School of Social Sciences and Philosophy
Assignment Submission Form

Student Name:	
Student ID Number:	
Programme Title:	International Politics
Module Title:	PO8003 Research Design
Assessment Title:	Education, political knowledge and turnout rates: Testing the effect of compulsory voting systems on regional elections.
Lecturer (s):	Dr Constantine Boussalis
Date Submitted	

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Voter turnout is one of the most studied phenomenon of electoral studies. The general global trend of declining turnout has significant implications for the legitimacy of the nature of democracy in a state. A compulsory voting system has been shown to have a robust positive association with voter turnout (Blais 2006). The strength of this association is affected by the severity of the sanctions and enforcement which a state applies (Panagopoulos 2008). Wealthy and better educated citizens vote more often than more disadvantaged counterparts, this is a well-established pattern in states such as the United States (Gallego 2009). This can lead to policy preferences which benefit more well-to-do citizens (Lijphart 1997). Compulsory voting has been shown to significantly increase the number of citizens with a lower socioeconomic status who vote in national elections (Jaitman 2013). Greater equality in turnout has a tangible effect on policy formation which could benefit lower-class citizens: welfare policies have been shown to be more generous and the state redistributes resources more equally (Gallego 2009).

Although compulsory voting may increase equality in voter turnout, there is a debate in the literature between whether it increases voter engagement or increases voter apathy. Empirical evidence is largely mixed on the issue, experimental evidence shows that when voters are compelled to vote they are both less likely to vote for their true preferences and less likely to look for costly information than voters who are not compelled to vote (Bhattacharya et al 2014). Conversely, Carreras (2016) reports a greater cognitive engagement in the political process by citizens with low levels of education in a compulsory voting system. Strict enforcement of compulsory voting has also been found to increase the diffusion of political knowledge among a greater range of citizens (Sheppard 2015). Education is an important moderator variable in explaining a potential relationship between political knowledge and compulsory voting. Education is a key resource for political engagement, Carreras suggests that “individuals with a high level of education are more likely to be politically engaged

because they possess civic skills that are essential to political activity" (2016:p.161). A compulsory voting system may act as a replacement for this civic education among those with low education and operate as a stimulus for increased political engagement (Lijhart 1997).

Theories of turning out to vote have tended to focus on rational choice models, that is, a cost-benefit calculation to the voter. These models tend not to account for a possibility in which a reluctant voter would seek out more costly information before voting. A citizen who votes in a compulsory system but would not vote in a voluntary system incurs the cost of voting in order to avoid the higher cost of non-voting sanctions, such a citizen would have little motivation to seek further costs by becoming more politically informed (Sheppard 2015). Arguments to include a search for political information in these models claim that citizens incur a cost by being obliged to vote and look for further information in order to make the best use of this vote (Lijhart 1997). Alternative explanations claim that by engaging in the act of voting a voter a voter will be forced to put further thought into voting and this process may impart greater political knowledge (Mackerras and McAllister, 1999).

The normative impact of compulsory voting may also have a stronger impact than accounted for by rational choice models. The majority of states with compulsory voting laws have used these systems since at least the early 20th century: the strength of the normative effect on successive generations of voters should not be dismissed. There is strong evidence for externalising factors such as social pressure inducing citizens to vote (Gerber et al 2008). An internal benefit of performing civic duty and complying with the norm of voting might also bear significance. These norms are by their nature difficult to quantify and thus may not be fully accounted for in current rational choice models.

The significance of regional elections in study of voter turnout has been slightly overlooked in the literature. A key intrastate development over the last few decades has been an increase in governance at a regional level, in many advanced industrial states new regional governments have been formed or existing institutions provided with greater power (Lefevere and Van Aelst 2014). The growing salience of regional elections appear not to be represented in voting turnout however, cross-nationally regional elections generally continue to have lower turnout than national elections (Lefevere and Van Aelst 2014). Second order theory claims that this is due to less being at stake, voters feel that there are less direct benefits to be gained by voting (Lefevere and Van Aelst 2014). Our revised rational choice model of voter turnout would predict an increase in turnout in regional elections in a compulsory voting system, particularly among low education voters. The acquisition of costly information by low education voters in a compulsory voting system is also hypothesised by the model, this is explained by the stimulus effect of compulsory voting, norms and the voting process.

The first hypothesis (H1):

In regional elections the impact of strict enforcement on the turnout rate among citizens with low levels of education is greater than those with high levels of education.

The second hypothesis (H2):

In regional elections the impact of strict enforcement on the political knowledge of citizens with low levels of education is greater than those with high levels of education.

The key explanatory variable for both hypotheses will be if a state strictly enforces voting. The control condition will be the absence of enforcement of voting: a voluntary voting system. Compulsory voting is typically studied in terms of the degree of enforcement by a state. Weak enforcement, exemplified in the cases of Greece and Mexico, is largely symbolic and although legally present is not enforced. Strict enforcement is typically measured by sanctions such as monetary fines which are strongly enforced by the state, as in Australia, or potential disenfranchisement and reduction in civil rights, as in Belgium (Panagopoulos 2008). This study will only distinguish between a strict enforcement treatment and the control, a voluntary system, the reasoning is twofold: firstly, the strongest effect on turnout has been shown by the strict enforcement condition, it is hypothesised that this effect should be strongest on political knowledge too. If an effect is not present for the strict condition than it would not be expected to appear for moderate or weak enforcement. Secondly, the difficulty of procuring data on regional elections indicate that it may be better to look at the two extremes of the scale rather than comprise the internal validity of the study by constructing a scale based on missing and limited data. The type of sanction which a state enforces will also be significant in causal explanation. A study of compulsory voting in Brazil found that non-monetary penalties disproportionally affect middle and upper class voters (Cepaluni and Hidalgo 2016). Lower-class voters may care less about non-monetary sanctions, which in Brazil involve a restriction in civil liberties such as the ability to work in the civil service. Analysis would have to distinguish between regions which use monetary sanctions, non-monetary sanctions or a combination of both in order to control for potential variance in the dependent variable.

A central difficulty for this study will be finding the data required to fully test the hypotheses. There is no cross-national index of data for regional elections. Survey and exit poll data for each region would need to be sourced. Considerable thought will need to be given to which countries and states to include in analysis. Assignment to the control or treatment condition should choose states which share similar cultural characteristics in order to minimise potential variation. The low education condition will be categorised by the attainment of education up to the completion of high school, the high education condition by any further qualifications beyond this level. Political knowledge would be operationalised by survey responses to several questions regarding factual knowledge of actors, institutions and history.

A number of confounding variables will need to be controlled for. At the individual level age is one prominent variable which is positively associated with political knowledge. At the regional level, the degree of regional autonomy would need to be controlled for, turnout is typically much higher in regions which have greater political autonomy (Lefevere and Van Aelst 2014). The voting procedure in each state and region will also need to be controlled for, voting via mail is far less costly to a voter than going to a polling station; higher turnout would be expected to be observed in regions where these procedures are less costly. A case study will be used to assess the model's explanation of causality and to address potential issues of reverse or bi-directional causality.

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