

## Case 8: Responsibility to Vote

Contrary to the USA policies on voting—where citizens can choose whether they register to vote and whether they actually vote—voting is compulsory for Australian citizens 18 years of age and older.<sup>1</sup> Australia imposes a penalty on Australian citizens who do not vote and cannot provide a valid reason for failing to vote. As in the USA, Australians can choose to leave the ballot blank, declining to vote for any candidate. Penalties for not voting range from \$20 to \$50.<sup>2</sup> Such a measure results in much higher voter turnout—approximately 95% in Australia, as compared to typical voter turnout in the US, which usually ranges from around 38% for mid-term elections to 55% for presidential elections (and solely local elections typically garner even lower voter turnout).<sup>3</sup>

Americans cite various reasons for choosing not to register to vote. One reason is that courts select jurors from registered voters, and many people wish to avoid being called for jury duty.<sup>4</sup> (Perhaps jurors can be chosen by casting a wider net—for example, by using drivers' license numbers, as has been proposed in Arkansas.) Others complain that they do not have time—that they are too busy to be involved in politics and vote. Often, people who choose not to vote say that they do not like any of the candidates and believe that their vote will not matter at all.

Compulsory voting traces its origins to the Athenian concept of direct democracy, which held that it was every citizen's duty to participate in decision making.<sup>5</sup> Proponents of compulsory voting argue that it would make elections less expensive since the parties would not have to spend money and resources to “get out the vote.” A higher election turnout would result in a higher level of democracy, as the elected officials would be chosen by a more representative sample of the public.

On the other hand, those who oppose compulsory voting argue that people may resent being forced to come to the voting place. Moreover, they argue that individuals forced to vote will not be educated about their choices, which will lead to poorer quality elected officials. In sum, they contend that it represents an imposition on the free will of citizens and that it trivializes the process inasmuch as those compelled to vote may cast invalid or spoiled votes.

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, Regional Ethics Bowl Cases 2010

---

<sup>1</sup> See generally, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) at: <http://www.aec.gov.au/>.

<sup>2</sup> Voting Within Australia – Frequently Asked Questions,” Australian Electoral Commission, [http://www.aec.gov.au/faqs/voting\\_australia.htm](http://www.aec.gov.au/faqs/voting_australia.htm) (last updated Nov. 12, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Matt Rosenberg, “Compulsory Voting: Australia is Well-Known for its Compulsory Voting Laws,” About.com Guide, <http://geography.about.com/od/politicalgeography/a/compulsoryvote.htm> (last accessed Aug. 1, 2010); “National Voter Turnout in Federal Elections: 1960–2008,” Infoplease.com, 2008, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781453.html>. Note that voter turnout in the last federal election (2008) was the highest in decades. See Curtis Gans, “African-Americans, Anger, Fear and Youth Propel Turnout to Highest Level Since 1964,” American University News, Dec. 17, 2008, [http://timeswampland.files.wordpress.com/2008/12/2008turnout-report\\_final11.pdf](http://timeswampland.files.wordpress.com/2008/12/2008turnout-report_final11.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Dixon, “The Right and Responsibility to Vote: Non-Voters Take Our Freedom For Granted,” Associated Content, Sept. 10, 2007, [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/367768/the\\_right\\_and\\_responsibility\\_to\\_vote.html?cat=9](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/367768/the_right_and_responsibility_to_vote.html?cat=9)

<sup>5</sup> For more sources and community content, see “Compulsory Voting,” Wikipedia (article), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compulsory\\_voting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compulsory_voting) (last modified Aug. 16, 2010).