

# What Other Countries Can Teach Us About Turnout

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## Introduction

Voter turnout in the United States remains consistently lower than most other advanced democracies. The United States saw turnout of 62.8% among eligible voters in the 2020 Presidential election, the highest level in decades. Yet this turnout rate – which amounts to roughly one in three eligible voters sitting out the election – is significantly lower than other peer countries in their recent elections. For example, Sweden's 2022 election saw turnout of 80.3%, while Belgium saw turnout of 77.9% in 2019. New Zealand, Denmark, Australia, and Iceland likewise all had turnout of over 75% among eligible voters.<sup>1</sup>

Lower levels of turnout in the United States are often described as the result of factors like disinterest, cynicism, or some other distinctive cultural or social failing. Different social conditions and attitudes are undoubtedly a central cause. As are barriers to voting meant to suppress turnout. However, there are also structural differences that likely play a major role in other countries' higher turnout.

This report investigates the roles different voting structures around the world play in increasing turnout among eligible voters. The purpose is to surface several alternatives the United States could explore as a way of confronting its voting challenges and increasing turnout. In recent years, numerous states have made critical changes to voting laws and procedures to increase voter convenience and facilitate greater participation. However, in this moment it is worth also looking at larger structural shifts that the United States might consider and learn from other countries. The perilous state of democracy in the United States is also well documented, and facing this challenge will require more active participation in elections.

The United States has already begun to gradually adopt changes that help increase turnout in other countries, such as efforts to automate voter registration and updating and to reduce disenfranchisement of people convicted of crimes. This report explores additional, more structural forms that other countries have in place that evidence suggests increase turnout. The report primarily focuses on compulsory voting (also known as universal voting) and proportional representation, two reforms where research shows a strong effect on turnout. The report also studies the significant turnout impact of concurrent elections – holding national, state, and local elections on the same days. Finally, the report explores the potential turnout effects of a more stable and well-trained election administration profession.

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<sup>1</sup> DeSilver, D. (2022, November 1). Turnout in U.S. has soared in recent elections but by some measures still trails that of many other countries. Pew Research Center.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/11/01/turnout-in-u-s-has-soared-in-recent-elections-but-by-some-measures-still-trails-that-of-many-other-countries/>

For each structural reform, the report explains the theoretical and statistical case for how the change results in higher turnout. Because of the unique nature of the United States' election system, direct apples-to-apples comparisons on impact are impossible. However, given the impact of these policies and procedures in other countries, policymakers and advocates in the United States who are interested in increasing turnout should take a hard look at the benefits of adopting them in some form.

## Compulsory Voting

In countries with compulsory voting, citizens are required by law to vote in elections. This does not mean casting a ballot for a particular candidate or party but rather represents a requirement to cast a ballot, even if it's blank. In this sense, voting itself is not compulsory. Instead, the act of participation is compulsory. For this reason, some prefer the term "universal voting" to "compulsory voting."

In any compulsory voting system, there are always permitted excuses for abstaining which vary by country, such as "sickness and disability, natural disasters, travel, and religious belief."<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless failure to vote absent such an excuse can result in fines or other kinds of penalties, of which there are a wide range, described in more detail below.

More than two dozen countries have some form of compulsory voting, including Argentina, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Gabon, Greece, Honduras, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Mexico, Nauru, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Samoa, Singapore, Thailand, Turkey, and Uruguay.<sup>3</sup> Many of these countries have had compulsory voting in place for decades, with a history of compulsory voting that goes back more than a century in some countries.

Countries with compulsory voting systems use different penalties and enforcement mechanisms for people who fail to vote. Many countries impose a monetary fine for failure to vote, although the amount of the fines varies a great deal depending on the country and can include significant penalties and sanctions beyond a non-voting fee.<sup>4</sup>

- Australia imposes a fine of AU\$20 (about US\$14) for non-voting.
- Peru uses three tiers of fines ranging from US\$6.50 to US\$24, determined by the poverty level in the district where the non-voter lives. People who do not pay their fines can be barred from public services, including banking and passport issuance.
- Belgium uses a fine of €5 to €10 (about US\$5.50 to US\$11) for the first instance of nonvoting and a fine of €10 to €25 for a second instance. In a particularly draconian penalty, if a person does not vote four or more times within a 15-year period, he or she can be disenfranchised for 10 years.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Working Group on Universal Voting convened by The Brookings Institution and The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School, (2020). Lift Every Voice: The Urgency of Universal Civic Duty Voting, p 21. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Br\\_LIFT\\_Every\\_Voice\\_final.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Br_LIFT_Every_Voice_final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Dionne, E.J., Rapoport, M. (2022) 100% Democracy: The Case for Universal Voting. The New Press.

<sup>4</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Compulsory Voting. <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database/compulsory-voting>

<sup>5</sup> The Working Group on Universal Voting convened by The Brookings Institution and The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School, (2020). Lift Every Voice: The Urgency of Universal Civic Duty Voting, p 21. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Br\\_LIFT\\_Every\\_Voice\\_final.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Br_LIFT_Every_Voice_final.pdf)

- In Bolivia, a voter is given a card proving participation. People without this card are not able to receive their salary from a bank for three months after the election.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, there are countries where voting is compulsory but there are no formal repercussions for not voting, such as Mexico and Italy. Similarly, there are other countries where there are legal penalties for non-voting, but the government lacks the capacity to enforce them, such that the penalties do not exist in practice.

The following chart, borrowed from a 2008 paper, shows the range of sanctions and enforcement that exist in countries with compulsory voting.<sup>7</sup>

Country	Sanctions	Enforcement
Argentina	High	Weak
Australia	Moderate	Strict
Belgium	High	Strict
Bolivia	High	N/A
Brazil	Moderate	Weak
Chile	High	Weak
Costa Rica	No/low	No/low
Cyprus	Moderate	Strict
Dominican Republic	No/low	No/low
Ecuador	Moderate	Weak
Egypt	High	N/A
Fiji	High	Strict
Gabon	N/A	N/A
Greece	No/low	No/low
Guatemala	No/low	No/low
Honduras	No/low	No/low
Italy	No/low	No/low
Lichtenstein	Moderate	Weak
Luxembourg	Moderate	Strict
Mexico	No/low	No/low
Nauru	Moderate	Strict
Paraguay	Moderate	N/A
Peru	High	Weak
Singapore	High	High
Thailand	No/low	No/low
Turkey	Moderate	Strict
Uruguay	High	Strict

**Table 1** Compulsory voting in comparative perspective: severity of sanctions and degree of enforcement

*Notes: Sanctions:* Adapted by author from IDEA (2001) as follows: No/low, no formal sanction; Moderate, fine only; High, fine and additional sanction including possible imprisonment, civil rights infringements, or disenfranchisement.  
*Enforcement: Source:* IDEA 2001. Excludes states in which mandatory voting laws apply only in certain regions or for certain offices (Switzerland, Austria, France) and states where compulsory voting laws were not in place in the 1990s or later (Philippines, Switzerland)

<sup>6</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Compulsory Voting. <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database/compulsory-voting>  
<sup>7</sup> Panagopolous, C. (2008). The Calculus of Voting in Compulsory Voting Systems. *Political Behavior*, 30(4), 455-467 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9058-9> (note that details may have changed since this paper was written)

## THE DATA

Comparative data on turnout demonstrates that countries with compulsory voting have higher levels of participation.<sup>8</sup> Dozens of studies, analyzing countries around the world over several decades, consistently demonstrate the positive impact of compulsory voting on turnout.<sup>9</sup>

In general, research finds that compulsory voting increases turnout between 12% and 30%.<sup>10</sup> One study comparing Australian states, which adopted compulsory voting at different times, found that the change increased turnout by 24%, raising turnout from 67% to 91%.<sup>11</sup> A study of a Swiss canton (Vaud) that had compulsory voting from 1900 to 1970 similarly found a 30% effect on turnout.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in a “meta-analysis” of 83 studies on the issue, nearly all of them find a significant jump in turnout from compulsory voting.<sup>13</sup>

One study observes that compulsory voting “is the only institutional mechanism that can achieve turnout rates of 90 percent and above on its own. This tends to be the case not just in prosperous well resourced settings but also in compulsory systems generally. Further, its effect on turnout is immediate.”<sup>14</sup>

Crucially, significant effects on turnout exist even where penalties for non-voting are weak or not consistently enforced, as shown in the below chart.<sup>15</sup> One study looking at 1400 elections in 116 countries finds that compulsory voting “[even] without enforced sanctions increases turnout by about 7.5-10 points, as a percentage of registered voters. At the same time, turnout effects from compulsory voting are largest where the penalties are more significant, or enforcement is more strict. The same study found that compulsory voting with enforced legal sanctions boosts turnout even more, by 14.5-18.5 percentage points.<sup>16</sup> Other studies likewise confirm that the extent of the turnout increase depends on whether sanctions for noncompliance are in place, significant, and enforced.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Working Group on Universal Voting convened by The Brookings Institution and The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School, (2020). *Lift Every Voice: The Urgency of Universal Civic Duty Voting*, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Br\\_LIFT\\_Every\\_Voice\\_final.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Br_LIFT_Every_Voice_final.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Kostelka, F., Singh S.P., & Blais, A. (2022). Forthcoming, *Is Compulsory Voting a Solution to Low and Declining Turnout? Cross-National Evidence Since 1945*. *Political Science Research and Methods*, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> Brennan, J., & Hill, L. (2014). *Compulsory Voting: For and Against*. (p. 119). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Fowler, A. (2013). Electoral and Policy Consequences of Voter Turnout: Evidence from Compulsory Voting in Australia. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 8(2), 159-182. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.181664>

<sup>12</sup> Bechtel, M., Hangartner, D., & Schmid, L. (2018). Compulsory Voting, Habit Formation, and Political Participation. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 100(3), 467-476. <https://doi.org/10.1162/>

<sup>13</sup> Stockemer, D. (2017). What Affects Voter Turnout? A Review Article/Meta-Analysis of Aggregate Research. *Government and Opposition*, 52(4), 698-722. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.30>

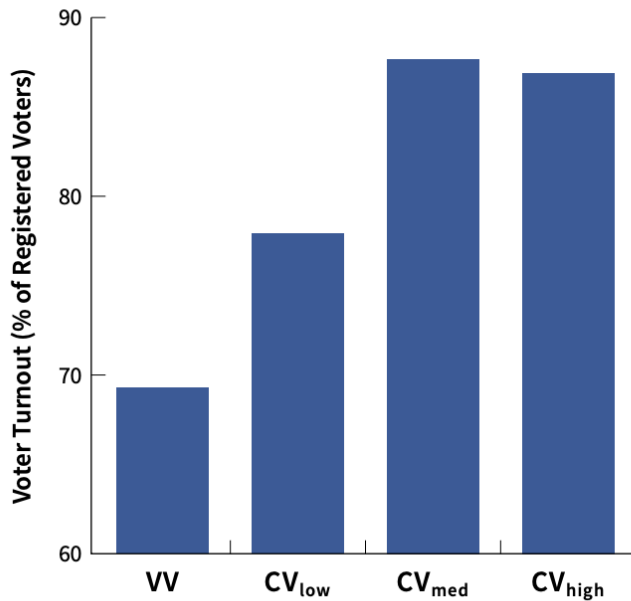
<sup>14</sup> Brennan, J., & Hill, L. (2014). *Compulsory Voting: For and Against*. (p. 119). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>15</sup> The Working Group on Universal Voting convened by The Brookings Institution and The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School, (2020). *Lift Every Voice: The Urgency of Universal Civic Duty Voting*, p. 23. [https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2020/07/Br\\_LIFT\\_Every\\_Voice\\_final.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2020/07/Br_LIFT_Every_Voice_final.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Kostelka, F., Singh S.P., & Blais, A. (2022). Forthcoming, *Is Compulsory Voting a Solution to Low and Declining Turnout? Cross-National Evidence Since 1945*. *Political Science Research and Methods*, p.2.

<sup>17</sup> Stockemer, D. (2017). What Affects Voter Turnout? A Review Article/Meta-Analysis of Aggregate Research. *Government and Opposition*, 52(4), 698-722. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.30>

**FIGURE 1: Civic Duty Voting and Turnout across Countries**



Note: Data and classification of civic duty voting rule severity taken from Version 8 of the Varieties of Democracy Project. The classifications are as follows: VV (Voluntary voting); CV<sub>low</sub> (Civic duty voting without sanctions or with sanctions but no enforcement); CV<sub>med</sub> (Civic duty voting with enforced sanctions but that impose minimal costs upon abstainers); CV<sub>high</sub> (Civic duty voting with enforced sanctions that impose considerable costs upon abstainers). Included elections are from 1945–2017 in countries considered “Free” by Freedom House.

Beyond improving overall turnout, compulsory voting also increases turnout among groups with persistently low rates of participation. One study examined 18 presidential elections in Latin America in countries with compulsory voting and high levels of inequality and found that compulsory voting increased turnout disproportionately among the socioeconomically disadvantaged when penalties are enforced.<sup>18</sup> However, the report points out that while this is promising, it is not a panacea—inequality still persists because of the barriers to voting that exclude these groups, such as voter identification laws. But that lack of engagement is not because of disinterest in voting. Therefore, while compulsory voting is helpful, without addressing structural barriers aimed at socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, it does not fully eliminate the turnout gap.

Another study similarly found that compulsory voting disproportionately raises voter turnout among the poor because penalties such as fines hit them harder.<sup>19</sup> Finally, a third study looked at policy outcomes in Venezuela before and after compulsory voting was abolished, and found that the elimination of compulsory voting led to policies that increased income inequality and disfavored lower-income groups. The authors hypothesize that these policy outcomes were the result of politicians chosen through non-compulsory elections, where the electorate was less representative in terms of demographics and income.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> González, Y., & Snell, S. (2015, August). *¿Quién Vota? Compulsory Voting and the Persistence of Class Bias in Latin America*. (Harvard University Working Paper). [https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/yanilda/files/gonzalezsnell\\_quien\\_vota.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/yanilda/files/gonzalezsnell_quien_vota.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Jaitman, L. (2013). The Causal Effect of Compulsory Voting Laws on Turnout: Does Skill Matter. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 92(C), 79-93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2013.05.008>

<sup>20</sup> Carey, J., & Horiuchi, Y. (2017). Compulsory Voting and Income Inequality: Evidence for Lijphart’s Proposition from Venezuela. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 59(2), 122-144. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2374092>

## CHANGING THE CULTURE

Beyond the obvious potential penalties for noncompliance, there are other reasons compulsory voting increases turnout. Indeed, a norm of compulsory voting appears to change the “culture” of electoral participation, such that turnout increases even where sanctions are weak or unenforced. As one scholar has observed:

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**Many citizens have an intrinsic desire to follow the law and conform to the norms it creates. As such, cost-benefit calculations about the expected benefits of shirking the law versus the consequences of being caught doing so may not alone predict compliance. Most drivers will spend time waiting at a red traffic light even at an intersection where there are no other cars and no police present to enforce the law...<sup>21</sup>**

Lisa Hill has written extensively on Australia’s compulsory voting system and has observed a number of different ways psychological and cultural factors play a role in increasing participation. She discusses the value that knowing other people are voting has on people’s propensity to vote. “Ensuring full turnout means that voters know other voters like them will also be voting, which means having voter power. People are inherently organized into meaningful blocs of electoral power.<sup>22</sup> Sensing that electoral power, compulsory voting instills a sense of “agency” and “efficacy,” factors many political scientists have found to be important in increasing participation. In turn with increased participation that includes previously neglected communities, elected representatives will increasingly be forced to respond to the will of all voters, demonstrating the reality of political power of voters who may have previously been largely ignored.<sup>23</sup>

By contrast, in a non-compulsory system, voters who don’t believe elected officials are responsive to their needs can become more cynical about and disconnected from politics generally. Hill argues that “A self-perpetuating cycle exists... the more they abstain the worse their exclusion is likely to become so that a counterproductive cycle of exclusion, low efficacy, cynicism and nonparticipation becomes entrenched. Compulsory voting can provide a circuit breaker to this cycle, partly because it can boost levels of subjective political efficacy, but mainly because laws are extremely effective way of changing entrenched behavior.”<sup>24</sup> Others also find some tenuous evidence that compulsory voting instills a sense of “civic duty”, i.e. a belief that one has a moral obligation to vote in an election.”<sup>25</sup>

“Cultural” rationales for compulsory voting and its effect on turnout are bolstered by the substantial volume of American research showing that voting is “habit forming.” Once someone votes for the first time it is more likely they will vote

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<sup>21</sup> Kostelka, F., Singh S.P., & Blais, A. (2022). Forthcoming, Is Compulsory Voting a Solution to Low and Declining Turnout? Cross-National Evidence Since 1945. *Political Science Research and Methods*, p.5.

<sup>22</sup> Hill, L. (2006). Low Voter Turnout in the United States: Is Compulsory Voting a Viable Solution? *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 18(2), 215. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0951629806061868>

<sup>23</sup> Hill, L. (2006). Low Voter Turnout in the United States: Is Compulsory Voting a Viable Solution? *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 18(2), 216. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0951629806061868>

<sup>24</sup> Hill, L. Compulsory Voting in Australia: A Basis for a ‘Best Practice’ Regime. *Federal Law Review*, 32(3), 483. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0067205X0403200307>

<sup>25</sup> Feitosa, F., Blais, A., & Dassonneville, R. (2020). Does Compulsory Voting Foster Civic Duty to Vote? *Election Law Journal*, 19(1), p.21;32. (citing Blais, A. (2000) *To Vote or Not to Vote?: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory*. University of Pittsburgh Press.)

again in the future.<sup>26</sup> Thus, under a compulsory voting system, a person may vote for the first time due to fear of legal sanction, but subsequent votes may be the result of tradition and habit.<sup>27</sup>

## OTHER EFFECTS OF COMPULSORY VOTING

Beyond increasing turnout, compulsory voting has other secondary effects that can improve the political process. Some scholars have found evidence that compulsory voting leads people to better inform themselves on politics and the political process, and that this higher “civic literacy” is connected to higher turnout.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, in non-compulsory systems, research finds that many non-voters choose not to participate due to the feeling of “not knowing enough”. For example, CIRCLE found that “nearly a third of young people who did not vote in 2022 said either they didn’t have enough information about the candidates or where to vote (21%).”<sup>29</sup>

Compulsory voting can also increase the quality of election administration. Hill argues that compulsory voting has improved election administration in Australia. She notes, “In the United States...the costs of voting to individual electors is quite high due to factors such as registration obstacles, the fact that voting is held on a weekday and problems associated with poorly resourced electoral administration (leading to disincentives like long queues and even insufficient quantities of ballot papers). In Australia, ... most of the ergonomic and practical obstacles to voting normally experienced by electors in voluntary systems have already been eliminated by the state by the time elections take place.” In other words, the mandate that people vote requires the system to make that as accessible as possible in advance.<sup>30</sup>

As discussed more fully below in the section on professionalism in election administration, improved election administration can increase trust in the process, and a better voting experience increases the likelihood that a voter will come back to the polls in the future.

Similarly, compulsory voting changes the nature of campaigns and turnout. Because voters are obligated to cast a ballot, campaigns, candidates and third-party organizations can focus their resources just on voter persuasion. Similarly, there will also be less effort needed to combat voter suppression in a system where legal norms require all eligible voters to cast a ballot.

Likewise, compulsory voting changes the nature of voter registration. If all eligible voters are required to cast a ballot, the government has an obligation to ensure that all eligible voters are registered to vote and able to participate. Similarly, in a system where all eligible voters must participate, information can be more widely disseminated without the need for targeting of registered or high-propensity voters.

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<sup>26</sup> See for example Plutzer, E. (2002). Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood. *The American Political Science Review*, 96(1), 41-56. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0003055402004227>

<sup>27</sup> Given this evidence, some have argued that voting should be compulsory for first time voters. (Birch, S. & Lodge, G. (2015). Voter Engagement, Electoral Inequality and First-Time Compulsory Voting. *The Political Quarterly*, 86, 385-392. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12178>). At the very least, this proposal would force policymakers to be accountable to young people a bit more than they are now.

<sup>28</sup> Ghazarian, Z. & Laughland-Booÿ, J. Becoming an Informed Voter: Compulsory Voting and Developing Political Knowledge in Australia. In Bonotti, M. & Strangio, P. (Eds.), *A Century of Compulsory Voting in Australia*. (pp.119-140). Palgrave Macmillan.; Milner, H. (2007, November). *The Political Knowledge and Political Participation of Young Canadians and Americans* (The American University of Paris Working Paper No. 56)

<sup>29</sup> The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, *Youth in 2022: Concerned about Issues but Neglected by Campaigns*, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/youth-2022-concerned-about-issues-neglected-campaigns>

<sup>30</sup> Hill, L. (2021). Compulsory Voting: Activating the Demos and Enhancing Procedural Democracy in Australia. In Bonotti, M. & Strangio, P. (Eds.), *A Century of Compulsory Voting in Australia* (p. 173). Palgrave Macmillan.



# Proportional Representation

For almost all legislative elections, the United States uses a “first past the post” system – people vote for one candidate in their district and whoever has the most votes wins. Legislators are chosen from these individual districts (which may be the product of gerrymandering) by plurality vote, and the ultimate partisan makeup of the legislature can differ significantly from the statewide vote share received by each party.

Proportional representation (or “PR”) represents an alternative electoral system, where the distribution of seats in a legislative body is determined by the proportion of votes each political party receives in an election. There are several different methods of implementing proportional representation, but they all share the common principle of allocating seats to parties in proportion to their share of the total vote, rather than the outcome of individual districts.<sup>31</sup> To illustrate this principle, if a party wins 60% of the statewide vote share in legislative elections, and the legislature has 100 seats, that party would be entitled to 60 seats in the legislature.

This system replaces the winner-take-all approach under first-past-the-post systems.<sup>32</sup> With individual districts in a first-past-the-post system, the voters who do not vote for the winning candidate have no representation, as the candidates they prefer are not elected. In a proportional representation system, however, all of these votes cast for losing candidates would matter, as they would count towards the party's overall vote share and translate to additional seats for the party in the legislature.

Similarly, in a first-past-the-post system, many votes cast for the winning candidate may seem wasted, since a candidate only actually needs a bare plurality to prevail. If a district is not expected to be close, and a candidate is expected to win by a large amount, a voter may conclude that their vote does not matter and stay home. By contrast, in a proportional representation system, such additional votes would be crucial for increasing a party's statewide vote share, resulting in additional seats in the legislature.

Proportional representation also allows minor parties to emerge, since a minor party that receives the minimum threshold for seats (typically as little as 5% of the statewide vote share) would be entitled to seats in the legislature. By contrast, first-past-the-post systems are unfavorable to minor parties, forcing voters to choose between the two leading candidates from major parties to have a meaningful say in the outcome of the election.

Some form of proportional representation is used in the great majority of democracies comparable to the United States.<sup>33</sup> Roughly 75% of the countries in Western Europe use proportional representation, including Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. Worldwide, 111 countries use some form of proportional representation, compared to fewer than 50 which use first-past-the-post systems.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For more discussion on the various types of proportional representation, see Amy, D. (2000) Behind the Ballot Box: A Citizen's Guide to Voting Systems.; Praeger., Protect Democracy (2023, December 5). Proportional representation, explained. <https://protectdemocracy.org/work/proportional-representation-explained/#varieties-of-PR>.

<sup>32</sup> Lipjhart, A. Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 1996. American Political Science Review, 91(1). p.7. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952255>

<sup>33</sup> Ridley-Castle, T. (2023, March 20). How many countries around the world use proportional representation? Electoral Reform Society. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/how-many-countries-around-the-world-use-proportional-representation/>

<sup>34</sup> Ridley-Castle, T. (2023, March 20). How many countries around the world use proportional representation? Electoral Reform Society. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/how-many-countries-around-the-world-use-proportional-representation/>



## THE DATA

Study after study finds that proportional representation systems lead to higher turnout than first past the post. Overall, most studies land on the effect being 9-12 %.<sup>35</sup>

Andres Blais has done a number of studies over the years demonstrating this effect. In one study he looked at 509 national elections in 20 countries and “clearly identify[ed] higher turnout rates in PR systems that cannot be explained by a wide variety of control variables,” in other words, other factors that can affect turnout levels.<sup>36</sup> Depending on the system one compares it to, he finds the increase to be approximately 5-10% where there is a PR system.<sup>37</sup> Other scholars have found PR increases turnout by 12%.<sup>38</sup> Another review of 83 studies from the US, Europe, the UK and Canada also finds the overwhelmingly preponderance of the evidence is that more proportional systems result in higher turnout, and the size of the effect is significant.<sup>39</sup>

## WHY DO PROPORTIONAL SYSTEMS INCREASE TURNOUT?

Several reasons explain why proportional representation results in higher turnout.

First, representation is more reflective of the statewide vote count, making voters feel more like their vote matters. This is true for all voters relative to first past the post systems, including voters supporting losing candidates, voters supporting winning candidates in a blowout election, and voters supporting minor party candidates, all of whom may feel that their vote was not necessary to the outcome. In a situation where legislative seats are awarded based on a party's statewide vote share, none of these votes are wasted.

Second, in a system where no vote is wasted, parties and candidates are incentivized to mobilize more voters. In a proportional representation system, there are no uncompetitive districts. Rather than focusing purely on turning out friendly voters in swing districts, and avoiding wasting resources communicating with voters in uncompetitive ‘safe’ districts belonging to one party or the other, parties and aligned interest groups aim to persuade, mobilize, and turn out voters everywhere. In a proportional representation system, voters everywhere, regardless of the political composition of the community in which they live, contribute equally to each party's percentage of the vote and its take of the assigned seats. Given that the overwhelming majority of seats in federal, state, and local elections in the United States are uncompetitive (and many are wholly uncontested), and that parties, candidates, and aligned organizations are effective at mobilizing voters when incentivized to do so, proportional representation could significantly increase mobilization efforts by parties and candidates in the United States.

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<sup>35</sup> Lijphart, A. Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 1996. *American Political Science Review*, 91(1), p.7. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952255> (citing Blais, A. & Carty, K. (1990) Does proportional representation foster voter turnout?, *European Journal of Political Research*, 18(2), p. 174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1990.tb00227.x>; Burnham W.D. (1987) The Turnout Problem. In Reichley, A.J. (Ed), *Elections American Style*, (pp.106-107). Brookings Institution Press.; Franklin, M. (1996) Electoral Participation. In LeDuc, L. Niemi, R., & Norris, P. (Eds.), *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective* (p 226). SAGE Publications.; Lijphart, A. (1994). *Democracies: Forms, Performance, and Constitutional Engineering*. *European Journal of Political Research*, 25(1), pp.5-7. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1994.tb01198.x>)

<sup>36</sup> Blais, A. & Carty, K. (1990) Does proportional representation foster voter turnout?, *European Journal of Political Research*, 18:2, p. 167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1990.tb00227.x>

<sup>37</sup> Blais, A. & Carty, K. (1990) Does proportional representation foster voter turnout?, *European Journal of Political Research*, 18(2), p. 174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1990.tb00227.x>

<sup>38</sup> Franklin, M. (1996) Electoral Participation. In LeDuc, L. Niemi, R., & Norris, P. (Eds.), *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective* (pp. 216-235). SAGE Publications.

<sup>39</sup> Geys, B. (2006) Explaining voter turnout: A review of aggregate-level research, *Electoral Studies*, 25(4), p. 651. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2005.09.002>

Third, proportional representation encourages sincere voting. Voters who may not prefer one of the major parties will still be able to cast a meaningful vote for a minor party that could result in seats for that party in the legislature. A voter can cast a ballot for someone they enthusiastically support, rather than choosing between staying home or supporting the candidate they dislike least.<sup>40</sup> In these systems, voters experience a greater feeling of agency – their vote is always meaningful and worth casting no matter where they reside or who they support. The same is obviously not always true as a practical matter in a first-past-the-post system. Further, a proportional representation system often supports several well-organized parties who are better equipped to communicate a broader set of choices to voters.

It is argued that proportional representation can also increase representation of racial and ethnic minorities, even where they are geographically dispersed. In first-past-the-post systems, minority communities often must be geographically concentrated and rely on districts where they constitute a majority or near-majority of the electorate in order to elect their candidates of choice. By contrast, in a proportional representation system, if a sufficiently large minority community cohesively prefers a legislative candidate affiliated with a party, that candidate will be elected, regardless of the geographic distribution of the minority community. This means that minority voters can elect their candidates of choice, regardless of whether they are located in areas where the minority community constitutes a majority or near-majority of the electorate.

A particularly interesting case study that demonstrates the impact of a PR system is New Zealand. In 1986,

“...a royal commission in New Zealand concluded from its inquiry that PR would produce results that are more fair, make voting more effective and satisfying, and enhance the representation of women and Maori, who are the primary ethnic minority in New Zealand. Relying on both theory and empirical evidence, the commission argued that under PR, voters in safe constituency seats would have more of an incentive to participate because the choice of government would be determined by the nation-wide party vote, not by a relatively small number of voters in marginal electorates. `We consider that the greater effectiveness of votes [under PR] would be likely to result in a turn-out higher than under plurality.’<sup>41</sup>

These recommendations served as the basis for the adoption of PR in New Zealand in 1996.<sup>42</sup> In 1993, New Zealanders voted in favor of a referendum to change the system from first past the post to proportional. As a result, scholars were able to use survey data to see if voters had different attitudes toward voting before and after the implementation of the PR system. The survey results are revealing:<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Blais, A. & Carty, K. (1990) Does proportional representation foster voter turnout?, *European Journal of Political Research*, 18(2), p. 167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1990.tb00227.x>

<sup>41</sup> Lipjhart, A. *Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma* Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 1996. *American Political Science Review*, 91(1), p.7. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952255>

<sup>42</sup> Karp, J. & Banducci, S. (1999). The Impact of Proportional Representation on Turnout: Evidence from New Zealand. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 34(3) p.364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361149950281> (citing the New Zealand Royal Commission on the Electoral System (1986) Report of the Royal Commission on the Electoral System: Towards a Better Democracy, p. 55. <https://elections.nz/democracy-in-nz/what-is-new-zealands-system-of-government/report-of-the-royal-commission-on-the-electoral-system/>)

<sup>43</sup> Karp, J. & Banducci, S. (1999). The Impact of Proportional Representation on Turnout: Evidence from New Zealand. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 34(3) p.364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361149950281>

**Table 1.** Change in attitudes about voting, 1990, 1993, 1996 (percentage who agree or strongly with the statement)

	1990	1993	1996	Overall change
Voting is important even if it makes no difference to who wins	75.6	81.6	81.4	5.8
It is a citizen's duty to vote	70.5	82.3	83.9	13.4
My vote really counts in elections	76.8	74.7	85.3	8.5
Very interested in politics	14.6	14.6	21.1	6.5
Sometimes politics seems so complicated people like me can't understand what goes on	NA	54	47.2	- 6.8
Considered not voting	14.2	11.9	7.6	- 6.6
n	1767	998	1520	

*Source:* New Zealand Election Study 1990, 1993, 1996 Cross-sections

Beyond these increased positive attitudes to participation, the percent of the eligible population who voted rose from 78 percent to 81 percent, reversing a downward trend. However, the authors are careful to note that this study only looked at one election. While this data focuses on only the election immediately after adoption of proportional representation, the turnout increase and survey data are impressive, and confirm both the theoretical and statistical evidence in support of proportional representation from other countries, and indicate an immediate impact from the change.

## Concurrent Elections

Americans are asked to vote in many more elections than their counterparts in other countries. Not only are more offices elected in the United States than in other countries, but elections are held far more frequently here than in other countries. A voter in the United States could conceivably cast ballots in 40 separate election contests in a four-year period, compared to a German who could vote in a maximum of eight elections in the same time span.<sup>44</sup>

The federal government in the United States holds an election every two years, whereas in other advanced democracies, elections occur every 4-5 years. In addition, unlike other democracies, there also primary elections, which precede the general election. Similarly, five states (Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey, and Virginia) also hold odd-year statewide elections for governor, other statewide offices, and the state legislature. Moreover, some states require runoff elections for offices where no candidate wins more than 50% of the vote in the general election. Finally,

<sup>44</sup> Karp, J. & Banducci, S. (1999). The Impact of Proportional Representation on Turnout: Evidence from New Zealand. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 34(3) p.368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361149950281>

the major source of decentralized elections in the United States are local elections for county and city governments as well as school boards. Depending on the state, these local elections can occur fully divorced from federal and state elections, and often appear on their own ballot in spring and summer of odd-years.

Beyond regularly scheduled elections, states, counties, and municipal governments also hold special elections to fill vacancies as well as additional elections dedicated to putting single measures on taxation and other issues before voters. These can range from statewide contexts, like Ohio's election on August 1, 2023 to decide whether to require a supermajority of 60% in votes to change its constitution, to local elections that may be important but most voters are unaware of.

## THE DATA

This paper began by noting that the United States 2020 Presidential election turnout of 62.8% is little to celebrate since it reflects more than one in three eligible voters sitting out the election, amounting to significantly lower participation than recent elections in peer nations. Off-cycle election rates in the United States are far worse: participation in those elections averages 29%. Though context matters, off-cycle turnout also overwhelmingly tends to include certain typically high propensity voters (older voters, homeowners, and white voters) as opposed to other voters (younger voters, renters, and Black and Latino voters).<sup>45</sup>

There is strong evidence from other countries that holding fewer elections contributes to higher turnout. Studies from various European countries conclude that moving local elections to coincide with national and European elections significantly increases turnout for traditionally low turnout local contests.<sup>46</sup>

The most interesting and compelling data comes from Switzerland, which is the only European country with turnout rates as low as the United States and the only country where elections are similarly frequent. As one scholar observed:

"The one country with even more frequent dates on which elections are conducted [than the United States] – about six or seven times per year—is Switzerland...The United States and Switzerland are also the two Western democracies with by far the lowest level of turnout...The most plausible explanation is voter fatigue...or in terms of rational choice, the fact that frequent elections increase the cost of voting."<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, studies find that holding unconsolidated elections is potentially more important in reducing turnout than a lack of party competition.<sup>48</sup>

## WHY DO CONCURRENT ELECTIONS INCREASE TURNOUT

The reasons concurrent elections contribute to higher turnout are fairly straightforward.

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<sup>45</sup> Lopez, G. (2022, November 7). Does America Vote Too Much? New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/07/briefing/midterms-voting.html>).

<sup>46</sup> Hajnal, Z. L. (2010). *America's Uneven Democracy: Turnout, Race, and Representation in City Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>47</sup> Leininger, A., Rudolph, L., & Zittlau, S. (2018). How to Increase Turnout in Low-Salience Elections: Quasi-Experimental Evidence on the Effect of Concurrent Second-Order Elections on Political Participation. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 6(3), p. 510. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2016.38>; Vetter, A. (2015). Just a Matter of Timing? Local Electoral Turnout in Germany in the Context of National and European Parliamentary Elections. *German Politics*, 24(1), 67-84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2014.984693>; Schakel, A.H. & Dandoy, R. (2014). Electoral Cycles and Turnout in Multilevel Electoral Systems. *West European Politics*, 37(3), 605-623. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.895526>; Geys, B. (2006). Explaining voter turnout: A review of aggregate-level research. *Electoral Studies*, 25(4), p. 651. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2005.09.002>.

<sup>48</sup> Lijphart, A. *Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma* Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 1996. *American Political Science Review*, 91(1). p.8. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952255>

First, concurrent elections reduce “costs” of voting, alleviating “voter fatigue.” Fewer elections means voters must engage in the process of casting a ballot less frequently. By contrast, when voters are asked to undertake the process of casting a ballot for multiple elections held across multiple days, some share of voters will naturally save their resources and energy for more high-profile contests.

Second, concurrent elections allow turnout resources to be focused on fewer days. During so-called “big” elections, there is much more voter mobilization by campaigns, parties and organizations, especially when there are national offices on the ballot. When there are purely local or even state-wide elections, there are fewer resources and less effort goes into voter turnout. When candidates for multiple offices, like U.S. Senate and mayoral races, face election on the same day, the efforts of their campaigns may have cumulative impacts on voter turnout. This can occur by reinforcement, that is, by providing multiple messages to the same voter about the importance of the election and the logistics of voting; or by addition, that is, delivering mobilization messages and logistical information to different voters. These candidates’ campaigns, when aligned in the same party or coalition, may also have efficiency effects, possibly through direct coordination and shared resources, or assignment, like a mayor’s campaign providing rides to the polls while a senatorial campaign blankets the airwaves with pro-voting messages.

Similarly, when a community has fewer elections, every election it does have is more newsworthy. Rare, high-importance elections that elect many positions of importance garner more news media attention, particularly if they include national contests. This may be an increasingly important factor in an era when local news institutions are in precipitous decline. There is less reliance on local news to publicize a purely local contest.

An observation from my own work on elections is the phenomenon of organizer fatigue. Even though civic organizations well understand the importance of local elections for their communities, they cannot constantly ramp up registration, education and turnout operations for all elections and must save their resources for higher-profile contests. Many mobilizing organizations also have additional civic agendas, such as issues advocacy or community organizing. These organizations don’t have the money or the energy to equally prioritize all elections, and repeated attempts to mobilize communities can work to the detriment of their other efforts as well as organizers’ mental and physical health.

Similarly, concurrent elections can also ease the stress over voter registration, given the need to re-register every time one moves. Voters who may have failed to update their registration may skip a seemingly minor election rather than going through the effort of making the change. But if elections are consolidated on fewer days, voters will have more time and incentive to ensure that their registration is current and they are ready to vote.

Finally, consolidated elections can reduce costs for election administrators and improve election administration. Rather than having to recruit poll workers and set up polling places multiple times, election administrators could focus on running elections very well on a limited number of days. If this led to a better voter experience at the polls, this too could lead to a higher likelihood people will vote going forward.

## **Greater Professionalization of Election Administration**

“Professionalization” of election administration has become a major topic among election administrators, scholars, policymakers and advocates. Given the intense duress elections administrators conduct their work under as the political and technological environment has changed, and the huge number of tasks that they are responsible for undertaking

that they were never charged with before, there is a strong interest in helping develop the election administration field to be better positioned to face these new challenges.

Although scholars have not made this precise connection, professionalization of election administration may also lead to increased turnout.

First, more professional election administration can lead to an improved voting experience, which can increase voters' trust in the system. As the OECD Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights has observed, "Election management bodies are one of the main guardians of democratic elections, and their activities are central to fostering public confidence in the election process."<sup>49</sup>

Given research that increased trust in the voting system leads to higher turnout, well-run elections that voters treat as being implemented by experts might also have an impact on both integrity and turnout. One frequently cited American study found a positive connection between confidence in elections and likelihood of voting.<sup>50</sup> An examination of 22 democracies also found that trust in the electoral system has a significant positive effect on turnout.<sup>51</sup> Conversely, a number of studies from around the world find mistrust in the system reduces voter turnout, whereas perceptions of election integrity increase voter turnout.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, well-run elections implemented by professional administrators can simply make the voting process more accessible and pleasant, also indirectly boosting turnout. Studies show that having a good experience when voting makes it more likely one will vote again, and the converse, that having a negative experience dampens turnout. For example, one study finds that for "every additional hour a voter waits in line to vote, their probability of voting in a subsequent election drops by 1 percentage point."<sup>53</sup>

As American scholars continue to focus on how election administrators and others can increase trust in the election system, it will be interesting to observe a potential secondary impact on turnout from these efforts.

## Conclusion

Voter turnout in the United States has been astonishingly low for decades, especially in comparison to most other democracies around the world. The causes of this low turnout are complicated and subject to highly contentious debate. Nonetheless, outside of the social and cultural challenges to persuading people that it is important to vote, and

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<sup>49</sup> Blais, A. & Kostelka, F. (2021) The Generational and Institutional Sources of the Global Decline in Voter Turnout. *World Politics*, 73(4), p. 658. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0043887121000149>.

<sup>50</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2023, October 3). Election administration as a key to ensuring the rights of voters and candidates the focus of new ODHR handbook for election observers. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/554134>

<sup>51</sup> Alvarez, R. M., Hall, T. E., & Llewellyn, M. H. (2008). Are Americans Confident Their Ballots Are Counted? *The Journal of Politics*, 70(3). 754-766. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608080730>

<sup>52</sup> Hill, L. (2021). Compulsory Voting: Activating the Demos and Enhancing Procedural Democracy in Australia. In Bonotti, M. & Strangio, P. (Eds.), *A Century of Compulsory Voting in Australia* (p. 179). Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>53</sup> Norris, P. (2014). *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107280861>. Lisa Hill argues that that compulsory voting has led to better election administration, reinforcing voters' likelihood of participation. She points particularly to having an independent commission overseeing elections, free of partisanship. I was not able to find any studies specifically on a relationship between nonpartisan election administration, or professionalization more broadly, and turnout. However, we might extrapolate from these findings a connection; this is an area for further examination.

the enormous barriers that reduce voter turnout among marginalized communities, there are worthwhile alternative structures that other countries employ that could be adopted in some form in the United States.

Although ideas like compulsory voting, proportional representation, and concurrent elections are not in the mainstream discussion of how to increase turnout, the impact from these changes in other countries suggests a rethink is in order. While these ideas have received growing attention in the United States, particularly at the local level, they are often treated as ideas that may happen at some distant future date. Democracy reformers should consider pushing harder to mainstream these ideas given the data on the impact such structures have on voter turnout in other countries.

This is a moment where pro-democracy Americans need to think broadly and boldly about what needs to change to increase turnout among all segments of society. As part of that process, it is critical to look to how other countries administer elections. A comparative approach, incorporating best practices and proven changes from other democracies, can help create and sustain a truly representative government in the United States.

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