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## **For and Against: Compulsory Voting in Britain and Belgium**

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## **For or Against: Compulsory Voting in Britain and Belgium**

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### **Abstract**

In the UK and in Belgium there is a debate regarding compulsory voting. Belgium has had compulsory voting in place since 1893 but recently some commentators would wish to change this situation. In part, these voices are motivated by the fear of the rise of the right. In Britain, on the contrary, there are those who would wish to see the introduction of compulsory voting – their main argument being the low turnout in recent elections. Starting from the literature on compulsory voting, this article analyses the key arguments that are present in contemporary debates surrounding compulsory voting in both countries. The article deals with the effects regarding the political strength of parties, the overall turnout and the turnout of specific socio-demographic groups in society. We also question prominent politicians in Belgium and the United Kingdom concerning their views on the importance of the major arguments in contemporary politics for and against compulsory voting; namely, democratic values such as freedom, citizenship and equality, voicing the will of the people, legitimacy of representative institutions, education and information, and the financial aspects. By doing so, the article assesses the key arguments in the debate regarding maintaining or changing the status quo concerning compulsory voting in Britain and Belgium. Our findings indicate that matters of legitimacy of the democratic institutions and voting as a civic duty would be main features of eventual debates concerning introducing or abolishing compulsory voting.

### **Keywords**

Elections, compulsory voting, representation, elite opinion, U.K., Belgium.

## Introduction

In Britain and in Belgium there is a debate regarding compulsory voting. Belgium has had compulsory voting in place since 1893 but recently some commentators would wish to change this situation. In part, these voices are motivated by the fear of the rise of the right. In Britain, on the contrary, there are those who would wish to see the introduction of compulsory voting – their main concern being the low turnout in recent elections. This article deals with these expectations: Will specific political parties lose votes due to compulsory voting? Does it result in higher voter turnout? Besides discussing empirical proof regarding the material effects of compulsory voting, the article also deals with the beliefs of the political elite in Belgium and Britain about the benefits and costs of compulsory voting regarding democratic values such as freedom, citizenship and equality, voicing the will of the people and the legitimacy of representative institutions.

Starting from the literature on compulsory voting, this article analyses the key arguments that are present in contemporary debates surrounding compulsory voting. The arguments for and against compulsory voting are described and we test their validity by confronting them with empirical research regarding the political strength of parties, the overall turnout and the turnout of specific socio-demographic groups in society. Next, we analyse the key arguments for and against compulsory voting using empirical data from Belgium and Britain. We have questioned prominent politicians in Belgium and Britain concerning their views on the importance of the major arguments in contemporary politics for and against compulsory voting. By doing so, the article assesses the key arguments in the debate regarding maintaining or changing the status quo concerning compulsory voting in Britain and Belgium. Our findings indicate that matters of legitimacy of democratic institutions and voting as a civic duty would be the main features of eventual debates concerning introducing or abolishing compulsory voting.

## What is compulsory voting?

Compulsory voting is the duty to participate in the electoral process. As many commentators point out, compulsory voting is a misnomer because what it actually means is compulsory attendance at the polling station. With reference to Australia, Hill states that it “is only registration and attendance at a polling place ... that is compulsory.” (Hill, 2001: 130). As Watson and Tami state, people are not forced “to vote”, they have “the option of spoiling their paper, abstaining, or even refusing to put the paper in the ballot box” (2000: 14). Keaney and Rogers prefer the term “compulsory turnout” (2006: 26) believing it to be a more accurate description than compulsory voting. Furthermore, compulsory voting does not

mean that people have to vote for one of the parties. You would also have the option of ticking a box stating “none of the above”. This could, in fact, give us more of an indication of levels of dissatisfaction with the current state of British politics than we have at the moment.

Compulsory voting is often compared to other ways in which the state forces us to fulfil certain duties. These include “jury duty, the obligation to pay taxes, military conscription, compulsory school attendance and many others. These obligations are more burdensome than the duty to appear at the polls on election days” (Lijphart cited in Watson and Tami, *op. cit.*: 15). Likewise, Baston and Ritchie emphasise state compulsion in areas other than voting, “Jury service, a comparable obligation in some ways, is compulsory. Electoral registration is compulsory. Participation in the National Insurance and taxation system is compulsory. Issue of a self-assessment tax return imposes a compulsory duty to return it. Compliance with the decennial census is compulsory. In many democratic countries the obligation to take part in military or social service is imposed by law and is permitted by the European Convention on Human Rights.”(2004: 35-36). The notion of compulsion, duty or obligation is not, therefore, unknown to citizens.

Mandatory participation in elections is “a feature in a diverse range of countries across the world – in Western Europe, South East Asia, Australia and Central and South America” (Electoral Commission 2006: 5). The introduction of compulsory voting has “often been implemented as a result of wider political reform such as change in a country’s political system, as in Chile, or alongside the introduction of universal suffrage, as in Belgium and Luxembourg.” (Electoral Commission 2006: 6). More than 30 countries operate a system of compulsory voting, Australia has had compulsory voting since 1924 (1915 in the state of Queensland). As Ballinger points out, “Seventeen per cent of the world’s democracies compel their citizens to vote ... ten of the 30 OECD countries have compulsory voting.” (2006: 8). Proponents of compulsory voting highlight the experience of countries such as Australia and Belgium but also Luxembourg, Netherlands until 1971 and Italy until 1989<sup>1</sup>. Many of these provide positive role models of how compulsory voting processes can work successfully in practice. If Britain looks to the experiences of these other nations, it may be that they decide to go down the route of compulsory voting. In particular Australia and Belgium that have operated a system of compulsory voting for some time now are flagged up as being two large, stable democracies whose systems operate in a democratic and inclusive manner.

In relation to compulsory voting, part of the issue is what should the state do with those who still refrain from voting even where voting has been made compulsory? The “carrot” or the “stick” debate is relevant here. Should incentives

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<sup>1</sup> See McAllister, and Studlar, 2002: 13 for further detail as to why Italy is no longer considered a compulsory voting country.

be given to encourage people to vote or should punishments be metered out to those who fail to fulfil their civic duty? Generally, in countries that have compulsory voting, the state levies a fine upon those who fail to vote. This is usually a relatively small amount (e.g. 20 Australian dollars) and it is claimed that often the state fails to chase up non-payers. Others argue that, if Britain adopts a system of compulsory voting, the fine imposed (possibly as much as £40) may come to be regarded in the same light as speeding fines and parking tickets – as simply a revenue-raising exercise as opposed to constituting a real concern over the future of democracy (*The Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2006<sup>2</sup>). As Watson and Tami illustrate using the example of Australia, the number not voting is usually relatively small. After the 1993 Election, there were roughly half a million non-voters, of these 23,320 (4.7%) chose to pay a \$A20 (about £8) fine straight away. Of the rest, 94 per cent gave a valid reason why they did not vote (e.g. overseas, tried to vote but could not, belong to a religious order that prohibits voting) “This leaves a small group – 4,412 in 1993 (0.9 per cent of non-voters) – who go to court, where the fine increases to \$A50 plus costs – if convicted.” (2000: 8). In Greece, according to Watson and Tami, “... the punishment for not voting can include up to a year’s imprisonment” (*Ibid*) but they say that this is never imposed.

It could be, however, that the state ought to implement an incentive scheme as opposed to a punishment for non-voting. One suggestion is that tax-payers who do vote could see a small percentage reduction in the amount of taxation that they are eligible to pay. This more positive response may have a greater impact upon turnout levels than the imposition of a fine or other such punishment. Baston and Ritchie believe that a “... financial incentive is basically another way of looking at a fine – whichever way, voters are advantaged relative to non-voters.” (2004:38). They argue that incentive voting “...lacks some of the high-minded dignity of the case for compulsory voting...” but it does “... go with the grain of contemporary social attitudes and has a more market-oriented, libertarian flavour to it.” (*Ibid*: 39). Other suggestions include a “... constituency-based lottery [with] a prize of something in the order of £250,000, calculated perhaps at the rate of £5 per voter in that constituency.” (*Ibid*: 40). It is debatable as to whether these incentive suggestions would work but they do offer an alternative to the “stick” approach of fines for non-voting.

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<sup>2</sup> Oliver Heald, Shadow Constitutional Affairs Secretary states ‘We have already seen how speed cameras and parking fines are being used to rake in ever more money’: [http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk\\_news/story/0,,1765255,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,1765255,00.html)

### Arguments for and against compulsory

The main arguments for and against compulsory voting (summarised in table 1 above) revolve around issues of democracy, legitimacy, equality, voicing of concerns, educational and financial effects. The most central discussion weighs up two central democratic principles: the representativeness of assemblies on the one hand and freedom on the other. Representativeness of the legislative bodies that are central to democracy, necessitates that all the people choose their representatives and not just a self-selecting few. Voting, therefore, is a democratic duty of all citizens and compulsory voting increases the democratic degree of elections and elected assemblies. Those opposed to compulsory voting highlight the freedom of the individual as the cornerstone of liberal democratic practices. According to these people, voting encapsulates a tripartite notion of freedom; firstly, the right to vote; secondly, the right *not* to vote and thirdly, the right to vote for whom you want.

**Table 1. Six discussions revolving around compulsory voting<sup>3</sup>**

	<b>FOR</b>	<b>AGAINST</b>
<i>Democratic argument</i>	Representativeness	Freedom
<i>Legitimacy argument</i>	More people equals greater legitimacy	Non-informed, invalid and blank votes do not increase legitimacy
<i>Equality argument</i>	All groups in society participate	Weak stay potential voters and are addressed as such
<i>Voice argument</i>	Protest and dissenting voices are also heard	Makes apathetic and ill-informed voters structure political life
<i>Educational argument</i>	Spread of information and knowledge	People turn away from political system that forces them to participate
<i>Financial argument</i>	Resources not spent on getting out the vote	Expensive especially for poorer states

<sup>3</sup> Table and section based on Jackman, s.d.; Lijphart 1997; Franklin 1999; Maddens, s.d.; [http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory\\_voting.cfm](http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm)

The democratic argument is firmly linked with the legitimacy argument which claims that governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate in elections. Opponents object that legitimacy is not increased when apathetic and ill-informed citizens are forced to vote: non-informed, invalid and blank votes do not increase legitimacy. The increase in turnout, engineered by obliging people to vote, is therefore purely statistical and theoretical; it only creates the illusion of participation and hides political apathy.

Also linked to the democratic prerequisite that democratic institutions need to be representative is the equality argument. Proponents claim that compulsory voting ensures that the weak in society do not drop off the political radar. Generally speaking, these are women, younger and older people, the low educated, low social status, blue-collar workers, people without a profession, people with little interest in politics, negative feelings about politics and a belief that their vote will not make a difference. The exclusion of these groups, at the input side of the policy-making process, can have far-reaching consequences for the outputs of politics, namely, for policy. The mechanism behind this process is that political parties do not take the interests of these voters to heart if they feel they are unlikely to vote (for them). This results in a Catch-22 situation whereby certain voters do not vote because they feel that their interests will be ignored and where political parties ignore the interests because the parties feel that they will not receive electoral support from them anyway. In the light of the severe crisis politics is facing at the moment where people turn away from politics, this argument gains importance. The counter-argument here is that the inverse is true. In the absence of compulsory voting, political parties are more inclined to encourage the electorate (especially certain under-represented groups, such as the less educated) to actually turn out. This mobilising effect might disappear when people have to vote anyway, thus parties may have a tendency to become apathetic themselves and take voters for granted.

The fourth discussion concerns the importance of political actors hearing distinct voices and receiving different signals from society. Compulsory voting manages to capture apathetic and protest votes which must be seen as relevant information about the will of the people. It might be better to channel these feelings, present in society, through democratic or parliamentary routes as opposed to letting them fester underneath the surface. These votes then function as a flashing light for democracy, illuminating problems in their early stages. But this also implies that apathetic and anti-political voters structure political life; opponents of compulsory voting stress that, in this case, compulsory voting is dysfunctional for democracy. In this line of reasoning, the voice of the people is distorted by compulsory voting and undermines one of the basic tenets of representative democracy, namely that expression is given to the voice of the people.

Two other arguments for and against compulsory voting point at educational and financial benefits; in terms of the former, elections are a conduit

for spreading and gathering information, not only for an interested elite but for all. Therefore, compulsory voting fosters a minimal level of political knowledge amongst all citizens. But people might also turn away from a political system that forces them to do something against their will. In that case, people will not try to be better informed. They will stay as apathetic and anti-pathetic as they were before. Absence of compulsory voting might also have the opposite effect; it might lead to a more active spreading and gathering of political information compared to elections with compulsory voting because in the absence of compulsory voting parties want and need to mobilise the voters.

Lastly, compulsory voting has financial implications. Some voices say that compulsory voting diminishes the importance of money during elections since politicians and political parties are not forced to spend resources trying to convince people to vote. Opponents stress the fact that there are also cost implications of compulsory voting due to the scale of elections which might be too heavy a burden for poorer states.

### **Testing the arguments for and against compulsory voting**

In this section, we test the above arguments. We give a brief overview of some empirical research that looks at the effects of introducing or abolishing compulsory voting regarding 1) voter turnout; 2) power balance between political parties and 3) inclusion or exclusion of socio-demographic groups. Whether or not compulsory voting increases, voter turnout is, of course, a fundamental element in the democratic discussion revolving around compulsory voting. It is evident that restricting the freedom of citizens by obliging them to vote should be compensated by a democratic gain such as increased representativeness and legitimacy of representative bodies. The second question is intertwined with the voice argument and points at the political effects of compulsory voting. The underlying question is whether having compulsory voting or not has an impact on the will of the people that is registered by means of elections. The third line of research is relevant for the equality argument for or against compulsory voting, the basic question being whether compulsory voting includes socially and politically marginalised groups.

#### *Voter turnout*

The effect on voter turnout is measured by comparing countries with and without compulsory voting, by comparing voter turnout within states before and after abolishing or introducing compulsory voting and by public opinion surveys that assess if voters would turn out in case voting would no longer be obligatory (Jackman, s.d.). These studies show that compulsory voting has a direct impact on

voter turnout. A recent cross-country analysis by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) shows that the 24 nations that have compulsory voting have a higher voting turnout (69 per cent of potential voters) compared to the 147 nations without (63 per cent of potential voters). In sheer numerical terms, studies have shown that compulsory voting does increase electoral turnout. According to Baston and Ritchie, cross-national studies have shown a 7 to 17 per cent increase in turnout where countries have compulsory voting (*op. cit.*: 35). According to Keaney and Rogers, “on average countries with compulsory turnout have 15 per cent higher turnout than countries where voting is voluntary.” (*Op. cit.*: 6).

Such comparisons should be treated with caution because also other political features impact on voter turnout. Most importantly, voter turnout is strongly affected by the salience of the elections; voter turnout will be higher for instance when votes are not wasted (majority electoral systems), when political discussions are polarised during electoral campaigns and a shift in power can be established (majority electoral systems), when important electoral bodies are chosen and when executive power is at stake (Franklin, 1999; Billiet 2001). This implies that compulsory voting has the most considerable effects in low salience elections (Franklin, 1999: 209; Jackman s.d.: 5 referring to Hirczy 1994). Furthermore, one might ask whether these comparisons actually capture the impact of mandatory voting and not “civic norms enshrined in law” (Jackman, s.d.: 5). Indeed, one might expect states that consider voting as a civic duty to adopt compulsory voting. Evidence for this can be found in Australian public opinion surveys that show that voter turnout would stay rather high in case voting would no longer be compulsory and in the Belgian case where high turnout is not due to the state sanctions: there are hardly any actions against absentees. As Hill explains, compulsion has never really bothered Australians, “... probably a function of the fact that our relationship to the state has normally been a friendly one, often characterised as either Benthamite, utilitarian or social democratic in nature. Most Australians regard voting as a fairly undemanding civic duty and tend to accept the compulsion to vote as both reasonable and legitimate.” (2001: 130). A feeling of moral obligation and tradition are also the main explanations for high turnout in Belgium (Billiet 2001: 11).

Therefore, within-country comparisons attribute more compelling proof regarding the impact of compulsory voting on voter turnout. Such studies show that in states that abolished compulsory voting such as the Netherlands in 1970, Switzerland in 1974 and Venezuela in 1993 turnout decreased, and that turnout increased when compulsory voting was introduced in Austria in 1924 (Billiet, 2001: 3; Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1997: 4-5; Jackman s.d.: 5). More specifically, “Turnout in Australia has averaged 94.5 per cent in the 24 elections since 1946. In Belgium turnout has averaged 92.7 per cent in 19 elections since 1946.” (Keaney and Rogers, 2006: 6).

To test the effect of compulsory voting, public opinion surveys were conducted to verify the hypothesis that voter turnout would drop in case voting would become voluntary. The results show that voter turnout would decrease with 8% in Australia and circa 30% in Belgium, Brazil and Venezuela (Billiet 2001: 11; Jackman, s.d. referring to Mackerras and McAllister, 1996; Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1998; Power and Roberts, 1995). Again, these figures do not take political reality into account and are abstracted from the salience of the election at stake and effects of possible actions and campaigns to mobilise voters.

### *Political effects*

Compulsory voting would have political consequences. Elections are expected to have more polarised results: the (extreme) left and extreme right would gain from voluntary voting because the discontented would vote and the most satisfied would stay at home. Research from Belgium has shown that making voting voluntary would not affect the strength of political parties and division of seats in parliament (Maddens, s.d.; Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1997). Nevertheless, Belgian polls show that indeed progressive parties would win, but also that the extreme right would lose voters. The explanation for the latter finding is that extreme-right votes are protest votes by apolitical voters who would not be inclined to vote if the political system would leave them alone. But, again, this kind of research is abstracted from eventual mobilising campaigns.

The findings regarding the electoral gains for Belgian leftist parties when voting would be voluntary contradict the common expectation that the left would gain from compulsory voting. The rationale behind this hypothesis is that voluntary elections are socio-economically biased; specifically groups that would benefit from leftist programmes tended towards a large welfare state are the ones to drop out in the case of voluntary voting (Keaney and Rogers 2006; Jackman, s.d. referring to Pacek and Radcliff, 1995; Nagel, 1988; McAllister and Mughan 1986; Hicks and Swank 1992; Castles and McKinlay 1979). This brings us to our third point.

### *Social-demographic effects*

Electoral research in the US, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Austria and Sweden (all countries with voluntary voting) show that the higher the social position of people, the higher the voter turnout (Lijphart, 1997). Decline in turnout means a decline in the political participation (and thus representation of the interests) of the socially vulnerable groups in society (Billiet, 2002). Public opinion surveys for Belgium show that women, older people, the low educated, blue collar workers and people without a profession, the group of people with

little interest in politics, negative feelings about politics and a low estimation of their political empowerment would drop out (De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2006; Billiet 2001<sup>4</sup>; Ackaert en De Winter, 1996<sup>5</sup>). Especially people with social capital (members of civic organisations, political parties, neighbourhood organisations, citizens that participate in hearings and consultancy) would still vote (De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2006; Billiet 2001). Furthermore, a rise in social inequality in the voting population was reported after the abolition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands (Verba, Nie and Kim 1978).

But voluntary voting (resulting in lower voter turnouts) does not always exclude the socio-economically weak. Electoral practices in the US show that less politicised groups such as the Spanish population receive a great deal of attention from political parties during campaigns because they can make a difference (Maddens s.d).

### **Weighing the arguments for and against compulsory voting**

Given this set of arguments for and against compulsory voting, what would be the most compelling argument(s) for making voting obligatory in countries without compulsory voting and voluntary in countries where voting is compulsory? Are there other arguments? This section of the article weighs up the arguments of proponents and opponents of compulsory voting in Belgium and in the U.K. In Belgium, there is a debate regarding compulsory voting whereby some commentators would wish to change this situation. In Britain, on the contrary, confronted with the low turnout in recent elections there are those who would wish to see the introduction of compulsory voting. We questioned prominent politicians in Belgium (survey) and the United Kingdom (survey and interviews) concerning their views on the importance of the major arguments in contemporary politics for and against compulsory voting.

The small-scale survey we conducted amongst the members of the House of Commons and the Flemish parliament asserted their opinion about arguments for and against compulsory voting. We also asked whether it is probable that compulsory voting would be abolished in Belgium (survey addressing the Flemish MPs) or introduced in Britain in the near future (survey addressing the British MPs). Foremost, we wanted to shed light on what constitutes the most compelling arguments for and against compulsory voting. The box below gives an overview of the arguments for which the Flemish and British MPs were asked to indicate to which extent they agree or disagree.

In order to ascertain the views of elite opinion in Britain, the survey was administered to a random sample of Members of Parliament. The low response

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<sup>4</sup> Billiets research shows no age effects.

<sup>5</sup> Ackaert and Dewinters research shows no gender effects.

rate needs to be highlighted. A dual-pronged approach was adopted; that is to say, some questionnaires were administered by email and some by post. Initially, thirty emails were sent to a cross-section of Members of Parliament and thirty five letters were sent out. Thus, 65 Members of Parliament were contacted in total – roughly ten per cent of the total number of MPs (currently 646). It was disappointing that, as a result of the first mailshot, only four responses were received. Discussions with other researchers<sup>6</sup> who have also questioned UK Parliamentarians reveal that, in order to get a ten per cent response rate, they had to contact all 646 MPs.

#### Arguments for compulsory voting

Democratic argument 1: *“Voting is a civic duty; that is the reason why it should be compulsory”*

Democratic argument 2: *“That all the people choose their representatives is a crucial, democratic necessity; that is the reason why it should be compulsory”*

Legitimacy argument: *“Governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate in elections; that is the reason why it should be compulsory”*

Equality argument: *“Compulsory voting avoids social and demographic bias in the votes and by extension in the political themes addressed by political parties and decision makers”*

Voice argument: *“Compulsory voting captures protest and anti-political votes; this functions as a flashing light for democracy”*

Educational argument: *“Compulsory voting forces citizens to maintain a minimal level of political knowledge”*

Financial argument: *“Compulsory voting diminishes the importance of money during elections since politicians and political parties do not have to spend resources trying to convince people to vote”*

#### Arguments against compulsory voting

Democratic argument: *“Compulsory voting is not consistent with freedom, the cornerstone of democratic government”*

Legitimacy argument: *“Compulsory voting hides political apathy and creates the illusion of high electoral participation”*

Voice argument: *“A vote without compulsion is a “better” vote because the voters are self-selecting and more likely to be interested and informed”*

Educational argument: *“People will turn away from a political system that forces them to do something against their will”*

Financial argument: *“Compulsory voting makes elections unnecessarily expensive”*

Strategic argument: *“Compulsory voting encourages extreme right parties and therefore should be abolished”*

Part of the problem is that the MP’s mailbag and workload is ever-increasing. It could be that many restrict their responses to constituents’ correspondence or to

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Defty has recently conducted research on MPs’ attitudes to welfare.

issues in which they have a particular passion. In order to ascertain a wider cross-section of MP's opinions, a repeat questionnaire was sent out and questionnaires were sent out to a 100 additional MPs as well as the original 65. In the final instance, 25 responses were received but, of these, five were letters stating that the particular MP has now adopted a policy of not responding to questionnaires, given the sheer volume of such requests that they receive on a weekly basis. One MP stated that he receives, on average, twenty questionnaires per week. It could be perhaps that the small response rate is indicative of a lack of interest in the topic but it seems more likely that the low response rate is simply indicative of the workload of an MP. Increasingly, they are prioritising correspondence from their constituents as opposed to requests from researchers.

The same survey was sent to all the political factions within the Flemish Parliament asking to distribute it amongst the individual members. Of the 6 political factions of the Flemish parliament 5 participated in the research. The individual members of these factions were free to participate in the survey. The nationalist party NVA (6 members) opted for one coordinated response. The one member of the francophone faction UF and the one independent parliamentarian did not participate. Taken together 56 of the 124 members of the Flemish parliament responded (response rate = 45,1 %). The Christian-democrat faction (29 members) unfortunately refused to cooperate. The explanation for this is probably the ongoing discussion within the party about compulsory voting. Illustrative for this is an incident in 2005 whereby a member of the Christian-democratic faction proposed to abolish compulsory voting for local elections; the party - that is officially in favour of compulsory voting- has blown the whistle on him (De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2006: 35).

Given the rather low response rates, we cannot extrapolate our findings. Nevertheless, these data can give us insight into the support for arguments for and against compulsory voting of politicians who are to a certain degree interested in the topic. When discussing the findings, however, we should bear in mind that apparently the topic seems not important enough to a substantial number of parliamentarians in order to participate in the survey. By comparing the support for arguments for and against, we want to gain insight in which arguments are the most compelling, the weakest and the most controversial.

### **Compulsory voting in Britain?**

The question of whether voting should be compulsory has recently moved onto the political agenda in Britain. The key factor that has prompted the current debate has been the low turnout experienced in recent general elections. In relation to turnout and declining levels of political participation, general elections have received the most media attention and highlighted the issue most significantly but declining turnout has also been an issue in other elections; such as local and

European elections. The 1997 General Election saw turnout fall to 71.5 per cent (the lowest turnout in a British General Election since 1935) but it was the 2001 General Election that marked a real turning point as far as electoral participation is concerned. The turnout this time was 59.4 per cent – the lowest turnout in British General Election since the so-called Khaki Election of 1918. Turnout did increase marginally in 2005 (to 61.3 per cent) but not enough for the debate about measures to increase turnout in elections to cease. Proponents also highlight the fact that compulsory voting has been subject to legal challenge in 1971 where the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the case of *X v. Austria* that compulsory voting does not violate Article 9 of the Convention in relation to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Using this case as precedent, compulsory voting would not, therefore, violate the UK's Human Rights Act (Baston and Ritchie, *op. cit.*: 36).

There is some support for compulsory voting amongst the British public. According to Keaney and Rogers (2006: 31), a MORI poll after the 2001 General Election revealed that public opinion was fairly evenly split on the issue, with 49 per cent against and 47 per cent in favour. Similarly, a MORI poll undertaken ten years earlier (1991) was relatively evenly split with 49 per cent in favour and 41 per cent against (*Ibid*). Added to this, a number of prominent politicians have recently entered the debate about compulsory voting. These include, Neil Kinnock (Leader of the Labour Party from 1983 until 1992), and current cabinet members, Geoff Hoon and Peter Hain. Support from such eminent politicians lends weight to those who wish to see the introduction of compulsory voting into British politics. Discussion on the topic of compulsory voting has taken place in the past. Indeed, a Private Member's Bill was introduced on the topic as far back as 1921 (Electoral Commission, 2006: 10) and Winston Churchill declared his support for compulsion in 1948 (Watson and Tami, 2000: 10). But, to be fair, the topic has been very much on the back burner until relatively recently. The catalyst for the current debate appears to be the low turnout in recent elections.

Both Hoon and Kinnock stress the legitimacy and democratic arguments in favour of compulsory voting. For Hoon, these arguments tie in seamlessly with the educational and voice argument. Since postal voting did not fundamentally increase voter turnout, Hoon concludes that, for democratic reasons, making voting compulsory must be considered as an option:

So, in the end, I suppose I come to compulsory voting having felt that the other initiatives have not had the kind of success that we might have hoped they would have. And, therefore, where else do you turn in order to try and get the turnout back to where it used to be. I think in a democracy the turnout is fundamental.

According to Hoon, an increase in legitimacy is the main gain of compulsory voting; low turnout undermines the legitimacy of the party in power. The counter-

argument referring to the freedom of people is not a valid one, says Hoon: "(...) I don't believe that that is a significant interference with civil liberty any more than being required to wear a seatbelt in a car is." He estimates that the majority of the people would easily accept voting as a civic duty:

I rather think that, if you make it compulsory, then again there may be one or two fines but then I think that most people will then say "Oh yes, this is something that I really have to do". So, I think that it's overcoming the kind of inertia. So I don't think that people consciously don't vote. I think that people just get into the habit of not voting.

Compulsory voting would break the vicious circle and, furthermore, would be a strong incentive to be better informed about politics, he states:

I think what making it compulsory does is, in effect, forces people to think about it. In a sense, compulsory voting might force people to think about the issues more than they do at the moment. In a way being allowed not to vote allows people to opt out. In a sense, back to legitimacy, if we are a democracy, then presumably we ought to represent the views of those who don't vote as much as those that do vote so.

When asked what convinced him that compulsory voting would be good for Britain, Neil Kinnock answers that currently democracy in Britain is in danger of losing its vitality. The low turnout in 2001 and 2005 is a symptom of a more general phenomenon: reduction in political participation. Low turnout "(...) feeds the other toxins that are at work like the contemptuous dismissal of engagement in politics" According to Kinnock, the real danger is "not only that people don't use their vote, they don't think about not using their vote". He is convinced that improvements in accessibility to voting are not an alternative to compulsory voting. Only compulsory voting could "cut through the vicious circle": "(...) voting is so basic and the lack of use of the vote has become so problematic that I really don't feel that in any case we can rely on cajoling. We need a bit of a clunk and the clunk is compulsory voting." Like Hoon, he rejects the argument that compulsory voting is an infringement upon freedom:

democracy is a state of responsibility. And voting is a responsibility of that and just as you've got a responsibility to get your child to school, you've got a responsibility not to park on double yellow lines, you've got a responsibility not to burn smoky fuel in smokeless zones, you've got a responsibility to vote.

The second main advantage of compulsory voting, according to Kinnock, is linked with the legitimacy argument:

I think that the impact on policy would be the impact of clearer mandate. First of all, because, by definition, more people would be voting. The mandate given to the victorious parties and the mandate denied to the defeated parties would make things much clearer, that's the first effect. The second effect, I think parties in conditions of compulsory voting have to be much clearer themselves and more detailed in their policy appeal. In order to ensure that the exercise of the duty to vote becomes turned actively into the exercise of a preference.

The latter part of this argument highlights an aspect of the educational argument that was not put at the forefront by the literature. Kinnock would only expect power shifts when compulsory voting is combined with the introduction of proportional representation. That would mobilise the broad centre and diminish extremist votes.

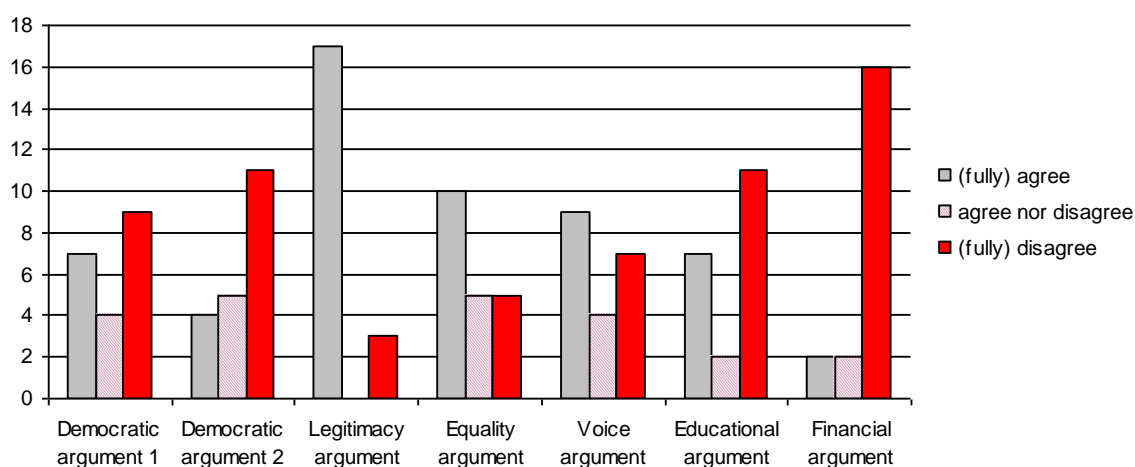
It is striking that the equality aspect is absent from the arguments of these proponents of compulsory voting. They do not explicitly emphasise the idea that all groups participate under a system of compulsory voting. Whilst this is perhaps surprising, it is evident that the other issues – namely, the legitimacy and the democratic arguments - appear to be more important to the interviewees. Hoon and Kinnock do not expect that compulsory voting will be introduced in Britain in the near future, but do expect that it will gain political salience if turnout continues to decrease. They also agree that it would be relatively easy to put it into effect.

In Britain, the debate around compulsory voting is non-partisan. It is clear, however, that support for compulsory voting has mainly come from the Labour Party – both in terms of the in-depth interviews and in terms of those who responded to the questionnaire. This may be due to the fact that, when turnout starts to fall, Labour supporters are traditionally those who are more likely to stay at home. Presumably, therefore, there are those amongst the Labour Party ranks who feel that, as a party, they would have the most to gain by the introduction of compulsory voting. The evidence from the small-scale survey reveals that although there are pockets of quite strong support for the introduction of compulsory voting, generally, there is no overwhelming groundswell of opinion in its favour. It is likely, therefore, that if compulsory voting was to be introduced in Britain, it will be in the long-term and not for the foreseeable future at least.

The figures below that illustrate the responses of the members of the House of Commons to the questionnaire, reveal that there is no strong sense of opinion in favour of the introduction of compulsory voting. Of those who responded to the questionnaire, only 30 per cent are in favour of its introduction, 65 per cent are against and 5 per cent are undecided. All those who are in favour represent the Labour Party. Of those who are against; 54 per cent represent the Conservative Party, 38 per cent represent the Liberal Democratic Party and 8 per

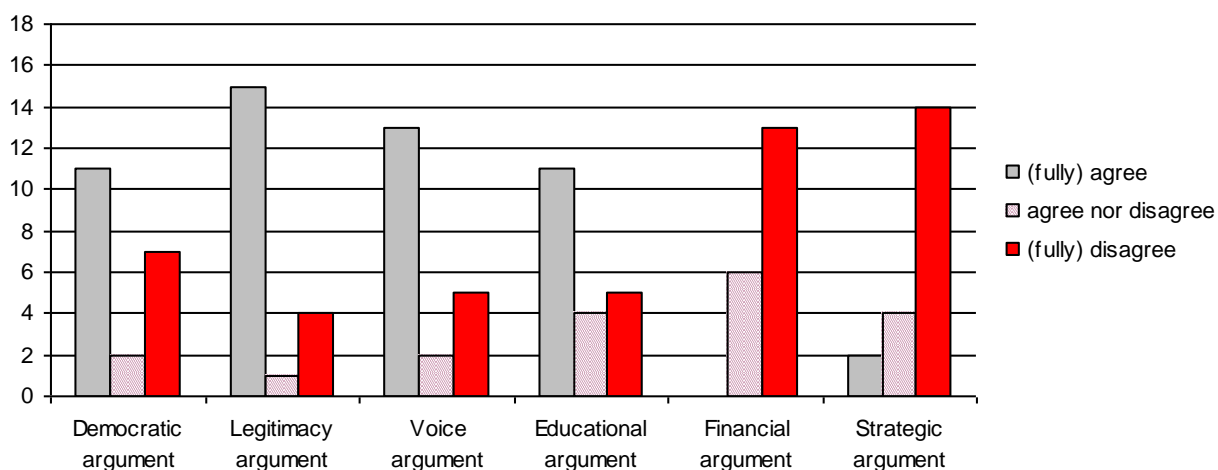
cent represent the Labour Party. The five per cent undecided belong to the Conservative Party.

Figure 1: Arguments for compulsory voting (House of Commons)



In terms of a detailed breakdown of the arguments in favour of compulsory voting (see Figure 1), the aspect receiving the most support is the legitimacy argument that “Governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate in elections; that is the reason why it should be compulsory”. The legitimacy argument received the highest agree score and the lowest disagree score. The equality argument, “Compulsory voting avoids social and demographic bias in the votes and, by extension, in the political themes addressed by political parties and decision makers” and the voice argument, “Compulsory voting captures protest and anti-political votes; this functions as a flashing light for democracy” are the second and the third most favoured arguments that received more supported than they were rejected. The democratic arguments “Voting is a civic duty; that is the reason why it should be compulsory”, and “That all the people choose their representatives is crucial, democratic necessity; that is the reason why it should be compulsory” also gains favour but are also strongly rejected. Two factors that are deemed less important are the educational argument “Compulsory voting forces citizens to maintain a minimal level of political knowledge” and the financial argument, “Compulsory voting diminishes the importance of money during elections since politicians and political parties do not have to spend resources trying to convince people to vote”. The respondents did not generally feel that compulsory voting enhances political knowledge nor does it mean that finance is less important.

Figure 2: Arguments against compulsory voting (House of Commons)



In terms of the arguments against compulsory voting (see Figure 2), the legitimacy argument, *“Compulsory voting hides political apathy and creates the illusion of high electoral participation”*, receives the most support. This notion of “illusion” is the key aspect as far as the majority of those who are opposed to compulsory voting are concerned. Combining the high agree score for the legitimacy argument for compulsory voting with the high agree score for the legitimacy argument against compulsory voting, we conclude that the question whether compulsory voting raises the legitimacy of political institutions is highly controversial. The voice argument is the second most favoured argument against, that is to say, *“A vote without compulsion is a “better” vote because the voters are self-selecting and more likely to be interested and informed”*. In joint third place, if the arguments are placed in rank order, are the democratic and the educational arguments; namely, *“Compulsory voting is not consistent with freedom, the cornerstone of democratic government”* and *“People will turn away from a political system that forces them to do something against their will”*. The financial (*“Compulsory voting makes elections unnecessarily expensive”*) and the strategic (*“Compulsory voting encourages extreme right parties and therefore should be abolished”*) arguments are not really supported to any great extent.

Figures three to six give a more detailed breakdown of the responses received by the Members of the House of Commons. The results reinforce two earlier conclusions. Firstly, the conclusion that the main controversy revolves around the question whether or not legitimacy would be improved by compulsory voting is strengthened. Opponents strongly agree with the fact that legitimacy increases, but at the same time also agree with the statement that this is but an

illusion. Secondly, the conclusions regarding the low importance of the financial and strategic arguments are underlined; also the proponents strongly reject them.

Figure 3: Arguments for compulsory voting of proponents  
(House of Commons)

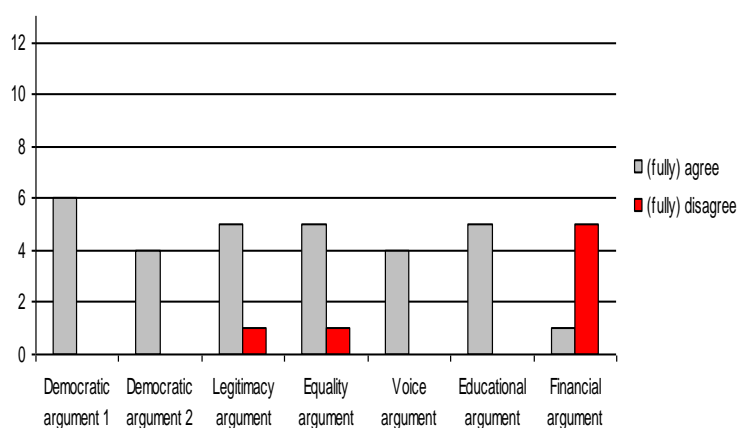


Figure 4: Arguments for compulsory voting of opponents  
(House of Commons)

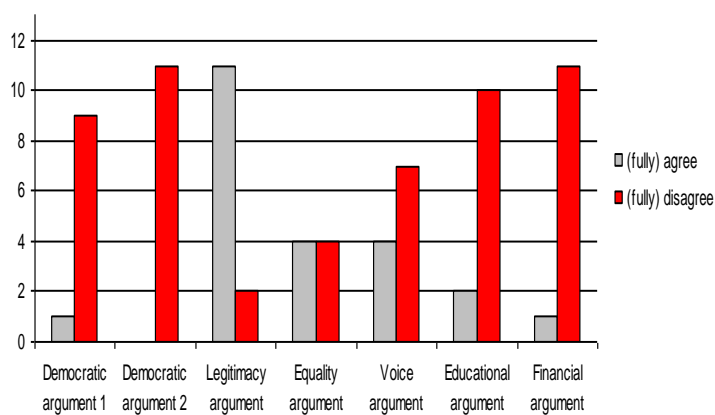


Figure 5: Arguments against compulsory voting of proponents  
 (House of Commons)

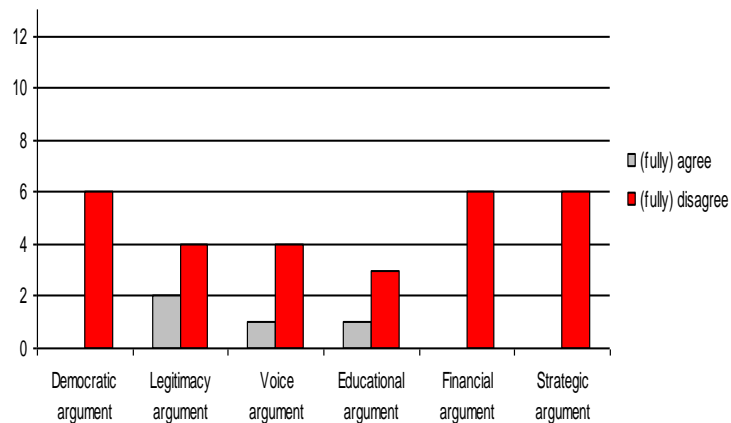
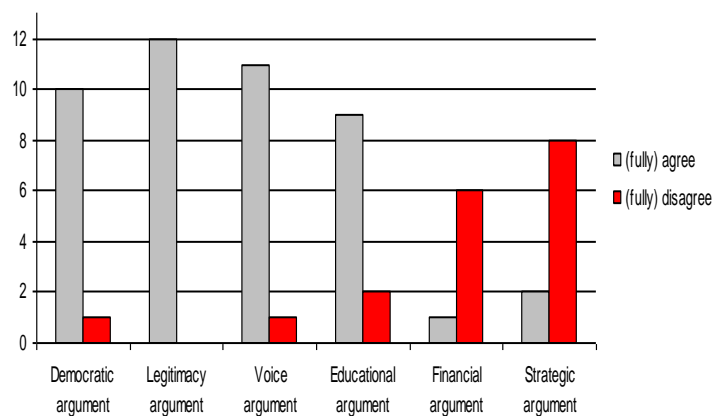


Figure 6: Arguments against compulsory voting of opponents  
 (House of Commons)



### Voluntary voting in Belgium?

Since the beginning of the nineties, the extreme-right party Vlaams Belang (the former Vlaams Blok) won election after election in Flanders. This fed the discussion about compulsory voting in Flanders: the extreme-right votes were interpreted as anti-establishment, protest votes that could be eliminated by not forcing anti-political groups in society to vote (Billiet 2001). In general, the liberal, the nationalist, ecologist and, paradoxically, the extreme right parties are against compulsory voting in Flanders for strategic reasons (reducing the strength of the Vlaams Belang), to enlarge the freedom of the voter, to make voting more motivated and authentic and the voter better informed; the socialist and christian-democrats are in favour of compulsory voting for equality reasons (De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2006; De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2005). De Ceuninck *et al.* also conducted a survey amongst political scientists in Flanders: 20 were contacted, 13 are in favour of compulsory voting. The proponents argue that voting is civic duty, that it makes elections more equal and less socio-economically biased, increases legitimacy and functions as a flashing light for discontentment and extremism in society. The argumentation of the opponents of compulsory voting stress that it curtails freedom (political participation should not be forced) and that voluntary voting would not result in social inequality nor in a less informed voter (De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2006; De Ceuninck *et al.*, 2005).

**Table 2: Proponents and opponents of compulsory voting in the Flemish Parliament (plus non response)**

	For Compulsory Voting	Against Compulsory Voting	Did not participate in survey
Christian-democratic faction (CD&V) <i>n</i> =29	/	/	29
Ecologist faction (Groen!) <i>n</i> =6	1	/	5
Nationalist faction (N-VA) <i>n</i> =6	0	6	
Socialist-progressive faction (SP.a – spirit) <i>n</i> =25	15	1	10
Extreme-right faction (Vlaams Belang) <i>n</i> =32	8	2	22
Liberal faction (VLD - Vivant) <i>n</i> =24	5	18	1
Francophone faction (UF) and independent parliamentarians <i>n</i> =2	/	/	2
Total – Member of the Flemish Parliament <i>n</i> =124	29	27	69

In contrast with the findings of De Ceuninck *et al.*, the respondents of the ecologist and the extreme-right party in our small-scale survey are in favour of compulsory voting. Also, the respondents of the socialist party are amongst the

proponents of compulsory voting. The nationalist and the majority of the liberal fraction are against. In sum, the respondents include a more or less equal number of opponents and proponents. We also asked whether it is probable that compulsory voting would be abolished in Belgium in the near future. Most respondents do not exclude that possibility, but indicate that there is only a small chance that it would occur. Of the 56 respondents, 48 (85,7 %) assess that there is a small chance that voting will become voluntary in the near future; 3 indicate that it is impossible and 5 that it is likely.

Figure 7 illustrates the support for arguments for compulsory voting of the respondents. An overall conclusion from this figure is that all the arguments for compulsory voting are more strongly supported than they get rejected. Figure 8 presents the data about the arguments against and gives a less clear-cut image of the views on the arguments against compulsory voting of the respondents.

Figure 7 clearly shows that out of the arguments for compulsory voting the legitimacy argument gains the most support (and the least opposition): more than three quarters of the respondents are convinced that *“Governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate in elections; that is the reason why it should be compulsory”*. But of the arguments against compulsory voting (see figure 8), the counter-argument that gets the most support also concerns legitimacy: *“Compulsory voting hides political apathy and creates the illusion of high electoral participation”*. Whether or not compulsory voting really increases legitimacy is thus controversial.

Figure 7: Arguments for compulsory voting (Flemish Parliament)

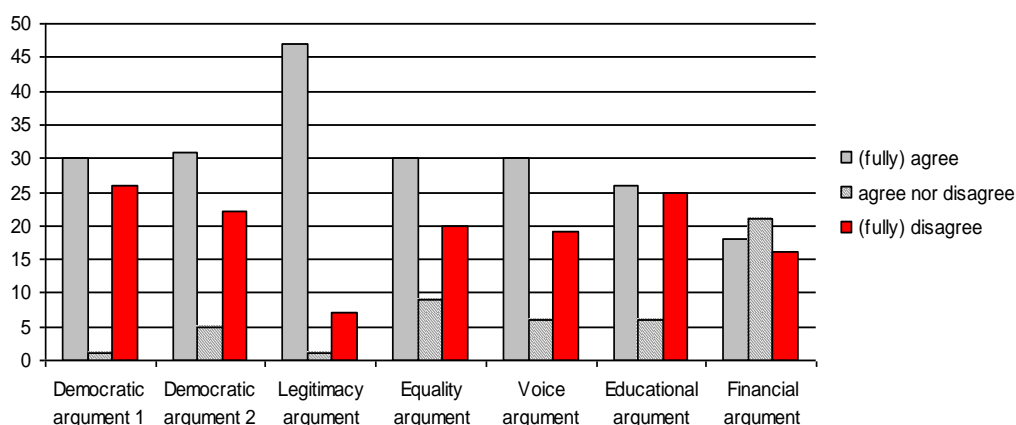
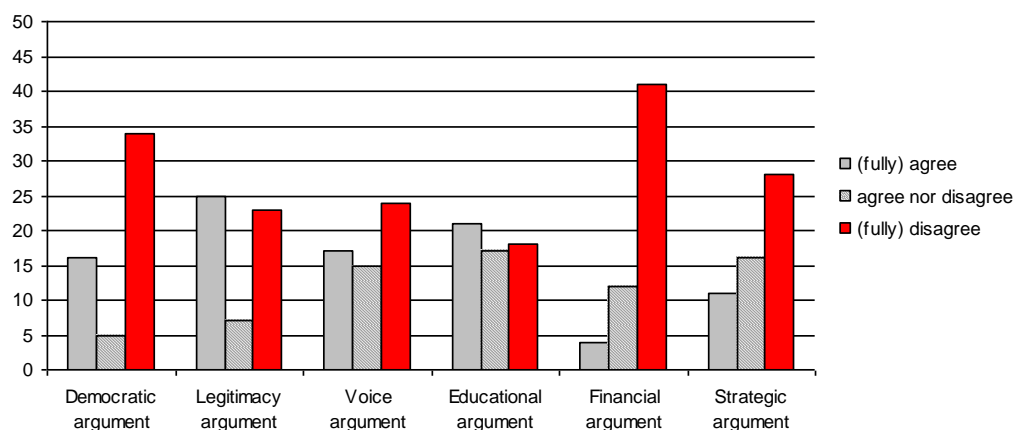


Figure 8: Arguments against compulsory voting (Flemish Parliament)



Half of the respondents support the democratic arguments that voting is a civic duty and a democratic necessity and that compulsory voting avoids a socio-demographic bias in politics (equality argument) and functions as a flashing light for democracy by capturing protest votes (voice argument). The democratic argument is also supported by the high “disagree score” for the democratic argument against compulsory voting, notably “*Compulsory voting is not consistent with freedom, the cornerstone of democratic government*”. Nevertheless, the democratic arguments in favour of compulsory voting also receive high “disagree” scores which indicate that they are highly controversial. The equality argument “*Compulsory voting avoids social and demographic bias in the votes and by extension in the political themes addressed by political parties and decision makers*” and the voice argument “*Compulsory voting captures protest and anti-political votes; this functions as a flashing light for democracy*” do not seem to be controversial. The voice argument pro compulsory voting is further supported by a high disagree score for the statement “*A vote without compulsion is a “better” vote because the voters are self-selecting and more likely to be interested and informed*”.

Like the legitimacy and the democratic arguments, the educational argument is controversial. We conclude this from the equally high “agree” and “disagree” scores for the statements “*Compulsory voting forces the citizens to maintain a minimal level of political knowledge*” and “*People will turn away from a political system that forces them to do something against their will*”. The financial objection against compulsory voting “*Compulsory voting makes elections unnecessarily expensive*”, is strongly rejected (and receives the least support). Furthermore, of the arguments in favour of compulsory voting, the financial argument is the least convincing. From this, we conclude that the financial aspect is not central to the debate.

Abolishing compulsory voting for strategic reasons, notably to diminish the strength of the extreme-right party, does not gain much support. A substantive group (including respondents from the extreme-right party) is against this motivation for abolishing compulsory voting. From this, we conclude that this argument is also not convincing.

In figures 9 to 12, we distinguished the support for arguments for and against compulsory voting from proponents of compulsory voting from opponents. These figures support the conclusions based on figures 7 and 8, but also highlight two elements. Firstly, these figures illustrate more clearly that the democratic arguments involved in the discussion about compulsory voting are highly controversial. The democratic arguments in favour of compulsory voting are the most compelling arguments for the opponents, whereas they are situated in the top three of disagreement scores of the opponents. Furthermore, the democratic counter argument receives the highest “disagree” score of the proponents. Secondly, these figures add weight to the conclusion that the legitimacy argument for compulsory voting is a compelling argument - also opponents of compulsory voting support this argument in a strong way- but, given the high agree score with the legitimacy argument against compulsory voting, also a controversial one.

Figure 9: Arguments for compulsory voting of proponents  
(Flemish Parliament)

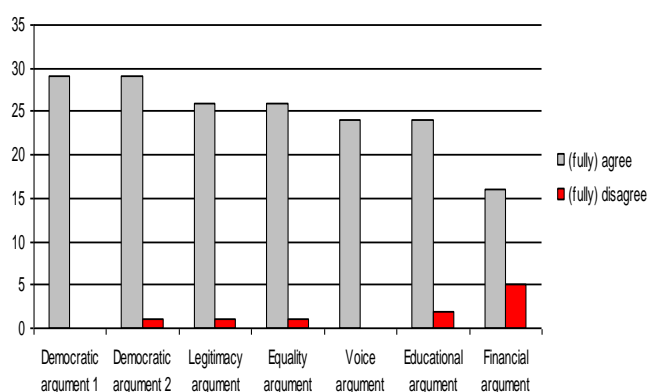


Figure 10: Arguments for compulsory voting of opponents  
(Flemish Parliament)

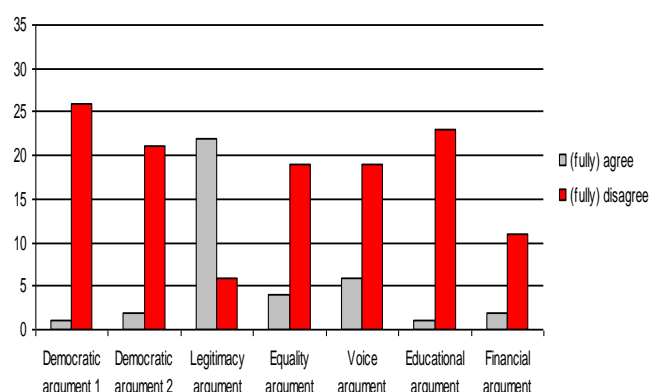


Figure 11: Arguments against compulsory voting of proponents  
(Flemish Parliament)

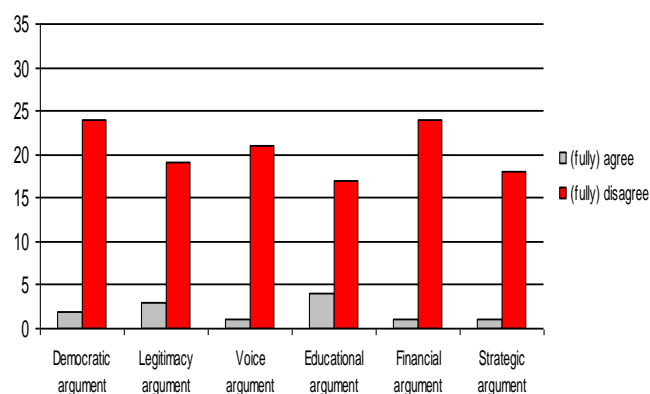
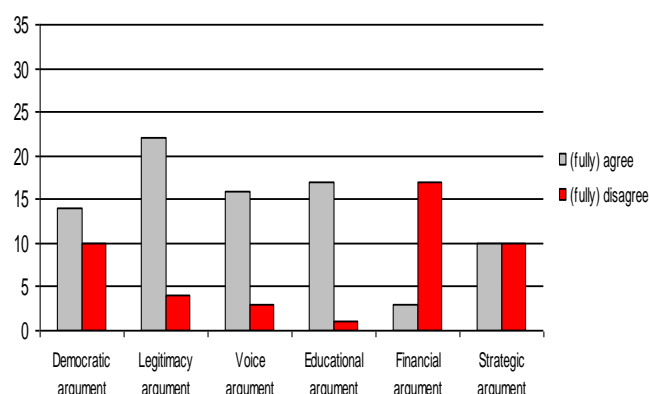


Figure 12: Arguments against compulsory voting of opponents  
(Flemish Parliament)



## Comparing the UK and Flanders

There are parallels between the responses received from the UK Members of Parliament and those of the Flemish Parliamentarians. Supporters of compulsory voting in both countries highlight the legitimacy argument (see Figure 1 and Figure 7). In both groups, the notion that “*Governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate in elections*”, is the most popular factor in terms of any ranking of the arguments. Similarly, both the British and the Flemish parliamentarians, rank the equality, the voice and the democratic 1 arguments highly. The Flemish MPs also rate the democratic argument 2 highly “*That all people choose their representatives is crucial*”. This aspect does not gain a great deal of support amongst the British MPs. The equality and the voice arguments do not seem particularly controversial in both countries. The financial argument received high disagreement scores amongst the British and the Flemish MPs.

In terms of arguments against compulsory voting in both countries (see Figure 2 and Figure 8), there is more of a marked distinction between the two countries. In Britain, the legitimacy argument “*Compulsory voting hides political*

*apathy and creates the illusion of high electoral participation*” is the most important factor. The voice, the democratic and the equality arguments are also important. For the Flemish respondents, opinion is less divided. There is, for example, significant disagreement with the argument that “*Compulsory voting makes elections unnecessarily expensive*”. Likewise, the democratic argument “*Compulsory voting is not consistent with freedom*” and the strategic argument, “*Compulsory voting encourages extreme right parties*” also receive significant disagreement. Overall, the financial and the strategic arguments can be considered as weak.

The data clearly illustrates that there is much more support for compulsory voting amongst Flemish Parliamentarians than there is amongst British Parliamentarians. This could be due to the fact that, in Belgium, they are already familiar with a system of compulsory voting. Nonetheless, a relatively high percentage of the Flemish respondents judge that it is possible that voting becomes voluntary in the near future. On the other hand, in Britain, supporters of compulsory voting are essentially arguing for change. Despite these differences, it is striking that in both countries the controversy revolves around matters of legitimacy and democratic rights and duties. It is to be expected that changing the electoral system regarding the obligation to vote (introducing or abolishing it) in both countries would raise discussions regarding these themes, i.e. the representativeness and legitimacy of the democratic institution and whether or not voting should be conceived as a civic duty.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined the debate in the UK and Belgium regarding compulsory voting. Compulsory voting is well established in Belgium having been introduced in 1893 but we have seen how some commentators wish to change this situation, partly motivated by the fear of the rise of the right. In Britain, on the contrary, there are those who would wish to see the introduction of compulsory voting – their main argument being the low turnout in recent elections. Starting from the literature on compulsory voting, this article has analysed the key arguments that are present in contemporary debates surrounding compulsory voting. After defining compulsory voting, the discussion moved to illuminate the fact that compulsory voting is used in various countries world-wide. The article then examined what happens to those who do not vote; sanctions and incentives were highlighted. Next, the arguments for and against compulsory voting are described and we tested their validity by confronting them with empirical research regarding the political strength of parties, the overall turnout and the turnout of specific socio-demographic groups in society.

Next we analysed the key arguments for and against compulsory voting using empirical data from Belgium and Britain. We questioned prominent

politicians in Belgium and Britain concerning their views on the importance of the major arguments in contemporary politics for and against compulsory voting; namely, democratic values such as freedom, citizenship and equality, voicing the will of the people, legitimacy of representative institutions, education and information, and the financial aspects. The article also examined the practicalities involved in introducing or eliminating a system of compulsory voting. Certain groups are excluded *de facto* when they are not obliged to vote. This chimes with other figures illustrating the exclusion of particular socio-demographic groups in society when voting is optional. Research has shown that turnout drops without compulsion and that, more specifically, certain groups drop out. Generally speaking, it is women, younger and older people, the low educated, low social status, blue-collar workers, people without a profession, people with little interest in politics, negative feelings about politics and a belief that their vote will not make a difference. The exclusion of these groups, at the input side of the policy-making process, can have far-reaching consequences for the outputs of politics; namely, for policy. The mechanism behind this process is that political parties do not take the interests of these voters to heart if they feel they are unlikely to vote (for them). This results in a Catch-22 situation whereby certain voters do not vote because they feel that their interests will be ignored but where political parties ignore the interests because the parties feel that they will not receive electoral support from them anyway. In the light of the severe crisis politics is facing at the moment where people turn away from politics, politics cannot afford risking excluding these people and their needs.

Finally, the small-scale survey reveals interesting cross-national data, enabling comparisons to be made between elite opinion in Britain and Belgium. It is evident from the data that there is significantly more support for compulsory voting in Belgium than there is in Britain. This could be that, in Belgium, they are identifying support for the status quo whereas in Britain support for compulsory voting means arguing for change. Psychologically, perhaps it is easier to get people to argue for maintenance of the status quo than it is to get them to argue for significant change (although this argument is weakened when acknowledging that abolishing compulsory voting in Belgium would be a major change too). Not surprising perhaps that only a minority of the British respondents, 30 per cent, are actually in favour of compulsory voting, compared with 65 per cent that are against and five per cent that are undecided.

In terms of the British MPs, as stated in section three, the main reason cited by those in favour of compulsory voting is the legitimacy argument, i.e. that governments are more legitimate when more people participate in the electoral process. Of those arguing against compulsory voting, the main argument is the civil liberties argument, that people should not be compelled to participate and that compulsion gives the illusion of participation. The finance and the voice arguments are not particularly given a great deal of weight. In terms of the Flemish MPs, the main argument in favour of compulsory voting is the legitimacy

argument, that “*Governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the population participate in elections*”. This chimes with the responses from the British MPs. The main argument “against” used by the Flemish MPs is the legitimacy argument, that “*Compulsory voting hides political apathy and creates the illusion of high electoral participation*” but opinion is much more divided in Belgium and there is not such strong support for the arguments against. There are, therefore, both parallels and differences between the Flemish and British responses.

Crucially, this research has sparked a debate and illustrates that those who support or oppose compulsory voting do so for a variety of reasons. Despite the differences we also highlighted a striking parallel; in both countries there exists controversy about whether or not the legitimacy of the representative bodies raises due to compulsory voting. Changing the electoral system regarding compulsory voting would raise debates about perceived legitimacy and about voting as a civic duty. This is a purely “political” - in the sense of normative - debate that complements arguments regarding voter turnout, social bias and electoral strength of parties that are central to the research regarding the effects of compulsory voting today. Future research might wish to examine the normative dimension of the debate regarding compulsory voting further.

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