Your democracy needs you:

The Labour case for compulsory voting

MAY 2026

David Klemperer

Labour Together

Contents

About

About the Author

David Klemperer is a historian and researcher working at the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Bath. He was previously a Research Fellow at the Constitution Society, specialising in democracy and elections.

About Labour Together

Labour Together is a think tank working at the heart of British politics to support the Labour movement with research, strategy, and policy development. We work closely with policymakers, parliamentarians, and political leaders to help Labour govern and win again.

Acknowledgements

This paper includes research originally conducted for the Constitution Society, and previously published on the Comment is Freed Substack.

Additional data analysis was provided by Dylan Cridland, and polling conducted by Convergent Opinion was generously provided by the Campaign for Compulsory Voting.

Thanks also go to James Howat, Charles White, Nick Garland, Morgan Jones, and Morgan Wild for their intellectual contributions to this paper.

labourtogether.uk | @labourtogether

Executive Summary

Politics has become more unstable and zero-sum as we wrestle with an ageing population, a breakdown in the global order and a transformation in our infosphere. This has put our democracy under strain. All this poses big challenges for Labour's ability to pursue a long-termist politics of economic growth and redistribution.

Democratic politics will always feel short-termist and cake-ist. But our political institutions can do a much better job of helping politicians make decisions in the long-term interests of the country. This paper argues that compulsory voting is a key part of this democratic renewal.

At the last general election, barely half of eligible voters cast a ballot. The long-term trend is for this to fall further. Those who don't vote are disproportionately poorer, younger and ethnically-diverse people. These are the people that Labour exists to help.

As a consequence:

- politicians prioritise the interests of richer, older, and more secure voters. That is why spending on the state pension has doubled since 2010.
- small groups of highly-motivated voters can make it difficult for governments to take on vested interests. That is why it is so hard for councils to build houses.

Taken together, it is harder for Labour to win re-election after taking the tough choices to build more houses, redistribute for social mobility and generally grow the economy.

By raising turnout, compulsory voting means those who benefit most from these policies have their voices heard at elections, rebalancing the incentives that all politicians face.

Essentially, we should establish an Australian-style legal duty to vote. That should include:

- a £10 fine for those who don't vote.
- a "Democracy Day" bank holiday for general elections
- a "None of the Above" option to ballot papers.

The evidence suggests that compulsory voting is popular with the public, who are twice as likely to support as to oppose it. And our analysis shows that raising turnout is most likely to benefit progressives, including Labour.

Labour may be accused of gerrymandering. But that misses what this is really about. Compulsory voting reflects a moral argument about the society we want to live in:

Enjoying the benefits of a democracy should come with a responsibility to uphold it.

Introduction

The problem of democratic disconnect

Over a decade ago, the Irish political scientist Peter Mair diagnosed a "hollowing out" of western democracy, in which a widespread retreat from the public sphere was leaving citizens disconnected from political elites, and politicians presiding over a socio-political "void".[1]

In the UK, the starkest facet of this democratic hollowing is the decline in electoral turnout. At the general election of July 2024, the official turnout rate of registered voters was just under 60%; given gaps in registration, it has been calculated that this amounted to a real turnout rate of merely 52.8%. It was likely the lowest-turnout election in the UK since the introduction of universal suffrage.[2]

While turnout fluctuates from election to election, there has been a secular downwards trend. Over the last three decades, turnout at general elections has fallen by around 30%. This trend is common across advanced democracies, but it is particularly pronounced here in the UK, where national-level turnout is now around 12 percentage points below the OECD average.[3]

At the local level, the UK picture is even worse: in May 2025, barely 34% of registered eligible voters cast a ballot in the elections for county councils, and less than 31% voted in the elections for Combined Authority Mayors.[4]

Such low turnout figures are not just a symptom of the problem of democratic disconnect – they are also a contributing factor. Within a democratic political system, elections are one of the central mechanisms for linking people to the state. But as more and more people stop voting, elections become less effective at conferring legitimacy on governments, holding them accountable, and ensuring that they are responsive to the needs and wants of the public as a whole.

This effect is all the more pronounced since non-voting is not an evenly-spread phenomenon. Rather, low turnout is in practice *unequal turnout* with some demographic groups now voting at far higher rates than others. In the UK today the poor vote less than the rich, the young vote less than the old, ethnic minorities vote less than white people, and renters vote less than homeowners.

Data from the polling firm Ipsos suggests at the July 2024 general election, turnout was:

- 13 points higher amongst white people than amongst ethnic minorities
- 22 points higher amongst social grades AB than amongst social grades DE

---

[1] Peter Mair, *Ruling the void: the hollowing of western democracy*, Verso, 2011.

[2] House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, "Review of the 2024 general election", 22 July 2025, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/48937/documents/256975/default/.

[3] OECD, "Society at a Glance 2024", 20 June 2024, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/society-at-a-glance-2024_918d8db3-en/full-report/voting_4cc36656.html.

[4] The Electoral Commission, "Report on the May 2025 local elections in England", 24 October 2025, https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/report-may-2025-local-elections-england.

- 34 points higher amongst those aged 65+ than amongst those aged 18-24
- 36 points higher amongst outright homeowners than amongst renters

The result is that rather than being universal, our elections are now the province of an *unrepresentative electorate* – one that is richer, older, whiter, and more secure than the population as a whole.[5] This has the potential to seriously distort our politics, by presenting politicians of all parties with clear electoral incentives to prioritise the interests of older, richer, whiter, and more secure voters over those of the rest of the public.

Why compulsory voting?

The UK needs a political system capable of representing the whole public, and of making difficult, long-termist decisions in the national interest – decisions in which everyone can feel they have a stake. Low and unequal turnout currently constitutes a major threat to the ability of our system to do this. It also poses a particular challenge for progressives, who care specifically about serving the interests of those groups least likely to vote.

The Elections Bill now going through Parliament contains a number of important measures designed to increase turnout and widen electoral participation, including reducing the voting age to 16, widening the powers of the electoral commission, expanding the range of accepted forms of voter ID, and introducing an automated system of voter registration.[6]

However, such measures are unlikely to be sufficient to raise turnout to a healthy and sustainable level, or to close the demographic disparities. This paper therefore makes the case for a more radical reform: the introduction of Australian-style compulsory voting.

Under compulsory voting, every registered voter would have a legal duty to cast a ballot in every election for which they were eligible, on pain of a small fine. This "duty to vote" would reflect an understanding of citizenship as grounded in reciprocal obligations, and an idea of democracy as a shared endeavour.

Compulsory voting should not be understood as an authoritarian measure: the act of voting is no more onerous than other acts we already consider to be enforceable legal and civic duties, such as paying taxes, filling in the census, serving on a jury, or registering to vote. As in Australia, exemptions from voting could be allowed for those with conscientious objections, and voters would also have the option of spoiling their ballot, leaving it blank, or voting for a new "None of the Above" option.

In countries with compulsory voting, elections take on new significance as moments of universal participation, when everyone comes together to play their part in democracy. In Australia for instance, election days have a celebratory atmosphere – symbolised by the ubiquity of

[5] Ipsos, "How Britain voted in the 2024 election", 26 July 2024, https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/uk-opinion-polls/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election.

[6] House of Commons Library, "Representation of the People Bill 2024-26", 4 March 2026, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10506/.

community-organised barbecues and bake sales at polling stations, where voters can purchase the now-famous "democracy sausages".

Source: Democracysausage. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Compulsory voting is not a silver bullet. It cannot solve every problem with our democracy, and it is not the only reform that will be needed. But it is a necessary measure, and one that could serve in the UK as it has in Australia – as an "egalitarian pressure", and as a "quiet engine of trust and civic harmony".[7]

[7] Daniel Nichanian, "An Egalitarian Pressure": Australia Has Been Requiring People to Vote for 100 Years", *Bolts Magazine*, 2 May 2025, https://boltsmag.org/compulsory-voting-australia-election/; Nick Dyrenfurth and Tony Shields, "Compulsory Voting Keeps Australia from Going Trumpian", *John Curtin Research Centre*, https://curtinrc.org/compulsory-voting-keeps-australia-from-going-trumpian/.

Part I: The need for compulsory voting

1. How low turnout tilts the playing field against progressive politics

Low turnout distorts distributional trade-offs

As long-term fiscal pressures mount, distributional trade-offs are becoming starker. In this context, the viability of progressive politics depends on the ability of governments to effectively redistribute from rich to poor, and to ensure a fair distribution of resources between young and old. However, low turnout is making the politics of distribution significantly harder for progressives.

Internationally, comparative studies consistently identify a clear relationship between turnout, redistribution, and inequality: lower turnout is associated with lower levels of redistributive social spending, and thus higher levels of socio-economic inequality.[8] This is because low turnout almost always means disproportionately low turnout amongst low-income voters; when they fail to vote, it pushes the political incentives against redistribution. These findings suggest turnout inequalities on the basis of class and income are likely exerting a long-term regressive impact on the fiscal choices made by UK governments.

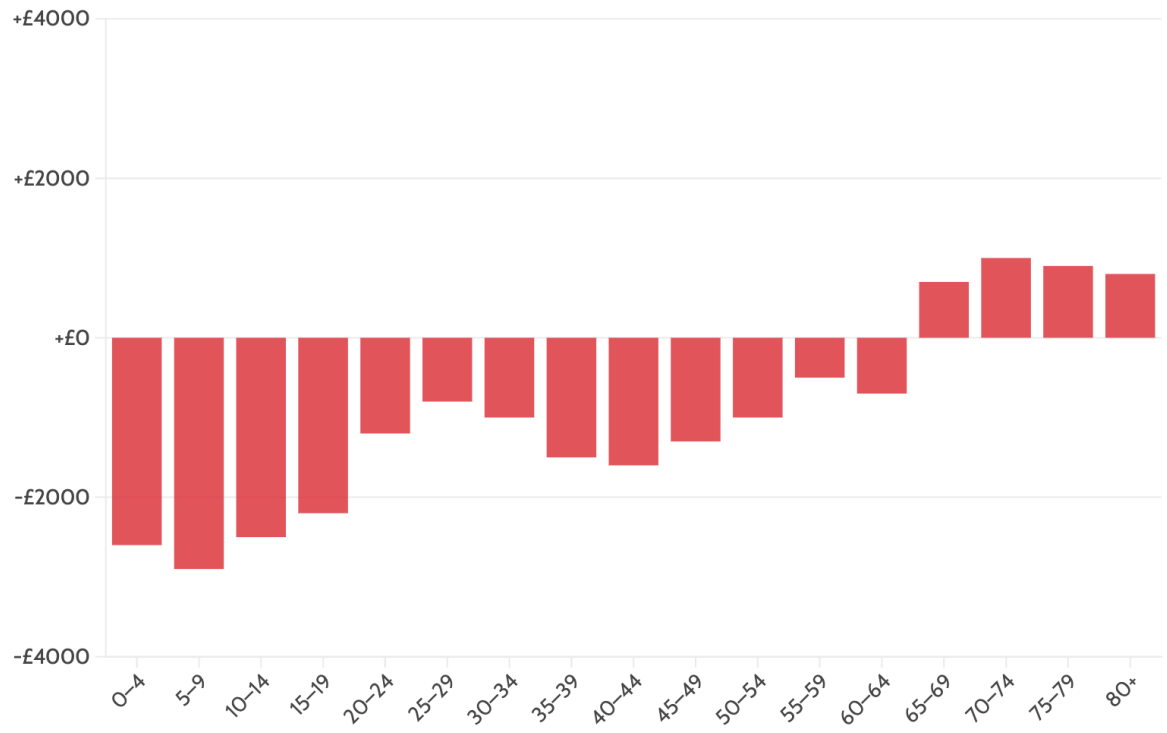
In the UK, the impact of differential turnout on distributional choices has been clearest on intergenerational trade-offs. Since Labour last left office in 2010, welfare provision has been drastically re-oriented towards the elderly, at the direct expense of children and working-age adults. Resolution Foundation research shows that between 2007-2008 and 2024-2025, expenditure on benefits for children and working-age adults unrelated to health or housing declined from 2.8% to 1.9% of GDP while spending on the state pension increased from 3.7% to 5% of GDP.[9] In cash terms, welfare changes over the Conservative Party's 14 years in office left working-age households £1,500 a year worse off, and pensioners over £800 better off.

---

[8] Alexander Hicks and Duane Swank, "Politics, Institutions, and Welfare Spending in Industrialized Democracies, 1960-82", *The American Political Science Review*, September 1992, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1964129; Lane Kenworthy and Jonas Pontusson, "Rising Inequality and the Politics of Redistribution in Affluent Countries", *Perspectives on Politics*, 26 August 2005, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/rising-inequality-and-the-politics-of-redistribution-in-affluent-countries/4D3A6A2774D7BC5AB25C4DEABDE7F699; Valentino Larcinese, "Voting over Redistribution and the Size of the Welfare State: The Role of Turnout", Political Studies, 16 April 2007, https://personal.lse.ac.uk/larcines/LarcinesePS.pdf; Vincent Mahler, "Electoral turnout and income redistribution by the state: A cross-national analysis of the developed democracies", European Journal of Political Research, 31 January 2008, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2007.00726.x; Vincent Mahler, David Jesuit, and Piotr Paradowski, "Political Sources of Government Redistribution in High-Income Countries", in Janet Gornick and Markus Jantti, *Income Inequality: Economic Disparities and the Middle Class in Affluent Countries*, Stanford University Press, 2013.

[9] Mike Brewer and Alex Clegg, "Ratchets, retrenchment and reform: The social security system since 2010", *Resolution Foundation*, 13 June 2024, https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/ratchets-retrenchment-and-reform/.

Figure 1. Impact of social security changes since 2010 on household incomes, by age: UK 2024-25



Recreation of chart by the Resolution Foundation. Available at: https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/old-age-tendencies/

Notes: Shows change in unequivalised annual household income per person. The UK tax system has been applied to Scotland in this analysis. Source: RF analysis of DWP, Family Resources Survey using the IPPR tax-benefit model.

This shift was both incentivised and enabled by the persistent disparities in turnout between younger and older age groups, which enabled successive Conservative governments to win re-election on the basis of overwhelming support amongst the elderly, despite increasingly limited support amongst younger generations. Indeed, by 2016 the Resolution Foundation was rightly noting the "correlation between generational voting blocs and the tax and benefit policies being implemented this parliament, which deliver a net benefit to those aged 55-75 set against large losses for those aged 20-40".[10]

Today, these generational turnout gaps continue to distort the political terrain: we cannot separate the skewed composition of the electorate from the seeming inviolability of expensive policies such as the state pension triple lock, and the political difficulties faced by the current Labour government in the course of its efforts to rebalance Britain's tax and welfare systems – difficulties exemplified by early controversy over the means-testing of Winter Fuel Payments. Nor can we separate it from the cynical promises recently made by Nigel Farage and Reform UK to pay for the

[10] Laura Gardiner, "Votey McVoteface: Understanding the growing turnout gap between the generations", Resolution Foundation, 23 September 2016, https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/votey-mcvoteface-understanding-the-growing-turnout-gap-between-the-generations/.

maintenance of the triple lock with cuts to welfare for working-age families (including reinstating of the two-child cap).

Low turnout disincentivises growth

Progressive politics depends on economic growth. Only a growing economy can deliver long-term improvements to people's living standards, and sustain a generous social settlement. For this reason, the Labour government has rightly made delivering economic growth one of its central missions. However, by giving disproportionate voice to richer, older, and more secure voters, low and unequal turnout risks tilting the political playing field against pro-growth politics, and making it harder for governments that do deliver growth to be rewarded.

In 2022, the economics writer Duncan Weldon warned that a combination the UK's aging population and inequalities in turnout had led to the rise of what he described as a "post-economic voting block", comprised of "the retired and those nearing retirement who are insulated from the day to day gyrations of the economic cycle by guaranteed pensions and asset ownership".[11]

For Weldon, the electoral predominance of these elderly asset owners poses a major obstacle to pro-growth policies. Not only are they unlikely to electorally reward governments for successfully delivering economic growth, but they are instead liable to punish them for pursuing pro-growth measures (such as planning reform) that could threatened the values of their assets, and from which they would themselves see little benefit.[12]

Weldon's argument is supported by the work of the political scientist Tim Vlandas, who has used cross-national data to explore the impact of aging electorates on political and economic outcomes. Vlandas finds that in their expressed policy preferences, older voters prioritise short-term consumption spending on pensions and healthcare over growth-driving social investments in education and childcare.[13]

More importantly, Vlandas identifies the economic outcomes that older voters electorally reward and punish. Compared with working-age voters, older voters are far less likely to reward governments for delivering economic growth or high employment, or to punish them for failing to do so. Conversely, they are highly sensitive to inflation, and liable to severely punish any government that presides over it.

These findings suggest the material interests of older voters influence their electoral behaviour in ways that disincentivise governments from pursuing pro-growth policies. So when unequal

[11] Duncan Weldon, *Two Hundred Years of Muddling Through,* Abacus, 2022.

[12] Duncan Weldon, "The Politics of Growth", *Value Added*, 14 December 2022, https://duncanweldon.substack.com/p/the-politics-of-growth.

[13] Tim Vlandas, "Aging Advanced Capitalist Democracies: The New Electoral Politics of Economic Stagnation", *World Politics*, 24 January 2026, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395661388_Ageing_Advanced_Capitalist_Democracies_the_new_Electoral_Politics_of_Economic_Stagnation.

turnout produces a disproportionately elderly electorate, the political incentives for growth will diminish.

Vlandas points to three specific mechanisms. Firstly, the preferences of elderly voters "crowd out" necessary social, educational, and infrastructural investments by incentivising governments to prioritise short-term spending on pensions and healthcare. Secondly, elderly voters undermine aggregate demand at key junctures, by incentivising governments to disproportionately prioritise low inflation over low unemployment. Thirdly, by failing to punish poor economic performance, elderly voters both reduce the incentive for governments to pursue pro-growth policies, and increase the likelihood of governments whose policies are antithetical to growth ultimately remaining in power.[14]

Since 2010, we have seen all three mechanisms play out in the UK. Appealing to the preferences of older voters, Conservative governments repeatedly prioritised austerity over growth, while cutting long-term social investment programmes like Sure Start to instead prioritise policies like the state pension triple lock. Today, the Labour government has faced difficult political head-winds in its efforts to shift resources towards investment.

Above all, we have had a stark demonstration of how this third mechanism can play out: in 2015, 2017, and 2019, Conservative governments succeeded in winning re-election despite historically low GDP growth, and despite persistent wage stagnation for working-age adults. Notably, this was made possible by the Conservative Party's strong support from high-turnout older voters (in particular older homeowners) in the context of rising house prices, and of continuous real-terms increases to both health and pension spending.[15]

The UK's unequal turnout is thus creating a situation in which politicians of all parties are encouraged to prioritise low inflation over jobs and growth, and short-term spending on health and pensions over long-term social and economic investment.

A further consequence of this situation is that growth-focused progressive governments risk struggling to reap much electoral benefit from successfully delivering on their goals. Instead, they risk being punished for failing to prioritise the short-term consumption preferences and asset values of the older, more secure voters who now dominate the electorate.

Low turnout thus risks limiting pro-growth governance to occasional fortuitous interludes, amidst a political system dominated by electorally-incentivised stagnation. Given the current government's missions and focus, this not only poses a long-term challenge to progressive politics, but also an immediate problem for Labour's electoral prospects.

---

[14] Tim Vlandas, "From Gerontocracy to Gerontonomia: The Politics of Economic Stagnation in Ageing Democracies", *The Political Quarterly*, 18 August 2023, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.13301.

[15] Joe Chrisp and Nick Pearce, "The age divide in UK politics", *Institute for Policy Research*, November 2021, https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/the-age-divide-in-uk-politics/.

Low turnout empowers sectional interests

Progressive politics often requires making decisions that attack narrow vested interests for the benefit of the wider public. This can often be a challenge in democracies, since small groups of losers are generally more vocal than larger groups of beneficiaries, and more likely to alter their voting behaviour in response to the decisions in question.

When turnout is low, this problem is exacerbated: it becomes far easier for small, highly-motivated groups to exercise a disproportionate influence on electoral outcomes. Firstly, under low turnout conditions, they will account directly for a higher share of the electorate. Secondly, with election results heavily dependent on relative rates of turnout, small activist groups can exercise decisive influence through their mobilisational power – in other words, their ability to turn out voters for their political party of preference. This can effectively give them a political veto.

Today, this problem is particularly visible at the local level, where the hollowing out of local democracy has often enabled small groups of anti-planning campaigners to wield a disproportionate influence.[16] At all levels, however, this risks posing major obstacles to any progressive government.

Low turnout undermines democratic stability

In warping political incentives at the expense of progressive politics, there is a risk that low turnout could also suck UK democracy into an irreversible downwards spiral: by incentivising and enabling economic stagnation and intergenerational inequality, low turnout risks feeding the widespread political disillusionment that in turn contributes to low turnout.

This may be where we are now: falling turnout, and its concomitant effects of ineffectual government, low growth, and intergenerational unfairness have been accompanied by declining satisfaction with democracy, and declining trust in political institutions – above all amongst low-turnout demographics. After the last general election, polling conducted by More in Common found that a lack of trust in politicians and a lack of belief in the efficacy of voting were the top two expressed reasons for non-voting.[17]

In addition to deepening stagnation and inequality, such a spiral risks building up a pool of discontented non-voters, alienated from the political system, who are potentially susceptible to populist snake-oil. A low turnout polity is thus one which will progressively become not only poorer and more unequal, but also more politically unstable.

Today, Reform UK is taking advantage of this situation: exploiting dissatisfaction with British democracy's failure to deliver, Farage and his party are successfully mobilising specific sections of this pool of alienated non-voters by presenting themselves as challengers to a broken political system.

---

[16] Aaron Wells, "The Politics of Planning", *The Northern Star*, 18 March 2025, https://thenorthernstar.online/2025/03/18/the-politics-of-planning/.

[17] More in Common, "Change Pending - the path to the 2024 General Election and beyond", 15 July 2024, https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/research/change-pending/.

To combat the threat of Reform in the short-term, and to restore the long-term health of democracy, it is incumbent on progressives to tackle low turnout directly.

2. How compulsory voting can rebalance democracy

Compulsory voting is not a new or untested idea. Today, it is used in 22 democracies – including Australia, Singapore, Belgium, and Chile. We can therefore be confident about its likely effects in the UK.

Specifically, compulsory voting is a tried-and-tested method of delivering higher and more equal turnout. This in turn rebalances political incentives in favour of progressive politics, leading to better socio-economic outcomes and a healthier, more stable democracy.

Higher and more equal turnout

Internationally, compulsory voting has a consistent record of delivering immediate, substantial, and sustained increases in the overall level of electoral turnout:

- In Australia, the introduction of compulsory voting in 1924 saw turnout rise from 58.0% at the previous election to 91.3% (since then, it has only once fallen below 90%)
- In Singapore, the introduction of compulsory voting in 1958 saw turnout rise from 52.7% to 90.1% (since then, it has averaged 95%)
- In Chile, the re-introduction of compulsory voting in 2022 saw turnout rise from 47% to 88%

Notably, such immediate positive results were produced despite the introduction of compulsory voting often taking place at what might seem like unpropitious moments, defined by social turmoil and low political trust:

- In Australia, the introduction of compulsory voting came amidst declining turnout, in a society dislocated by traumas of the First World War, the Spanish Flu, and post-war industrial conflicts
- In Chile, compulsory voting was re-introduced after a decade of collapsing turnout, in the context of a fragmenting party system, and amidst the political and constitutional crisis that followed the violent “Social Outburst" of 2019-2020

Today, where compulsory voting is used, it tends to be uncontroversial, and treated as an accepted part the democratic political system. In Australia for instance, support for the maintenance of compulsory voting has averaged over 70% for the last three decades.[18]

[18] Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, “Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987–2022”, *Australian National University*, December 2022, https://australianelectionstudy.org/wp-content/uploads/Trends-in-Australian-Political-Opinion-Results-from-the-Australian-Election-Study-1987-2022.pdf.

Overall, a recent study of 1400 elections in 116 countries between 1945 and 2017 found that the presence and enforcement of compulsory voting boosts voter turnout amongst registered voters by an average of 14.5-18.5 percentage points.[19]

These substantial and sustained boosts to turnout generated by compulsory voting reliably reduce turnout inequalities, since with turnout rates so universally high, it is hard for meaningful gaps in turnout to emerge between different demographic groups.

A recent study of 105 elections in 45 countries between 2001 and 2016 found that compulsory voting drastically reduces turnout disparities in age, income, and education. On age specifically, the author estimated that without compulsory voting the average difference in predicted probability of voting between those aged 20 and aged 60 was 26%; when compulsory voting was enforced, it dropped to 3.1%.[20]

Introducing compulsory voting would thus give the UK a larger and more representative electorate – one that was younger, poorer, more ethnically diverse, and less economically secure than the partial electorate of today.

A more progressive politics

In the UK, the higher and more equal turnout produced by compulsory voting would re-balance politics towards progressive priorities.

In the short-term, compulsory voting would most likely be of immediate electoral benefit to progressive parties (in particular Labour and the Greens), who generally command greater support amongst younger and lower-income voters – in other words, those demographics whose turnout we would expect to increase the most. It would also create immediate electoral difficulties for those parties (in particular the Conservatives and Reform UK), who have consciously focused their electoral appeals on older and more secure voters.

Over the long-term however, there is little evidence that compulsory voting exercises any meaningful partisan effect.[21] Rather, its key effect would be to change the political and electoral incentives facing all parties, in ways that would force them to adapt – shifting the centre of the pitch, rather than advantaging any given player.

Specifically, the centre of the pitch would be shifted in a progressive direction: parties and governments of all stripes would be incentivised to better serve the interests of younger, poorer, minority ethnic, and more economically-insecure voters, by pursuing policies to promote social

---

[19] Filip Kostelka, Shane P. Singh, and André Blais, "Is compulsory voting a solution to low and declining turnout? Cross-national evidence since 1945", *Political Science Research and Methods*, 25 November 2022, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/political-science-research-and-methods/article/is-compulsory-voting-a-solution-to-low-and-declining-turnout-crossnational-evidence-since-1945/4ED6699B791F437FDFDC13D7A12D483E.

[20] Brian Boyle, "Engineering Democracy: Electoral Rules and Turnout Inequality", *Political Studies*, 7 June 2022, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00323217221096563.

[21] Alexander Held, "Compulsory voting, turnout, and support for left-wing parties: The case of Australia", *Electoral Studies*, December 2023, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0261379422001251.

justice and economic growth. Moreover, an expanded electorate would also make it easier for governments to take on the interests of entrenched minorities.

Both cross-national and single-country studies of compulsory voting find its presence is associated with lower inequalities of income and wealth, and with higher levels of social investment.[22]

Under a compulsory voting system, it is far harder for governments to secure re-election despite disregarding the interests of low-turnout demographics, and more difficult for them to avoid electoral consequences for failing to deliver growth or social justice. It is also far easier for governments that do deliver to reap electoral benefits from their practical successes, and ultimately to win re-election.

The recent Australian election of May 2025 – in which prime minister Anthony Albanese and the Australian Labor Party (ALP) returned to power with an increased majority – show how compulsory voting can help enable this kind of positive outcome.

In their first term, Albanese and the ALP combined fiscal prudence with ambitious policies on climate, housing, and employment rights to deliver low unemployment, a growing economy, and steadily increasing real-wages. The result was that they were able to win re-election on the back of strong support amongst renters and working-age voters, which more than cancelled out the conservative opposition's dominance amongst the over-65s.[23]

Crucially, Australia's system of compulsory voting, and its consequent universally high levels of turnout, meant that such demographics were well represented within the Australian electorate, with almost half of voters being below the age of 45.[24] Compulsory voting thus played a key role in enabling Albanese and the ALP to benefit electorally as much as they did from their successful record of delivery.

Labour Together conducted an analysis to explore what the results of the 2025 Australian election might have looked like if turnout levels had instead been closer to those seen in the UK. A logistic

---

[22] Alberto Chong and Mauricio Olivera, "Does compulsory voting help equalize incomes?", *Economics & Politics*, 13 October 2008, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-0343.2008.00336.x; Sarah Birch, *Full Participation: A Comparative Study of Compulsory Voting*, Manchester University Press, 2009; Anthony Fowler, "Electoral and Policy Consequences of Voter Turnout: Evidence from Compulsory Voting in Australia", *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 26 April 2013, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1816649; John Carey and Yusaku Horiuchi, "Compulsory Voting and Income Inequality: Evidence for Lijphart's Proposition from Venezuela", *Latin American Politics and Society*, 9 May 2017, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/laps.12021; Michael Klien, Mickael Melki and Andrew Pickering, "Voter turnout and intergenerational redistribution", *Journal of Comparative Economics*, June 2021, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0147596720300433.

[23] Tom Crowley, "Millennials and Gen Z voters continued shift away from Coalition in 2025", ABC News, 10 November 2025, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-11-11/millennials-gen-z-voters-continued-shift-away-from-coalition/105993530; Andrew Tillet, "How the election was won and lost (and the key voters that mattered)", Financial Review, 4 May 2025, https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/how-the-election-was-won-and-lost-and-the-key-voters-that-mattered-20250504-p5lwcv.

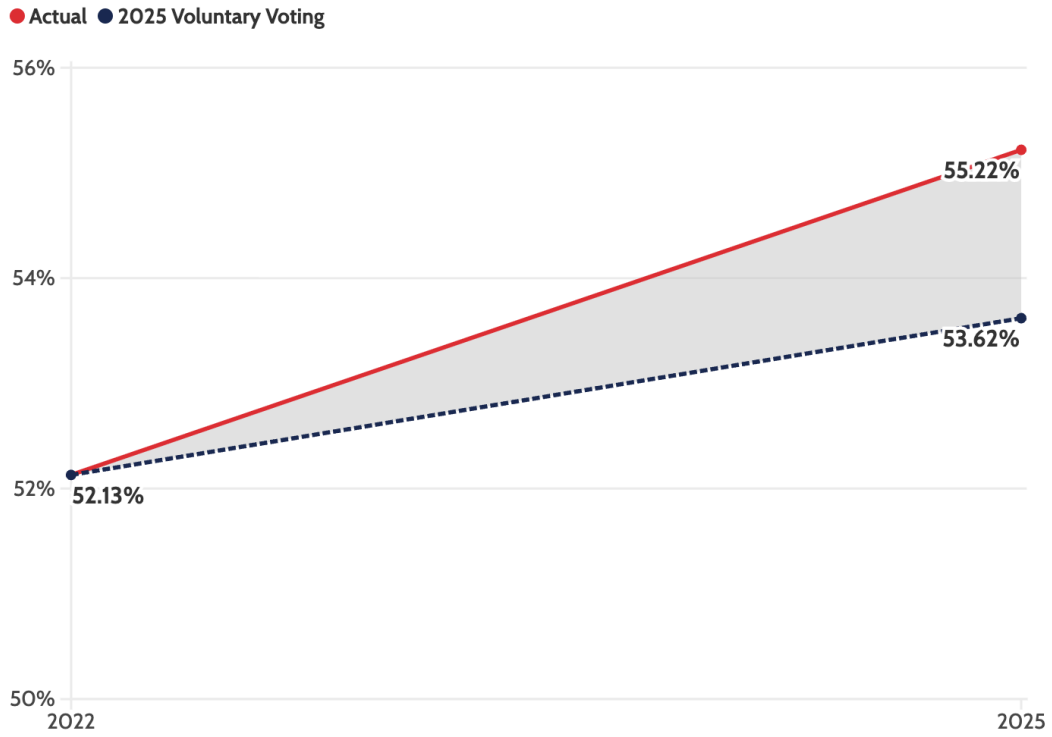
[24] Intifar Chowdhury, "This election, Gen Z and Millennials hold most of the voting power. How might they wield it?", The Conversation, 23 April 2025, https://theconversation.com/this-election-gen-z-and-millennials-hold-most-of-the-voting-power-how-might-they-wield-it-252803.

regression model was constructed based on British Election Study data, predicting whether a respondent voted based on age, gender, education, housing tenure, and household income. This model was then applied to 1,900 Australian Election Study respondents with complete demographic information.

The results of this analysis confirm that if levels of turnout across different demographic groups in Australia were equivalent to those seen in the UK, the ALP's share of the crucial "two-party preferred" vote (essentially: votes cast in the final round of Australia's instant runoff voting system) would likely have been lower. In fact, the dramatic swing it achieved against the conservative opposition Liberal-National Coalition would likely have been more than halved.

Figure 2. Labour two-party preferred vote share

Actual results vs counterfactual with UK levels of turnout*



Source: Analysis by Labour Together
*Counterfactual swing applied to 2025 Labor two-party preferred vote share. Counterfactual modelled using BES Wave 29 turnout model, calibrated to 60% turnout

Labour Together

A healthier, more stable democracy

In Australia, compulsory voting is widely considered not just to exercise an "egalitarian pressure", but also to pull political competition towards the centre, and to disempower extremist forms of politics.[25]

[25] Nichanian, "An Egalitarian Pressure"; Paul Strangio, "A century of compulsory voting and the character of Australian democracy", *Papers on Parliament*, 26 July 2024, https://www.aph.gov.au/-/media/05_About_Parliament/52_Sen/Publications_and_resources/Papers_and_research/Papers_on_Parliament/PoP73/Paul-Strangio-Compulsory-voting.pdf; Philip Coorey, "Why compulsory voting keeps Australia in the centre",

Near-universal turnout dilutes the otherwise disproportionate electoral weight of highly-motivated voters with strong ideological views of either left or right. Compulsory voting also forces parties to prioritise "breadth" over "intensity" of support: with electoral participation mandated by law, Australian parties spend less time trying to motivate their core supporters to turn out, and more time appealing to swing voters in the centre of the political spectrum.

Most importantly, by ensuring that disillusioned voters continue to participate, and that politicians are thus forced to address rather than ignore the causes of their dissatisfaction, compulsory voting prevents the build-ups of democratic discontent that can ultimately translate into mass support for extreme politics. As Nick Dyrenfurth and Tony Shields of the John Curtin Research Centre have put it:

> *"When people believe the system does not work for them, they stop voting. When a wrecking-ball candidate promises to break that system, they return to the polls in anger. In Australia, compulsory voting gives those same citizens a voice every time, forcing parties to court them rather than ignore them. It is one reason our politics, for all its flaws, has avoided the descent into grievance and rage that plagues other democracies."*[26]

Compulsory voting is thus – in their words – "the quiet engine of trust and civic harmony in Australian life".

Such positive democratic outcomes from compulsory voting have also been replicated beyond Australia: comparative studies find that compulsory voting is associated with higher trust in governments, parliaments, and justice systems, that "compulsory voting has a strong and significant impact on satisfaction with democracy", and that "the residents of mandatory electoral participation states are happier with the way democracy works in their systems than those in states where voting is voluntary".[27]

Financial Review, 14 June 2024, https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/compulsory-voting-keeps-australia-centred-20240613-p5jlia.

[26] Dyrenfurth and Shields, "Compulsory Voting Keeps Australia from Going Trumpian".

[27] Krister Lundell, "Civic Participation and Political Trust: The Impact of Compulsory Voting", Representation, 6 June 2012, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00344893.2012.683488; Birch, *Full Participation.*

Part II: The politics of compulsory voting

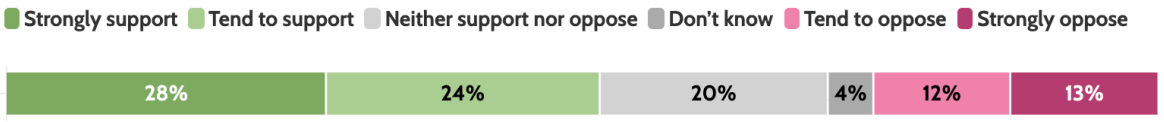
1. Compulsory voting is popular

Convergent found strong public support for the introduction of compulsory voting for general elections, with the voters twice as likely to support than to oppose it:

Figure 3. Would you support or oppose making it a legal requirement for everyone eligible to cast a vote in each of the following types of election?

Please select one answer for each item. UK general elections

% of all Britons



Source: Convergent for Campaign for Compulsory Voting • 7-14 April 2026

Labour Together

Notably, this polling concurs with recent polling conducted by Savanta for the Telegraph, which found that 54% of the public support the introduction of compulsory voting for both local and general elections.[28]

Compulsory voting is thus a reform that makes intuitive sense to the public, and which chimes with their existing moral outlook. Indeed, polling conducted by YouGov has consistently found that the public overwhelmingly consider voting to be a moral duty.[29]

2. Compulsory voting would likely benefit progressives

Convergent Opinion simulated the potential short-term impact of compulsory voting on the current strength of the political parties in a hypothetical general election.

We asked Convergent Opinion to simulate the potential impact of compulsory voting on the current strength of the political parties in a hypothetical general election, working to the following assumptions:

First, that those who currently say they don't know how they would vote would, under compulsory voting, turn out and vote. Second, that the small minority who say they would not vote at all would remain non-voters, reflecting the 10-15% who do not vote even in countries with compulsory voting such as Australia and Belgium.

---

[28] Rosa Silverman, "Should Britons be fined if they don't vote? It could soon be compulsory", *The Telegraph*, 22 April 2026.

[29] D. Klemperer, "Universal Suffrage? The problem of low and unequal turnout and the case for compulsory voting", *Constitution Society*, 10 July 2025, https://consoc.org.uk/publications/universal-suffrage/.

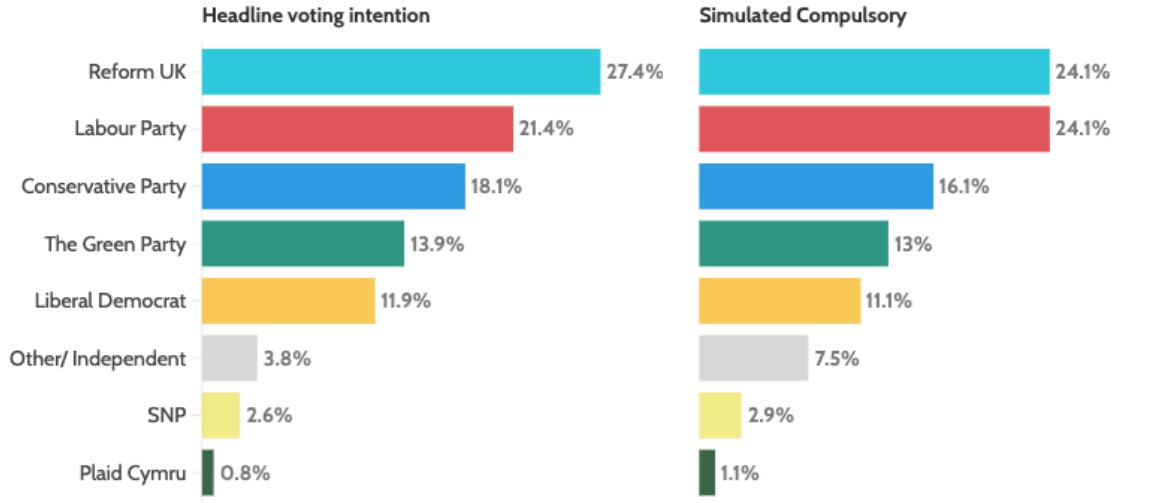
Working to these assumptions, Convergent removed turnout weightings and redistributed 'Don't Knows' based on their standard model.

The results were as follows:

Party	**Headline Voting Intention** *Turnout weighted*	**Simulated Compulsory** *No turnout weighting, "Don't knows" redistrubuted*	**Change (+/-)**
Conservative	18.1	16.1	-2
Green	13.9	13	-0.9
Labour	21.4	24..1	+2.7
LibDem	11.9	11.1	-0.8
Plaid	0.8	1.1	+0.3
Reform	27.4	24.1	-3.3
SNP	2.6	2.9	+0.3
Other/Independent	3.8	7.5	+3.7

Figure 4. Headline voting intention and Simulated Compulsory voting intention

% of all Britons, applying Headline and Simulated Comulsory adjustments***



Source: Convergent for Campaign for Compulsory Voting • 7-14 April 2026
* Weighted as normal, including turnout, removing 'Don't Knows' and those who said they would not vote
** Removing turnout weighting, redistributing 'Don't Knows' and removing those who said they would not vote at all

Overall, Labour is the largest beneficiary (gaining 2.7 points), with Reform UK (losing 3.3 points) and the Conservatives (losing 2 points) as the biggest losers.

This chimes with data from the most recent British Electoral Study, which found that non-voters at the general election of July 2024 were around three times more likely to say that they would have voted Labour had they voted than that they would have voted for the Conservatives.[30]

This should be an intuitive result: if compulsory voting were introduced to the UK, we would in the short term expect progressive parties like Labour, whose core support is amongst traditionally low-turnout demographics (ethnic minorities, younger, and more economically-insecure voters), to perform more strongly. Conversely, we would expect parties whose support is concentrated in traditionally high-turnout demographics (whiter, older, and more economically-secure voters) to lose out.

Non-voters are not radicals or highly-motivated extremists, who we should expect to see gravitate to the extremes: rather, they are for the most part disengaged from politics, and tend to differ little in their substantive outlooks from their demographic peers who vote.

3. Risks can be offset by adding a "None of the Above" option to the ballot paper

Despite the polling evidence, some progressives worry that compulsory voting could strengthen extremist, anti-system, or populist parties, either simply by bringing more low-propensity anti-system voters to the ballot box, or by sparking backlash amongst the previously apathetic.

Such fears are likely overblown: beyond current polling and modelling, both national and cross-national studies find no evidence that compulsory voting increases electoral support for extremist parties.[31]

However, there is also a simple way to offset whatever risks in this regard may actually exist: adding a "None of the Above" option to the ballot paper.

The benefits of such an option being on the ballot paper are two-fold. Firstly, although voters would already have the option of spoiling their ballots, the introduction of a "None of the Above" option would make clear that compulsory voting was neither an authoritarian measure, nor an infringement on freedom of conscience, with no voter forced to show support for a party or candidate they were not fully happy with. Secondly, it would offer those voters unhappy with mainstream politics a clear way to signal their dissatisfaction or register their dissent without having to vote for the extremes.

Recent cross-national survey experiments have found that the hypothetical introduction of a NOTA option would in fact be likely to sap support from extremist and protest parties – above all

[30] Rob Ford, Tim Bale, Will Jennings and Paula Surridge, *The British General Election of 2024*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2026, pp.549-550.

[31] Birch, *Full Participation*; Ivan Ankudinov, "Assessing the Relationship Between Compulsory Voting and the Over-Representation of Extreme Parties*", Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 2 April 2024, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1866802X241242807.

amongst those with low trust in the political system. Similarly, a recent study of how the actual introduction of a NOTA option in India has impacted elections there found it reduces the number of votes cast for anti-system independent candidates.[32]

Convergent Opinion tested the potential impact of the introduction of a "None of the Above" option in the UK by dividing poll respondents into groups as part of a multi-armed randomised control trial. They showed one group a standard ballot paper, and the other group another ballot paper which included a None of the Above option. They then modelled the effect of having a None of the Above option on the ballot paper on vote choice.

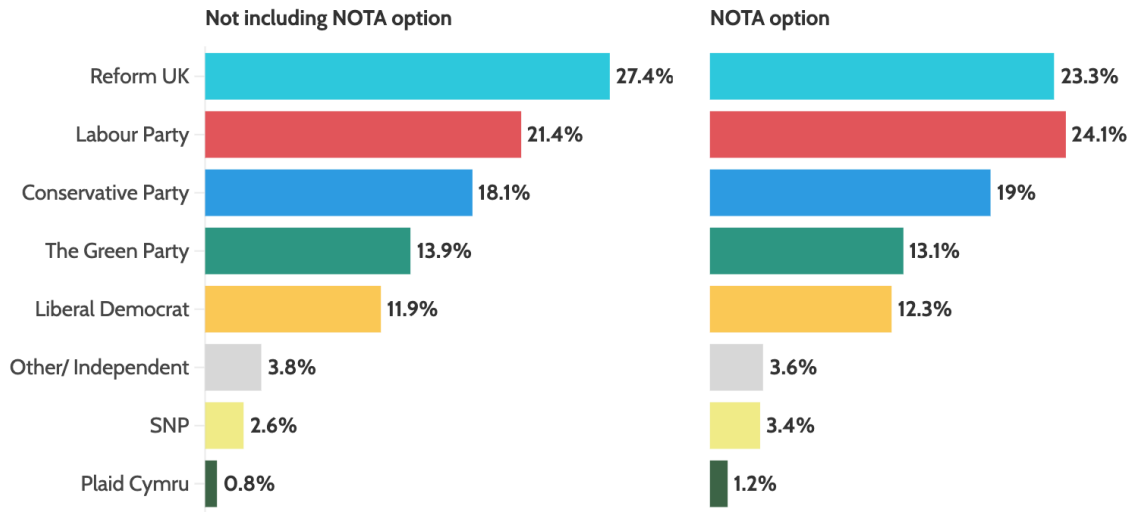
In line with what we would expect based on the studies cited above, the results found that the presence of a "None of the Above" option shifted support away from non-traditional parties, strengthening both Labour and (to a lesser degree) the Conservatives at the expense of Reform in particular.

Party	Headline Voting Intention	Voting Intention	Change (+/-)
Conservative	18.1	19	+0.9
Green	13.9	13.1	-0.8
Labour	21.4	24..1	+2.7
LibDem	11.9	12.3	+0.4
Plaid	0.8	1.2	+0.4
Reform	27.4	23.3	-4.1
SNP	2.6	3.4	+0.8
Other/Independent	3.8	3.6	-0.2

[32] Caroline Plescia, Silvia Kritzinger and Shane Singh, "Who would vote NOTA? Explaining a 'none of the above' choice in eight countries", *European Journal of Political Research*, 27 November 2021, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1475-6765.12497; Attila Ambrus, Ben Greiner and Anita Zednik, "The effect of a 'None of the above' ballot paper option on voting behavior and election outcomes", *Journal of Public Economics*, February 2025, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272725000039; Raghav Kumar, Sudarsan Padmanabhan and P. Srikant, "NOTA: a strategic choice with a positive impact on Indian elections", 9 October 2023, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02185377.2023.2265372.

Figure 5. Headline voting intention not including, and including, a 'None of the Above' option

% of all Britons, excluding those who did not know, would not vote, and, if applicable, none of the above (NOTA)



Source: Convergent for Campaign for Compulsory Voting • 7-14 April 2026

Labour Together

Labour should therefore feel confident that "None of the Above" could be an effective means of offsetting any political risks created by the introduction of compulsory voting.

Part III: Implementing compulsory voting

This paper calls for the introduction of Australian-style compulsory voting for all public elections in the UK. This will require reforms to electoral registration and enforcement, which are discussed in the sections below.

The international evidence is clear that the introduction of compulsory voting tends to be highly effective, and is rarely met with any resistance from the public. Where compulsory voting is used, it tends to be widely-accepted as a natural feature of democratic politics.[33]

Nonetheless, this paper also calls for two complementary measures to accomp

any the introduction of compulsory voting, in order to minimise any risk of a hostile public response.

1. Adding a "None of the Above" option to ballot papers: this would make clear that compulsory voting does force anyone to vote for a party or candidate if they would prefer not to, and provide voters with a way of clearly registering their dissatisfaction with the range of candidates on offer.

2. Making general election days a bank holiday: this would minimise the obstacles to voters fulfilling their civic duty, emphasise the significance of the act of voting, and help create a celebratory civic atmosphere around elections.

The Australian model of compulsory voting

The Australian system of compulsory voting offers a clear model for Britain to emulate – what the political scientist Lisa Hill has characterised as a "Best Practice" regime for compulsory voting globally.[34]

In Australia, compulsory voting relies on the maintenance of an accurate and up-to-date electoral register, and the enforcement of non-voting penalties by the Australian Electoral Commission.

Before elections, in addition to enrolment being formally compulsory, the Australian Electoral Commission uses data from other government agencies to "directly enrol" citizens onto a centralised electoral register; citizens are then notified, and given 28 days to challenge any

[33] Lisa Hill, "Public acceptance of compulsory voting: Explaining the Australian case", Representation, 15 November 2010, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00344893.2010.518089; Ruth Dassonneville, Thiago Barbosa, André Blais, Ian McAllister and Mathieu Turgeon, *Citizens Under Compulsory Voting: A Three-Country Study*, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

[34] Lisa Hill, "Compulsory Voting in Australia: A Basis for a 'Best Practice' Regime", *Federal Law Review*, 24 January 2025, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/federal-law-review/article/abs/compulsory-voting-in-australia-a-basis-for-a-best-practice-regime/569C91355E1A3018C7EF34316B9657BC.

incorrect enrolment.[35] The result of this system is that an estimated 98.2% of eligible Australians are currently registered to vote.[36]

After each election is held, the Australian Electoral Commission then sends out "apparent failure to vote" notices to all eligible individuals on the electoral register who were not recorded as having cast a ballot. These notices request that such individuals either a) provide a valid excuse for not having voted (such as physical incapacity, or a religious or philosophical objection), or b) pay a AUS$20 penalty (a sum of around £10).[37]

In general, around 95% of individuals contacted in this way provide valid excuses for their failure to vote; around 5% choose to pay the administrative penalty; only around 1% end up facing further prosecution.[38]

Alongside these formal aspects to the system, compulsory voting in Australia has produced a culture in which elections are treated as a form of civic celebration. Community groups often set up barbecues and bake sales outside polling stations, giving rise to the famous "democracy sausage" as a ubiquitous feature of Australian elections.[39]

The overall result of this system is typical turnout levels of over 90%, and in which administration and enforcement costs average around AUS$5 (£2.50) per vote.[40]

Adopting Australian style registration and enforcement

To follow this model in the UK would firstly require two changes currently envisaged in the government's Representation of the People Bill:

1. The introduction of Automatic Voter Registration, to enable Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to maintain complete and up-to-date electoral registers by allowing them to add voters directly using data from other sources
2. The extension of the Electoral Commission's remit to include the enforcement of certain political and electoral regulation through the application of civil penalties

Beyond these currently-envisaged measures, the changes required would be relatively straightforward:

---

[35] Australian Electoral Commission, "Managing the Commonwealth Electoral Roll", 25 October 2024, https://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/About_Electoral_Roll/direct.htm.

[36] Australian Electoral Commission, "Enrolment Statistics", 20 April 2026, https://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/Enrolment_stats/index.htm.

[37] Australian Electoral Commission, "Non-voters", 18 July 2025, https://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/non-voters.htm.

[38] Malcolm Mackerras and Ian McAllister, "Compulsory voting, party stability and electoral advantage in Australia", *Electoral Studies*, June 1999, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S026137949800047X; when it does occur, further prosecution involves the Australian Electoral Commission resorting to the criminal justice system to enforce escalating fines in cases of egregious non-compliance – in a manner comparable to the enforcement of fines for failing to respond to a jury summons or fill in the census in the UK.

[39] Judith Brett, *From Secret Ballot to Democracy Sausage: How Australia Got Compulsory Voting*, Text, 2019.

[40] Hill, "Compulsory Voting in Australia: A Basis for a 'Best Practice' Regime".

1. Formally establishing a legal duty for individuals to participate in all public elections for which they are eligible to vote – with participation defined as having cast a ballot (whether in person, by post, or by proxy)

2. Empowering the Electoral Commission to impose a fixed penalty of £10 on any individual who (without a valid and sufficient reason) fails to comply with the legal duty to participate in an election for which they are eligible to vote

Adding a "None of the Above" option on the ballot paper

The introduction of compulsory voting should also be combined with the introduction of a "None of the Above" option on the ballot paper. Although such an option is not currently used in Australia, various versions of this option are used for elections in other advanced democracies such as France, Spain, and Greece.[41]

Crucially, while votes cast for "None of the Above" would be counted, recorded, and declared, the option itself would effectively be symbolic – votes cast for "None of the Above" would be put to one side when it came to determining the winner of the election.

Such an option would make clear that compulsory voting in no way impinges on freedom of conscience. It would also provide voters with a new way of expressing dissent, that could (as set out in the previous section) help dissuade both new and old voters from casting their ballots for extremist or anti-system parties.

Adding a "None of the Above" option to the ballot paper in UK elections would in practice be extremely straightforward, as ballot paper design can be amended by Affirmative Statutory Instrument.[42]

Introducing a "Democracy Day" bank holiday for general elections

The introduction of compulsory voting should also be combined with the introduction of a "Democracy Day" general election bank holiday. Like the addition of a "None of the Above" option on the ballot paper, this would emphasise that the introduction of compulsory voting was not a punitive measure, but rather designed to create a more inclusive democracy and strengthen the voice of the public.

Symbolically, making general election days a bank holiday would highlight the value and importance that society accorded to the act of voting, thus helping to legitimise the idea that voting should be a legal duty. Moreover, instead of losing spare time to this new obligation, voters would be gaining time in order to participate in a process whose civic importance had been re-emphasised.

A "Democracy Day" holiday would also give general election days a new feel, turning them into distinctive and impossible-to-ignore occasions. In combination with compulsory voting, it could

[41] Electoral Reform Society, "Would you back 'None of the Above'?", 14 May 2013, https://electoral-reform.org.uk/would-you-back-none-of-the-above/.

[42] Ballot paper design is set by Schedule 1 of the Representation of the People (Ballot Paper) Regulations 2015.

thus encourage the emergence of the celebratory election day culture currently seen in Australia (where elections are held on Saturdays), with barbecues and bake sales springing up around polling places.

Like a "None of the Above" option, a "Democracy Day" bank holiday would not necessarily require primary legislation, but could be established by ministerial decision under the Banking and Financial Dealings Act 1971.

Conclusion: a stronger democracy

This paper has set out why compulsory voting would create a more effective democracy, and rebalance UK politics in favour of a long-termist progressive politics of social justice and economic growth.

Some will argue that for Labour to implement it would be an illegitimate form of gerrymandering. That is ridiculous: governments of all stripes routinely reform both the franchise and the electoral system in line with what they believe democracy should look like. More importantly, this would be to ignore the more fundamental stakes: the case for compulsory voting is ultimately not a partisan one, but a moral argument about the kind of society that we want to live in.

Compulsory voting is about equality and accountability: ensuring that every voice is heard in our politics, and that our democracy is genuinely geared towards serving everyone. It is also about reciprocity and obligation: the idea that citizenship implies duties as well as rights, and that enjoying the benefits of living in a democracy brings with it an obligation to participate. Under compulsory voting, these principles will be given practical embodiment in our national life.

Politicians will become accountable to all, driving better and fairer outcomes. And election days on which the whole country participates will ensure that democratic citizenship – taking the time to exercise political judgement on behalf of yourself and others – is something that everyone across the UK will live, feel, and practically experience. The result will be a more cohesive polity, with a healthier, stronger, more fully democratic politics.

---

labourtogether.uk | @labourtogether