

---

# Compulsory voting: has its time come?

Stephen Lambert *looks at the arguments*

**V**oting is the most basic form of political participation in a representative democracy like the UK. Yet voter turnout has declined sharply since the 1950s – from about 80 per cent in the 1951 general election, it fell to 64 per cent in 2010. In the Newcastle Central constituency only 56 per cent of those registered to vote did so! Amongst some social groups like the young, aged 18 to 24, only 44 per cent bothered to vote in the 2010 general election, yet many teenagers do express some interest in political issues such as the environment and are prepared to join campaign groups – a strange paradox. And more 16 to 19 year-olds are studying A-level government and politics than ever before at local FE colleges such as Newcastle College, Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College Darlington, and school sixth forms in Gosforth Academy and St Mary's High School, Newcastle.

Turnout is even lower in council elections, Euro elections and even referendums (with the notable exception of last year's referendum on whether Scotland

should go separate from the rest of the UK, where turnout hit a staggering 85 per cent). Turnout in last year's city local elections averaged 30 per cent. Our country is not alone in this. Low levels of electoral participation are a key feature of other liberal democracies such as the USA, and have been subject to much sociological analysis by experts, such as Robert Puttman in his classic book *Bowling Alone*.

To many political experts, significant non-voting threatens the democratic legitimacy of any elected body. According to top political analyst Paul Whiteley: 'if this is not a crisis of democratic politics in Britain, then it's hard to know what would be', while Bill Jones notes: 'worryingly large numbers of people have little faith in the political system'. There remains today a big debate in British universities as to why 40 per cent of the electorate don't bother to vote, despite the increase of postal voting which takes the hassle out of walking to a polling station which may be over a mile away.

It's generally assumed that apathy is a major cause, and that

compulsory voting (with non-voters being fined) would help. Let's consider the arguments for and against compulsion.

The argument for compulsion is quite attractive, especially when other methods of boosting turnout haven't been highly successful – such as more postal voting as noted earlier, voting on-line and longer polling hours. It's already practised to some extent in several nations, including Australia, Austria, Belgium and Greece, and seems to work well.

Others have rightly pointed out that if turnout continues to fall (which is likely to happen in the forthcoming general election this spring, and which could be due to the fact that a minority of people are simply not on the electoral register), it raises the possibility that extremist candidates will be elected. Likewise, a democracy is entitled to look upon voting as a civic duty for its citizens. Over 75 per cent of older people feel it's their obligation to vote. Let's not forget that working-class movements in the nineteenth century such as the Chartists and the Suffragettes in the early part of the last century were prepared

---

to give up their lives for the right to vote. And many more died during World War 2 to preserve Britain's democratic way of life against Hitler's fascist drive to take over the whole of Europe. Don't we have a moral obligation to those millions of servicemen and women?

Yet many are strongly against compulsion for the following reasons. Apathy, it's suggested, may not be the main cause of non-voting. It could be confusion and lack of knowledge about politics or the lack of any candidate representing the voters' views. If apathy is the main factor

behind non-voting, it may not arise from laziness. It could arise from distrust of politicians and the political system. Certainly there's survey evidence to indicate that lots of people have little faith in elected politicians, especially at national level, partly in response to the expenses scandal which was exposed in 2009 under the Freedom of Information Act by an American researcher. If so, it's argued, we should not blame and punish non-voters, but make politics cleaner, more relevant and more idealistic.

And lastly, some writers have pointed out that compulsion is

anti-democratic because it takes away freedom of choice. But, to counteract this view, why not have a box on the ballot paper saying 'none of the above'?

Overall, in the light of the sharp decline in electoral turnout, I'm now of the view that the time has come for the UK to adopt compulsory voting, with fines being administered to those who can't be bothered to vote either in a polling booth or by post. I do hope this provokes some debate amongst *PSE* readers in FE and HE as we get nearer to the general election that will take place on May 7th 2015.

---