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Voter Engagement, Electoral Inequality and First Time Compulsory Voting

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ABSTRACT: This paper reviews the problem of declining turnout and proposes as a solution a system whereby each elector would be legally obliged to vote in the first election for which they were eligible. Popular attitudes toward first-time compulsory voting are measured and probed by means of UK data. The main findings of the paper are that first-time compulsory voting is a politically and administratively feasible proposal that appears tentatively to command popular support and has the potential to help address a number of the problems associated with declining turnout, and in particularly low rates of electoral participation among younger citizens.

Keywords: Compulsory voting, turnout, participation, disengagement, young voters

The recent report ‘Voter Engagement in the UK’ by the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee makes what, by British standards, is an unusual suggestion: it recommends that ‘the Government report to the House [of Commons] setting out how a system of compulsory voting could operate in the UK’.¹ In January 2015 Labour MP David Winnick introduced a ten-minute-rule bill on making the civic duty to vote a legal duty; the measure received support from *Times* columnist Tim Montgomerie. Even President Obama seems to have jumped on the compulsory voting bandwagon, musing to an audience at the City Club of Cleveland on 19 March 2015 that ‘In Australia and some other countries, there’s mandatory voting. [...] It would be transformative if everybody voted. That would counteract money more than anything’. Compulsory voting is an obvious solution to falling turnout, but there are

¹ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee [PCRC] (2014), ‘Voter Engagement in the UK: Fourth Report of Session 2014-2015’, 14 November, HC 232, parliament.gov.uk, p. 75.

questions about the feasibility of such a measure in the UK context, and in particular the question of whether the British public would accept a requirement to turn out on polling day.

There are a variety of reasons for the reluctance of political leaders and opinion-formers to engage with compulsory voting: libertarian wariness of coercion, the perception that making voting mandatory would address the symptoms rather than the causes of low participation, and concerns over how effectively a system of compulsory electoral participation could be implemented. There has been only limited effort made to explore popular attitudes toward compulsory voting, save in states which already employ this institution. This paper analyses a newly-proposed variation which mandates voting only the first time an elector is eligible and reviews the evidence for popular attitudes toward this proposed institutional innovation.

The justification behind the proposal for first-time compulsory voting is that turnout inequality has risen precipitously in the UK in recent years, and that this has had profound consequences for social and political equality more generally. Falling voter turnout has been well recorded over the past several decades, but it is not the decline in overall turnout alone that is of concern. A deeper underlying issue is the growing inequality in turnout as younger and poorer citizens are removing themselves from the electoral process at a much faster rate than those who are older and more affluent. The gap between the turnout of the under 24s and the over 65s has nearly doubled since the 1970s, and at the 2010 general election the turnout rate for a typical 70-year-old was 36 percentage points higher than that of a typical 20-year-old. Moreover, there is no

indication that the turnout age gap will close; all the evidence suggests that it will get even worse.²

This trend has profound political consequences, as politicians tend to respond to the interests of voting groups over non-voting groups. In a set of unusually frank remarks early in 2015, Shadow Justice Minister Sadiq Kahn admitted as much: ‘If you speak candidly to a campaign manager of any of the mainstream parties they will say that they concentrate their energies disproportionately on those they know are going to vote. [...] If you’ve got a candidate with an hour spare and a choice to go to an old people’s home or a sixth-form college, 99 per cent of campaign managers will say you’ve got to go to an old people’s home. That’s because 94 per cent of them are on the register and 77 per cent of them will vote. That is not true of the younger generation’.³

It is clear that younger members of the electorate have preferences and interests that are distinct from their older counterparts, which means lower voting rates by this sector of the electorate have practical consequences. Indeed, the government spending cuts presaged in the 2010 Spending Review have resulted in a reduction in the value of government services to people in the 16-24 year-old age group worth an estimated 27.5 per cent of their annual

² For a wider discussion of the consequences of political inequality see Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried and Guy Lodge (2013), *Divided Democracy: Political Inequality in the UK and Why it Matters*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

³ Oliver Duff and Oliver Wright, ‘Young people are neglected by politicians – and this is why’, *The Independent* 4 January 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/labour-mp-sadiq-khan-admits-young-people-are-neglected-by-politicians-9956943.html>.

household income, whereas no other age group has faced average cuts worth more than 16 per cent of their income.⁴

Numerous commentators have acknowledged that when politicians favour the interests of higher turnout groups it unleashes a vicious cycle of disaffection and under-representation of lower turnout groups. As policy becomes less responsive to their interests they become even more likely find that politics has nothing to say to them, thus reducing their motivation to vote. In short, falling turnout matters for democracy, as it compromises equality of representation and responsiveness. We argue here that making voting compulsory for electors once and only once in their lives is a politically and administratively feasible reform that would go a considerable way toward addressing both the overall decline in turnout and age-related turnout inequality.

I Compulsory Voting and British Political Culture

Compulsory voting is currently practiced by approximately 29 states across the globe, including a quarter of the world's democracies. Nearly half the states that practice it have adopted the institution since the Second World War. Yet in the UK, many elites look askance at the idea of obliging people to vote. The widespread elite aversion in the UK toward making electoral participation mandatory can be traced to historical developments in democratic thinking over the past generation. The left-libertarian position that developed over the final decades of the 20th century and currently prevails among many sectors of the educated elite shares with neoliberalism a view of democratic liberty as freedom from coercion, which is fundamentally at odds with older republican notions of public service and duty. This has meant that even many who do not see themselves as liberals nevertheless balk at the idea of being required to

⁴ Sarah Birch, Glenn Gottfried and Guy Lodge (2013), *Divided Democracy*, p. 14.

contribute to the public realm. Though the idea that duties go hand in hand with rights may be accepted in the abstract, efforts to manifest this principle in concrete institutions are resisted by both the neoliberal right and the libertarian left. For proponents of this point of view, voting may in theory be a civic duty, but to institutionalise this duty in law would be going too far, as right to vote implies the right not to vote. In Britain this view is evident in frequently-expressed objections to compulsory voting.

At the same time, there is also a ‘republican’ stance mandating civic duty that has gained credibility in recent years that harks back to 17th and 18th century understandings espoused by thinkers such as James Harrington, Joseph Priestly and Algernon Sydney, but has remained in evidence also in more modern times. In *Considerations on Representative Government*, John Stuart Mill wrote that ‘His vote is not a thing in which [a person] has an option; it has no more to do with his personal wishes than the verdict of a jurymen. It is strictly a matter of duty. He is bound to give it according to his best and most conscientious opinion of the public good’. James Bryce articulated a similar position in the early 20th century when he maintained that ‘as individual liberty consists in the exemption from political control, so political liberty consists in participation in legal control’.⁵ Though not all those who held this republican attitude toward rights and duties were advocates of compulsory voting as an institution, it is but one step from the acknowledgement of the duty to vote and the institutionalisation of this duty as a legal obligation. From this point of view, it makes sense in an era of declining electoral participation, to seek to staunch the fall by obliging voters to fulfil their civic duty. For advocates of this position, locking in the duty to vote by making it a legal obligation is a natural move in the context of the current generational shift toward non-voting. Another common argument in favour

⁵ James Bryce, *Modern Democracies*, vol. 1, New York: Macmillan, 1921, p. 55.

of compulsory voting is that it promotes democracy and egalitarianism, in that it ensures that all sectors of the electorate are represented equally and it helps to overcome the well-known collective action problems associated with voting.

Though majority opinion among political elites still weighs against mandating electoral participation, the idea does periodically receive serious consideration, and has gained support from senior political figures including Winston Churchill and former Labour minister Geoff Hoon.⁶ As noted above, a number of influential voices have recently begun to discuss the merits of mandatory electoral participation.⁷ The chances of an institution such as compulsory voting being adopted in the UK obviously depend also on its popularity among the electorate at large. It is to consideration of this question that we turn in the next section.

II Popular Attitudes toward Compulsory Voting in Britain

Given the broad *elite* consensus in the UK that compulsory voting is an unpalatable alternative, the level of *popular* support for this institution is perhaps surprising. Attitudes toward

⁶ See Sarah Birch (2009), *Full Participation: A Comparative Study of Compulsory Voting*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

⁷ See Tim Montgomerie, ‘Compulsory Voting Could Save Our Politics’, *The Times* 15 January 2015, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article4323583.ece>; Philip Collins, ‘Let’s halt the pensioners’ runaway gravy train’, *The Times* 17 October 2014, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article4238905.ece>; Jeremy Paxman ‘A wake-up call for those sick off politics’, *Financial Times* 17 April 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/fbde12a0-e353-11e4-aa97-00144feab7de.html#axzz3Xp9BLh2O>, and Polly Toynbee, ‘Every Vote Counts – To Waste Yours Would Be Near-criminal’, *Guardian* 7 May 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/07/every-vote-counts-election>.

compulsory voting have been gauged in a number of public opinion polls and surveys in recent years (see Table 1). As is evident from these figures, between three and four of every ten people in the UK appears to back making electoral participation mandatory, despite the fact that no major party formally supports such a move.

– Table 1 about here –

Data from a question fielded in July 2013 as part of the British Election Study's Continuous Monitoring Survey affords an opportunity to probe the correlates of support for compulsory voting in detail. In this survey, marginally more respondents voiced support for compulsory voting (39.9 per cent) than opposed it outright (38.8 per cent), with the remainder undecided or ambivalent (see also Figure 1). Support for compulsory voting spans all demographic groups, though there is a clear preference for the measure among the old, and a reluctance on the part of younger electors to support the institution, with the young approximately equally divided between those against and those who say they 'don't know'. There is also a clear association between political engagement and support for electoral compulsion. Among those with affective ties to political parties and among voters, support for the institution is strong. Indeed, 48% who reported having voted in the most recent (2010) General Election voice support for the legal obligation to vote.

At the same time, it is clear that a minority of Britons favour making participation at elections mandatory, and given the elite distaste for this institution, there is limited chance of it being introduced in the foreseeable future.

III First Time Compulsory Voting: An Alternative Proposal

A potential alternative to full-scale compulsory voting is the option of making voting compulsory for selected categories of people. There are already precedents for this approach among some states that make voting mandatory; for example in some European and Latin American states voting is only compulsory for people below certain ages, and historically there have been cases where voting was compulsory for men but not for women or for the majority ethnic group but not the minority. These measures may be objected to on the grounds that they are discriminatory. Nevertheless the principle of requiring people only to vote under certain circumstances is not necessarily discriminatory if applied equitably. One approach that would overcome a number of the objections both to full-scale compulsory voting and to making voting compulsory for certain groups only is to require all electors to vote in the first election for which they are eligible, but to allow voting to be voluntary thereafter. Every elector is, by definition, eligible for the first time once and only once, thereby overcoming the objection to the versions of partial compulsory voting cited above.⁸ First-time compulsory voting also goes a long way toward addressing a number of the other objections that have been lodged against full-scale electoral compulsion.

In being directed principally at an age group – young people and young adults – that is already in most democracies subject to considerable compulsion and age-related restrictions in connection with activities such as formal education; eligibility to stand for certain elected positions; motor vehicle use, vehicle hire and vehicle insurance; the consumption of substances such as alcohol and tobacco; sexual relations, first-time compulsory voting would form part of a family of ‘special measures’ that apply to people who are post-pubescent but still not treated in

⁸ The only relevant parallel with this requirement is an inverted one; in Brazil, the official voting age is 16, but sanctions are not applied against non-voters aged 16 and 17.

exactly the same way as older adults. This logic would apply even more fully in contexts where the voting age is lower than 18, as in Austria and the Scottish independence referendum held in September 2014.

First-time compulsory voting also addresses the oft-voiced concern that electoral compulsion only addresses the symptoms of political disengagement rather than the underlying causes. A common criticism of our proposal for first-time compulsory voting is that it may simply breed resentment among the young.⁹ It is certainly true that on its own, requiring members of a particular group to vote will likely have little impact on the genuine engagement of that group with politics, and for some it may even be counterproductive. However, that is not the main aim of this proposal. Granted, young people will, upon achieving the age of electoral majority, be required once – and only once – to attend a polling station, collect a ballot and deposit it in the ballot box (whether they actually vote for a party is entirely up to them), but the goal of the measure is empowerment. First-time compulsory voting would force politicians to cater to the interests of young people who will, under this system, represent a far greater proportion of the total electorate. The ‘compulsory’ aspect of first-time compulsory voting would therefore mainly reside in the fact that it would compel politicians of all stripes to pay attention to what young people are saying, take account of their needs, and develop policy that caters to those needs.

⁹ Mycock, Andrew and Jonathan Tonge (2014), ‘Some progress made, still much to do: Youth political engagement since the Youth Citizenship Commission’ in Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge (eds.), *Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission: Young People and Politics*, London: Political Studies Association, p. 12; Matt Henn and Nick Foard (2014), ‘Will compulsory voting fix the disconnect between young people and the political process?’, p. 19.

Finally, by being applied to a small proportion of the electorate only, first-time compulsory voting would represent a limited logistical challenge. Age-related data is already recorded on UK electoral registers, which include ‘attainers’ aged 16 and 17; it would therefore be relatively straightforward for electoral administrators to identify most of those who were eligible to vote for the first time.¹⁰

First-time compulsory voting also has a number of additional benefits. First and foremost, it would go some way toward righting the age gap in turnout. Secondly, it could well instil in voters a lifetime habit of voting. There is considerable evidence that voting – and non-voting – is habitual. Those who don’t vote at an early age are less likely to pick up the habit of voting later in life.¹¹ By locking citizens into voting when they are young, first-time compulsory voting could be expected to lead to a cohort shift in turnout which over time would go a considerable way toward increasing electoral participation overall. Thirdly, mandatory voting could socialise young voters into the idea of civic duty at a formative stage in their lives.

If such a system were implemented it would be wise to include measures to mitigate the impact of objections it might provide. One such measure is a ‘none of the above’ or ‘abstain’

¹⁰ Newly-naturalised citizens would not be readily-identifiable under the current registration system, and measures would need to be put in place to ensure that electoral administrators were made aware of any new citizens in their jurisdiction. This could, however, easily be integrated into the new ‘matching’ system employed since June 2014 to register most UK citizens automatically.

¹¹ See Elias Dinas (2012), ‘The Formation of Voting Habits’, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 22(4): 431–456; Ronald Inglehart (1990), *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Mark Franklin, (2004), *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

option on the ballot. Such options are employed in a number of US states, and they have been used elsewhere also. The rationale behind such an option is that while voting would be mandatory for first-time voters, no-one should be coerced into selecting from among a set of options which are not attractive. A ‘none of the above’ option would enable voters to fulfil their civic obligation to take part in the electoral process while at the same time allowing them to express their political dissatisfaction with the options available to them.

The second measure that it would be wise to introduce alongside first-time compulsory voting would be a ‘conscientious objector’ status, as proposed by Lisa Hill in the Australian context. The idea behind this measure is that there may be a very small number of electors who have deep-seated religious or other ideological objections to voting, and it should be possible for these people to be released from the obligation to vote, provided they provide a cogent justification via a formal application process. The application process itself would be intentionally designed to be rigorous, so as to discourage those who are simply lazy from taking advantage of this option. In other words, the system would be designed so that it was easier to vote than to be released from the obligation of voting.

With these two safeguards in place, it is likely that first-time compulsory voting would work effectively to engage the vast majority of young people with the political process and compel politicians to pay attention to their interests.

IV Exploring Popular Attitudes toward First-time Compulsory Voting

Despite the many attractions of first-time compulsory voting, many might be sceptical as to the viability of the proposal in terms of public opinion. We have already seen that support for full-scale compulsory voting is a minority taste, and if the public cannot be convinced of the benefits

of first-time compulsory voting, it is unlikely that it would ever seriously be considered for adoption in the UK. The electoral costs for any government that pushed through such a measure would simply be too high.

In July 2013 the Continuous Monitoring Survey of the British Election Study fielded a question on first-time compulsory voting, making it possible to gauge popular support for the idea. The item was as follows: ‘Thinking for a moment about voting in British elections, we would like to know if you *agree* or *disagree* with the following statements: [...] People should be *required by law* to vote in the *first election* for which they are eligible’.

Responses to this question (Table 2) indicate – not surprisingly – that many people are unsure what they think about first-time compulsory voting. A total of 38.4 per cent agreed, with 34.7 per cent against the idea. (The remaining 26.9 per cent either said they did not know or they neither agreed nor disagreed). The idea is a new one, and though it has had some coverage recently in the UK press, no political party has yet adopted the proposal, and there has yet to be a serious public debate about it.

– Table 2 about here –

That said, it is noteworthy that when the ‘don’t know’s’ and undecideds are removed, a majority of respondents in this survey who have made up their mind do support the measure (see Figure 1), suggesting that first-time compulsory voting might prove to be the form of mandatory electoral participation that the electorate is most willing to support. Among those who report having voted at the last election, the figure is higher still.

An obvious question that arises when considering these figures is what those who would be subjected to this measure think of it. As indicated in Table 3, there is markedly less support for first-time compulsory voting among young people themselves, but only 21.4 per cent

expressed support, though there were far more – 47.3 per cent – who said they did not know or were neutral. Only approximately a third – 35.7 per cent – of young people disagreed with the proposal outright and a substantial minority of those who have made up their minds favour the idea (see Figure 1).

- Figure 1 about here -

Multivariate regression analysis, which demonstrates the impact of several different factors at once, shows that when vote at the previous General Election is taken into consideration, age is no longer a significant correlate of attitudes toward first-time compulsory voting.¹² This indicates that demographic factors are mediated by aspects of political engagement. From a narrowly self-interested point of view, one might anticipate that the politically active would be content for less-politically engaged citizens to stay out of politics, thereby conferring more power on those who do take part. The evidence presented here suggests the opposite is true, however. Once people get involved in politics, they believe strongly that others should be involved also. This provides some hope that were the vicious cycle of disengagement and under-representation to be broken, a virtuous circle of engagement and involvement might form. Further survey research on first-time compulsory voting would be useful in tracking the durability of these findings.

V Conclusion

Radical problems often require radical solutions. This is, we argue, the case for falling turnout and rising age-related turnout inequalities in the UK. Older people have been in politicians' sights in recent years because *they vote and politicians know that they vote*. Thus politicians across the political spectrum have introduced and maintained policies that benefit the old and

¹² Details of the regression model mentioned here are available from the authors upon request.

penalise the young. In the British context we have seen a triple lock put on pensions, maintained winter fuel allowances and continued free transport and tax breaks for the old, yet in contrast the young have seen tuition fees triples, the Education Maintenance Allowance scrapped and increasing numbers of young people are working on zero-hour contracts. The only way to change this bias in policy-making is to get young people to the polling station. Only this will compel politicians to pay attention to their collective voice.

Regarding the ‘compulsion’ this represents for young people, it pales in comparison to other mandatory tasks in our lives as citizens, attending school being one of them. The 15 minutes of a person’s life that is typically expended on the task of voting is almost nothing compared to the time that the typical 18-year-old devotes to activities such as completing application forms for their first job; getting an MOT for their first car; collecting references, bank statements, letters from parents and sundry other documents required to rent their first flat; not to mention registering to vote, which is effectively compulsory in the UK. And if an 18-year-old is particularly time-poor, he or she can always apply for a postal ballot.

It is also worth addressing the reproach that singling out young people as ‘different’ by making them vote would reinforce stereotypes about young people. There are many institutions in contemporary Britain that are age-specific, such as the requirement to receive formal education, eligibility for certain types of insurance, and eligibility to be a magistrate. Moreover, everyone enters the electorate once (including naturalised citizens, who may well not be young), so the proposed institution will in that sense be equitable, once it has been established for a period.

First-time compulsory voting could usefully be combined with other reforms designed to overcome low political efficacy – including voting at 16, enhanced citizenship education,

registering to vote in their school and more accessible polling stations – and other initiatives to raise the profile of young people in politics. But it is not clear that these measures will be sufficient. We believe that in addition to increasing demand on the part of young people *for* representation, it is also important to increase the incentives for politicians to supply representation *to* those young people. Virtually all those who write about falling participation in politics argue that it is up to politicians to inspire and motivate members of the electorate by engaging with their concerns; we completely agree, and first-time compulsory voting is designed to achieve precisely that end.

First-time compulsory voting is by no means a panacea that would single-handedly solve problems of citizen disengagement from politics, falling turnout and turnout inequality, but it could usefully be considered as part of a package of measures to reinvigorate democracy. With constitutional reform potentially again in the offing in the UK, the time may well be right to initiate debate on first-time compulsory voting.

Table 1: Recent Survey Evidence on Attitudes toward Compulsory Voting in the UK

Date	Survey body	Question wording	Percentage of respondents in favour of CV (as a % of those expressing a view)
2005	MORI	N/A Cited in the 2006 Electoral Commission report <i>Compulsory Voting Around the World</i>	36%
2010	British Co-operative Campaign Analysis Project (BCCAP)	‘In recent months, various suggestions for reforming the political system have been proposed. Which proposals do you support? [...] Changing the law to require people to cast a vote at elections’	30%
2013	British Election Study Continuous Monitoring Survey, July	‘Thinking for a moment about voting in British elections, we would like to know if you <i>agree</i> or <i>disagree</i> with the following statements [...] Anyone who is eligible to vote should be <i>required by law</i> to vote.	40%

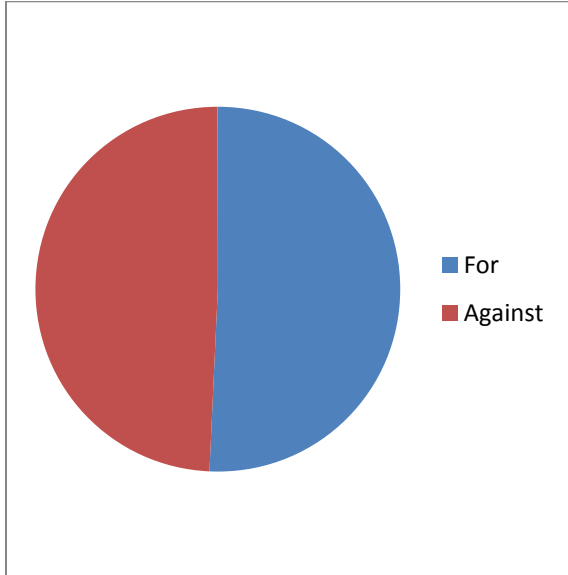
Notes: In the 2010 poll this was one of five options listed; respondents could indicate their support for as many of the five options as they liked. The Continuous Monitoring Survey, fielded in July 2013 was an online poll carried out by YouGov. The total number of survey respondents was 1,140. Responses were recorded as favourable to compulsory voting if respondents listed either ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’.

Table 2: Support for First-time Compulsory Voting in the UK by Demographic Group

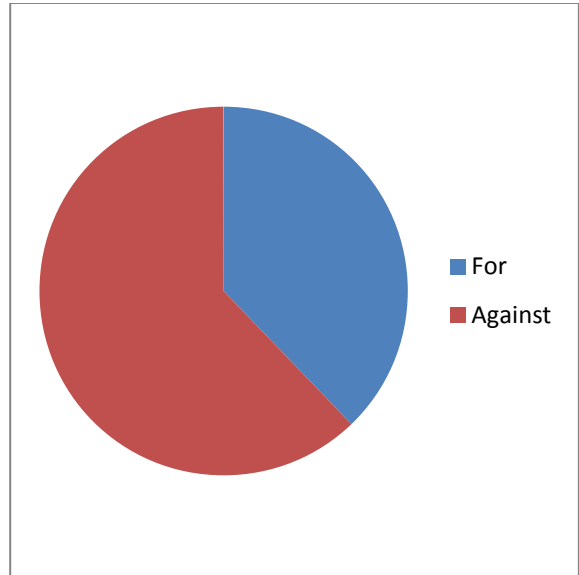
Group	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
Women	16.9%	20.4%	24.6%	22.3%	10.8%	5.1%
Men	19.4%	20.1%	16.8%	20.8%	15.7%	7.1%
<25 years old	9.8%	11.6%	17.9%	22.3%	13.4%	25.0%
25-54 years old	16.1%	19.9%	21.3%	21.8%	15.3%	5.6%
+54 years old	23.0%	23.0%	21.1%	20.9%	10.1%	1.9%
Left school at 16 or earlier	22.9%	18.8%	24.1%	20.9%	8.1%	5.2%
Left school at 17 or 18	16.5%	20.5%	24.8%	18.3%	13.3%	6.5%
Left school at 19 or later	15.5%	21.1%	16.6%	23.8%	16.4%	6.6%
Conservative party supporter	19.2%	23.5%	17.3%	23.8%	11.9%	4.2%
Labour party supporter	23.7%	23.2%	17.6%	21.6%	10.8%	3.2%
Liberal Democrat party supporter	21.3%	23.3%	16.4%	23.3%	15.1%	0%
Other party supporter	16.3%	34.6%	26.0%	17.3%	4.8%	1.0%
Does not support any party	10.9%	9.2%	25.9%	25.9%	22.2%	5.9%
Voted GE 2010	22.2%	23.6%	19.2%	20.6%	10.8%	3.6%
Did not vote GE 2010	4.2%	8.8%	26.4%	24.9%	21.1%	14.6%
All	18.1%	20.3%	20.9%	21.6%	13.1%	6.1%

Figure 1: Relative Support

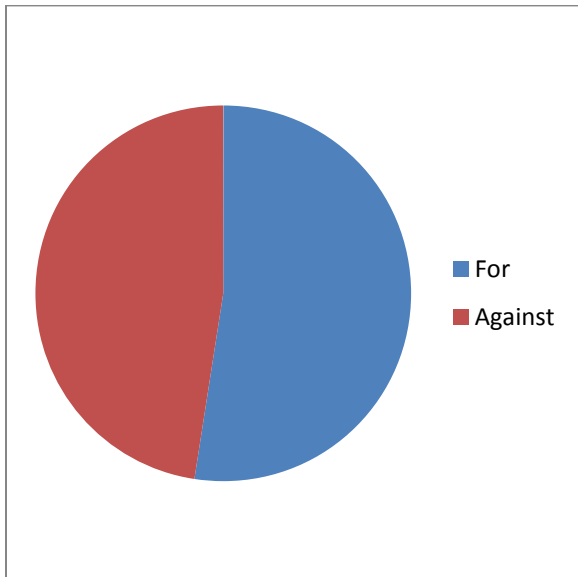
Support for compulsory voting (undecideds removed)



Support for compulsory voting among those under 25 (undecideds removed)



Support for first-time compulsory voting (undecideds removed)



Support for first-time compulsory voting among those under 25 (undecideds removed)

