

Topic: his House Would Make Voting Mandatory

Prime Minister, Government (5 minutes):

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to this debate. The motion before us today is that this house would make voting mandatory in general elections. We, as today's proposition, strongly believe this motion is true.

Before we come to our actual argumentation, let us define what we mean. By "mandatory voting" we mean a legal requirement for every eligible adult citizen to either cast a ballot or formally abstain at every general election, with a small fine for non compliance, modelled on the Australian system that has been in place since 1924.

We have structured our case as follows. I, as the first speaker, will be talking about why mandatory voting produces more representative governments. My deputy will then speak to why it strengthens democracy itself, and how the objections raised against it do not hold up under examination.

My first argument is representation. In voluntary voting systems, the people who turn out to vote are not a representative sample of the population. They are older, wealthier, and more politically engaged than the average citizen. The result is governments that respond to the preferences of voters, not the preferences of the public. Australia, with mandatory voting, consistently produces governments whose composition reflects the population. The United States, with voluntary voting, does not. The motion is the simplest available fix.

For these reasons, we strongly believe this motion is true.

Leader of the Opposition (5 minutes):

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome from this side of the house. The proposition has presented its case. We, the opposition, do not accept it.

But before I come to my own arguments, let us first have a look at what the Prime Minister has said. He claimed that mandatory voting produces more representative governments. The example he gave was Australia. What he did not mention is that Australia's politics, with mandatory voting, has produced just as much polarisation, just as much populism, and just as much voter dissatisfaction as any voluntary voting system. The supposed benefit does not survive contact with the data.

Now my own arguments. We will make two points.

First, mandatory voting violates a principle democracies are supposed to honour: the freedom not to participate. The right to vote includes the right to refuse to vote. A citizen who has examined the candidates and concluded none deserve their support is exercising democratic agency by abstaining. Mandatory voting forces them to either lie or pay a fine. Neither is the behaviour of a free citizen.

Second, mandatory voting does not solve the problem the proposition identifies. The proposition says voluntary voting produces unrepresentative outcomes. Mandatory voting produces uninformed outcomes. A voter compelled to vote without engagement chooses largely at random or by superficial cues. The proposition has traded one distortion for another.

For these reasons, we oppose the motion.

Deputy Prime Minister, Government (5 minutes):

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome back from the proposition. The Leader of the Opposition has raised two objections. I will respond to both and then develop the second arm of our case.

On the freedom not to vote argument, the opposition has confused freedom with disengagement. The Australian system already protects the right not to vote; citizens can show up and submit a blank ballot, which counts as turnout but not as a vote for any candidate. The freedom is preserved. What is removed is the freedom to ignore the question entirely, and that freedom is what the proposition argues citizens of a democracy should not have.

On the uninformed voter argument, the opposition assumes that voluntary voters are informed. The data shows they are not. Voluntary voting systems have voters whose information levels are no higher than those of mandatory voting systems. The opposition has compared an idealised voluntary voter to an actual mandatory voter. The fair comparison is actual to actual, and on that comparison, the gap closes.

Now, my own argument: mandatory voting strengthens democracy itself. When everyone votes, parties cannot win by mobilising their base while suppressing the other side's turnout. They have to compete for the median voter. The politics that result is less polarised and more responsive. The American experience is the strongest evidence for this; entire campaign strategies are built around turnout suppression and base mobilisation, which would be impossible under mandatory voting.

For these reasons, we strongly support the motion.

Deputy Leader of the Opposition (5 minutes):

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome for the last time from today's opposition. It is now my pleasure to summarise this debate and respond to the proposition's second speaker.

A first major clash was on representation. The proposition told us that mandatory voting produces representative governments. We had to find that the actual evidence from Australia does not support this claim. Australian politics is no less polarised and no more representative than comparable voluntary voting democracies.

A second major clash was on freedom. The proposition argued that the freedom not to vote is preserved by allowing blank ballots. We have to point out that requiring a citizen to physically attend a polling station to register their disengagement is not the same as preserving their freedom to disengage. It is a procedural fiction.

A third major clash, raised by the Deputy Prime Minister, was on whether mandatory voting reduces polarisation by forcing parties to compete for the median voter. This is the proposition's strongest argument, and we should be honest about it. The answer is that polarisation has many causes, such as media fragmentation, social sorting, primary systems and turnout is only one of them. Australia, with mandatory voting, still has polarisation. The proposition's mechanism is real but small.

And for all these reasons, I beg you to oppose the motion.