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To cite this article: Anthoula Malkopoulou (2020) Compulsory voting and right-wing populism: mobilisation, representation and socioeconomic inequalities, Australian Journal of Political Science, 55:3, 276-292, DOI: [10.1080/10361146.2020.1774507](https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2020.1774507)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2020.1774507>



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Published online: 08 Jun 2020.



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Compulsory voting and right-wing populism: mobilisation, representation and socioeconomic inequalities

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ABSTRACT

When all citizens vote, the influence of radical parties decreases. Despite this being a central justification for compulsory voting in the past, it has been absent from contemporary debates. I examine the normative and empirical premises of the ‘moderation thesis’ in relation to radical right-wing populist parties today and suggest that, under certain conditions, compulsory voting can limit these parties’ appeal. First, it replaces the excessive *mobilisation* of discontented voters with a more universal mobilisation. Second, it addresses the problem of *underrepresentation* offering a more pluralist type of representation than the populist one. And third, it reverses *socioeconomic inequalities* that drive support for populism through the egalitarian effects that compulsory voting has on policymaking. My central thesis is this: because compulsory voting embodies inclusivist, pluralist and egalitarian values, it addresses some of the grievances that drive support for right-wing populist parties without carrying the same normative costs as populism.

KEYWORDS

Compulsory voting; right-wing populism; radical right; political parties; social inequalities; representation

Introduction

Compulsory voting is known to be a great leveller. As a tool that promotes universal turnout, it produces participation that is de facto, not only de jure, equal (Hill 2014; Lijphart 1997). But compulsory voting is also a good preventive measure against right-wing populism, or so I argue. It is preventive in that it structures the socio-political space in a manner that reduces the appeal of populist claims. In that sense, the benefits of making voting compulsory address some of the demands that are associated with the rise of right-wing populist parties. This interpretation takes for granted that populism, as problematic as it is for liberal democracy, is also a reaction to justified grievances and pragmatic inequalities. Even though they offer questionable solutions, populist parties have often mobilised vulnerable groups, enabled their political integration and provided a tool for counteracting socioeconomic inequality (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Compulsory voting serves these exact same goals, without compromising liberal-democratic ideas and institutions as does populism.

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The idea that universal turnout creates a barrier to radical politics is not entirely new. Empirical scholars have observed, for example, that those who hold strong partisan beliefs (as supporters of right-wing populist parties¹ usually do) tend to vote in higher proportions than those with more moderate views (Hoffman, León, and Lombardi 2017); this results in an overrepresentation of radical parties in the polls. In Sarah Birch's words: 'if intensity of preference equates with ideological extremism, and indifference translates into moderation at the polls, the logical conclusion is that mandatory electoral participation is a useful means of stemming extremism and promoting centrist outcomes' (Birch 2009, 52). In other words, mandatory equal participation reduces the impact of hyper-mobilised parties as it prevents them from garnering a higher support in the polls vis-à-vis their support within the entire eligible voting population.

On these grounds, parties that feel particularly threatened by radical challengers have in some countries supported mandatory voting. For example, in 2013 a group of French conservative MPs promoted the introduction of mandatory voting in order to control the rise of the *Front National*. Low turnouts, it was argued, produced overblown support for far-right and far-left parties in the polls; this could change by forcing abstainers to vote (Micoïne, Martinat, and Chevalet 2014). Likewise, in the 1920s, compulsory voting was supported as a way to counteract the excessive mobilisation of fascists and socialists (Malkopoulou 2015, 95). That the abstention of 'the honest and moderate majority' created political gains for the 'turbulent and factious minorities' (Malkopoulou 2015, 86–89) has historically been the most persistent argument in favour of compulsory voting.

While the tempering effects of full participation have been a recurring theme in debates on compulsory voting, this line of reasoning has received only scant attention by students of either compulsory voting or counterradicalism. As a result, we do not know if claims about the moderating effect of compulsory voting are empirically justifiable, in the past or today. And we have very little insight into the conceptual aspects of this claim. This paper attempts to address this gap, and kickstart a discussion on the moderating effects of compulsory voting. It draws on existing empirical and normative research to explore if and how compulsory voting can deter right-wing populism.

After providing some nuance on the concept of populism, in this paper I make three arguments about how compulsory voting can limit the social and political appeal of populist claims. First, I argue that, if we accept that populism aims at *mobilising repressed social groups*, as is often argued, compulsory voting removes the need for such forceful mobilization as it a priori solves the problem of voter mobilisation. Second, I show that, if we admit that populism is triggered by *inequalities in political representation*, compulsory voting is the best remedy against such inequalities. Third, if indeed the underlying causes of populism are *socioeconomic inequalities*, compulsory voting helps alleviating them through the effect that equal electoral participation has on public policy choices. I end by addressing an empirical objection to my argument and recommending lines for future research.

Populism: threat and corrective

To understand why it is worthwhile to prevent the rise of right-wing populist parties, and how compulsory voting can fulfil this goal, a closer look at the nature, meaning and goals of populism is in order.

Most scholars define populism as an ideology, often a thin-centred one (Mudde 2007; Müller 2016). Others refer to it as a rhetorical strategy, a discourse or a movement (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018), and yet others as a political style (Canovan 1999; Arditì 2007; Moffitt and Tormey 2014). For the purposes of this paper, populism will be conceptualised as a *strategy of collective action* that has distinct ideological and rhetorical characteristics (Urbinati 2019). I come back to this definition in the next section where I discuss the mobilisation-conception of populism.

On the second question – the meaning of populism – most say that it relies on a dichotomy between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013), one that foregrounds a homogenous people whose general will should be the basis of government. Because of this claim to homogeneity, for some scholars, populists are by definition anti-pluralist and oppose liberal-democratic values (Urbinati 2019; Müller 2016). Regardless, most authors agree that two different, almost contradictory, types of populism exist, some indeed authoritarian, nationalist and exclusive – such as right-wing populism (Mudde 2007), but some progressive and inclusive – such as left-wing populism (Mouffe 2018). This distinction between exclusive and inclusive populism is key in understanding the different practices associated with populism.

Thus, the third question – populism’s strategic goals – invites two separate interpretations. For many observers, populism aims to establish the hegemony of popular will and eliminate its opponents. In that sense, populists tend to undermine liberal procedures, such as institutional checks and balances, the rule of law and party government (Müller 2016), often by handing over power to individuals who pose as defenders of ‘the people’. These are simply a new elite (think of Trump), who claim a symbolic identification with ‘the common man’ (i.e. low- and middle-class people) and the exclusive moral legitimacy to speak in the name of *the* people, without necessarily subjecting themselves to established structures of accountability (Urbinati 2019). Seen from this perspective, populism constitutes a *threat* for liberal democracy.

However, for others, the goal of populism is to mobilise grievances and inspire excluded social groups. In a context of increasing socioeconomic inequalities and uncertainties about the future, the many are disappointed by political elites, and distanced from economic, cultural and urban elites. In this context, a radical type of politics seems justified. Populists then emerge to challenge established power structures and influence decision-making in favour of policies that are (or at least appear to be) in the interest of the people. They ‘give voice to groups that do not feel represented by the political establishment’ and bring forward issues that are ‘normally seen by most elites as disgusting and vulgar’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012, 209). In other words, populism productively brings to the fore painful but real problems of the existing political and social order, articulates the will of a neglected part of the population, and produces antagonism and political dissensus, which is vital for democracies to progress. In this scenario, populism functions as a *corrective* to democracy (Kaltwasser 2012).

In light of this double-sided understanding of populism, as potentially both a threat and a corrective to democracy, it is hard to decide how to deal with populism in a way that is not itself one-sided. Chances are that responses will either overlook the illiberal side of populism or undermine its inclusivist side. Those who see populism as a type of proto-authoritarianism are ready to support restrictions and even sanctions dictated by the logic of ‘militant democracy’ that prescribes preventive strikes against democracy’s

internal enemies. Others who recognise the contribution of populism to democratic politics tend to stress what they perceive as its justified causes – elitism, inequalities, neoliberal dominance – and join forces with populists to eradicate these causes.

Contrary to this dichotomous approach to populism, that is either excessively dismissive or too permissive, I would like to propose possibilities for constitutional engineering that avoid the traps just mentioned. This line of approach does not presuppose that populism is only bad or only good; it takes for granted that both of these qualities coexist. What is needed, then, is a measure, which, on one hand, rejects the exclusivist, anti-pluralist and anti-egalitarian danger of populism, especially right-wing populism, and on the other promotes its positive goal, which is the democratic inclusion of neglected sectors of society. Compulsory voting is, I argue, such a measure. On one hand, it addresses three central sources of populist discontent: demobilisation of excluded groups, unequal representation and socioeconomic inequalities. On the other hand, it bolsters the inclusivist, pluralist and egalitarian elements of a democratic system. In what follows, I present in more detail how exactly a legal obligation to vote reconciles these two goals.

Voter mobilisation

The problem: populist voter mobilisation

Populism is a successful mode for mobilising voters. In sociology, mobilisation is commonly defined as ‘the process by which a group goes from being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life’ (Tilly 1978, 69). This requires a formation of groups and associations (or parties, for that matter) that explore and pursue collective goals. Indeed, populist parties bring about *popular* mobilization, ‘the mobilization of the poor, the excluded, or others not previously mobilized, into coordinated – and often confrontational – political activity in public space’ (Jansen 2011, 83).² Studies consistently find that working-class voters are the most likely supporters of right-wing populist parties (Betz and Meret 2013; Ford and Goodwin 2014). Disaffected by economic macro-changes and centre-left parties’ programme shifts, workers seem to have abandoned their former party loyalties and driven up abstention numbers during the 1990s and 2000s (Rydgren 2005).

These developments created a political opportunity for populist parties. As one recent study puts it: ‘in a systemic crisis, which depresses the motivation to vote for traditional parties of both left and right, the disappointment generates an abstention-based entry space for a populist platform’ (Guiso, Herrera, and Morelli 2017, 4). As a result, populists mobilised disaffected populations that were likely to abstain, specifically young, white, male members of the working class.

Yet, while *popular* mobilisation of demobilised groups is a broad, non-ideological and politically neutral act, *populist* mobilisation is very particular. Unlike *popular* mobilisation, *populist* mobilisation is always accompanied by populist rhetoric, i.e. actions and expressions that reinforce the populist *principle*. The populist principle, as defined earlier, invokes the dichotomy of a virtuous and homogenous people versus a corrupt and powerful elite. The aim of populist rhetoric is then to forge a solidary collective group – the ‘people’ – by means of referring to it rhetorically. In other words, the mobilisational force of populism relies on activating, through a particular type of rhetoric, cognitive, affective and symbolic resources that persuade ordinarily marginalised social groups to come forward and engage in contentious political action.

Populist parties use this type of rhetoric to bring voters to the polls. This has both a positive and negative side. What is positive is that it indeed mobilises alienated and disadvantaged groups and engages them in electoral politics that are crucial for agenda-setting and policy reform. What is negative is that it does so through rhetoric that promotes on one hand an anti-pluralist conception of ‘the people’, which is depicted as an indivisible unit, and on the other a one-sided notion of popular sovereignty that excludes elites and other ‘enemies of the people’ from the exercise of this sovereignty. Radical right-populist rhetoric has the additional effect of racialising the working class, i.e. portraying it as white and homogenous, ignoring its non-white members, as well as the disenfranchised immigrant population that shares the same working-class insecurity (Mondon 2017). The challenge then is to preserve populism’s mobilisational inclusiveness and discard its deleterious rhetorical and normative premises.

The solution: universal voter mobilisation

Does compulsory voting represent a non-populist alternative to inclusive mobilisation? In what follows, I argue that compulsory voting impedes right-wing populist mobilisation and prompts a more inclusive form of voter participation.

The most crucial advantage with regard to voter mobilisation is that compulsory voting brings out the vote of *all* members of the electorate. This includes (1) the disaffected parts of the population that populists appeal to, but also (2) the disaffected parts *not* captured by populist mobilisation, as well as (3) habitual voters. Indeed, the *universal mobilisation* produced by compulsory voting has two crucial add-on effects in comparison to populist mobilisation: that of mobilising *the most* disaffected voters, and of inclusively and evenly mobilising *the entire* electorate.

In the first case, a distinction must be made between the disaffected voters mobilised by right-wing populist parties, and *the most* disaffected voters not mobilised by them. In practice, disaffected voters include blue-collar workers and lower-level employees, especially young, less educated, white males (Norris 2005; Betz and Meret 2013); right-wing populism is often lauded as ‘democratic’ or ‘inclusivist’ because it brings *these* disaffected voters back into the voting game. Yet, the working-class and under-class constituency does not solely consist of male white voters. It also includes *the most* disaffected voters, namely female, non-white and immigrant voters – to the extent that the latter are enfranchised (Mondon 2017). These voters are particularly vulnerable to intersectional layers of disempowerment that add to working-class resentment. We already know that the worse off a person is – in terms of socioeconomic and educational attainment – the more likely she is to abstain (Birch 2009; Hill 2014). Thus, female, non-white and (enfranchised) immigrant voters from low-income groups would be particularly disinclined to vote. Women and immigrants are indeed in general less inclined to support right-wing populist parties (Spierings and Zaslove 2015; Pietsch 2017). Thus, mobilising these voters may counter-balance the over-mobilisation of other disaffected parts of the population.

Yet, the most crucial difference between populist and mandatory mobilisation is that, while the former is inclusive of *some* excluded parts of the voting population, the latter is inclusive of *all* parts of the voting population. This distinction matters both empirically and normatively. Empirically, the higher the abstention rates of the overall registered voter population, the more inflated the percentage of elected parties (including right-wing populist parties) will be. This creates a mismatch between party support and actual voter shares

in the population or within particular social groups. Mondon underlines how the propensity of working-class voters to abstain in both France and the UK has created the wrong impression that the majority of working-class voters support right-wing populist parties, when in reality only the majority of those working-class voters *who make the journey to the polling station* have supported such parties (Mondon 2017); this is less than half of the overall working-class voter population.³ In a system where all registered voters would be required to cast a ballot, such artificial increase in right-wing populist parties' voting percentages that does not correspond to an increase in absolute numbers of voters that support them would disappear. This does not only matter in terms of misguided perceptions about the popularity of right-wing populist parties; it also has direct institutional consequences as voting percentages translate to parliamentary seats and, as such, into real political decision-making power.

In addition, the difference between mobilising *a demobilised subset* of the electorate and mobilising *all* members of the electorate highlights a crucial normative quality. True, populist mobilisation supports the inclusion of formerly excluded parts of the voting population (at least some of them); but while doing so it advocates and promotes the *exclusion* of other parts of the population, the so-called 'elite' and – in the case of right-wing populist parties – ethnic and religious minorities. Put differently, populist mobilisation is from a rhetorical and normative viewpoint by definition exclusivist; it defines the people, i.e. the legitimate source of popular sovereignty, in terms that do not include the entire population. By contrast, mandatory mobilisation is by definition, empirically and normatively, inclusivist and universal.

Representation

The problem: populist representation

Another oft quoted advantage of right-wing populism is that it represents the underrepresented. This effect may sound very similar to that of mobilising the demobilised, but it has its own characteristics. Whereas mobilisation regards abstainers who turn into populist voters, representation is about turning a previously scattered vote into a unified voter bloc. Indeed, one of the most common claims of populists is that they give voice to “ordinary, decent people”, whose interests and opinions are (they claim) regularly overridden by arrogant elites, corrupt politicians and strident minorities' (Canovan 1999, 5). This claim is expressed through appeals to 'the silent majority', very common, for example, in the Trump presidential campaign. What is assumed is that non-populist, progressive partisans have a larger political impact than what their actual size commands. By contrast, populists paint the image of their supporters as being *underrepresented*.

The topos of unjustified underrepresentation is ubiquitous in populist rhetoric. Empirical scholars discuss it under the rubric of *political* or *institutional grievances*; these are mostly associated with dissatisfaction with politicians or with the state of democracy more generally (Ivarsflaten 2008). That some voters increasingly feel disconnected from politicians reflects to some extent real contemporary developments. The chasm between governed and governors may have pragmatically widened due to the development of technocratic governance, particularly during the expansion of the European Union. Further, the feeling of distant centres of power was amplified by the erosion of political parties and trade unions, which in the past provided an institutional link between official

policymakers and the grassroots of society (Kaltwasser 2012, 194). For populists, politicians are not *inherently* evil, but they have *become* unrepresentative and neglectful of their electoral constituencies (Taggart 2017).

In addition, political disaffection has been linked to major political corruption scandals in several European countries, for example the 2009 UK parliamentary expenses scandal or the 2008–2012 Siemens scandal in Greece. Populists left and right are known for mobilising voters against corruption, whether it is corruption of political elites, mainstream parties, or institutions. The notion of corrupt elites is, after all, the definitional opposite of the virtuous people in the normative grammar of populism. To be sure, political disaffection may have various reference points: a specific government, the entire political class or political institutions as such. The common cause in all these cases, however, is assumedly that the largest part of the electorate has little access to political power.

This is the golden opportunity that populists of all stripes seize in order to make their electoral breakthrough. Societies with low levels of inclusiveness are a breeding ground for populist politics. In that sense, all varieties of Latin American populism have been described as strategies for giving voice and political presence to the excluded masses (Kaltwasser 2012, 198). It is possible then to see in populism a positive phenomenon that corrects the current ills of democratic government and rehabilitates representational equality.

However, populist inclusiveness comes at a very high price for liberal democracy. The ‘silent majority’ is not simply offered access to political resources, but represented as *one single voice*, encapsulated in the voice of the populist leader. In the populist imagination, representation is not identical with parliamentary representation through electoral procedures. It is rather representation through plebiscitary acclamation and symbolic identification of governors and governed; the populist leader has a quasi-natural commitment to ‘the people’. In this scheme, traditional procedures of accountability are superfluous (Urbini 2019, 113–117). In sum, the populist promise for inclusive representation poses a threat to the liberal-democratic conception of representation that is based on procedures of authorisation and accountability.

The solution: mandatory universal representation

How does the principle of universal turnout compete with populist claims to restore representation? First of all, obliging everybody to vote diminishes the vicious cycle of abstentionism that perpetuates feelings of disempowerment. Systematic abstention exacerbates feelings of neglect and resentment towards mainstream parties. The longer and the deeper the distance between traditional parties and voters, the more opportunity for populists to protest against unjustified underrepresentation.

Conversely, it is well known that *voting* citizens are more satisfied with their state of democracy than are *non-voting* citizens (Hill 2011). Electoral participation carries ‘psychological’ benefits, especially for those who feel underrepresented. Thus, it should not surprise us that citizens in compulsory voting regimes are more content with democratic performance than citizens in voluntary voting regimes (Birch 2009, 112–113). The very act of electoral participation enhances one’s perception that they live in an inclusive, responsive and representative system.

Granted, a minority of voters consciously want to be left out of the voting process. Others may be willing to vote but resent being obliged by law to do it; they may even develop a dissatisfaction towards democracy because of this obligation (Singh 2018) or

may grow more insistent in their propensity to abstain (Henn and Oldfield 2016).⁴ However, the reception of compulsory voting as 'repressive' can be easily counterweighed by offering the possibility of casting a blank ballot or crossing the option 'none of the above'. Further, dissatisfaction with abstention penalties concern only a small number of citizens: 13–22 per cent of (only) young people who self-identify as non-voters, mostly white and male (Henn and Oldfield 2016, 1274) or people who had already a negative predisposition towards democracy (Singh 2018). It should not surprise us that anti-democrats and people from affluent backgrounds are dubious about the benefits of compulsory voting; after all, this is a very egalitarian measure that brings to the polls the less affluent. Hence, these objections do not trump the overall benefits of compulsory voting compared to voluntary voting systems: that of generally increasing (rather than decreasing) perceptions of democratic legitimacy (Birch 2009).

But the relation between electoral presence and political inclusion is not just a matter of perception. The presence of voters at the polls *does* produce parliaments and governments that are more responsive to citizens (Hill 2014). Here is how. Imagine a national election where all eligible voters, including the poor who usually abstain, show up at the polls and cast their ballots. The poor's potential to influence election results nudge party campaigns and platforms into directions that take into account their views and interests. As a result, policies that benefit them are squarely placed on the *electoral* and *legislative* agenda. To secure election or re-election, candidates and legislators are motivated to support poverty-alleviating or redistributive policies, as party behaviour is being conditioned by a bottom-up incentive to address the poor. Thus, by amplifying and broadening voter participation, universal turnout leads to more representative political agendas.

True, populism too succeeds in representing citizens that had been previously marginalised. But in doing so it brushes aside the plurality of individual opinions within 'the people' (Müller 2016). Mandatory representation instead does not come at the cost of compromising pluralism. Whereas populists claim to be the voice of the 'people' collapsing into that voice any differences that subsets of the people and individuals may have, mandatory voting produces representation that is majoritarian, not unitarian. Representation is generated through procedures of aggregation and deliberation, not through a symbolic embodiment or acclamatory confirmation of the people's will. With mandatory voting, the represented retain their individual preferences, they are not reduced into one indivisible whole. The plural voices of the represented are further reflected in the plurality of perspectives that parties and candidates bring into the representative assembly (especially in proportional systems). Hence, unlike populism, compulsory voting promotes a pluralistic principle of representation. And still, like populism, it does counteract the problem of underrepresentation.

In addition, in order to promote the representation of the people, populism advocates the exclusion of 'the elite' and, in the case of right-wing populism, of immigrants and other minorities; in other words, it involves a deliberate underrepresentation of another subset of the population. By contrast, universal turnout corrects embedded practices of exclusive representation without creating new ones. It produces representatives that respond to the perspectives, interests and opinions of the *full* spectrum of society, that is, neither only 'the people' nor only 'the elite' (whichever way each of these categories is defined). Put differently, it expands the scope and reach of representation in an inclusive but also *non-discriminatory* manner. Moreover, compared to equal yet voluntary voting, the principle of full

turnout ensures that representational *equality* is not simply a formal requirement of the democratic system, but a real one; it applies not only *de jure*, but also *de facto*. In other words, compulsory voting prevents material conditions from turning the formal equality to vote into a situation where only well-off citizens make use of that equal right.

Socioeconomic inequalities

The problem: populist promises of greater equality

So far, I have shown how populism and mandatory voting constitute two qualitatively different strategies for addressing the ills of demobilisation and underrepresentation. Yet, for many scholars, these two so-called *political grievances* are not the only type of grievances explaining the populist phenomenon. Economic and cultural grievances are cited as equally relevant, if not more so.

How important for populist mobilisation are cultural grievances? *Cultural grievances* include ‘the rise of immigration and the failure to culturally and socially integrate new minorities, especially of Muslim origin’ (Ivarsflaten 2008; see also Oesch 2008), as well as ‘a retro reaction’ to progressive values (Norris and Inglehart 2018). It has been claimed, however, that ‘what may look like a racist or xenophobic backlash may have its roots in economic anxieties and dislocations’ (Rodrik 2018, 25). Likewise, Guiso et al. argue that ‘populism does not have a *cultural cause*, but rather an *economic insecurity cause*, with an important and traceable *cultural channel*’ (Guiso, Herrera, and Morelli 2017, 41, emphasis in the original). In other words, cultural grievances may only be the political manifestation of reactions to economic shocks, a strategic way to channel economic anxiety into opposition for immigrants and refugees with different cultural and religious identities.

These observations create increasing support for the idea that the populist backlash originates in *economic grievances*. A growing number of scholars indeed point at the link between populism and macroeconomic changes, for example, welfare state retrenchment or wage repression (Guiso, Herrera, and Morelli 2017; Dal Bó et al. 2018). In fact, the rise of economic inequalities in Europe and the United States since the 1970s has been exacerbated by post-industrial developments and global trade practices, such as the outsourcing of manufacturing industries. As a result, local communities, especially semi-urban and rural ones, have seen a decrease in social mobility and an increase of economic insecurity (Bonikowski 2017). Moreover, the 2008 financial crisis created an unusual sense of combined inability for both governments and markets to provide economic security (Guiso, Herrera, and Morelli 2017). According to the economic-grievance model, then, voters are attracted to right-wing populist parties either *as a protest* against mainstream parties’ economic policies or indeed *as a preference* for populist economic policies (Rydgren 2005; Mudde 2007; Betz and Meret 2013). In response to this, many right-wing populist parties have adopted pro-welfare positions, although their overall economic agendas may remain pro-market, ambiguous, or even irrelevant for their political appeal (Ivarsflaten 2008; De Koster, Achterberg, and Van der Waal 2013).

Regardless of right-wing populist parties’ actual economic policies, it remains a given that the *rhetorical* promise of greater socioeconomic equality is key for populist mobilisation. The winning formula of populists is that they shake the established political order by bringing in radical ideas, new faces with little-to-no over-exposure to political office, a

willingness to violate basic norms and to upend the status quo (Bonikowski 2017, 204). Their program is appealing because it highlights and unequivocally condemns inequalities and offers an – often unreasonable – vision for how to overcome them. In the words of Benjamin Arditi (2007, 97): ‘Their individual gesture of unveiling present inequality and depicting it as unjust and unnecessary educates us in the promise of a seemingly impossible equality to come. It opens the way for emancipation’. However, unlike traditional left-wing calls for economic egalitarianism, populists base their claims not on class, but on popular sovereignty (Da Silva and Vieira 2018, 12). Because ‘the people’ is a fluid category with unclear borders, it is up to the populist leader to define these borders in economic but also in political, social and cultural terms. As a result, the populist promise of socioeconomic equality expends the universalist criterion of equality for all in favour of a particularistic claim of equality for (only those who constitute) ‘the people’; in combination with radical right ethno-nationalism, this particularistic claim for socioeconomic equality then easily transforms into support for welfare chauvinism.

The solution: egalitarian outcomes of universal turnout

In view of the questionable egalitarian promise of populism, my third and last argument is that compulsory voting is a more reliable tool for reducing socioeconomic inequalities compared to populist mobilisation. In what sense do high turnouts lead to more egalitarian policies? Firstly, we know that voters who turn out have a higher impact on policymaking than voters who abstain – this is because politicians pay closer attention to habitual voting groups (for a full overview of the relevant literature see Hill 2014, 137–141). When turnout is low, habitual voters are more likely to be ‘white, well-off, home-owning, educated, older and middle-class’, in other words, voters who are already better off (Chong and Mauricio 2008; Mahler 2008; Birch 2009; Fowler 2013). Conversely, when turnout is high, the active electorate is more socially diverse. Indeed, high turnout closes voting gaps associated with socioeconomic status,⁵ but also with other sources of inequality like ethnic origin and gender (Córdova and Rangel 2017). This makes governments and political parties more responsive to all citizens, not just the well-off.

What follows is that high turnouts lead to policy outputs that better serve the interests of typical non-voters. Many empirical case studies confirm the solid relationship between, on one hand, the demographic profile of voters who show up at the polls and, on the other, public policies that favour the wellbeing of these groups (e.g. Martin 2003, 111; Griffin and Newman 2005; Chong and Mauricio 2008; Mahler 2008; Gallego 2010; Peters and Ensink 2015). For example, in some US constituencies where the disadvantaged vote in higher numbers, there is more redistribution and higher amounts of welfare state assistance (Martin 2003).

A few historical examples also point to the same conclusions. In Australia, a hike in turnouts following the introduction of compulsory voting in 1924 brought more poor citizens to the polls and led to a ‘dramatic increase in pension spending’ (Fowler 2013).⁶ Similarly, in Switzerland, sanctions for non-voting in pre-WWII referenda increased support for leftist, redistributive policies, such as a guaranteed minimum wage, higher unemployment benefits and increased public sector spending (Bechtel, Hangartner, and Schmid 2016); the evidence is robust enough to suggest that compulsory voting may have single-handedly contributed to building the Swiss modern welfare state (Ibid., 765). In

general, as Sarah Birch (2009) has shown, high turnouts in compulsory voting settings are associated with lower wealth inequality (Birch 2009, 131). The overall picture here is that compulsory voting effectively causes more egalitarian socioeconomic outcomes.

As a result, a system where everyone votes produces less *sudden* demand for egalitarian socioeconomic policies. This is because such policies are supported systematically and consistently as a result of the way the political system is structured: with more electoral participation leading to more even responsiveness and policy outcomes. Because voters who habitually abstain tend to favour egalitarian policies, in mandatory systems political parties across the political spectrum are incentivised to campaign and vouch for these policies. In other words, compulsory voting systems are less likely to allow conditions where socioeconomic inequalities are so profound to fuel the success of right-wing populist parties.

Yet, some empirical studies challenge these expectations. They argue that under mandatory voting the share of invalid ballots, random ranking of candidates, and distance between voters' ideological and electoral preferences rise (Power and Garand 2007; Selb and Lachat 2009; Singh 2016). This in turn is seen as an indication that the policy responsiveness elicited by mandatory voting is either misplaced (in the case of ideological dissonance) or impossible (in the case of invalid ballots). How solid are these findings, and their interpretations? In the first case, it is possible that voters may deliberately select parties that are not closest to their ideological preferences but still close enough, because they may consider other factors, such as party size, party loyalty, candidate profile, and so on. Second, invalid ballots should be recognised as a permissible means to voice protest – along with blank ballots – in a system where abstention is eliminated as an 'exit' option (Uggla 2008; Martínez i Coma and Werner 2019). Besides, not only is the hike in spoiled votes much more correlated with the low stakes of a single contest, but the percentage of invalid votes is anyway less than half of the increase in voter turnout that the introduction of mandatory voting rules delivers (Kouba and Lysek 2016). In other words, it remains a fact that most marginalised voters do tend to cast valid and rather deliberate votes under mandatory voting and thus do indirectly affect policy outcomes.

This means that universal turnout is a *more reliable* predictor of egalitarian policies than populist success. True, populists may mobilise economic grievances and offer a promise of equality. Yet, it is very uncertain that they can deliver on that promise. This has to do not only with their lack of sufficient credentials in the field of economic governance. It is also a matter of populism's ambivalent commitment to egalitarian policies. A number of right-wing populist parties have in the past supported market liberal policies, others have argued against the welfare state and several of them have joined government coalitions that implemented neoliberal reforms (e.g. The Finns party in Finland). Hence, egalitarian economic policy is not a typical normative pillar of populist ideology.

Lastly, compulsory voting is a *more procedural* tool for achieving egalitarian policy outcomes compared to populism. It is not an ideological clarion call for introducing social policies or other substantive norms into a country's constitutional law. The legal obligation to vote is a relatively value-neutral electoral procedure that does have projected policy implications but does not directly promote substantive goals. I say 'relatively' value-neutral because there are still norms that inform its conception; but these are policy-independent, non-substantive, liberal-democratic norms such as universal and equal participation. By contrast, populism, while presumably being a democratic corrective, is by all means a threat to liberal norms and procedures. It creates two unitary

poles, the people and the elite, both of whom are defined in arbitrary and exclusivist terms. Worse yet, populism is replete with anti-procedural convictions that have the power to transform democracy into autocracy.

A general empirical objection

Is the claim that compulsory voting stifles the rise of populism supported by empirical evidence from cross-country comparisons? To be precise, how come most Latin American countries have compulsory voting legislation, and yet populism has swept across the continent since the 1990s?⁷ There is reason to believe that compulsory voting might have even facilitated the ascendance of populists to power, as it tends to redirect disaffected voters from an exit choice to voting for political outsiders (Carreras 2012). This observation, however, stumbles on two problematic assumptions.

The first concerns the type of Latin American populism, which is mostly ‘inclusionary’, in the sense of advocating political and socioeconomic inclusion for greater parts of society. By contrast, my argument draws on studies of voters and parties in European and Anglo-American settings, where populism has predominantly been ‘exclusionary’, pitched in nationalist terms and directed against aliens and cultural minorities (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). My argument is that compulsory voting is a good countermeasure against *exclusionary* or right-wing forms of populism, because contrary to them it creates broader and *de facto* political inclusion.

A second problem concerns the extent to which Latin American countries can count as typical compulsory voting settings. The form of penalties and enforcement practices in place shed doubt on that. Take for example Brazil. Abstention penalties have been affecting different professions and regions disproportionately, indicating a pattern of higher abstention among poorer regions or citizens that resembles the situation in voluntary voting settings (Power 2009; Cepaluni and Hidalgo 2016). True, turnouts in Brazil are generally higher than in voluntary voting settings, such as the US. Yet, at 79–81 per cent in the last twenty years (IDEA 2019) Brazilian turnouts fall much behind those in more robust compulsory voting countries such as Australia; and they have been further suppressed in the wake of the election of far-right populist Jair Bolsonaro (Iglesias 2018). Likewise, voter turnout in Peru in the election won by neo-populist Fujimori in 1990 dropped by almost 10 per cent compared to previous elections (IDEA 2019). Large voter turnout fluctuations indicate that these countries are imperfect cases for studying the implications of compulsory voting. They may actually offer additional evidence that lower turnout is associated with the rise of parties advocating inequality and exclusion.

We are therefore better advised to focus on countries with strongly enforced compulsory voting laws and consistently high (over 90 per cent) rates of turnout, such as Australia, Uruguay and Belgium. Uruguay has had a stable 90–92 per cent turnout since 1994 (IDEA 2019); importantly, it is one of the few Latin American countries that has eluded the populist tide in the continent. Australia, with turnout consistently above 91 per cent, has also been spared the populist turmoil that has hit other Commonwealth countries in the past few years (notably the US and the UK). The same is true for Belgium. Right-wing populist parties such as One Nation and Vlaams Belang have had only minimum success, especially compared to the popularity of similar parties in Belgium’s neighbours France and the Netherlands. In sum, a closer look at the structure

and enforcement of abstention penalties in various compulsory voting settings, in addition to the different types and the comparatively low success of populism, can dispel scepticism about whether universal turnout depresses right-wing populism.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that compulsory voting, understood as the legal enforcement of universal voting turnout, can tackle some of the reasons that have contributed to the success of right-wing populist parties in the last years. It addresses the ills of working-class voter demobilisation, underrepresentation and socioeconomic inequalities in a way that is more inclusive, non-discriminatory and pluralist than the populist recipe. As a result, compulsory voting is both a *legitimate* from a liberal-democratic viewpoint and, by all likelihood, an *effective* tool of democratic self-defence. This argument has two further implications for empirical and normative research.

First, it suggests that there is much to be gained by combining empirical studies on compulsory voting with those of right-wing populism. Since high turnouts minimise the demand-side for right-wing populist parties by anticipating and blocking out the problems that populists politicise, one can safely hypothesise that having compulsory voting legislation in place will prevent the rise of right-wing populist parties *a priori*. Likewise, it is valid to assume that countries with voluntary voting systems that face a resurgence of populism may successfully fight back right-wing populist parties *a posteriori* by introducing compulsory voting or similar turnout-boosting instruments. It would be worthwhile for future empirical research to examine these hypotheses in relation to specific cases and produce more context-sensitive evidence about how compulsory voting hinders support for right-wing populist parties.

A second, more normative, inference is that democratic theorists may be better advised to examine instruments that increase voting turnout instead of delving into the mobilising, inclusivist and egalitarian promises of populism. Both democrats and populists seem to be driven by a justified concern about increasing political and socioeconomic inequalities. Yet, as this article has shown, populism fails to deliver on its promises: populist voter mobilisation is not universal, its model of representation is not pluralist, and its egalitarian promises are ambiguous and selective. By contrast, universal turnout can achieve the same goals, minus the normative costs of endorsing populism. Thus, this paper offers fresh, empirically grounded reasons for democratic theorists to criticise populism. At the same time, it offers an argument in favour of compulsory voting not only as a tool of democratic egalitarianism, but also as an instrument of democratic self-defence.

Notes

1. When referring to right-wing populist parties, I assume that these are *radical* right-wing populist parties. I focus on right-wing rather than generic populist parties for two reasons: their pronounced exclusionary rhetoric, and empirical knowledge about their voters.
2. I am referring here to mobilization only in the narrow sense of *electoral* mobilization, that is, mobilization *initiated by political parties*, not by popular movements or leaders in general, and expressed by *turning up to vote*, rather than by engaging in broader types

of political action. My thanks go to one anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to clarify this point.

3. Kemmers (2017) examines what influences a disaffected voter's decision to abstain or not. He suggests that channelling one's discontent to a non-traditional political party instead of abstaining depends on a voter's belief that parties and governments are key players in the political power game (as compared to, for example, economic actors). But because such belief in power transparency is losing ground, disaffected voters may turn more and more to 'non-arena' politics or become attracted to more radical anti-establishment parties that capture general antiparty sentiment (cf. Bélanger 2004). In other words, it is suggested that we are likely to see a further increase in abstention or radicalisation in the future.
4. Institutional context matters too. It has been argued, for example, that voters are less satisfied with democracy when compulsory voting is used in a centralized majoritarian system that provides few opportunities for the representation of diverse interests (Berggren et al. 2004).
5. Notice, however, that compulsory voting may not produce even socioeconomic turnouts lest it is combined with monetary penalties for abstention. With data from Brazil, Cepaluni and Hidalgo (2016) show that nonmonetary penalties tend to attract wealthy voters in higher numbers than poor voters.
6. I am grateful to Lisa Hill for drawing my attention to this example.
7. Some form of compulsory voting exists in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Peru, which have respectively seen the rise of such populist leaders as Kirchner, Lula, Correa and Fujimori from the 1990s until the mid-2010s.

Acknowledgement

The author thanks Lisa Hill, participants in workshops in Geneva, Princeton and Uppsala, and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on earlier drafts.

Notes on contributions

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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