



## Compulsory Voting—Lesson Plan

### Student Objectives

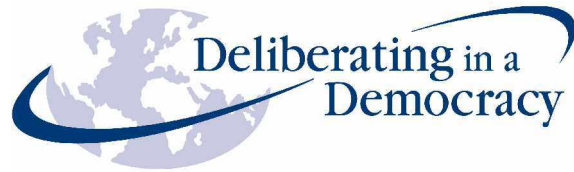
- Discuss the importance of voting in democratic societies.
- Learn how *compulsory voting* works in democratic countries that use it.
- Analyze the reasons for supporting and opposing compulsory voting.
- Identify areas of agreement and disagreement with other students.
- Decide, individually and as a group, whether compulsory voting is a necessary democratic reform; support decisions based on evidence and sound reasoning.
- Reflect on the value of deliberation when deciding issues in a democracy.

### Question for Deliberation

*Should voting be compulsory in our democracy?*

### Materials

- Lesson Procedures
- Handout 1—Deliberation Guide
- Handout 2—Deliberation Worksheet
- Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation
- Reading
- Selected Resources
- Deliberation Question with Arguments  
*(optional—use if students have difficulty extracting the arguments or time is limited)*



## Compulsory Voting—Reading

1        Voting is key to civic participation in a democratic society. Elections are a vital way for people  
2 to express their views and promote change. Elections also are seen as affirming a country's  
3 commitment to democracy. For a nation to be a democracy, every eligible adult citizen should  
4 have the right to vote. Governments that do not offer their citizens a choice to vote for more than  
5 one candidate are not generally viewed as real democracies. Evidence indicates that people around  
6 the world place great value on their right to vote.

7        In democracies where open elections are relatively new, voter turnout is usually very high.  
8 But in other democracies, many adults choose not to vote. For example, in the 2004 American  
9 national elections, fewer than 60 percent of eligible voters cast ballots. Things are not much better  
10 in other democracies. When the first open elections were held in Lithuania in 1993, more than 78  
11 percent of registered voters participated, compared with about 50 percent in the 2004 elections.  
12 In the 2006 election in the Czech Republic, about 65 percent of eligible voters cast ballots, a  
13 substantial drop from the 1992 election, when 85 percent of people voted. Estonia has seen  
14 participation fall from 78 percent in 1990 to 58 percent in 2003.

### 15 **Worries about Low Voter Participation in Elections**

16        Many experts and ordinary people in democratic countries are concerned about low voter  
17 participation in elections. Democratic societies have tried numerous ways to increase voter turnout.  
18 Laws and practices that seem to increase voting include:

- 19 • Advertising or advocating voting.
- 20 • Mailing sample ballots and polling information in advance.
- 21 • Early voting before election day at convenient locations.
- 22 • Electronic systems or mail-in ballots, where citizens can vote from home.
- 23 • Election day registration.
- 24 • Longer hours at polling places on election day.

25 Because of the importance attached to voting, some people who are concerned about low  
26 turnout have proposed requiring people to vote. This practice is called compulsory voting.

### 27 **Civic Participation and Compulsory Voting**

28 In several democratic countries—including Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Italy, and  
29 Mexico—citizens are required to vote in national elections. In these countries, voting is seen not  
30 only as a right but also as a civic responsibility. Compulsory voting also has a history in the United  
31 States. Simon Jackman of Stanford University notes that North Dakota (1898) and Massachusetts  
32 (1918) amended their constitutions to allow compulsory voting, but their legislatures never passed  
33 laws to make voting compulsory.

34 In countries with compulsory voting laws, each citizen must register and show up at the polls  
35 to vote. They are not required to vote for any particular candidate. Sometimes people deliberately  
36 spoil their ballots to show their disapproval of the listed candidates or just vote randomly for any  
37 candidate. Those who choose not to vote and do not have a valid reason must pay a small fine.

38 According to the Australian Legal Information Institute, Australians who do not vote, lack a  
39 “valid and sufficient reason” for not voting, and refuse to pay the fine may be jailed, although this

40 punishment is rare. In other countries with compulsory voting, the penalties for persons who  
41 choose not to vote are often not enforced.

42 Generally, countries that have compulsory voting also have strong, nationally centralized  
43 voting systems. In Peru, for example, the voter registration system is coordinated by an official  
44 organization that maintains the national voting database. People are given a national voter  
45 identification card—with a photograph and thumbprint—when they reach voting age. Registration  
46 is transferred whenever a person moves.

### 47 **Compulsory Voting: Advocates and Opponents**

48 Advocates for compulsory voting make several arguments for why the practice should be  
49 adopted by democratic societies. First, compulsory voting laws *do* increase voter turnout. Political  
50 scientists Louis Massicotte, Andre Blais, and Antoine Yoshinaka, who study countries that  
51 mandate voting, estimate that compulsory voting increases voter turnout by 8 to 15 percent. The  
52 increase is most often seen among people who normally do not vote, particularly the poor and less  
53 educated. As Simon Jackman notes, “to the extent that compulsory voting increases turnout,  
54 compulsory voting also removes socioeconomic differences in electoral participation.” In other  
55 words, say advocates, the higher the rate of voter participation in democratic elections, the more  
56 those elections can be said to represent legitimately the will of the people.

57 Supporters also see important civic outcomes in compulsory voting. In their view, voting is a  
58 necessary part of a citizen’s work. While they acknowledge that this responsibility might compel  
59 people to vote against their will, as American legal commentator John Dean notes, “so is the  
60 compulsion to drive only on the right side of the road. Requiring citizens to vote is no more  
61 restrictive than requiring them to register for the draft. And it is far less restrictive than requiring

62 us, for example, to attend school; to serve on juries, possibly for weeks or months at a time; to pay  
63 taxes; or to serve in the military when drafted. . . . (V)oting is the least a citizen can do for his or her  
64 country.” Furthermore, advocates claim an element of civic education through voting: if people  
65 know they must vote, they will pay closer attention to the issues and go to the polls more informed.  
66 Compulsory voting laws will reinforce the idea that voting is a vital part of democratic  
67 citizenship.

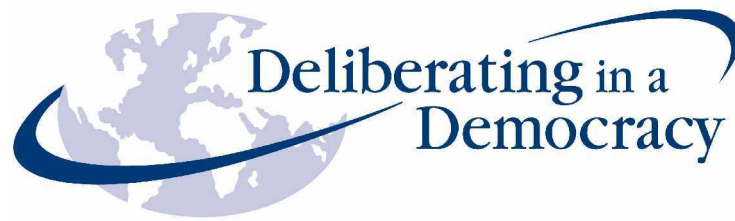
68 Opponents of compulsory voting argue that, at least in the United States, citizens do not *want*  
69 compulsory voting, a fact supported by a 2004 survey conducted by ABC News. In fact,  
70 opponents argue that low voter turnout may well be a sign of overall voter satisfaction, not  
71 disappointment, with the current system.

72 Because voting is an expression of faith in the political system, opponents of compulsory  
73 voting also argue that deciding *not* to vote is one of the few tools citizens have to challenge  
74 corruption or fraud. When the people have reason to believe that their votes will not be counted,  
75 will be tampered with by election officials, or will be otherwise misrepresented, forcing them to  
76 vote compels them to endorse a false outcome. Canadian academic Filip Palda agrees: “The less  
77 legitimate politicians feel, the more they try to pass laws that build around their regimes a  
78 Potemkin façade of citizen involvement. This is why Soviet Bloc countries forced their citizens to  
79 vote.” Forcing people to vote in a corrupt or meaningless election actually weakens citizen power  
80 in a democratic society.

81 In addition, opponents of compulsory voting worry about the central government’s control of  
82 the information that compulsory voting requires. Today, when computers and information  
83 databases can reveal so much about a person, decentralized control of election information is an  
84 important way to protect citizens from an increasingly powerful national government. More

85 fundamentally, opponents argue that voting is not an obligation but a privilege. If the goal is to  
86 foster citizen participation, then there are easier—and better—ways than compulsory voting to  
87 foster civic engagement. By increasing the level of education people receive, countries can help  
88 their citizens better understand public issues and how to address them meaningfully. Reminding  
89 people that they must choose to vote fosters the personal responsibility necessary for every  
90 democracy. Finally, critics of compulsory voting say that forcing participation of millions of  
91 people who neither know nor care about an election is counterproductive.

92       Is making voting compulsory a step toward greater participation by better informed voters, or  
93 a counterproductive strategy that will weaken citizen power? As democracies seek to engage  
94 more citizens in the vital act of voting, citizens must be prepared to deliberate this and other  
95 proposals aimed at making elections truly representative.



## Compulsory Voting—Selected Resources

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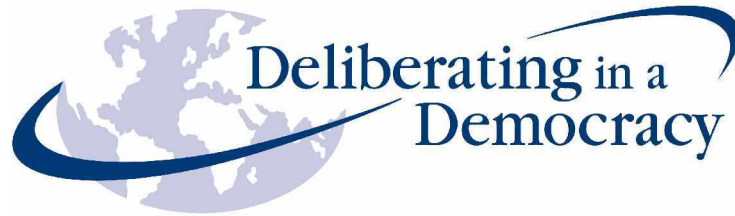
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## **Compulsory Voting—Deliberation Question with Arguments**

### **Deliberation Question**

*Should voting be compulsory in our democracy?*

### **Arguments to Support the Deliberation Question**

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





## **Compulsory Voting—Deliberation Question with Arguments**

### **Deliberation Question**

*Should voting be compulsory in our democracy?*

### **Arguments to Oppose the Deliberation Question**

1. People should have the right to refuse to participate in politics. Just as the right of free speech includes the right to be silent, the right to vote should include the right NOT to vote.
2. Forcing people to vote in what they believe are fraudulent or meaningless elections breeds cynicism about democratic processes and betrays core democratic principles.
3. Compulsory voting requires extensive and centralized databases of citizen information. In today's world, where computers and information databases can reveal so much about a person, the decentralized control of election information is an important way to protect citizens from an increasingly powerful national government.
4. Low voter turnout may indicate that voters are satisfied with the current system and see no need to change it.
5. People who are required to vote will not be wise or informed voters. Also, people who are voting against their will may simply vote for a candidate at random.
6. High rates of voter participation do not mean that people have freedom or support the government. Totalitarian governments often force people to vote. For example, voter turnout in the Soviet Union between 1950 and 1984 averaged 99.97 percent.