Partisanship and Political Support:
The Impact of Compulsory Voting

Krister Lundell
Department of Political Science
Åbo Akademi University
Biskopsgatan 15
FIN-20500 Åbo, Finland
krister.lundell@abo.fi

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Introduction

The purpose of the study is to explore whether compulsory voting, in some respects, provides a refinement of democracy from the perspective of citizens. Compulsory voting is first and foremost an institutional remedy to the problem of low turnout in elections. The level of popular participation in elections is normally regarded as an indicator of the well-being of democratic institutions. Because of a high turnout, elections become more representative in both a socio-economical and a party political sense. However, there are other measures of the stability of representative democracy as well, two of the most important being partisanship and general trust in various aspects of the political system. This study addresses the question whether the level of party identification and the level of trust in representatives of the people is higher among citizens in systems with compulsory voting than among citizens in voluntary voting systems.

Advanced industrial societies have undergone major changes during the last decades. The development of the modern welfare state has entailed high levels of economic security, concomitant with a cultural feedback that is having a great impact on the political systems of the modern world. The modernization process, along with improved skills and resources of average citizens, has resulted in a great diversity of social and political interests. Social class is no longer the natural basis of party choice; rather, political representation has become increasingly centered on single issues dependent on media coverage (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000: 11).

Inglehart (1999: 236-242) describes this development as a change from modernization to post-modernization. The ‘post-modern shift’ has moved authority away from religion and the state to the individual himself, allowing much wider range for individual autonomy and concerns. Emphasis has shifted from maximizing economic gains to maximizing subjective well-being. New identities and loyalties among citizens bring about a change in political attitudes as well. The placement on a traditional left-right scale is no longer self-evident,
and the gap between the functioning of democracy and the expectations of democracy is increasing.

Several studies have reported a decline in voter turnout and other forms of electoral participation as well as decreasing party membership figures in advanced industrial democracies (e.g. Blais 2000; Gray and Caul 2000; Wattenberg 2002). Moreover, citizens are increasingly critical of politicians, political parties, and political institutions (e.g. Dalton 2002; Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000). Also, public disenchantment is often directed against the system of party government itself (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000: 3). Dalton has observed a clear downward trend in party identification in most established democracies; likewise, he presents evidence of a general decline in support for politicians and political institutions (1999: 57-77).

Might compulsory voting provide a partial cure to these problems? On the basis of survey data from the European Social Survey 2-2004, I shall compare mandatory voting systems (in Belgium, Greece, and Luxembourg) with voluntary voting systems (in twelve countries) regarding party identification and political trust in politicians, parties and the legislature. A separate analysis of Austria is conducted, because two of totally nine Austrian states (Tyrol and Vorarlberg) applied compulsory voting until 2004.

The essay has five sections. After the introduction, a brief review of the benefits and drawbacks of compulsory voting is provided. In the third section, dependent variables and controlling factors are presented, the application of compulsory voting is dealt with, and the research population is selected. Thereafter, empirical analyses are carried out. The main findings and related problems are discussed in the concluding section.

**The Pros and Cons of Compulsory Voting**

There are lots of moral and philosophical arguments for as well as against the use of compulsory voting in democratic elections. Advocates maintain that elections become
more representative when everyone votes; compulsory voting equalizes participation since the will of less-privileged citizens is expressed to the same extent as those of more well-to-do citizens (Lijphart 2000: 150). However, critics point out that compulsion leads to a high number of ‘random votes’; that is, votes by citizens who do not care about whom they vote for (Gratschew 2005). In like manner, it is argued that mandatory voting forces people who lack an interest in politics to the polls: “An unwilling or indifferent vote is a thoughtless one” (Abraham 1955: 21). Consequently, according to this view, compulsory voting does not increase the legitimacy and representativeness of elections. Yet, this objection disregards the fact that compulsory voting might have an educational effect in a political sense.

Moreover, critics assert that compulsory voting violates individual freedom and deprives citizens of the right not to vote. Abstention is a civic right that should not be restricted by the law. In the same vein, Abraham (1955: 33) has characterized compulsory voting as undemocratic. In opposition to this point of view, it is argued that the duty to vote; or more exactly, the obligation to attend the polls is a very minor restriction in comparison to many other citizen obligations like paying taxes, military conscription and obligatory school attendance (Lijphart 1997: 11).

One specific argument in favor of compulsory voting is derived from rational-choice theory: citizens should not be free riders in matters of collective action. Therefore, regarding participation in elections, legal measures are needed in the form of obligation to turn out to vote (Wertheimer 1975). Furthermore, advocates claim that it reduces the role of money in elections, since no large campaign funds are needed (Lijphart 1997: 10). However, while this is certainly true for parties and candidates, the administration and enforcement of compulsory voting may be financially burdensome for the state (Gratschew 2005).

In addition to these arguments, research has shown that compulsory voting has some distinct political consequences, the most evident being increased participation in elections. The effectiveness of mandatory voting in generating high levels of turnout has been proven
in several studies (see e.g. Jackman 1987: 405-423; Blais and Carty 1990: 167-181; Franklin 2002: 148-168). For instance, when compulsory voting was introduced to Australian federal elections in 1924, voter turnout increased from 58.0 to 91.3 per cent (Mackerras and McAllister 1999: 220). Furthermore, Powell has demonstrated that higher voter turnout correlates with less citizen turmoil and violence, concluding that citizen participation enhances democratic legitimacy (1982: 206).

In an analysis of Australia, Mackerras and McAllister (1999: 217-233) point out that compulsory voting results in a large share of invalid or spoiled votes, the level being of the same size as that in the Netherlands in the two decades after the Second World War. Moreover, the authors conclude that left-wing and minor or protest parties benefit from a high level of turnout. Due to their support from less well-to-do citizens, left-wing parties are favored because these citizens are more likely to abstain than others under a voluntary system. Minor or protest parties are favored because high turnout tends to mobilize swinging and uncommitted voters who are dissatisfied with the major parties or the political system in general.

A major advantage of compulsory voting, Mackerras and McAllister assert, is that it contributes to a high level of party stability, which is reflected in the large number of citizens who identify with one or the other of the main parties. The level of party identification in Australia is one of the highest in the world. The act of voting means that citizens are enforced to think, albeit superficially, about politics, elections and the major parties every now and then. Compulsory voting is regarded as one the main underpinnings of Australia’s high level of partisanship (1999: 224-229).

**Research Design**

The extent of partisanship largely determines the quality of representative democracy. For instance, partisan ties perform a mobilizing function by drawing individuals into the political process. Moreover, they help individuals understand the complexities of politics
and provide a channel for receiving political information and making political evaluations and judgments (Dalton 2000: 20-21). On the whole, “…the extent of partisanship is an important political variable, and changes in these feelings over time provide us with a measure of the functioning of party-based democracy” (2000: 22).

From this follows that public trust in the party system as well as individual parties is largely connected to the extent of partisanship. More exactly, if the general confidence in parties decreases, the gap between citizens and parties increases. Furthermore, the level of trust in political parties goes hand in hand with the level of trust in other political institutions (Dalton 1999: 57-77; Inglehart 1999: 250-251). In other words, there is distinct connection between decreasing party identification, on the one hand, and increasing distrust of political parties, parliaments and governments (Pharr et al 2000: 5-25). Within the framework of this study, in addition to trust in political parties, general confidence in politicians and the legislature is of foremost interest. If the citizens lose confidence in political parties, we may also expect declining confidence in those who exercise power within these parties. The legislature, in its turn, is the playground for political parties – the arena that makes the party system visible.

**Dependent Variables**

Partisanship, or party identification, is an expression of citizens’ attachment to a particular party. The question in ESS2-2004 concerning party attachment is as follows: *Is there a particular political party you feel closer to than all the other parties?* Respondents are thus given two alternatives, yes or no. A further question to those who have answered in the affirmative is: *How close do you feel to this party? Do you feel that you are very close, quite close, not close, or not at all close?* These variables will be combined into a single variable that measures the strength of partisanship on a three-grade scale: *very close, quite close and not close* to a particular party. Trust in parliament, politicians and political parties is evaluated by means of the following question: *Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust.*
Population

The way compulsory voting is applied differs between countries. Firstly, differences exist regarding which citizens the law applies to. In some countries, voting is voluntary for people over 65 or 70. In addition to age limits, the law of compulsory voting in Brazil and Ecuador stipulates that illiterates do not have to vote. Several countries introduced compulsory voting before women gained the right to vote. For instance, not until 1981 were Guatemalan women obliged to vote, although mandatory voting has been applied to men since the introduction of universal (male) franchise in 1894 (Birch 2007: 14).

Secondly, the extent to which compulsory voting laws are enforced in practice varies. For example, Thailand has a law of compulsory voting but the decree is not enforced (Gratschew 2005). In some countries, the law is strictly enforced, implying that those who do not vote are sanctioned in one way or another. In Australia, voters that do not attend the polling station receive a ‘please explain’ letter. If a valid reason for non-voting is provided – for instance, being overseas or being member of a religious order that prohibits voting – no further actions are taken. If no acceptable explanation is provided, non-attendees are fined $A20-$A50, depending on whether the case is taken to court and whether the person is convicted (Mackerras and McAllister 1999: 224). In Bolivia, voters are given a card in order to prove their participation in the last elections. If citizens cannot show this ‘proof-of-voting’ card during three months after the elections, they may be prevented from receiving their salary from the bank. In Peru, voters have to carry a stamped voting card for several months in order to obtain some services and goods from public offices (Gratschew 2005).

Furthermore, if non-voters fail to provide a reason for their abstention, they may be disenfranchised in future elections. This is the case in Singapore and Belgium – in the latter, disenfranchisement may come into force, if a person does not vote in four elections within 15 years. Other sanctions are difficulties of getting a job within the public sector, and difficulties of receiving a driver’s license or a new passport. Even imprisonment is
possible. For instance, if a non-voter in Australia does not pay the fines after having been reminded several times, he or she may be sentenced to prison – however, imprisonment is regarded as punishment for not paying rather than for not voting.

In several countries, the law on compulsory voting offers loopholes, implying that non-voters may not be punished. For instance, the obligation to vote may apply only to those who have registered as voters. Furthermore, the intention of compulsory voting laws, despite lack of sanctions, may be to declare the government’s position on what the citizen’s responsibility should be. The mere presence of the law might have a positive impact on the willingness of citizens to vote (Gratschew 2005).

Since my study is based on the European Social Survey 2-2004, only European countries may be included. The following European countries have laws on compulsory voting: Belgium, Cyprus, France (Senate only), Greece, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg and Switzerland (Shaffhausen only). In the Netherlands, compulsory voting was abolished in 1970. The last parliamentary elections in which the Dutch were obliged to vote took place in 1967 (Irwin 1974). In Austria, compulsory voting was abolished in 1992 in all regions except for Tyrol and Vorarlberg. The latter two abrogated the law of mandatory voting in 2004. Cyprus, Italy and Liechtenstein are not included in the ESS2-2004. In any case, Italy would be excluded from the study since compulsion is not enforced. The regional division of Switzerland in the ESS2-2004 is not based on the 26 cantons. Since part of the Swiss respondents is obliged to vote while most of them live in regions with voluntary voting, Switzerland is omitted from the analysis.

Consequently, in the main sample of the study, Belgium, Greece and Luxembourg represent countries with compulsory voting. Respondents in these countries will be compared to respondents in established European democracies that lack provisions on compulsory voting. These are Denmark, Finland, France1, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

1 Voting in France is regarded as voluntary, since the law of compulsory voting applies to Senate elections only. Besides, compulsion is not enforced.
The case of Austria will be subjected to a separate analysis. Between 1992 and 2004, two states had laws of compulsory voting, while voting in other states was voluntary. By comparing Tyrol and Vorarlberg to the remaining seven Bundesländer, several other contextual factors may be controlled for. In Tyrol, abstention could result in fine sanctions and demand for explanation. According to the mandatory voting law in Vorarlberg, sanctions included fine and possible imprisonment. To be sure, sanctions against non-voters were weakly enforced – still, turnout in these regions has been higher than the national average (Gratschew 2005). Therefore, we may assume that mandatory voting has other effects as well.

Belgium was among the first countries in the world to introduce compulsory voting – in 1892 for men and 1949 for women. Non-attendees have to provide a legitimate reason for not showing up at the polls. Acceptable explanations are medically certified illness, being abroad or belonging to a religious order that forbids voting. Those who fail to provide a valid explanation face a fine sanction. Continued non-attendance may lead to exclusion from the electoral list and difficulties in getting a job within the public sector (Gratschew 2005; Electoral Reform Society).

Luxembourg has applied compulsory voting since 1919. Voting is voluntary for citizens over 70. Non-voters have to give a valid explanation of their abstention – otherwise, they will be punished by fines that vary from 99 to 991€, depending on how many times they have neglected to vote. Usually, however, non-attendees only receive a warning after the first abstention (Gratschew 2004: 29).

Mandatory voting was introduced into the Greek constitution of 1952. Compulsion applies to citizens within the age of 18 and 70, and to those living within a radius of 200 km from their assigned polling station. Those who do not vote are asked for an explanation. If non-voters fail to provide an acceptable explanation, they may face severe sanctions, e.g. imprisonment for up to one month. However, no one has ever been prosecuted. Earlier, sanctions included restrictions on obtaining a passport or driver’s license. However, under
the current electoral law, sanctions are weakly enforced, the institution of compulsory voting mainly being of symbolic character (Gratschew 2004: 28). Since compulsory voting in Greece is not enforced as strongly as in Belgium and Luxembourg, Greek respondents will be given the value 0.5 on the compulsory voting variable, which thereby distinguishes between voluntary voting (0), weak enforcement (0.5) and strong enforcement (1) of compulsory electoral participation.

The total number of respondents is 3,413 (12.2 per cent) in “strong” compulsory voting systems, 2,406 (8.6 per cent) in “weak” compulsory voting systems and 22,251 (79.3 per cent) in voluntary voting systems. Regarding Austria, 299 (13.3 per cent) respondents live in regions that applied compulsory voting until 2004, whereas 1,957 (86.7 per cent) individuals represent the remaining seven regions.

Control Variables

A slightly different set of control variables are needed when analyzing the possible impact of compulsory voting on party identification, on the one hand, and political support, on the other. Whether one identifies oneself with a particular party depends first of all on whether one is interested in politics or not. To be sure, it may appear self-evident that political interest is a prerequisite for partisanship – however, there are undoubtedly lots of people who are interested in politics, although they do not feel very close to any particular political party. In fact, it has been argued that the process of cognitive mobilization increases the political sophistication of citizens and thereby lessens the need to develop party identification in order to make political decisions (Borre and Katz 1973; Shiveley 1979). Political interest is included as a control variable in both sets of analyses, because it largely affects the way people think about parties, elections and political institutions. Interest is measured on a four-point scale.

Trust in political parties is also controlled for when analyzing the impact of compulsory voting on partisanship. As mentioned earlier, decreasing levels of trust in political institutions goes hand in hand with eroding party attachments. We may expect that citizens
who do not trust political parties do not develop ties to any particular party either. In other words, party identification presupposes support in at least one party.

Changes in mass media have largely contributed to partisan dealignment trends during the last few decades. More and more information functions that previously were controlled by political parties are now in the hands of mass media – television and newspapers have become the basic sources of campaign information (Dalton 2002: 188). However, mass media consumption cannot be used as a control variable regarding party identification, because citizens that to a great extent receive information on politics and current affairs from mass media are nevertheless more likely to feel attached to a particular party than others. The same is true of protest politics as a potential controlling factor. Protest politics represent a style of political action that clearly differs from conventional politics. Still, people who sign petitions, participate in demonstrations and tend to boycott certain products are on average characterized by a higher level of party identification than people who do not practice such activities.

Norris points out three separate schools of thought trying to explain variations in regime support: theories of cultural values, theories of government performance, and institutional theories of political support (1999: 217-221). The first mentioned is related to the concept of post-modernization, suggesting that core values transmitted through the socialization process affect attitudes towards the government. However, since cultural values are difficult to take into consideration as controlling factors, I prefer to directly concentrate on attitudes towards government performance. It is assumed that varying support in political institutions reflects the citizens’ overall evaluation of government performance, which in turn is essentially determined by the perception of its ability to handle the economy (Norris 1999: 218; see also Anderson 1995).

As for institutional theories of political support, Norris (1999) pays attention to four institutions within the broader constitutional context: form of government, the party system, territorial organization and the electoral system. Form of government cannot be included, since all countries in the research population but France have a parliamentary
system. Party systems are largely a consequence of electoral systems, which suggests that only the latter should be included. However, 13 countries of totally 15 apply proportional systems, whereas party system structure among these countries varies to a much greater extent. Consequently, party system fragmentation is included as a control variable. I shall apply Sartori’s (1976) classification into four principal types of party system: predominant one-party systems, two-party systems, moderate pluralism and polarized pluralism. Following Norris (1999: 224-225), countries with two-party and moderate multi-party systems should have higher levels of institutional support, since they function more effectively as a vehicle of voter opinions into government policy. Regarding the effective number of parties, measured by the Laakso and Taagepera index (1979: 3-27), I consider the value 4.5 as a dividing line between moderate and polarized pluralism. Party system fragmentation is measured at the point in time when respondents have participated in the ESS2-2004, based on data in Parties and Elections in Europe.

Moreover, federal systems should be associated with higher levels of institutional support than unitary systems, because federalism manages to accommodate the needs of different regions, while unitary systems are less flexible (Elazar 1997). The importance of party system structure is confirmed in Norris’ study. By contrast, the level of political support is surprisingly higher in unitary states than in federal ones. Into the bargain, since only two countries of totally 15 are federations, this factor will not be controlled for.

In studies of political behavior, controlling for individual characteristics is also needed – I shall control for age, gender, marital status and educational level. Unfortunately, ESS2-2004 does not provide information on income level and whether respondents live in urban or rural areas. Concerning marital status, two categories apply. Respondents who are in a partnership are coded 1, whereas all the others are coded 0. Educational level is measured on a seven-point scale, the lowest category consisting of those who have not completed primary education and the highest category representing second stage of tertiary.

In the analysis of party identification, ordinal logistic regression is applied, since the dependent variable constitutes an ordinal scale with three values. Trust in politicians,
political parties and parliament is measured on an eleven-point scale, which permits the use of OLS regression. All variables are (re)coded on a scale from 0 to 1.

Empirical Analysis

Bivariate Patterns

To begin with, bivariate patterns of compulsory/voluntary voting and dependent variables are analyzed. Results concerning the main population are shown in table 1. There are significant correlations between compulsory voting and partisanship as well as trust in politicians, political parties and parliament – however, the associations are weak. A glance at values for the 15 countries respectively reveals that Greece has the highest strength of partisanship, followed by The Netherlands, Norway and Denmark. Regarding political trust, Luxembourg performs well in a comparative perspective. Yet, generally speaking, political trust among the public is at an alarmingly low level.

Table 1. Compulsory voting, partisanship and political trust. Correlation analysis, Spearman’s rho.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strength of partisanship</th>
<th>Trust in politicians</th>
<th>Trust in parties</th>
<th>Trust in parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory voting</td>
<td>.027***</td>
<td>.069***</td>
<td>.045***</td>
<td>.027***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>28070</td>
<td>27545</td>
<td>27392</td>
<td>27319</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *** = significant at the .001-level

Table 2 shows that partisanship is approximately at the same level in Tyrol and Vorarlberg as in the other Austrian regions on average. Concerning trust in politicians and political parties, those two regions that practiced compulsory voting until 2004 perform somewhat better than Austria as a whole but the differences do not reach statistical significance. In other words, regarding evidence from Austria, compulsory voting has not a positive impact
on party identification and political support. Consequently, the Austrian regions will not be subjected to multivariate analysis.

Table 2. Compulsory voting, partisanship and political trust in Austria. Mean values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strength of partisanship</th>
<th>Trust in politicians</th>
<th>Trust in parties</th>
<th>Trust in parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory voting</td>
<td>.256</td>
<td>.347</td>
<td>.355</td>
<td>.470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary voting</td>
<td>.248</td>
<td>.327</td>
<td>.339</td>
<td>.477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>28070</td>
<td>27545</td>
<td>27392</td>
<td>27319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eta squared</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Multivariate Patterns*

Table 3. Partisanship in compulsory and voluntary voting systems. Ordinary logistic regression.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std.Error</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory voting</td>
<td>.168</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>18.68</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1.207</td>
<td>.080</td>
<td>229.679</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.833</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational level</td>
<td>-.058</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>.843</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>2.054</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>1582.07</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in parties</td>
<td>1.617</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>658.28</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threshold .00</td>
<td>2.850</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>2188.80</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threshold .50</td>
<td>5.374</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>5997.33</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28070</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model Chi-square</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3446.358</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2 Log likelihood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>32631.187</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R Sq.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.159</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *** = significant at the .001-level
In table 3, by means of logistic regression, the impact of compulsory voting on partisanship is measured. A test of covariation between the independent variables has been conducted. The model shows that compulsory voting has a significant, positive effect – however, in comparison with other factors possessing explanatory power, the impact of compulsion is modest. Political interest is the most important determinant; age and whether respondents trust political parties also have a considerable effect on party identification.

Table 4. Political support in compulsory and voluntary voting systems. OLS regression.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Trust in politicians</th>
<th>Trust in political parties</th>
<th>Trust in parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compulsory voting</strong></td>
<td>.123***</td>
<td>.175***</td>
<td>.198***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22.665</td>
<td>32.233</td>
<td>34.371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>-.020**</td>
<td>-.026***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.969</td>
<td>-.2.892</td>
<td>-.3.537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male</strong></td>
<td>-.013***</td>
<td>-.008***</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-5.347</td>
<td>-3.319</td>
<td>1.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
<td>-.008***</td>
<td>-.014***</td>
<td>-.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-3.265</td>
<td>-5.519</td>
<td>-.584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational level</strong></td>
<td>.029***</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.056***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.253</td>
<td>0.784</td>
<td>9.463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political interest</strong></td>
<td>.129***</td>
<td>.139***</td>
<td>.121***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30.858</td>
<td>33.047</td>
<td>27.235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Satisfaction with government</strong></td>
<td>.520***</td>
<td>.484***</td>
<td>.530***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>101.998</td>
<td>94.683</td>
<td>98.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party system</strong></td>
<td>-.053***</td>
<td>-.074***</td>
<td>-.026***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-21.697</td>
<td>-30.307</td>
<td>-10.197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R²</strong></td>
<td>.366</td>
<td>.352</td>
<td>.334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sig.</strong></td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>24716</td>
<td>24614</td>
<td>24567</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In each sell, from top downwards, figures indicate the regression coefficient and the T-value, *** = significant at the .001-level, ** = significant at the .01-level.

In table 4, using OLS regression, the independent effect of compulsory voting on three forms of political support is presented. The explanatory power of the models varies between 33 and 37 per cent. Compulsory voting has a significant effect on trust in
politicians but the regression coefficient is very small, indicating that the real impact is practically non-existent. The real effect of compulsory voting on trust in political parties, despite being statistically significant, is even smaller. Regarding trust in parliament, the impact of compulsory voting is negative. Satisfaction with government has by far the greatest impact on whether citizens have confidence in politicians, parties and parliament. Political interest also plays an important role. Contrary to the theoretical assumption, two-party systems and moderate pluralism have a negative effect on institutional support among the public. As for the purpose of the study, however, the positive impact of compulsory voting on political support is considered as minimal.

Discussion

In this paper, I have analyzed whether compulsory voting has a positive effect on party identification and political support among citizens. Mackerras and McAllister’s (1999: 217-233) statement on compulsory voting as one of the main reasons for Australia’s high level of partisanship was used as a point of departure. In the main sample, respondents in three countries that apply compulsory voting were compared to twelve countries with voluntary voting. An additional comparison was conducted on the basis of (past) regional differences in Austrian voting laws.

Concerning the latter mentioned analysis, no actual difference appears between Tyrol and Vorarlberg, on the one hand, and the remaining seven states, on the other. To be sure, the similarities between the groups may stem from the fact that mandatory voting was applied in all regions until 1992, differences in voting laws thereby being in force only during a twelve-year period. Still, it should be observed that voter turnout has remained high in the two states that continued applying compulsory voting by contrast with the other regions. Another more plausible explanation to the lack of difference is that compulsion was weakly enforced, not only in Tyrol and Vorarlberg but in all the other states as well.
In the main sample, slightly higher levels of partisanship as well as trust in politicians, political parties and the legislature are observed. Nevertheless, no substantial differences are at hand. The multiple analyses indicate that compulsory voting has a positive impact on party identification, trust in politicians and trust in political parties but the actual effect on the dependent variables is very small. It may well be the case that compulsory voting has a positive effect on part of the population in terms of partisanship and political support, but at the same time causes frustration among those who are indifferent to political matters.

One obvious shortcoming is that the survey material used for the study contains no more than three countries that apply compulsory voting, one of which is characterized by weak enforcement. This means that country specific features probably influence the results. It should be pointed out that the level of partisanship and political trust greatly varies between established democracies. On the basis of the analyses above, despite a small difference, we may conclude that no actual dividing line runs between countries with compulsory voting and countries with voluntary voting. Accordingly, compulsory voting does not provide a remedy to inadequate citizen confidence in political institutions and party-based representative democracy.

However, in addition to partisanship and institutional support, there are several other factors regarding citizen participation that may be affected by electoral obligation. For instance, has compulsory voting a positive effect on the level of political knowledge among the public? Are citizens in compulsory voting systems more diligent in obtaining information on political parties, candidates and political issues, or does compulsion create frustration because of lacking interest in politics among large segments of the people? Another possible effect is higher levels of participation in other forms of political life. It has been argued that people who take part in politics in one way probably do so in another (Berelson and Steiner 1964: 422). On the other hand, one may also assume that compulsion rather creates an atmosphere of protest that affects societal activity in general.

In any event, other possible effects need to be analyzed in order to find out whether mandatory electoral participation may provide a refinement of democracy. On the basis of
this study, compulsory voting does not at least reduce the level of partisanship or political support. We also know that it effectively increases turnout, at least when it is strictly enforced. If the institution has advantages in other respects of citizen participation as well, compulsory voting may be an option worth considering for countries that struggle with low voter turnout in elections.
References


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