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Voting: A Citizen's Right, or Duty?
The Case against Compulsory Voting
-Abstract-

Abstract della tesi di dottorato di Jan Rovenský
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Background:

Declining voter turnout has been haunting many democratic countries across the world. The decreases in participation have left a considerable number of citizens feeling uneasy. Various methods exist to achieve high participation rates but only one can immediately and dramatically increase turnout: compulsory voting (CV). In light of the dwindling willingness of voters to show up at elections, politicians and theorists have for some time been examining the prospect of introducing CV to counter the negative impact of low turnout. After all, they maintain that the legitimacy and health of a democracy depends on high participation, and thus voting is a citizen’s duty, not merely his right. This study critically examines the claims put forward by the advocates of compulsion and argues against the concept of CV.

Results:

Proponents of compulsion argue that voting is a citizen’s duty – this normative argument consists in fact of two claims: firstly, that high participation is good as it increases the health and legitimacy of a democracy, and secondly that non-voting is bad because it means immoral and selfish free-riding. To add weight to their argument, CV proponents back their claims with empirical data. In general, the case for compulsion proceeds in a series of steps; five of them were singled out for this thesis: (1) voter turnout has decreased in many democracies worldwide; (2) low turnout is undesirable because it causes unequal representation; (3) the easiest, fastest and most effective response is compulsory voting, which brings other benefits; (4) CV does not represent a significant infringement of personal freedom; (5) non-voting is morally wrong: it is free-riding on a public good and therefore it is acceptable to enforce turnout. The first three steps work as the empirical evidence to support the two points of the normative claim (steps four and five). The thesis shows that the empirical claims are false (the decrease in turnout is ambivalent, low turnout does not cause unequal representation and CV only increases turnout but brings no other benefits, CV can be a serious infringement of freedom), which in turn undermines the strength of the normative claims (the thesis argues that genuine low participation is preferable to inflated turnout and that calling non-voters immoral is wrong).

Conclusions:

The study casts into doubt the need for high turnout generated by CV and argues against the concept of forcing citizens to vote. The thesis finds the empirical evidence and normative arguments for compulsion either unsubstantiated or completely false.