Compulsory Voting

In many democracies, voter turnout is low and getting lower. If the people choose not to govern themselves, should they be forced to do so?

For Jason Brennan, compulsory voting is unjust and a petty violation of citizens’ liberty. The median nonvoter is less informed and rational, as well as more biased, than the median voter.

According to Lisa Hill, compulsory voting is a reasonable imposition on personal liberty. Hill points to the discernible benefits of compulsory voting and argues that high-turnout elections are more democratically legitimate.

The authors – both well known for their work on voting and civic engagement – debate such questions as

- Do citizens have a duty to vote, and is it an enforceable duty?
- Does compulsory voting violate citizens’ liberty? If so, is this sufficient ground to oppose it? Or is it a justifiable violation? Might it instead promote liberty on the whole?
- Is low turnout a problem or a blessing?
- Does compulsory voting produce better government? Or might it instead produce worse government? Might it, in fact, have little effect overall on the quality of government?

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Lisa Hill is Professor of Politics at the University of Adelaide, and formerly an ARC Senior Fellow (University of Adelaide) and a five-year Fellow in the Political Science Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University. Prior to that she was a lecturer in Government at the University of Sydney and took a D. Phil. in Politics at the University of Oxford. Her current areas of interest are political theory, history of political thought, and issues in electoral law. In 2011 Hill was elected a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences of Australia. Her most recent book, co-authored with Bruce Buchan, is An Intellectual History of Political Corruption (2014).
Compulsory Voting

For and Against

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