

Should Voting Be Mandatory?

Last spring, President Barack Obama suggested that Americans be required to vote. "It would be transformative if everybody voted," he said. Many Americans don't exercise their right to vote, with participation in U.S. elections far lower than that in many other developed countries. In the 2014 midterm elections, 36 percent of eligible voters cast ballots, a record low since World War II. (In the 2012 presidential election, the figure was 54 percent.) Below, two experts—a fellow at a policy research organization and a law professor—weigh in on the idea of making voting mandatory.

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YES Twenty-eight countries, ranging from Brazil and Mexico to Singapore and Thailand, have some form of mandatory voting. The United States should join that list.

Consider the experience of Australia, whose political culture is quite close to that of the U.S. Alarmed by a decline in voter turnout to less than 60 percent early in the 20th century, Australia adopted mandatory voting in 1924; violators today are subject to a fine of about \$15.

The results have been remarkable. In the 1925 election, turnout soared to 91 percent. In recent elections, it has hovered around 95 percent*, with most Australians now regarding voting as a civic obligation.

American citizenship today confers many rights but requires few responsibilities, especially since the abolition of the military draft in 1973. Requiring people to vote would reinforce the principle of reciprocity at the heart of citizenship: You must give to get. It would also make our democracy more responsive to the interests of all citizens,

since elected officials are more likely to pay attention to those who vote.

Low voter turnout is one reason for the polarization of American politics: Hard-core partisans—very conservative Republicans and very liberal Democrats—are more likely to dominate elections when turnout is low. Moderate politicians often decide not to run because they know that the voters most likely to show up at the polls tend to support more extreme candidates.

Imagine our political system in a world of near-universal voting: Campaigns could devote far less money to get-out-the-vote efforts. Candidates would know they must appeal more to middle-ground voters without the most extreme views. Such a system would also improve our legislative process. Rather than focusing on symbolic gestures to appease partisans, Congress might actually roll up its sleeves and tackle the serious issues it's now ignoring. •

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*The numbers in Galston's essay refer to the percentage of registered voters who cast ballots, as opposed to the percentage of the voting-age population, shown in chart; not everyone registers to vote.

College students in California waiting to vote in the 2012 presidential election

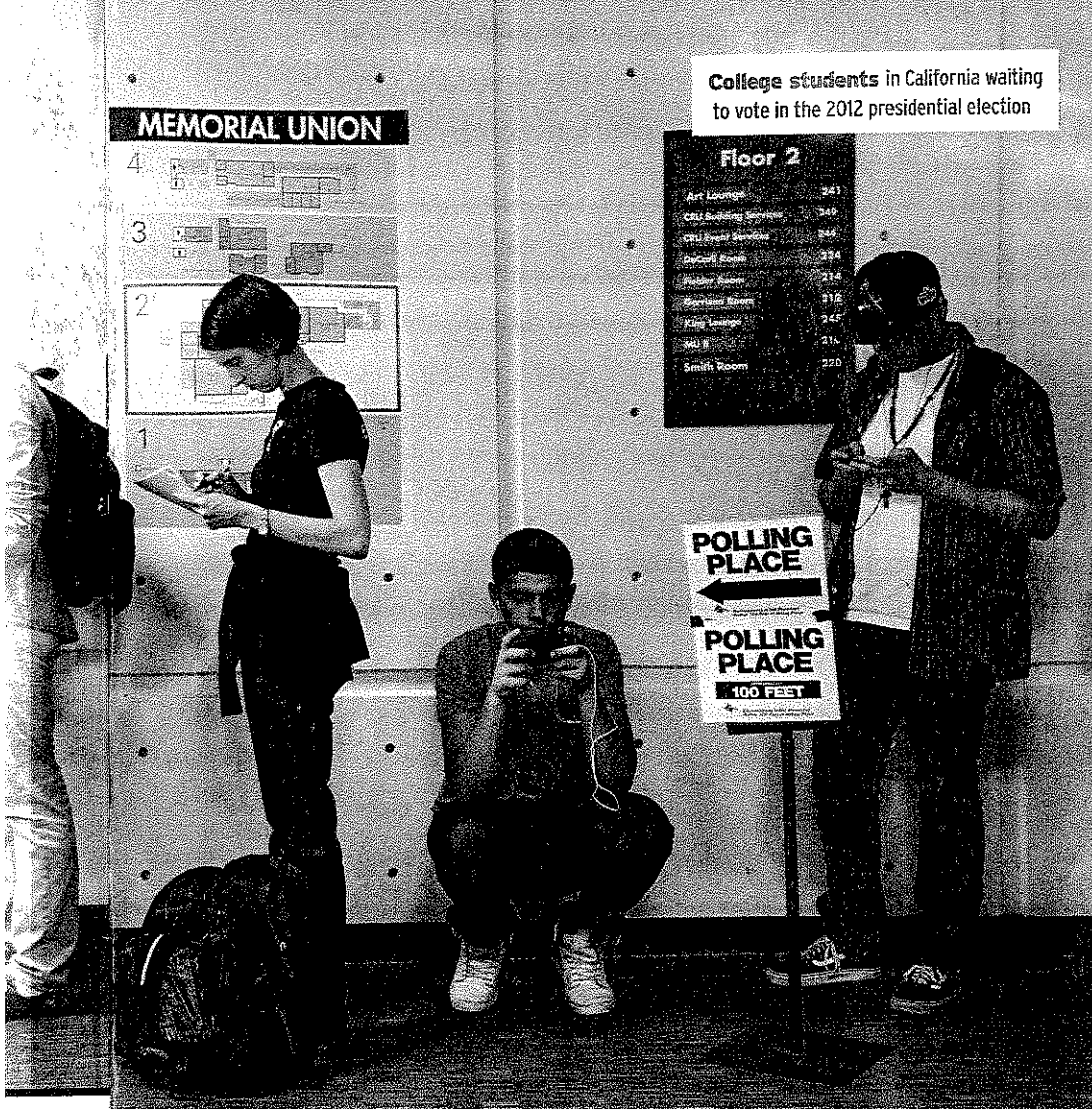
Who Shows Up to Vote

Developed countries with the highest percentage of voting-age population that cast ballots in the most recent national election

1. Belgium* 87%
 2. Turkey* 86%
 3. Sweden 83%
 4. Denmark 82%
 5. Australia* 81%
 6. South Korea 80%
 7. Iceland 80%
 8. Norway 78%
 9. Israel 76%
 10. New Zealand 73%
-
31. United States 54%

*Countries with mandatory voting

SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER; FIGURES ROUNDED



NO Proponents of mandatory voting seem to believe that if we force people to participate, all that ails American elections will be cured. That misses the real problems. Instead of making elections mandatory, we should make them more competitive, because nothing increases voter turnout more than giving voters meaningful, significant choices.

There are simple ways to accomplish that. For starters, we should eliminate the ability of Democrats and Republicans to design “safe” election districts—those where their own party holds a lopsided majority—for themselves and their allies. Only in the U.S. are sitting legislators given the power to create election districts that help them get re-elected; the practice is called gerrymandering.

Second, states should consider open political primaries in which independents—voters not registered with a political party—can vote in the primary of their choice. Broadening the primary electorate to include independents could generate more centrist candidates and make general elections more competitive.

We should make elections more competitive so voters have real choices.

Finally, we need public financing of elections. The most difficult task challengers face is raising enough money to become widely known. Public financing—using taxpayer money to fund political campaigns—would ensure that credible challengers have access to the resources they need to make

more races competitive. Some states and localities are adopting public financing, and Congress should too.

Of the various proposals for reforming our election system, mandatory voting is one of the least plausible ideas. Americans take their freedoms

very seriously, and the idea of requiring them to do something—especially something as important and personal as voting—runs deeply against the grain of our political culture.

Forcing people to participate does nothing to make our system more democratic. A healthy democracy requires competitive elections in which voters perceive something meaningful is at stake. Make that happen and increased voter participation will follow. •

—RICK PILDES

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