**Should Americans be forced to vote?**

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**STORY HIGHLIGHTS**

* William Galston: Compulsory voting could move politics away from polarization and gridlock
* Haydon Manning: In Australia, voters face misleading negative ads and banal sloganeering
* Donna Brazile: We require jury attendance, paying taxes, so why not voting?

**(CNN)** -- *If past votes are any guide, turnout in this year's midterm elections could be about [40%](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/24/voter-turnout-always-drops-off-for-midterm-elections-but-why/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) of the voting age population. Australia and some other democracies take steps to require citizens to vote. CNN Opinion invited several political experts to discuss whether the United States would be better off if it had mandatory voting. The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of the authors.*

**William Galston: James Madison would be smiling**

Let's imagine a future in which Americans must vote, or face a penalty.

It's April 2021. Media outlets around the country headlined major agreements between Democrats and Republicans on the long-stalled issues of tax and immigration reform. Commentators marveled at the momentous shift in American politics away from the polarization and gridlock of the previous two decades.



William Galston

What happened? Although opinions differed, observers agreed on one key point: The decision to follow the lead of countries such as Australia and institute mandatory voting in national elections transformed the political landscape. As turnout rose from 60% to 90%, citizens with less intense partisan and ideological commitments flooded into the electorate. Campaigns could no longer prevail simply by mobilizing core supporters. Instead, they had to persuade swing voters to come their way. They soon discovered that these new voters preferred compromise to confrontation and civil discourse to scorched-earth rhetoric. Candidates who presented themselves as willing to reach across the aisle to get things done got a boost while zealots went down to defeat.

Both political parties soon realized that they had a stake in a nominating process that produced the kinds of candidates the expanded electorate preferred. They eliminated party caucuses dominated by intense minorities and opened up their primaries to independents. They discovered that maximizing participation in their primaries was the best way of preparing for the general election. Individual donors, who wanted to invest in winners, favored candidates who could command broad support.

Once in office, members of the House and Senate tried hard to keep faith with the expanded electorate that had sent them to Washington. They spent less time in party caucuses and more doing serious legislative work. Congressional leaders returned power to the committees, where members relearned the art of compromise across party lines.

And somewhere, James Madison was smiling. Reforming institutions to change incentives is always the most effective course, and once again it had worked.

*William Galston is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and holds the Ezra K. Zilkha Chair in its governance studies program.*

**Gretchen Helmke and Bonnie Meguid: Motive is not what you think**

With roughly 40% of eligible citizens voting, turnout in U.S. midterm elections is notoriously low. Compulsory voting offers one possible, if radical, solution. Like any political institution, laws on it have multiple, if disputed, consequences.



Gretchen Helmke Bonnie Meguid

Today, compulsory voting exists in roughly a quarter of all democracies in the world, ranging from Western Europe and Australia to Latin America and Asia. Yet few believe that it stands any chance of being adopted in the United States. Why?

Our [research](https://www.rochester.edu/college/faculty/bmeguid/Endogenous_Institutions_Helmke_Meguid_May_2010.pdf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) suggests that the decision to adopt compulsory voting is largely strategic. While proponents often couch their arguments in terms of public benefits, it appears that parties around the world have been more likely to adopt it when such laws stand to favor their candidates and hurt their opponents.

Changing the electoral rules is not a risk-free proposition, however. Governing parties are unlikely to modify the rules that elected them. Only governing parties with relatively under-mobilized electorates and a growing opposition find compulsory voting an attractive option.

Interestingly, conservatives in the late 19th and early 20th century in Western Europe and Latin America were the first to champion compulsory voting. Expansion of suffrage dramatically shifted the composition of the voting population, while industrialization swelled the ranks of the working class and created new political identities. During this period, the left's organizational ability to mobilize voters was unmatched. Parties on the right countered with mandatory voting, which aimed to bring out their natural constituencies.

Today, the situation in the United States is just the opposite. With unions in decline, Democrats are disproportionately hurt by abstention. A recent George Washington University [poll](http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2014/03/25/democratic-pollster-predicts-huge-turnout-disadvantage-in-2014/) shows that in the coming election Republicans are fully 7 percentage points more likely to vote than Democrats. In other words, the politicians that will likely determine the rules of the game have no incentive to change them.

*Gretchen Helmke is associate professor and chairwoman of the political science department at the University of Rochester. Bonnie Meguid is associate professor in the same department.*

**Haydon Manning: In Australia, politics as usual continue**

Technically speaking, Australian citizens are not compelled to vote. Instead, they are required to attend a polling station, and upon receipt of their ballot, decide to vote or discard it. Granted, the failure to attend to one's "democratic duty" may incur a small fine if insufficient excuse is offered.



Haydon Manning

This approach goes back decades, having been adopted in 1924 for national elections. But the idea itself is even older, having been debated in 19th century colonial parliaments. While views vary as to the ultimate cause of its introduction, there is no doubt that concerns over low voter turnout, in a nation only two decades old, drove the decision.

Shepherding people to vote in this way might seem odd to some, but government loomed large in colonial Australia -- in sharp contrast to the American experience. This tradition of state paternalism did not wane when the Federation of Australia was formed in 1901 (i.e., when the six separate colonies became one nation). So, it was not surprising that the decision to compel voters to attend to duty was ultimately a bipartisan decision.

How successful has this approach been? In recent decades, about 5% of voters are typically asked to explain their absence on polling day. Surveys consistently indicate that about 70% say they favor compulsory voting, and 80% say they would still vote even if voting was not compulsory.

It's tim for mandatory voting in U.S.?

A decade ago, the conservative coalition government of John Howard controlled both houses of parliament, and its Senate leader proposed abolishing compulsory voting. In the end, old habits die hard, and the proposal failed to gain traction.

Political parties here may have good reasons to keep the current system. After all, "mandatory" voting makes it easier for politicians to keep the focus on attacking opponents, without being distracted by the task of encouraging a sometimes disillusioned party base to turn out.

I've been a supporter of "compulsion." But in the contemporary campaign setting, I doubt its virtues. Turning the vote out might not be a problem, but wooing disengaged citizens now requires banal sloganeering and crass misleading negative advertising. To me, this can diminish the democratic experience for those who take the time to think through the issues.

*Haydon Manning is an associate professor at Flinders University's School of Social and Policy Studies in Adelaide, South Australia.*

**Ari Ratner: Ill-suited for America now**

Should voting be compulsory? No. Should voting be far easier? Absolutely.



Ari Ratner

The arguments for compulsory voting seem persuasive. At least [38 countries](http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2013/09/economist-explains-10%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) have— or have had— some form of mandatory voting laws. U.S. turnout, in contrast, falls short of most advanced democracies.

Low turnout imposes real costs on our political system. It both reflects and helps drive an eroding sense of democratic legitimacy. It negatively impacts the representation of groups with low turnout levels, like younger voters and minorities. And it magnifies the power of special interests.

Yet, mandatory voting is ill-suited to America's current realities. First, it's impractical. Congress is currently incapable of passing a mandatory voting law. The federal bureaucracy and court system, moreover, are unlikely to be able to enforce any such law.

Would we impose sanctions on those who fail to vote? Would there be an exemption system? Is the voting system even equipped to handle a rush of new voters? (Remember the long lines of 2012 and the butterfly ballots of 2000?)

Mandatory voting would be a bureaucratic and legal nightmare. Not to mention that refusing to vote itself can be an important form of protest.

Far more important than the red herring on mandatory voting would be to make it far easier to register and cast a ballot.

Options available to facilitate voting include: making election day a national holiday or a weekend; expanding early voting and same-day voter registration, both of which Republicans have cut back in many states; creating an opt-out rather than an opt-in voter registration system; and increasing opportunities for remote voting via absentee ballots, vote-by-mail, or online voting.

Voting rights remains an important issue, especially given the rising cacophony about largely nonexistent "voter fraud." (One recent[investigation](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/08/06/a-comprehensive-investigation-of-voter-impersonation-finds-31-credible-incidents-out-of-one-billion-ballots-cast/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) found 31 credible incidents of voter impersonation in 1 billion ballots).

But the way to increase voter participation isn't to mandate it. It's to build a system capable of accommodating our citizens' voting needs.

*Ari Ratner is a fellow at New America Foundation. You can follow him on Twitter: [@amratner](https://twitter.com/amratner%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*

**Donna Brazile: You have to pay taxes, so why not have to vote?**

Mandatory voting requires citizens to present themselves at the polling place and either cast their votes on the candidates and issues, or spoil a ballot, indicating their disgust with the entire lot.



I've come to favor mandatory voting. It will sink the role of big money in our elections. Campaign spending is becoming a scourge and a scandal in our self-government. Millions are even spent for the anti-democratic purpose of reducing voter turnout for the opposition.

All that money, from secret contributors — guaranteeing greater influence for those who have money, over those who do not — cannot possibly have a healthy effect on the candidates on whom it pours. Are things better since the Supreme Court allowed big money to be introduced?

In the United States, voter turnout for midterm elections has been under 50% since the 1940s. This means that less than half of the American electorate gets to decide which party will control Congress. This can't be a good thing. In places that have mandatory voting, like Australia, there are indications of [less polarization](http://ideas.time.com/2012/08/21/should-voting-be-mandatory/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) and [dissatisfaction](http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2012-06-19/voting-should-be-mandatory%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)in the electorate.

I know some bristle at the idea of having to cast a vote, even a protest vote for Lassie. Yet, voting is the essential, central and indispensable feature of democracy. We require jury attendance, paying taxes, and public education attendance because those are also essential functions. Is voting less important?

*Donna Brazile, a CNN contributor and a Democratic strategist, is vice chairwoman for voter registration and participation at the Democratic National Committee. A nationally syndicated columnist, she is an adjunct professor at Georgetown University and author of "[Cooking With Grease: Stirring the Pots in America](http://books.simonandschuster.com/Cooking-with-Grease/Donna-Brazile/9780743253994%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)."*