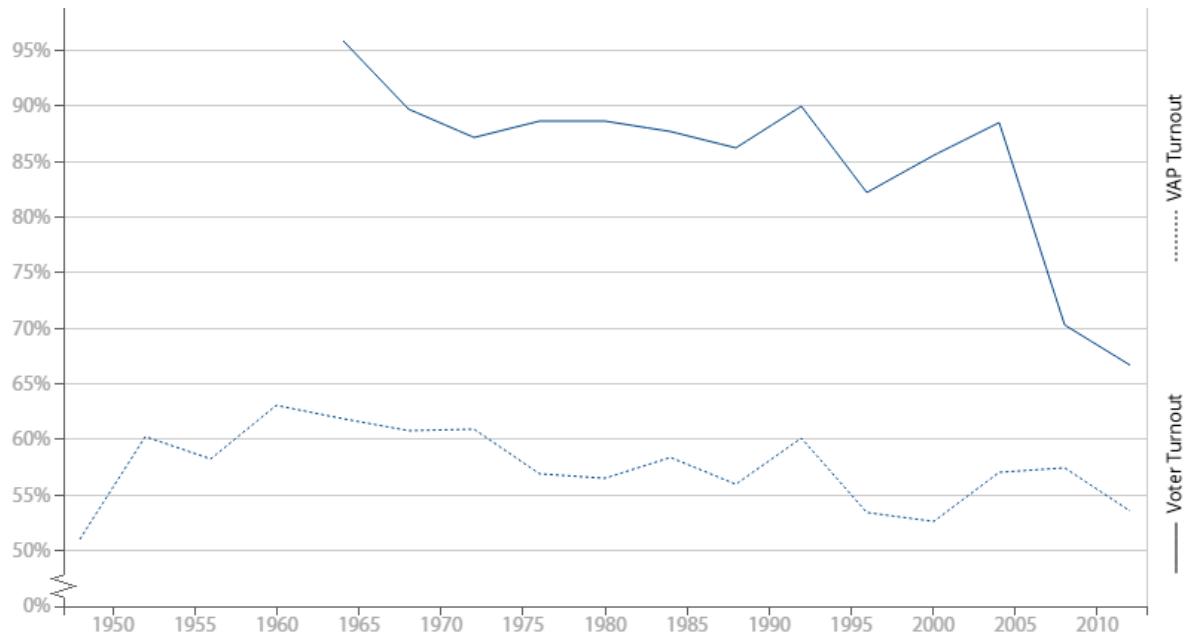
Source: IDEA (2016), www.idea.int/vt/

Figure 2 shows that Australia is not immune from this problem. After having voter turnout rates averaging 95% since compulsory voting was introduced in 1924, turnout started falling at the 2010 federal election. The 91% turnout rate at the 2016 federal election was the lowest turnout rate since compulsory voting was introduced.

These figures overstate electoral participation, especially for some countries, because the turnout rate is based on turnout as a percentage of enrolled voters, not of all eligible voters. Only Australia and New Zealand have compulsory voter enrolment, so in other countries many people eligible to vote do not enrol as a voter. In the United States this is particularly the case. At the 2012 presidential election, only 54% of the voting age population voted, as shown in Figure 3.¹

¹ Not all the voting population would be eligible to vote because some would be immigrants, in prison, etc.

Figure 3. Voting turnout in US Presidential Elections as a percentage of enrolled voters and as a percentage of voting age population (VAP)



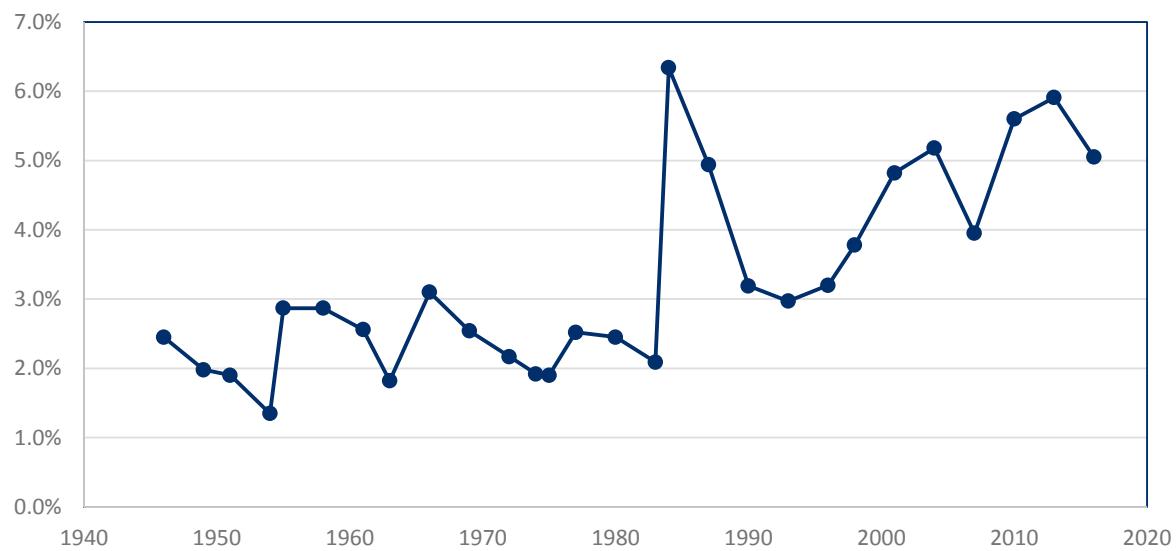
Source: IDEA Database, www.idea.int/vt/

Despite our drop in voter turnout, Australia's turnout rate of 91% at its last election ranks it with Luxembourg (also 91% and also compulsory voting) as the highest turnout rate for OECD countries for their most recent election and ranks it well above the OECD average of 66%.²

Just as turnout has fallen in Australia, invalid voting has risen. At the 2016 federal election, invalid votes as a percentage of total votes cast was 5%. This was higher than the 3% average since 1946 and has been trending upwards.

² IDEA (2016), www.idea.int/vt/

Figure 4: Invalid voting in federal elections



Source: IDEA (2016), www.idea.int/vt/

Voting: it's an Australian thing

Australia has been a world leader in electoral reform. Our success in maintaining high voter turnout is rooted in our long history of electoral reform. As a result, voting and electoral participation are part of Australia's culture. Is there any other country that sees social media tags such as #democracyusage trending on election days? Ensuring that everyone's vote is counted is consistent with our ethos that everyone gets a "fair go".

In 1857, the Colony of South Australia provided for universal male suffrage (though not for Indigenous voters), followed by Victoria and New South Wales in 1858.³

In 1896, South Australia extended the vote to women and, in 1902, the new country of Australia extended the vote to all women and men except Indigenous voters.⁴

Tasmania introduced the secret ballot in 1856. Other colonies followed its lead. In the United States and other countries, the secret ballot is called the Australian ballot, which reflects Australia's role in its development.⁵

In 1915, compulsory voting was introduced in Queensland state elections by its then Liberal Government, which was concerned that ALP shop stewards were more effective in "getting out the vote".⁶

Voting was voluntary at the first nine federal elections. At the 1922 federal election, turnout fell to less than 60% from 71% at the 1919 election. In 1924, a private member's bill for compulsory voting was introduced into federal parliament by Nationalist Party members. It attracted very little debate and was passed quickly in both houses without a division.⁷ According to Professor Stuart McIntyre, the dramatic fall in voter turnout from 1919 to 1922 seems to have been the main prompt to make voting compulsory. Both sides of politics also appreciated the benefit of not having to do the painful door knocking needed to simply get people to voting booths.⁸ It appears

³ AEC (2016), *Events in Australian electoral history*,
http://www.aec.gov.au/elections/australian_electoral_history/reform.htm

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

⁶ Evans (2006) *Compulsory Voting in Australia*,
http://www.aec.gov.au/About_Aec/Publications/voting/files/compulsory-voting.pdf

⁷ ibid

⁸ Trounson (2016) *Forcing your hand: Why we are made to vote*,
<https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/forcing-your-hand-why-we-are-made-to-vote>

neither side of politics was aware of how far-reaching the decision to make voting compulsory would be in terms of making voter turnout socially even and in turn how this would influence what type of nation Australia was to become.

The impact of making voting compulsory was immediate, with turnout at the 1925 election rising to over 91%.⁹

The states introduced compulsory voting for their state elections over the next two decades.¹⁰ In every state, apart from the initial case of Queensland, the bill for compulsory voting was supported by both sides of politics, as it was in the federal parliament.¹¹

Australia is one of 27 countries in the world that practice compulsory voting for their national elections, with countries varying in the degree of enforcement.¹²

⁹ Evans (2006) *Compulsory Voting in Australia*, http://www.aec.gov.au/About_Aec/Publications/voting/files/compulsory-voting.pdf

¹⁰ Apart from Queensland which had already introduced it.

¹¹ Fowler (2011) *Electoral and Policy Consequences of Voter Turnout: Evidence from Compulsory Voting in Australia*, Quarterly Journal of Political Science, 2013, 8: 159–182.

¹² IDEA (2016) http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm#practicing

Australian voting systems supported by research

Professor Lisa Hill points to the Australian electoral system as an example of best practice.¹³

Electoral offices are well organised, reasonably integrated and cooperative (despite federalism), professional, well-funded, independent, accountable and apolitical. As a result there is a very high level of trust around the election process and its outcomes.' Hill points out that this high standard has been driven substantially by the fact that voting is compulsory 'with the expectation that no Australian, however disadvantaged or isolated should be excluded from the electoral process.' Compulsory voting 'colours electoral authority activity in a positive way by encouraging electoral commissions to treat every vote as sacred and to expend considerable efforts in ensuring adequate access to the ballot.'¹⁴

In any given federal election, up to 500 mobile teams will visit 2000 special hospital locations; mobile teams will visit 300 or more remote outback locations and over 40 prisons and there will be hundreds of pre poll voting centres and 100 overseas voting places to which approximately three tons of election-related and staff training materials will be air-freighted immediately prior to polling. Finally, Australians living in the Antarctic and based on Antarctic supply ships are supplied with voting materials and facilities ... It would be hard to find an electoral authority in a voluntary setting anywhere that goes to nearly this much trouble to ensure full voting inclusion.¹⁵

As Hill points out, the high standard and integrity with which Australian elections are carried out has contributed to the support for compulsory voting in Australia hovering between 70% and 77% for decades.¹⁶

¹³ Hill in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press: 121-123.

¹⁴ Orr (2003) *The Australian Electoral Tradition* in G. Orr, B Mercurio and G Williams (eds.), *Realising Democracy: Electoral Law in Australia*, Federation Press: 390.

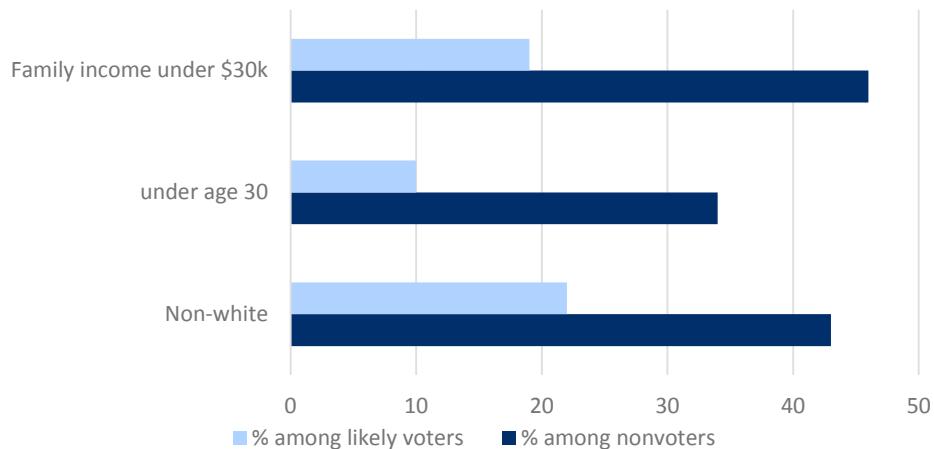
¹⁵ Hill in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press: 123.

¹⁶ Ibid: 123.

The importance of high electoral participation rates

Studies consistently find that non-voters are more likely to be the marginalised – the young, the less educated, the less wealthy, the sick, the unemployed, the Indigenous, the isolated, the homeless and those from non-English speaking backgrounds. Hill lists more than six studies that reach this finding.¹⁷ The Pew Research Center in the US found similar findings, summarised in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Socio-economic indicators of non-voters and likely voters



Source: Pew Research Center (2014) *The Party of Nonvoters*
<http://www.people-press.org/2014/10/31/the-party-of-nonvoters-2/>

The more marginalised are less likely to vote for two reasons. Firstly, they are more likely to be dissatisfied with the state of their democracy and therefore are less inclined to vote. Hill quotes six studies that support this finding.¹⁸ Secondly, the more marginalised are likely to find it harder to get to a voting booth, more likely to lack private transport, more likely to have employment demands that make it harder to vote and more likely to lack the education to participate in the political process.

¹⁷ Ibid: Chapter 6.

¹⁸ Hill in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press: 145–146.

Education makes people more comfortable with the voting process and better able to see the connections between their values/preferences and governmental action.¹⁹

Once it was thought non-voting was something that you grew out of. As the young grew older and became parents, bought a house, got a job for example, they were expected to become more likely to vote. The decline in turnout rates shows that the problem is more serious. As was remarked after the 2001 British election, ‘What used to be an under 25 problem a decade ago is now an under 35 problem and fast becoming an under 45 problem: once turned off, these people are staying turned off, perhaps for life.’²⁰

Numerous studies find that ‘if you don’t vote, you don’t count’. Hill quotes more than six studies that back this finding.²¹

- In Australia, compulsory voting lead to an increase in pension spending. Between 1920 and 1930, spending on the old age pension as a percentage of GDP rose more than 40 per cent, dramatically reducing poverty among older people.²²
- Miller found that after US women got to vote, there were ‘immediate shifts in legislative behaviour and large, sudden increases in local public health spending. This growth in public health spending fuelled large-scale door-to-door hygiene campaigns, and child mortality declined by 8–15% (or 20,000 annual child deaths nationwide)’.²³
- When the US *Voting Rights Act* (1965) fully extended the right to vote to African Americans, these communities saw improved public services, such as fire stations, recreational facilities, paved streets and garbage collection.²⁴
- Martin finds that US counties with high turnout rates are rewarded with higher per capital federal expenditure. As Martin puts it, ‘Not only do members of Congress typically try to bring back resources to their districts, they also try to allocate those resources in ways that improve their electoral fortunes by targeting areas that vote at higher rates.’²⁵

¹⁹ Ibid: 151.

²⁰ Freedland (2001) *The rise of the non-voter*,

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/dec/12/socialsciences.highereducation>

²¹ Hill in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press: 136-137.

²² Fowler (2014) *Electoral and Policy Consequences of Voter Turnout: Evidence from Compulsory Voting in Australia*, Quarterly Journal of Political Science, 2013, 8: 159–182.

²³ Miller, G (2008) *Women’s Suffrage, Political responsiveness, and Child Survival in American History*, Quarterly Journal of Economics, 123(3): 1287-1327.

²⁴ Hill in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press: 137.

²⁵ Martin (2003) *Voting’s Rewards: Voter Turnout, Attentive Publics and Congressional Allocation of Federal Money*, [http://www.chs.ubc.ca/participatory/docs/Martin\(B\).pdf](http://www.chs.ubc.ca/participatory/docs/Martin(B).pdf)

- Griffin and Newman's study of the roll call behaviour of US senators found that although 'senators may not know with certainty who votes and what their preferences are, their patterns of roll call voting respond to voters' opinions but not to non-voters' opinions'.²⁶

Studies have found that compulsory voting improves income distribution. Chong and Olivera (2005) in an Inter-American Development Bank working paper analyse 91 countries for the period 1960–2000 and find that compulsory voting, when enforced strictly, improves income distribution. They note that 'since poorer countries suffer from relatively greater income inequality, it might make sense to promote such voting schemes in developing regions such as Latin America'.²⁷ Birch (2009) and O'Toole and Strobl (1995) also find compulsory voting improves income distribution.²⁸

Other studies have found that higher rates of voter turnout are related to governments following more income redistributive policies: Bennett and Resnick (1990); Hicks and Swank (1992); Hill, Leighly, Hinton-Anderson (1995); and Mueller and Stratmann (2003).²⁹

As Martin Wattenberg put it, 'Politicians are not fools, they know who their customers are.'³⁰

²⁶ Griffin and Newman (2005) *Are Voters Better Represented?* Journal of Politics 67 (4) 1206-27. quoted in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press: 137.

²⁷ Chong and Olivera (2005) *On Compulsory voting and Income Inequality in a Cross-Section of Countries*, http://www.iadb.org/en/research-and-data/publication-details,3169.html?pub_id=WP-533

²⁸ Birch (2009) *Full Participation: A Comparative Study of Compulsory Voting*, Manchester University Press.

O'Toole and Strobl (1995) *Compulsory Voting and Government Spending*, Economics and Politics, 7 (3):271-280. Both quoted in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press: 137.

²⁹ Bennett and Resnick (1990) *The Implications of Nonvoting for Democracy in the United States*, American Journal of Political Science 34 (3): 771-802. Hicks and Swank (1992) *Politics, Institutions and Welfare Spending in Industrialised Countries 1960-82*, American Political Science Review 86: 658-74. Hill, Leighly, and Hinton-Anderson (1995) *Lower-Class Mobilization and Policy Linkage in the U.S. States*, American Journal of Political Science 36 (2): 351-65. Mueller and Stratmann (2003) *The Economic Effects of Democratic Participation*, Journal of Public Economics 87 (9-10): 2129-55. All quoted in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press: 137.

³⁰ Wattenberg (1998) *Where have all the voters gone?* paper presented in the Political Science Seminar Series, RSSS, ANU, 13 May 1998. Quoted in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press: 139.

Voting culture supported by compulsory voting

The strength of Australia's voting culture is supported by compulsory voting. Surowiecki explains that deciding on who are the best people and political parties to govern us is not necessarily the most important function of democracy. Instead, democracy's greatest value is providing a means of solving 'the most important problems of cooperation and coordination. How do we live together? How can living together work to our mutual benefit?'³¹ Compulsory voting improves the chances of answering those questions in a manner that leads to a more satisfied, cohesive society. A well-run compulsory voting system, such as Australia, in itself increases satisfaction with the electoral process and who gets elected. Moreover, those that are elected to government are more likely to reflect the general will of the people, not just those inclined to vote (who are generally better off), as shown in Figure 5 above.

A government that better reflects the wishes of all of its people is less likely to see the development of groups that are increasingly dissatisfied, frustrated and angry with their government and society. These groups are likely to form extremist movements such as the candidacy of Donald Trump in America and right wing movements in Europe. As Lijphart writes in support of compulsory voting, 'it is better to safeguard against sudden, sharp increases in turnout that support extremist movements by keeping electoral turnout at steady high levels, unaffected by crisis and charismatic leaders'.³² In support Lijphart quotes a comparative study of 29 countries by Powell which found a strong association between higher voter turnout and less citizen turmoil and violence.³³

Compulsory voting reduces the influence of powerful minorities. Australia has led the world with legislation that has been opposed by powerful minorities – for example firearms legislation and plain paper packaging for tobacco. In each case, politicians have been able to count on the votes of the majority which, while not strongly supportive, are still supportive. In a voluntary voting regime, politicians can't do this so easily as many of the weakly supportive majority may not attend a polling booth.

³¹ Surowiecki (2005) *The Wisdom of Crowds*, Anchor Books: 271.

³² Lijphart (1997) *Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma*: 10,
<http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~iversen/PDFfiles/Lijphart1997.pdf>

³³ Powell (1982) *Contemporary Democracies: Participation, Stability and Violence*, Harvard University Press: 206.

Similarly, in a voluntary regime such as the USA, it makes more sense for the very wealthy to spend money influencing politicians, because the votes of those who do vote (the better-off and better educated) are more likely to align with their interests.³⁴

Governments should hesitate to compel citizens to do anything. However, like school attendance, taxation and jury duty, there are important responsibilities in Australian civic life and culture that need to be compulsory. These activities are in the interests of the community and, in the case of voting, impose a small cost (half an hour every three years) to help achieve important ideals.

Other examples of where compulsion is in the public and individual interests include:

- Victoria was the first jurisdiction in the world to introduce compulsory seatbelt legislation (1970) and random breath tests (1976).³⁵ Other states followed shortly after.
- Our 1996 National Firearms Agreement is praised around the world.
- Our tobacco legislation has saved thousands from early death.

Compulsory voting similarly strikes an intelligent balance between individual freedom and serving the community.

Critics of compulsory voting may argue that if everyone has to vote, this will include those who are either uninterested or less informed. It is well established that the less educated are more likely not to vote when voting is optional, but there is little evidence that compulsory voting produces worse governments than would be the case otherwise. There is, however, strong evidence that compulsory evidence produces governments that are more representative and societies that are more cohesive.

Many factors affect voter turnout; holding elections on a weekend or holiday increases turnout by 6 percentage points. Proportional representation raises turnout by between 3 and 12 percentage points. None of these factors are as effective as compulsory voting.³⁶

Compulsory voting increases turnout by a minimum of 12 to 30 percentage points. As Hill writes, when it is done well, as it is in Australia, ‘it is the most efficient and effective means for raising and maintaining high and socially even turnout. In fact, it is the only institutional mechanism that can achieve turnout rates of 90 per cent and

³⁴ Hill in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press: 139.

³⁵ Jessop (2009) *Victoria's unique approach to road safety: A history of government regulation*, <http://researchbank.swinburne.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository/swin:13623>

³⁶ Hill in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press. The Economist (2016) *Make me: Compulsory voting is hardest to enact in the places where it would make the most difference*, 28 May 2016, <http://www.economist.com/node/21699459>

above on its own. This tends to be the case not just in prosperous, well-resourced settings but also in compulsory systems generally. Further, its effect on turnout is *immediate*'.³⁷

³⁷ Hill in Brennan and Hill (2014) *Compulsory Voting*, Cambridge University Press: 119.

Recommendations

We recommend that the AEC adopt more innovative marketing and education by activating other motivations to encourage Australians to enrol, to vote and to vote validly.

We encourage the AEC to emphasise voting as a part of Australian tradition and culture through measures such as:

- Promotion of our history of electoral reform and our world-leading participation rates.
- Working with social media trends such as the hashtag #democracyusage, some ideas include:
 - AEC guide to the perfect sausage and valid vote
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- Engagement with Australians who come from other countries, where voting is not well practised or doesn't happen, to help them communicate their experiences with voting.

We recommend a review of fines for not voting

The fine for not voting was last increased in 1984, to \$20. Average wage earnings – which are used by the federal government to index payments such as child support – have increased roughly 3.5 times since 1984.³⁸ A fine of \$70 would restore it to the equivalent of what it was in 1984 (adjusted for average wage earnings). The AEC should conduct behavioural economic studies as to whether such a change would incentivise greater participation, and to determine the socio-economic impacts of its imposition and enforcement.

In its report on the 2012 ACT Legislative Assembly, the ACT Electoral Commission considered that the current \$20 penalty for not voting at the ACT election was not a sufficient incentive to encourage some electors to vote and recommended that it be increased.³⁹ Currently only Commonwealth, WA and the ACT have a \$20 fine for not voting.

³⁸ ABS (2016) *6302.0 Average Wage Earnings*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6302.0>

³⁹ Elections ACT (2013) *Report on the ACT Legislative Assembly Election 2012*: 70,

Table 1: Penalty for not voting

Penalty for not voting	
NSW	\$55
VIC	\$78
QLD	\$55
WA	\$20, rising to \$55 for repeat offences
SA	\$70
ACT	\$20
TAS	\$26
NT	\$25
Australia	\$20

Source: Elections ACT (2013) *Report on the ACT Legislative Assembly Election 2012*: 70.
http://www.elections.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/837566/Report_on_the_2012_election.pdf. State electoral commission websites.

One approach could be to make fines for non-voting progressive, like our tax system. Such systems exist for a range of civic offenses in Scandinavia and The Australia Institute has explored the impacts of such systems for traffic fines in Australia, particularly South Australia.⁴⁰ Given that personal income data is collected at a federal rather than state level, this approach could be trialled at federal elections.

While the Australian Institute is uncomfortable with the regressive nature of fines, we recognise that they are a simple and effective, albeit blunt, deterrent. While fines hit the disadvantaged harder, it is precisely these people who really must be encouraged to vote because we know it is the disadvantaged who suffer, and suffer a lot more severely than the cost of a fine, when voting becomes optional.

http://www.elections.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/837566/Report_on_the_2012_election.pdf

⁴⁰ Linqvist (2016) *From Start to Finish: Reforming South Australia's traffic fine system*, <http://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/Reforming%20South%20Australia's%20traffic%20fine%20system%20-%20From%20start%20to%20Finish%20%5BWEB%5D.pdf>

Linqvist and Amos (2016) *Finland's fine example How to fix the regressive nature of traffic fines in Australia*,

<http://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/TAI%20Discussion%20Paper%20-20Finland's%20fine%20example.pdf>

We recommend that the Australian Electoral Commission adopt a 95/95/95 goal for federal elections:

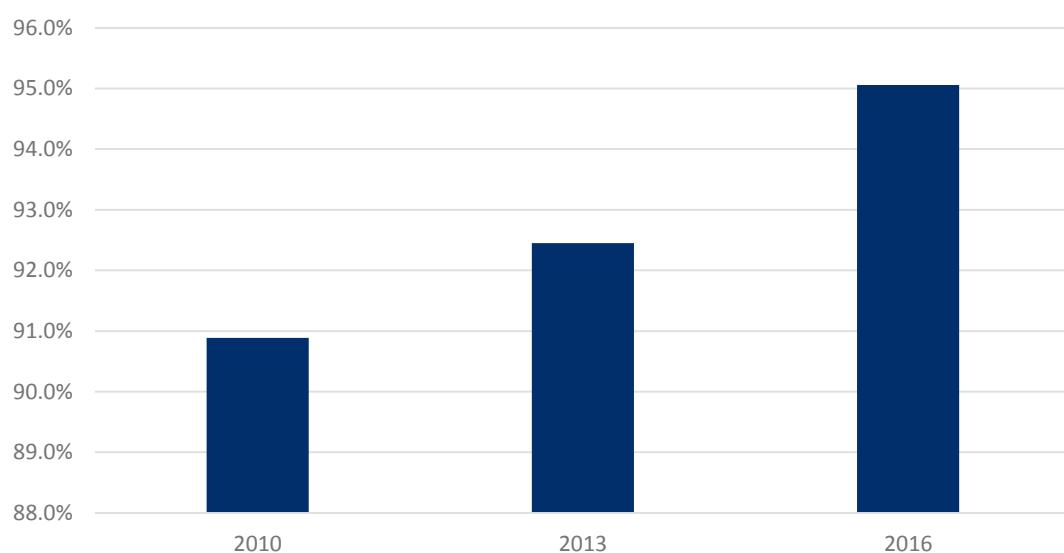
95% enrolment rate – 95% of adults eligible to be enrolled are enrolled

95% turnout rate – 95% of eligible voters attend a polling booth to vote

95% valid vote – 5% or less of votes are invalid

The Australian Electoral Commission has already adopted a 95% enrolment target. Helped by the introduction of direct enrolment, enrolment has risen since 2010. We commend this.

Figure 6: Federal Enrolment rate



Source: AEC (2016), www.aec.gov.au

Analysis on a state-by-state basis shows that there is still room for improvement, with enrolment across states varying from virtually 100% in the ACT to 84% in the Northern Territory. We urge the Australian Electoral Commission to continue its work and further increase enrolment rates. Rates are low in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. These states contain large Indigenous populations, a group that is among the most marginalised in Australia. It is important that their vote is counted.

Table 2: Federal Electoral Roll: Enrolment data, September 2016

State/ Territory	Electors enrolled	Eligible Australians	Proportion of Eligible Australians Enrolled	Estimated 'Missing' from the Roll
NSW	5,126,651	5,316,077	96.4%	189,426
VIC	3,997,699	4,147,289	96.4%	149,590
QLD	3,086,692	3,292,939	93.7%	206,247
WA	1,587,225	1,718,641	92.4%	131,416
SA	1,186,079	1,236,440	95.9%	50,361
TAS	375,024	388,938	96.4%	13,914
ACT	284,240	284,516	99.9%	276
NT	137,495	164,362	83.7%	26,867
National	15 781 105	16 549 202	95.4%	768 097

Source: AEC (2016)

http://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/Enrolment_stats/national/2016.htm

In 2013 the then Australian Electoral Commissioner, Ed Killesteyn wrote that:

We believe that the enrolment reforms of New South Wales, Victoria and now the Commonwealth will lead to a better overall turnout on election day; that is an increase in the *absolute number* of people who vote, albeit that the turnout percentage may fall. That is a good policy outcome from the perspective of the health of Australian democracy. But in the view of the AEC, enrolment reforms are not necessarily a panacea to non-voting. The number of people enrolled but not voting is still approaching 1 million across the Commonwealth. It is for this reason the AEC is keen to encourage a fresh debate, one that can build on the enrolment reforms recently introduced by the AEC and Parliament, but focuses on the next step of getting people to the ballot box at election time.⁴¹

Since the 2010 federal election to which Mr Killesteyn was referring to, turnout has fallen further with almost 1.4 million people not voting at the 2016 federal election. We agree with Mr Killesteyn and recommend that the Australian Electoral Commission adopt a goal to return turnout rates to back up to what they averaged for the 85 years prior to 2010 (i.e., 95%).

⁴¹ Killesteyn (2013) *Federal Direct Enrolment and Direct Update*,
http://www.aec.gov.au/about_aec/research/caber/2c.htm

Finally, we recommend that the AEC adopt a goal of 95% of the vote being valid (invalid votes are 5% or less of total votes). We also believe this is achievable given valid voting in federal elections averaged 97.5% for the four decades from 1946 to 1987.

The 95/95/95 targets are achievable, memorable and straightforward. Importantly, it is well known that what gets measured gets done. Setting these goals will increase the likelihood that Australia's compulsory voting regime remains best-practice.

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