

## The American Democracy Problem: Why We Need Compulsory Voting



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By Lauren Bartolotta

Famous historian and anthropologist Jared Diamond writes in his newest book, *Upheaval: Turning Points for Nations in Crisis*, that [a democracy in which citizens can't or don't vote is not a democracy](#). America's hollow promise of democracy and "rule by the people" is coming under fire as citizens are increasingly unwilling or unable to participate in the political process.

Millions of Americans feel like their "voice doesn't matter" and "politicians don't care," backfiring on democratic principles of liberty, justice, and equality for all. Objectively speaking, the American democracy is flawed. A government that is not perceived to be representative or legitimate by its citizens is not acceptable. Political disengagement is a major problem that needs to be addressed.

The obstacles to true democratic participation are fierce. Problems of voter suppression and citizens' lack of trust and faith in the system contribute to consistent low voter turnout, the enemy of democracy. Increasing voter turnout is essential to fixing America's democracy problem. Implementing compulsory voting is a powerful yet feasible tactic to increase civic

engagement with the political system and show citizens that their opinion is expected and most importantly, valued.

### What is America's democracy problem?

The American government is a representative democracy, meaning that every eligible citizen may participate in the political process by voting for candidates who can then advocate for laws on their behalf. Voting is an essential part of a healthy democracy, making it difficult to define America as a democracy if only half (or less) of the population contributes to the system.

While voter turnout levels fluctuate throughout the years, on average, [60% of our nation's eligible population](#) casts a vote during presidential elections while only 40% cast a vote during midterm elections. Turnout varies from state to state and also within states, and is significantly lower for primary and local elections. In the 2014 midterm elections, voter turnout levels in Southern California [dropped to a mere 22.6%](#).

Compared with all of the other countries with "affluent" democracies, America trails largely behind, suffering from especially low voter turnout levels.

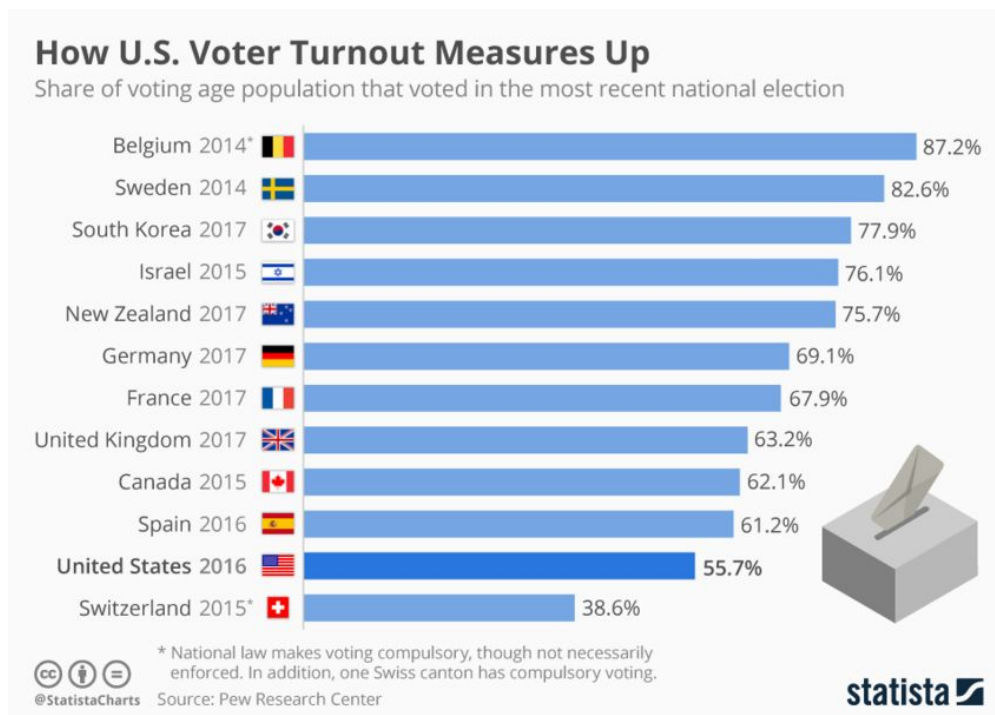


Image: [Statista](#)

### **Why is low voter turnout a problem?**

Low voter turnout results in political outcomes that don't always reflect public opinion. Current satisfaction levels with our political system are at an all time low. According to the 2018 American Institutional Confidence Poll, only [10% of American adults are "very satisfied"](#) with American democracy while 30% are "somewhat satisfied."

When asked about the faults of our current system, [67% of Americans blamed low voter turnout](#).

Take our current president for an example. [60% of Americans have expressed negative views of President Trump](#), including 41% who view him very unfavorably. [Only 37% of Americans view Trump favorably](#), indicating a major discrepancy between the 2016 election outcome and majority opinion. With the 2020 primary elections right around the corner, it's important to consider the impacts of low voter turnout on political and societal outcomes.



"Democracy is about voting and it's about a majority vote. And it's time that we started exercising the Democratic process."

— Debbie Stabenow

Image: [QuoteFancy](#)

### **How does voter suppression contribute to low voter turnout?**

Democratic voting is meant to encourage the idea that every citizen's opinion is sought, valued, and deserving of equal consideration. However, citizens of color and those on the lower end of the socio-economic scale are drastically less likely to vote yet comprise a majority of the American population. How can government officials be held accountable for adhering to the needs of such a significant portion of our population if those citizens can't or won't participate in decision making?

Voter suppression disproportionately affects certain groups, robbing them of their voices and contributions to the democratic process. The most common cited barriers at the polls involve issues related to voter identification, voter purges, voter confusion due to misinformation, voter intimidation, poll closures and long lines, registration deadlines, discriminatory district maps, and work conflicts.

Fears circulate about the disproportionate influence of wealthy citizens in contemporary democracies. Jared Diamond notes that [voter turnout is over 80 percent for Americans who earn more than \\$150,000](#) and [under 50 percent for those earning less than \\$20,000](#), skewing the electorate.

Research from the Leadership Conference Education Fund indicated that in the 2016 Election, states with a history of voter suppression policies faced mass poll closures, operating [868 fewer polling places](#), typically in low-income African American communities. By reducing the number of polling places, voters must travel further distances and wait in longer lines. While these may seem like minor inconveniences, these are the factors that deny low-income people the right to vote as they struggle to get time off work and coordinate childcare and transportation.

The evidence of voter discrimination is undeniable. African American & Hispanic citizens experience issues when attempting to exercise their democratic right to vote [up to three times more than whites](#), being significantly more likely to be turned down due to issues with valid identification, have difficulty locating a nearby polling place, and to not receive their requested absentee ballots. They are also [twice as likely](#) to have to wait in longer lines at polling stations.

Many people believe that the importance of voting lies in the ability to elect candidates who advocate for the issues they care about and are affected by. But during political campaigns, candidates prioritize the desires of voters over the needs of non-voters in order to get elected. In order for the government to hear and effectively respond to *all* citizens' needs, all citizens must be involved in the process.

## **What is compulsory voting and how does it facilitate true democratic participation?**

Compulsory voting requires all eligible citizens to contribute to the political process by registering and voting in local, state, and federal elections. Citizens who fail to comply with the mandate without a valid excuse typically face a minor penalty, such as a \$50 fine. Valid excuses are related to illness, work, school, family, or religion and are typically granted freely.

Compulsory voting, by virtue of high turnout levels, increases the representativeness of the government. Universal participation in government allows government officials to pursue more central political agendas that benefit the whole of society rather than particular groups.

Compulsory voting systems aim to equally distribute government attention and funding based on the needs indicated by the majority through the voting process.

Many Americans lack faith in the legitimacy of the system, believing that their individual vote simply doesn't matter and won't make a difference in political outcomes. Requiring citizens to vote is an effective way to show citizens that their engagement with government processes has a powerful effect on societal outcomes, prompting the government to actively respond to their needs.

Compulsory voting regimes typically implement complementary policies to make the process more convenient and accessible, such as automatic voter registration and turning Election Days into national holidays or placing them on the weekend rather than during the work week. Compulsory voting mandates strive to support rather than harm vulnerable members of the population through liberal acceptance of excuses if participation is not possible.

Mandatory voting and the aforementioned complementary policies naturally make it easier for governments to act in the best interest of all Americans, not just the ones who can easily show up. **An effective system of compulsory voting requires the establishment of more fair and accessible polling places and procedures.**

The most important message compulsory voting regimes spread is: Voting is a fundamental right for everyone.

## Does compulsory voting actually work? Ask Australia!

Many other countries have implemented compulsory voting mandates and have reported higher levels of perceived legitimacy and satisfaction with democracy. Using Australia as a case study provides some hopeful insights on the benefits of mandatory voting. Immediately after Australia implemented compulsory voting, turnout levels rose from less than [60% to over 90%](#).

The idea of implementing a system which forces citizens to vote may seem like an infringement on citizen rights and inherently anti-democratic. However, Australian citizens note that the \$20 fine and liberal acceptance of a variety of excuses does not make voting a burden, but instead a privilege. In fact, [87% of Australians](#) reported that they would “probably” or “definitely” still vote if the law was no longer enforced.

Opponents of compulsory voting often cite concerns about rising administrative and enforcement costs. However, many countries with compulsory voting systems have low enforcement rates yet maintain high voter turnout levels. American voting costs are actually higher than voting costs in Australia. [Average election costs per voter](#) is \$15 in Australia, but up to \$50 in Iowa. If local, state, and federal elections could be held on the same day in America, election costs could decrease significantly.

“Voting in Australia is like a party. There’s a BBQ at the local school. Everyone turns up. Everyone votes. There’s a sense that: We’re all in this together. We’re all affected by the decision we make today.” — Neil Ennis, Lawnton, Queensland

Quote: [NY Times](#)

“[Election Day in Australia is a community event that everyone is legally required to participate in](#),” featuring barbecues and community fundraisers at polling places and beyond. After voting, Australians celebrate their democratic right together by sizzling up what they lovingly call “democracy sausages.”



Image: [UNSW Newsroom](#)

Voter suppression and citizens' lack of faith in the political system clearly compromise the American democracy. Compulsory voting should be considered as an effective way to make America more democratic, encouraging American citizens to engage with politics and motivating public officials to be responsive to all, rather than some, citizens' needs.