

## **SHOULD VOTING BE MANDATORY? THE EFFECT OF COMPULSORY VOTING RULES ON CANDIDATES' POLITICAL PLATFORMS**

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This article analyzes the effect of political participation in the electoral process on parties' announced platforms in a model of electoral competition. The model highlights the existence of a class bias that favors groups of voters with higher turnout. There exists empirical evidence that wealthier economic classes present higher levels of political participation. In that situation, the model suggests that compulsory voting may be a useful mechanism to reduce the bias in favor of the higher-turnout class.

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## I. Introduction

Political participation is the cornerstone of modern democracies. Indeed, it is through voting that citizens select their representatives and, thereby, have their interests upheld in the policymaking arena. Yet, due either to legal impediments or to personal choice, citizens' participation in elections has been limited even in traditional democracies. In the United States, for instance, there were strong legal restrictions to voting until very recently. Only those who paid poll taxes and were able to pass literacy tests could vote, excluding not just the very poor classes, but also impeding black people from voting, since the tests were typically very difficult for them (Husted and Kenny 1997). It was only in the 1960's that such restrictions were banned in the American states, allowing for an increased political participation. In spite of the enlarged legal access, political participation in the U.S. has remained low, to the point where "Bill Clinton was, for example, elected to the White House in the 1996 U.S. presidential election with the support of less than 25% of the voting age population" (Jakee and Sun 2006).

Developing democracies have a similar history of limited participation. In Brazil, for example, until recently, significant portions of the population were legally excluded from the political scene. The vote franchise was extended to women only in 1934<sup>1</sup>, while the illiterate's suffrage was only established in the Federal Constitution of 1988. However, there are still several practical impediments to voting for the very poor citizens and residents living in deprived locations, such as displacement costs. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP 2005), during the period 1990-2002 only 75.9% of the voting population indeed voted, in spite of the fact that voting is mandatory in the country. Moreover, only 54.6% of the voting population cast valid votes.

In view of the low electoral participation, the academic literature and practice as well have suggested creating higher-powered incentives to voting. In countries such as Italy and the United States, voting is a voluntary decision, but there are several "encouragement" policies for voters' participation in elections, such as subsidies to transportation and promotion of absentee voting. Moreover, in countries such as Australia and Brazil, voting is mandatory and there are sanctions

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<sup>1</sup> This happened many years after the granting of the right to vote to women in countries such as Germany (1918), Sweden (1919) and the United States (1920). See <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm>.

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