Compulsory voting-does it favour the ALP?

"It is true that compulsory voting has a built-in bias against right-wing parties and in favour of left-wing and minor parties. Support for compulsion by the ALP, the Democrats and the Greens suggests so. But this is surely just the obverse of the bias against left-wing parties that would follow an abolition of compulsion. If turnout fell to 1922 levels, one estimate based on the 1996 result had the Liberal share of the vote up 7 percentage points. The vote the ALP receives as a result of compulsion could be viewed as an error that voluntary voting would avoid. But it should more accurately be viewed as valid opinion that would otherwise go unmeasured."

From **All the Votes Are Needed for a Full Picture**
Gary Johns
Sydney Morning Herald
Thursday, October 1, 1998

The issue of voluntary voting keeps bubbling along. Senator Nick Minchin has been pushing it for years but to date the Australian Government has not moved to reverse the 1924 decision to introduce compulsory voting. It was initially introduced into Australia by a conservative Queensland government in 1915 and by 1944 had spread to all States. The South Australian Government attempted to abolish it in 1994 but could not get it through the Legislative Council (the Upper House).

The quote above typifies the conventional wisdom: compulsory voting benefits the ALP. The source of the estimate (that the Liberal share of the vote would be up by seven per cent) was not disclosed and I have been unable to find it. Is it true?

Since the introduction of compulsory voting in 1924 there have been 32 Elections for the House of Representatives of which the ALP won 10 and non Labor 22. This alone suggests that if compulsory voting provided the ALP with such an advantage (and 7 per cent is huge in electoral terms) then the ALP should have won more. Of course over that period the ALP suffered a number of convulsions that did not help its cause. In 1970 the ALP effectively ended the split and has experienced no subsequent fractures; therefore, it should have done better from 1970 on. It did, since 1970 both the ALP and the Liberal-National coalition have won seven elections each. A history that suggests no advantage to either side.

The United Kingdom and New Zealand have a similar political culture to Australia and both have Labour parties with close ties to trade unions. But neither have compulsory voting. If it provided such an advantage for the ALP then one would expect it to have held office longer.

Since 1945 the number of years Labour has held office in each country is:

Australia	20
United Kingdom	23
New Zealand	23

An outcome that does not suggest any favourable impact from compulsory voting.

In the period 1901 to 1944 the number of years of Labour government were:

Australia   12
United Kingdom[1]   0
New Zealand   9

The ALP did have more years in office over this period but half of that was under voluntary voting.

Statistical analysis of election outcomes

More rigorous analysis can be employed by using election statistics. By comparing the election results before and after the introduction of compulsory voting it is possible to identify any differences.

The ALP achieved major party status in the 1906 election and has held it ever since. Therefore, the elections covered are from 1906 to 2004. In the first two federal elections the ALP was only a minor party.

From 1906 to 1922 the average ALP vote was 44.97 per cent[2] compared to 44.37 per cent for elections from 1925 to 2004. A very small difference that has the ALP doing slightly better under voluntary voting. The medians for the respective periods are 44.00 per cent and 44.95 per cent, again there is little difference but this time the compulsory period seems slightly better for the ALP. However, the respective standard deviations are 5.1 and 4.1 (percentage points) which makes the differences in the averages and medians statistically not significant. It could be argued that the pre compulsory period with only seven elections (the compulsory period had 32) was too small a number to provide a meaningful result. Despite this there is little evidence to suggest that compulsory voting gives the ALP any advantage.

South Australia adopted compulsory voting in 1942 almost 20 years later than the Federal Parliament. Statistics from South Australia may provide a more accurate comparison. In this case there were 12 elections before compulsory voting and 20 after. In South Australia the ALP average pre compulsion was 44.3 per cent and 46.3 per cent after. In this case the ALP has a slight edge of 2 per cent. The medians for the respective periods were 46.4 and 48.2 per cent. However, again the standard deviations were 5.4 and 6.7 (percentage points) which far outweigh the differences in the averages for the two periods making those differences statistically not significant.

On the basis of this evidence it could be concluded that compulsory voting does not provide the ALP with any advantage.

Overseas evidence

Few countries use compulsory voting. Countries that have some form of compulsory voting have a different political culture to Australia[3]. Although the United Kingdom and New Zealand do not, and never have had, compulsory voting their familiar political culture may provide some clues.

Turnout rates can be indicative, if the hypothesis that compulsory voting favours Labour parties is correct than higher turnout rates should favour Labour. In the UK turnout rates (since the Second World War) have varied from a high of 83.9 per cent to a low of 59.4 per cent[4]. Correlation between turnout rates and the percentage of votes received for Labour and the Conservatives reveal a statistically significant positive correlation between the turnout rate and the Conservative vote;

whereas the correlation between the turnout rate and the Labour vote while positive, was statistically not significant[5].

Thus in the case of the UK higher turnout rates appear to favour the Conservatives.

In New Zealand[6] higher turnout rates appear to favour both the major parties Labour and National, with a slight advantage for the Nationals. There is a positive and statistically significant relationship between turnout rates and votes for both of these parties[7]. In New Zealand it would appear that higher turnout rates favour the major parties.

Conclusions

On the basis of the above their seems little evidence to support the view that compulsory voting is a major plus for the ALP. Certainly estimates of a seven percent advantage are not sustainable. It is more likely that compulsory voting is neutral in respect of its impact on support for the ALP and non Labor.

The evidence from New Zealand suggests that higher turnout rates (which approximate the outcome of compulsion) are neutral while in the UK it seems that higher turnout rates give the Conservatives an advantage.

Terry Giesecke

1. Labour did hold office for some periods in coalition

2. The ALP actually achieved its best ever result in 1914 with 50.9 per cent of the vote, the next best was 50.0 per cent in 1943 and 1954, the ALP actually lost the latter.

3. Countries that use compulsory voting are:
Argentina, Austria (presidential elections only), Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile (Registration is optional, once registered voting is then required), Congo, Democratic Republic of the, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Fiji, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Italy, Lebanon (compulsory for men only), Libya, Luxembourg, Mexico (not enforced), Nauru, Panama, Paraguay (ages 75 and older voluntary), Philippines, Peru (ages 70 and older voluntary), Singapore, Some parts of Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, Uruguay

4. Source: BBC elections website

5. The Correlation coefficient between Turnout and Conservative vote was 0.6989 (with and R^2 of 0.4885), for Turnout rate and the Labour vote it was 0.2895 (with an R^2 of 0.0838); however, it was not statistically significant.

6. Source: Elections New Zealand Website

7. The Correlation coefficient between Turnout and National vote was 0.5141 (with and R^2 of 0.2643), for Turnout rate and the Labour vote it was 0.4465 (with an R^2 of 0.1994), both were statistically significant.