

## Compulsory Voting—Lesson Plan

### Student Objectives

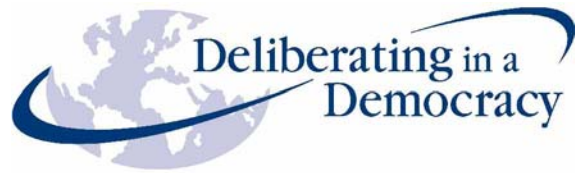
- Discuss the importance of voting in democratic societies.
- Learn how *compulsory voting* works in democratic countries that use it.
- Analyze the reasons for supporting and opposing compulsory voting.
- Identify areas of agreement and disagreement with other students.
- Decide, individually and as 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
- Compulsory Voting—Reading
- Compulsory Voting—Selected Resources
- Compulsory Voting—Deliberation Question with Arguments  
*(optional—use if students have difficulty extracting the arguments or time is limited)*



## Compulsory Voting—Reading

1 Elections are an important way for people to express their views about government. For a  
2 nation to be a democracy, every eligible adult citizen should have the right to vote. Governments  
3 that do not offer their citizens a chance to vote freely are not generally viewed as real  
4 democracies. Voting is key to civic participation in a democratic society.

5 Evidence indicates that people around the world place great value on their right to vote.  
6 Election turnout in newly democratic countries is usually very high. But in other democracies,  
7 many adults choose not to vote. For example, in the 2004 American presidential election, fewer  
8 than 60 percent of eligible voters cast ballots. Things are not much better in some newer  
9 democracies. In Lithuania, fewer than 54 percent of registered voters participated in the 2002  
10 presidential elections. In the most recent election in the Czech Republic, 60 percent of eligible  
11 voters cast ballots, a substantial drop from a decade before, when 85 percent of people voted in  
12 the 1992 election.

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

14 Many experts and ordinary people in democratic countries are concerned about low voter  
15 participation in elections, particularly among young citizens. According to the U.S. Census  
16 Bureau, for example, less than 47 percent of 18- to 24-year-old citizens voted in the 2004  
17 presidential election. Democratic societies have tried many ways to increase voter turnout among  
18 young people. Laws and practices that seem to increase youth voting include:

- 19 • Early voting at convenient locations.
- 20 • Voter registration at state motor vehicle agencies.
- 21 • Election day registration.
- 22 • Sample ballots and polling information mailed in advance.
- 23 • Longer polling place hours.

24 Many people remain concerned about voter turnout. They have proposed a number of ways  
25 to increase citizen voting in elections. The most dramatic proposal is to require people to vote.  
26 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  
31 United States. Simon Jackman of Stanford University notes that North Dakota (1898) and  
32 Massachusetts (1918) amended their constitutions to allow compulsory voting, but their  
33 legislatures never passed 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 ballot 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

40 this 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.  
46 Registration is transferred whenever a person moves.

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

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

57 People also see important civic outcomes in compulsory voting. In their view, voting is a  
58 necessary part of the work of a citizen. While they acknowledge that this responsibility might  
59 compel people to vote against their will, as American legal commentator John Dean notes, “so is  
60 the 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  
63 pay taxes; or to serve in the military when drafted. (V)oting is the least a citizen can do for his or  
64 her country.” Furthermore, advocates claim an element of civic education through voting: if  
65 people know they must vote, they will pay closer attention to the issues and go to the polls more  
66 informed. Such laws will reinforce the idea that voting is a vital part of democratic citizenship.

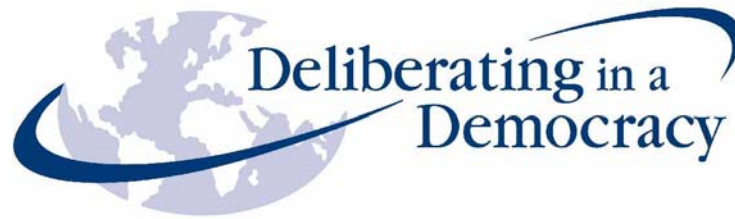
67 Opponents of compulsory voting argue that, at least in the United States, citizens do not *want*  
68 compulsory voting, a fact supported by a 2004 survey conducted by ABC News. In fact,  
69 opponents argue that low voter turnout may well be a sign of overall voter satisfaction, not  
70 disappointment, with the current system. Canadian academic Filip Palda agrees: “Those who  
71 obsess about voter turnout are perhaps the ones to whom we should pay the least attention.  
72 Politicians of established parties see low turnout as a rebuke. The less legitimate politicians feel,  
73 the more they try to pass laws that build around their regimes a Potemkin façade of citizen  
74 involvement. This is why Soviet Bloc countries forced their citizens to vote.”

75 Because voting is an expression of faith in the political system, opponents of compulsory  
76 voting argue that deciding not to vote is one of the few tools citizens have to challenge  
77 corruption or fraud. When the people have reason to believe that their votes will not be counted,  
78 will be tampered with by election officials, or will be otherwise misrepresented, forcing them to  
79 vote compels them to endorse a false outcome. When there is only one candidate or when all  
80 candidates appear as poor options, compulsory elections only breed cynicism about the political  
81 process. In short, forcing people to vote in a corrupt or meaningless election actually weakens  
82 citizen power in a democratic society.

83 Opponents of compulsory voting also worry about the central government’s control of the  
84 information that compulsory voting requires. Today, when computers and information databases

85 can reveal so much about a person, decentralized control of election information is an important  
86 way to protect citizens from an increasingly powerful national government.

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



## Compulsory Voting—Selected Resources

- ABC News, “ABC News Poll: Compulsory Voting” (June 11, 2004),  
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<http://www.idea.int/vt/pres.cfm>.
- Jackman, Simon, “Compulsory Voting,” a contribution to Elsevier’s *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (December 1, 2004),  
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[http://oldfraser.lexi.net/publications/forum/2001/02/section\\_09.html](http://oldfraser.lexi.net/publications/forum/2001/02/section_09.html).
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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. If political parties do not have to spend money trying to convince people to vote, they can focus more on educating people about their ideas and candidates.



## **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. It is expensive for nations to establish and maintain compulsory voting systems. There are cheaper and better ways to encourage voter participation.
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.