

Choosing compulsory voting in Belgium: strategy and ideas combined

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In recent years, the issue of compulsory voting is gaining more attention among academics but also among politicians. The main example of this new interest for the obligation to vote is Lijphart's presidential address at the 1997 APSA meeting when the famous scholar claimed that compulsory voting was probably to most obvious and efficient answer to increase turnout for elections (Lijphart, 1997: 11).

In most democracies, the declining turnout is a major concern. Various proposals have been made. Most aim at enhancing the commodity of voting. The goal is at reducing the cost of voting for citizens (in time and personal investment). New experiments like electronic voting, postal voting or even Internet voting are being tested but no significant impact on turnout has been demonstrated yet (Delwit, Kulahci & Pilet, 2004). Public campaigns and civic initiatives to bring citizens to the polling stations are also observed. But at the end, none has proven to be as efficient as compulsory voting in terms of turnout.

Therefore looking at Belgium, the country where compulsory voting was at first introduced nationwide, is certainly not a bad idea. Belgium is also one of the few democracies where the obligation to vote is still in use. Yet, compulsory voting is not and has never been a fully consensual issue in Belgian politics. Pros and cons have always argued about the legitimacy of the obligation to vote. In this paper, the arguments mobilised in these debates will be examined. In a first part, the discussions at the end of the 19th century, when compulsory voting was introduced, will be described before moving in a second part to the recent debates (late 20th century) to abolish the obligation to vote. But before turning to these discussions, a brief summary of how compulsory voting is applied in Belgium is given.

1. Compulsory voting in Belgium : a brief description

In Belgium, every citizen having the right to vote is obliged to turn out on Election Day¹. More precisely, Belgian citizens above the age of 18 and registered in the list of inhabitants of one municipality are automatically registered to vote. Fifteen days before the election, a polling card is sent to all voters mentioning clearly that ‘voting is compulsory’.

For Belgians not residing in Belgium, a different system applies. Belgian citizens living abroad are eligible to vote since 1999². Yet, they are not automatically registered on the list of voters. They first have to register to their embassy. Once they are, they will receive a polling card and voting becomes compulsory for them too. The same system is applied to non-Belgian citizens residing in Belgium. Since 1999, EU citizens living in Belgium have the right to vote for local elections³. They first have to register to be included in the list of voters. Once they are, they will also have the obligation to vote. Since 2004, the right to vote for local elections has been extended to all non-Belgian citizens living in the country for at least five years. For them, the same system already used for EU citizens has been adopted.

A voter that has not turned out on Election Day can be fined. After the election, the judiciary is in charge of contacting all citizens that did not respect the obligation to vote. They will receive a letter asking them to explain why they did not turn out⁴. If the justification is considered to be invalid, a fine has to be paid. It goes from 25€ to 50€ for the first absence and may rise to 50€ to 125€ for the second. A voter that did not vote four times in 15 years is not eligible to vote for the next 10 years. He is also not authorised to apply for any appointment or promotion in the civil service.

However, legal constraints are very rarely applied. For example, in 1985; only 62 out of 450,000 voters that did not respect the obligation to vote were sanctioned. It means only 0,015% (Vanmaercke, 1993). Actually, the judiciary has so much work to do that those voters that did not turn out are certainly not on the top of the list of priorities. In other words, compulsory voting in Belgium is more a moral than a legal obligation in Belgium. Yet, the vast majority of voters do turn out on Election Day (see table 1).

Table 1: Turnout for federal elections in Belgium

¹ Belgian constitution, article 62.

² Loi du 18 décembre 1998.

³ Loi du 23 mars 1989 relative à l’élection du parlement européen, article 39.

⁴ Code électoral, article 207.

Elections	Turnout (%)
1981	94,6
1985	93,6
1987	93,4
1991	92,7
1995	91,1
1999	90,6
2003	91,9

Even if a small decrease (-2.7%) is observable in the last 20 years, abstention remains below 10% in Belgium. In that sense, Belgium is far above the EU average in terms of turnout. The high proportion of Belgians voting even if the risk of being fined is limited can be explained because most voters do believe that the legislation is effectively applied. On the days before the election, all newspapers and TV channels remind that voting is compulsory and that you can be sued and fined. None of them do mention the small proportion of legal actions actually carried on and the even smaller number of fines finally paid.

2. The introduction of compulsory voting in Belgium (1893)

After having briefly described how compulsory voting is applied in Belgium, we will now turn to the way it is discussed in Belgium. First, the debates in the late 19th century about the introduction of the obligation to vote are going to be examined. Then, the debate to abrogate the rule one century later (1990s) will be detailed showing how similar the arguments mobilised in both periods are.

Compulsory voting was introduced in Belgium in 1893 at the same time as the extension of the voting franchise to all men aged above 21. Before 1893, like in most European countries, only citizens paying a certain amount of taxes – a census (20 florins) - were eligible to vote (Magnette & Luyten, 2003). In 1878, for local elections, some criteria of intellectual capacity were also introduced. Those passing an electoral exam were given the right to vote. At that time, 136,755 citizens had the right to vote (Van Eenoo, 2003).

From 1860 until 1893, one of the main issues, if not the main one, in Belgian politics was the extension of the voting franchise to all male citizens. Supporters of the reform were present in the three main parties. The *Parti ouvrier belge* (POB) was fully in favour of the extension of the voting franchise. Its main allies were the radicals within the *Parti liberal* but also some

democrats within the *Parti catholique*. The main opponents of a reform were most of the Catholics and the conservative liberals.

Finally, in 1893, the voting franchise was extended to all men above the age of 21. Yet, the universal suffrage was moderated by a plural voting system. One extra vote was attributed to citizens paying a certain amount of taxes and to citizens having children. Another extra vote was attributed on the basis of the intellectual capacity of the citizen, of the degree of education. The electorate grew from 136,755 to 1,370,687 voters (853,628 with one vote, 293,678 with two and 223,381 with three) (Van Eenoo, 2003: 60).

The introduction of compulsory voting was adopted at the same time, as the natural complement of universal franchise (Stengers, 1990). Its introduction was however not fully consensual. Actually, the same people who opposed the extension of the franchise also criticized the obligation to vote⁵. In these discussions, most arguments may be ranked in four categories: the wish to reduce the abstention, the fear of radical voters and of radical parties, the self-interest of parties, and values and principles arguments.

The first concern was the high level of abstention observed in parliamentary election in the second half of the 19th century. On average, only 30% to 40% of all voters did effectively turn out on Election Day. In 1843, only 14% of all potential voters did vote (Dewachter, 1967:79). The fear was that by giving the right to vote to all men, the abstention problem was going to become worse. For the ruling elite, most citizens were seen as depoliticised. Therefore, they expected turnout to be extremely low. Compulsory voting was already at that time seen as the most efficient solution.

The second motivation for those promoting the obligation to vote was the fear of radical voters. Conservatives were worried that most moderate voters will not turn out and vote while the most radical ones will be more mobilised and will actually vote. The consequence would be a relative rise of radical parties, and in particular of the POB (workers party). Their concern was that “the most conservative persons, in a broad sense, will abstain; they are brave persons, indifferent or shy. They don’t realise that by not voting they open the way to radicals, excessive and violent citizens who don’t have to be pushed to vote” (Dupriez, 1901:119). The

⁵ In the Chamber of Deputies, compulsory voting was approved by 94 votes for (most Catholics and socialists, plus some liberal MPs) and 38 against (most liberals, three Catholics and three socialists).

fear was nourished by the impressive demonstrations led by the workers movement to support the universal franchise. The strikes of April 1893 and the violence observed on this occasion made a strong impression on the conservative elite (Mabille, 1997). The socialist movement was also clear in its intention to take benefit of the extension of the voting franchise to introduce important reforms. For the socialists, it was a major step in their conquest of political power by democratic means (Bergounioux & Manin, 1979). These radical reforms were feared by conservatives. One answer for them was compulsory voting, notably promoted by the Catholic right. It was for them a top priority to avoid leaving the space open to radical voters because of the political apathy of the most moderate ones.

As in most electoral reform, the introduction of compulsory voting in Belgium can also be explained by looking at the self-interest of parties (Bowler, Donovan and Karpp, 2006). For the Catholic party, traditionally gaining more votes in rural areas, the obligation to vote was supposed to guarantee that the peasantry would vote massively. These safe votes could not be jeopardized. The POB and the radical-liberals also considered compulsory voting as an efficient manner to optimize their electoral potential after the extension of the voting franchise. They both feared that without compulsory voting, the clergy and the notables would use the influence they may have over some of their potential supporters to discourage them to go out and vote.

Finally, ideological motivations were also present. The influence of values, of principles was not negligible. Among the opponents to compulsory voting (conservative Catholics and liberals), the obligation to vote was seen as a new constrain imposed by an ever more powerful state. It was a new restriction to individual freedom. Charles Woeste, one of the most prominent opponents to compulsory voting talked about “the obligation that constrains us, that wants to strangle us” (Dupriez, 1901: 121). The same line of argument may be found among those claiming that abstention is a civic right that cannot be restricted by law. Abstention is for them a healthy way to express your opposition to the political offer made to the electorate.

Among the supporters of compulsory voting, references to values and principles were also mobilised. First of all, the obligation to vote was needed for those wanting the political institutions to be legitimate by the wish of the people. Beernaert, the Catholic Prime minister who introduced compulsory voting explained, for example, that:

Parliamentary regimes are based upon the wish of the people, expressed by those having the right to enounce this wish. But for the law to reflect the wish of the people, that wish has to be expressed, to be manifested, to be known, and obviously it is not if voters do not vote. Not only the wish of the people would not be known, but too many abstentions may even distort the wish of the majority (Dupriez, 1901: 119).

3. Abolishing compulsory voting in the 1990s?

Between the end of the 19th century and 1970, compulsory voting was hardly contested in Belgium. As a matter of fact, the issue was back on the agenda when the Netherlands decided to abolish the obligation to vote in 1970. At that time, in Flanders mainly, some parties started to reconsider their support for compulsory voting. Some voices were heard suggesting following the Dutch example. The idea was mainly pushed by the new regionalist parties (Volksunie-VU and Rassemblement wallon-RW). The two parties entered the political scene in the 1960s and grew significantly in the 1970s (van Haute & Pilet, 2006). Along their demands for more regional autonomy, they were also the first ones to bring *new politics* issues on the agenda (De Winter, 1998). Abolishing compulsory voting was one of their claims with the introduction of the referendum and the direct election of the maires. In the 1980s, other parties also included the abolition of compulsory voting in their manifestos. The first ones were the Green parties (Ecolo and Agalev)⁶.

The turning point occurred in the early 1990s. At that time, Guy Verhofstadt became the new leader of the Flemish liberals. He transformed the old liberal party, the PVV (Party for freedom and progress), into the VLD (Flemish Liberals and Democrats). One of the main changes was the new institutional stance of the VLD pushing for a more libertarian and individualistic democracy. Verhofstadt's new mantra, 'Democracy of the citizen' (*Burgerdemocratie*), included several reform proposals among which the abolition of compulsory voting. For the first time in one hundred years, one of the major Belgian parties was putting the obligation to vote into question. From that moment on, all parties had to make clear and public what was their position about compulsory voting.

⁶ Ecolo, Electoral manifesto 1981 and Agalev, Electoral Manifesto, 1985.

Both the socialists (SP and PS) and the Christian-democrats (CVP and PSC) firmly expressed their wish to maintain the obligation to vote. In 1995, the four parties were joined by a former opponent to compulsory voting, Ecolo. For what concerns the Francophone liberals (PRL, later MR), the position was less clear. The party was divided on the issue and therefore came with a minimalist position saying in its 1995 electoral manifesto that the debate must be open without telling what would be the attitude of the PRL⁷. Finally, by the end of the decade, the leader of the PRL, Louis Michel, declared that his party was not in favour of the abolition. The last party to be mentioned is the Vlaams Blok (later Vlaams Belang). The Flemish extreme right, even if relatively discrete in these discussions, has submitted a bill in 1994 for the abolition of compulsory voting⁸.

Now that the position of all parliamentary parties in the 1990s has been presented, the main arguments mobilised will be examined. The interesting element is that they are very similar to the ones observed one hundred years earlier. The first resemblance is that most parties are divided about compulsory voting. In 1893, the liberals and the Catholics were highly divided on the issue, and even some members of the POB were not in favour of the obligation to vote. One century later, the picture is fairly alike. Even within the VLD, the main promoter of the abolition, some MPs defended compulsory voting. Willy De Clercq, the former president of the party (1972-3 and 1977-81) declared, for example, in 2004 that “in accordance with the principle that a democracy is not only about rights but also about duties, I will always stand in favour of compulsory voting”⁹. Eventually, during a VLD conference in 1993, the abolition of compulsory voting was one of the most contested propositions. The CVP (later CD&V) was also divided. Most party members were for maintaining compulsory voting. Nevertheless, in 1997, Pieter De Crem and Johan Van Hecke (party president 1993-6) co-signed a VLD bill proposing the abolition¹⁰. The cohesion is apparently stronger within the PS, the SP and the PSC. Yet, talking about unanimity would be excessive. For example, in 1993, when the Flemish socialist voted on compulsory voting during a national conference, 26.9% of all SP delegates were in favour of the abolition. Furthermore, since 2003, the SP.a forms a cartel with Spirit. And some of the main figures of Spirit like Bert Anciaux and Annemie Van De Casteele are strongly pushing for the abolition of compulsory voting.

⁷ PRL-FDF, Electoral manifesto, *Il y a du changement dans l'air*, 1995.

⁸ Document parlementaire 48K1332, Chambre des représentants, 28/02/1994 (Dewinter, Filip – Vlaams Blok).

⁹ Quoted in Goorden, Thierry, *Willy De Clercq. L'art du possible*, Racine, Bruxelles, 2004, p. 193.

¹⁰ Document parlementaire 49K1009, Chambre des représentants, 25/04/1997 (Bourgeois, Gert – VU- Chevalier, Pierre, Dewael, Patrick, Versnick, Gert – VLD- De Crem, Pieter et Van Hecke, Johan – CVP).

The second similarity between 1893 and the 1990s is that the two camps, the pros and the cons, are almost the same parties. Even if the liberals, the Catholics and the socialists have changed a lot in one hundred years, the main opponents to compulsory voting remain the liberals while the main defenders of the obligation to vote are the socialists and the Christian-democrats.

Thirdly, there are strong similarities in the arguments mobilised in the discussed about compulsory voting in the 1890s and in the 1990s. First of all, when it comes to principles and values, the abolitionists raise the same line of arguments: citizens cannot stand another obligation. For the Flemish liberals, the State is too restrictive and the obligation to vote is directly in contradiction with the principles of individual liberty. For the VLD, “no one can be obliged to choose his representatives if he does not want to”¹¹. The Volksunie brought up the same ideas by saying that “the right to vote is a right and we are free to use or not to use our rights”¹². Finally, according to the Vlaams Blok, abolishing compulsory voting “would allow at last citizens to express their opinions freely”¹³.

A second case mentioned both in the 1990s and the 1890s by the abolitionist is that the risk of being sanctioned is too limited to be effective, in convincing people to go out and vote. For them, it is clear that “a citizen who does not fulfil his duty by voting is almost certain not to be sanctioned”¹⁴. The promoters of compulsory voting do not deny it but instead claim that the solution is to enforce the obligation to vote and to effectively fine those who do not turn out on Election Day¹⁵. Finally, in the 1890s, the opponents to the introduction of compulsory voting declared that such an obligation is a non sense because no other European country is applying it. One hundred years later, the same is heard when the abolitionist underline that Belgium is one of the last European country forcing citizens to vote¹⁶.

Those in favour of compulsory voting in the 1990s also mobilised arguments already heard one century earlier. The first one is that compulsory voting is required to guarantee that

¹¹ VLD Conference, *De bugerdemocratie*, Gent, 22-24/11/1993, p. 11.

¹² Document parlementaire 3-825/1, Sénat, 16/07/2004 (Germeaux, Jacques, Van de Castele, Annemie and Vankrunckelven, Patrick - VU)

¹³ Document parlementaire 48K1332, Chambre des représentants, 28/02/1994 (Dewinter, Filip – Vlaams Blok).

¹⁴ Document parlementaire 51K1216, Chambre des représentants, 16/06/2004 (Vautmans, Hilde, Turtelboom, Annemie and Chevalier, Miguel – VLD).

¹⁵ PS, Electoral manifesto, *Une société plus juste*, 1995.

¹⁶ Guy Verhofstadt in *Burgerkrant* (monthly journal of the VLD), n°48, October 1997, p. 4.

political institutions are legitimated by citizens. Democracy is based upon the wish of the people. Therefore, it is required that citizens do effectively express their wish by voting¹⁷. The Flemish socialists made this point clear in their 1995 electoral manifesto by saying that: “compulsory voting guarantee that the parliament is not like a company where a small minority of rich stockholders have the power because most small stockholders are absent”¹⁸.

But new lines of arguments are also present. For example, compulsory voting is often linked with a new topic in modern democracy, which is participatory democracy. For De Batselier (SP.a), abolishing compulsory voting goes against the objective of more citizens’ participation: “if the goal is to have more citizens active in politics, why do some propose to abolish the obligation to vote. It would reduce the amount of citizens actually participating to the democratic process”¹⁹.

Principle arguments are not the only elements present both in the 1990s and in the 1890s. It is also the case with the issue of turnout. In 1893, compulsory voting was introduced in a context of high abstention as only 30% to 40% of voters were turning out. One hundred years later, the debate is not about actual abstention but about hypothetical abstention. Almost 90% of Belgian voters cast a vote. But the fear is that without compulsory voting, the figures would fall drastically. What is observable in neighbouring countries feeds these concerns. But for the abolitionists, a high turnout is not in itself a good thing. It may give the false impression that things are fine and that all citizens are positive about Belgian democracy. In 1981, Ecolo declared that “[compulsory voting] gives the impression to traditional parties that they can rely upon the solid support of their supporters and that they do not need to put much effort to be active”²⁰. For the abolitionists, “politicians have the impression that the Nation supports them, but they throw sand into their own eyes”²¹.

Among socialists and Christian-democrats the issue of abstention is related to the participation of all social groups: “[it] ensures that each and every one is included within the democratic system. It avoids that some are left aside and that the less-educated, the weakest

¹⁷ Ecolo, Electoral manifesto, *L’avenir est ouvert*, 1995.

¹⁸ SP, Electoral manifesto, *De Versterkte Democratie*, 1995, p. 32.

¹⁹ Interview in *La Wallonie*, 07/07/1997.

²⁰ Ecolo, Electoral manifesto, *Une autre manière de faire de la politique...*, 1981.

²¹ Verhofstadt, Guy, *De Burgermanifest*, 1991, p. 44.

ones are on the political agenda”²². According to Herman Van Rompuy (CVP), “we must realise that the first ones who will not exercise their right to votes are the weakest citizens”²³.

The idea that compulsory voting is a protection against radical voters is also present in the two periods. In the late 19th century, the radical voters frightening most of the political class were the supporters of the POB. One hundred years later, the fear is that the abolition of the obligation to vote would strengthen the position of extreme right parties. Yet, not all politicians and analysts share this view. For some, without compulsory voting, the extreme right would be worse-off without compulsory voting because anti-system parties benefit from the fact that many voters are upset by being obliged to vote and therefore cast a protest vote by supporting the extreme right. For the Volksunie, “voters that do not want to take part to the election vote without caution or in reaction against compulsory voting. They give their vote to parties they don’t share the ideas and that defend extremist views”²⁴. According to the VLD, “the obligation to vote creates discontent and leads to reject politics and politicians”²⁵.

The problem is that it is complicated to determine whether the obligation of votes favours or disfavour extremist parties. Academic studies and polls are contradictory. In the last IPSO-PIOP elections study (De Winter, Dumond & Ackaert, 2003: 62), it appears that the Vlaams Blok would not receive a smaller proportion of votes if compulsory voting was abolished (see table 2). Actually, 46% of Vlaams Blok voters will still vote. The proportion is fairly similar to the ones observed for VLD, SP.a and CD&V voters. It can also be noted that the proportion of Vlaams Blok voters who will keep on voting even if the obligation was abolished has risen significantly in eight years (+13.6 points of per cent).

Table 2: Proportion of voters of each party declaring they will still vote even without compulsory voting (in %)

	ISPO-PIOP, 2003			<i>De Morgen</i> , 27/10/2004			
	1999	1995	1991	Municipal elections	Regional elections	Federal elections	EU elections
Ecolo	57,6	56,1	44,4	*	*	*	*

²² SP, *Toekomstcongres*, 1998.

²³ Van Rompuy, Herman, « Vers une nouvelle démocratie », *Cahiers du CEPSS*, n°5, 1993, p. 75.

²⁴ Document parlementaire 48K1756, Chambre des représentants, 15/03/1995 (Sauwens, Johan, Anciaux, Vic, Caudron, Johan, Lauwers, Herman, Olaerts, Hugo, Van Grembergen, Paul and Van Vaerenbergh, Etienne – VU).

²⁵ Document parlementaire 48K1768, Chambre des représentants, 23/03/1995 (Dewael, Patrick, Chevalier, Pierre, Denys, André, Gabriels, Jaak and Verhofstadt, Guy – VLD).

Groen !	54,9	56,0	47,3	98,0	98,0	98,0	94,0
SP.A-Spirit ²⁶	48,6	45,1	35,6	79,0	80,0	75,0	68,0
VLD	44,8	40,1	36,3	73,0	72,0	68,0	65,0
MR	57,7	53,6	53,3 ²⁷	83,0	78,0	79,0	77,0
Vlaams Blok	46,0	38,4	32,4	56,0	54,0	52,0	44,0
VU	47,0	49,2	46,5	*	*	*	*
CD&V- N-VA ²⁸	45,1	38,8	40,9	84,0	82,0	80,0	69,0
PS	59,0	47,7	47,4	89,0	85,0	83,0	77,0
CDH	71,3	56,6	53,2	90,0	83,0	77,0	84,0
Average	46,7	*	*	73,0	71,0	69,0	64,0

By contrast, a poll published in 2004 in the newspaper *De Morgen* tends to give credit to those believing that the Vlaams Blok is advantaged by compulsory voting. In that poll, the Vlaams Blok is the party that would lose the biggest proportion of voters if it was no longer obligatory to turn out. With almost 50% of voters that will go out on Election Day, the extreme right party is far behind all other parties (on average 70%). Another study led for local elections in three Flemish cities (Brugge, Gent and Antwerp) by the University of Gent also shows that the Vlaams Blok voters will abstain more than others if compulsory voting was abolished (De Ceuninck, et al, 2006). Facing these contradictory figures, it is hard to determine precisely whether compulsory voting is advantageous or not for radical parties. But the fact is that this argument of radical parties already present in the 1890s is still mobilised in the 1990s but for a different political family.

Finally, like in the late 19th century, the self-interest of parties was also decisive in the 1990s debate about compulsory voting. Parties believing their voters are more inclined not to vote than supporters of other parties will defend compulsory voting. As shown in many studies, it is known that socio-economically disfavoured social groups are less willing to vote (Hooghe & Pellerieaux, 1998). Therefore, parties gaining a lot of support from these categories of citizens have more to lose if compulsory voting was abolished. This is the case for the two socialist parties (SP.a and PS).

From table 2, it is possible to see whether parties determined to abolish compulsory voting are the ones that would relatively lose less electoral support. It was the case for the Volksunie but also for Ecolo and Groen! (Agalev) that were abolitionists until the mid-1990s. On the

²⁶ Spirit not included for ISPO-PIOP.

²⁷ PRL without FDF.

²⁸ N-VA not included for ISPO-PIOP.

contrary, the strong abolitionist stances of the Vlaams Blok and of the VLD are less coherent. In table 2, the two parties risk to lose relatively more electoral support than the average.

A last element of electoral strategy to be mention is the image given by a party proposing to abolish compulsory voting. The regionalist parties, the Greens, and later the Flemish liberals when they became the VLD wanted to show that they were different from traditional parties. Therefore, proposing to abolish compulsory voting and all other proposals that may appear radical or even iconoclast were supposed to be positive in terms of image, and perhaps in terms of votes.

Conclusion

Belgium has always been unique in the debate about abstention in modern democracies. It has been of the first country to introduce compulsory voting nationwide and one hundred years later it remains one of the last where citizens have the obligation to vote. Therefore, there has never been a problem of declining turnout. In terms of efficiency, compulsory voting performs very well as almost 90% of all who are eligible to vote do actually vote in Belgium.

Yet, the efficiency of compulsory voting does not mean that it has never been contested. Both when it has been introduced in the late 19th century and nowadays, voices are heard claiming that obliging citizens to vote is illegitimate. In this paper, the two periods in history when the discussions were the most intense have been studied. The first one is the introduction of compulsory voting in 1893 and the second one happened one century later when several major parties campaigned to abolish the obligation to vote.

Even if the two periods are separated by one century of political events, it appears that there are a lot of similarities between them. The lines of arguments mobilised in both periods are fairly comparable. First of all, comparable principle cases were used in both the 1890s and the 1990s. For those opposing compulsory voting, the freedom of citizens and the rejection of most constraints imposed by the state disqualified the obligation to vote. By contrast, the promoters of compulsory voting claimed in both periods that having all voters turning out on Election Day was needed for the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Strategic considerations related to the self-interest of parties are also observable in the late 19th and 20th centuries. In 1893, compulsory voting was supported by the Catholic party that hoped to maximize its electoral support in rural areas. One hundred years later, the socialist parties are afraid that if voting is no longer compulsory part of their support among the less well-off citizens would be lost.

Two other questions are present in the two periods but in different terms. First, the fear of high level of abstention is present in both the 1890s and the 1990s. The difference is that in the previous, low turnout was a reality with only 30% to 40% of those eligible to vote effectively casting a vote. One hundred years later, 90% of voters do vote as it is compulsory. The fear of abstention is still present but it is a hypothetical concern.

Secondly, one of the main elements in favour of compulsory voting in 1893 was the fear of parties perceived as radical and potentially dangerous. The conservative elite was afraid that if voting was not obligatory only the radical voters of the working class would vote. They feared that it would favour the party of the working class, the POB. In the 1990s, the same concern was present but in a different way. There were debates to determine whether the Vlaams Blok was favoured or disfavoured by compulsory voting. Those, like the Volksunie and the VLD, who believe the obligation to vote increase the results of the extreme right plead for the abolition of the rule.

The comparison of the two debates has shown that even if debate about compulsory voting may vary according to the moment in history they are occurring, the very heart of the discussion remains the same. The opposition on whether it is appropriate to force citizens to vote is a mixture of principles, values and electoral strategy.

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