



Degree Program in Politics, Philosophy and
Economics

Course of Political Science

**Compulsory voting: an interference in
democratic freedoms or a corrective measure
for participation disparities?**

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Academic Year 2022/2023

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Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

Abstentionism has lately become a focal point of attention in the public debate due to its emergence in European and non-European democracies. I was in Brussels on the 25th of September 2022 when the media started reporting the declining percentage of voters in the Italian elections. I immediately started developing an interest in the topic. Soon after, I discovered that Belgium was one of the first countries to introduce a tool against abstentionism itself: Compulsory Voting.

Indeed, this project aims to investigate compulsory voting, its implications, its effects on society and correlated variables, and its effectiveness in the fight against the main problem - the rise in the number of individuals that decide not to vote.

The first chapter of this Thesis is an introductory one: the very definition of the phenomenon of abstentionism is present, together with the explanation of the voting trend throughout the history of the Italian Republic.

Instead, the following paragraph is dedicated to introducing compulsory voting by providing its definition by Lever (2010) and giving examples of the states where it is currently applied.

Then there is a press review concerning the major opinions, both in favor and against compulsory voting: in this part, significant contributions of politicians (such as Obama, Hillary Clinton), political scientists (such as De Mucci, Gosnell, Lever, Dormagen) and scholars are brought together in order to give the broadest vision possible to go beyond the theoretical framework and understand how the tool is perceived in reality.

After discussing both sides, the chapter turns again to numbers by showing the substantial rise of abstentionism that democracies have experienced in the last decades: even though the results are not homogeneous, the trend corresponds to a decline in participation in most of the analyzed countries.

From here on, it is essential to state the reasons behind the choice whether to vote or not that citizens have to make and what are the variables that may influence it. The choice may depend on different circumstances or better-called models, which are correlated to education, socialization, exposure to politics, rational consideration, distrust in the institutions, etc.

In the final part of this first chapter, one of the main reasons behind the concern about the issue of abstentionism is explained: the distortion it causes in representativeness. The latter is, indeed, at the basis of a democratic system and should be preserved as much as possible to guarantee the well-functioning of a healthy state.

For what concerns chapter two, the first topic brought to the attention will be political participation, which may be interpreted from another perspective than just the act of voting, its importance, and how it has been decreasing worldwide, as shown by the data given by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).

Indeed, the following two paragraphs will use those data to show either the decrease in first and second order elections. For what concerns the former -mainly parliamentary elections- five European Republics (namely France, Italy, Republic of North Macedonia, Romania and Germany) have been chosen to demonstrate the most significant trends, which can be both decreasing or increasing according to the different countries.

Regarding second-order elections, which do not serve to elect the central government, Italy and Germany will be the leading examples thanks to their territorial subdivisions into regions that possess a certain extent of autonomy and decentralized government created through periodic elections.

The second part of chapter two is entirely dedicated to the inquiry into the correlation between abstentionism and social status: the former is, indeed, influenced by the latter, and the higher the individual's status, the more likely he is to be used to vote; the lower the social class he comes from, the more prone he will be to abstain from voting.

Social status does also seem to influence voting preferences, and paragraph 2.2.2 revolves around the issue of class voting -that is, the phenomenon which leads people who belong to the same or similar social condition to vote for the same party or candidate- and whether it still influences nowadays' society.

The economic and social condition, then, is also analyzed through the lenses of the different levels of education, meaning the academic education of citizens and the effects of them on the individual's political behavior: the aim is to understand if better-educated citizens tend to stick to a particular approach to politics, which is different from less educated individuals, and how it influences the choice to vote.

Lastly, the end of the chapter is devoted to finding out which social class produces more political abstainers, with evidence from class studies led in both the United Kingdom's and Argentina's populations.

Chapter three, which is also the final chapter of this Thesis, is entirely dedicated to explaining the compulsory voting system: a definition is provided, together with a list of all the different levels of enforcement and sanctions applied in all the countries that have introduced the system or are still using it.

Then, evidence from those countries is brought through data of registered turnout in the tool's introduction period. The countries taken into consideration belong to different frameworks to understand whether compulsory voting can be effective on different grounds.

Belgium will be used as a case study due to the fact that it has been enforcing compulsory voting since 1893 for men (Nerinx, 2018) and since 1948 for women (Rubio-Marin, 2014). Therefore, an inquiry will be led on whether it brings discrimination in representation or not.

Finally, alternative tools to compulsory voting, such as the Voting Advice Applications, the Motor Voter proposal and online voting, will be analyzed in order to understand whether they could be efficient competitors to compulsion.

1.1.1 An introduction to the issue: Abstentionism

The latest Italian elections, held on the 25th of September 2022, registered a turnout of 63.91% (CISE, 2022), the lowest percentage since the birth of the Italian Republic. This data quickly became impressive since it demonstrates the rising of one of the most problematic issues a republic can experience: abstentionism.

The latter has grown by 9% since the previous elections in 2018, which provides a catastrophic scenario compared to the statistics of the history of Italian polling from 1948 to 1979.

As shown by the table below, during this period of time, with affluence to the polls consisting of more than 90% of the voting population, abstentionism was not even considered an issue (Cerruto, 2012).

The Italian Republic, indeed, has always prided itself on an extremely high level of turnout from its beginning, as shown by data.

However, from 1979, and mainly after operation Mani Pulite in 1993, political participation experienced a dramatic decrease that led, as a result, to the before-mentioned and latest turnout.

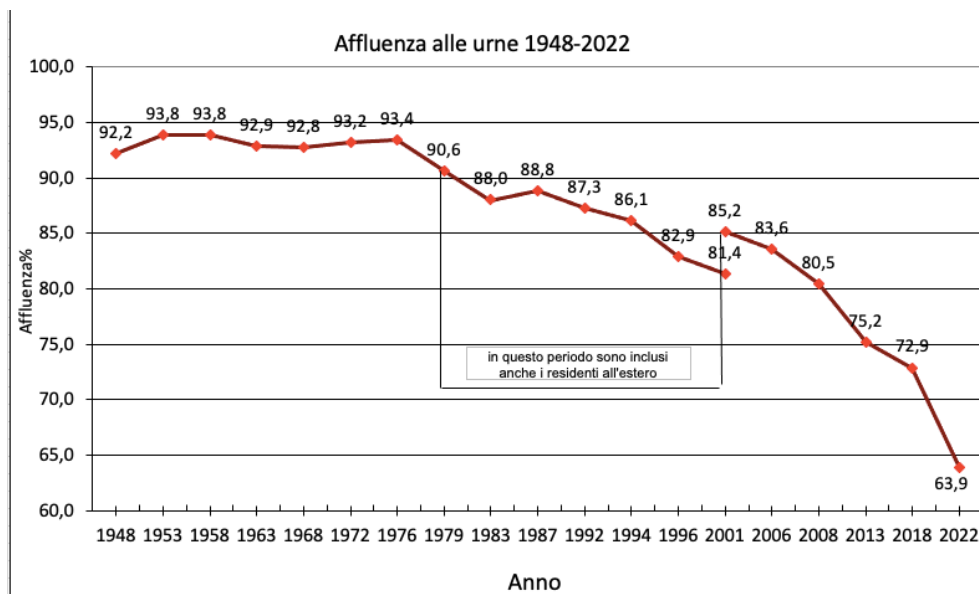


Figure 1: Voters turnout 1948-2022

Source: Improta, Emanuele, Angelucci (2022) 'Fuga dalle urne: affluenza mai così bassa nella storia della Repubblica'. Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali.

Moreover, even the latest regional elections in Lazio and Lombardia confirm this decreasing trend, since the former registered a turnout of 37.20%, against the former 66.55% in 2018, while the latter a 41.67%, against the former 73.11%.

If abstentionism was not considered an interesting object of research before, it now represents a mandatory subject of study: this problematic phenomenon has led to the opening of a debate on how to improve the relationship between voters and representatives, in order to regain a higher level of participation. One of the tools introduced in the discussion is compulsory voting, which is defined as

a system of laws and/or norms mandating that enfranchised citizens turn out to vote, often accompanied by (a) a system of compulsory voter registration and (b) penalties for non-compliance, usually fines or the denial of state-provided benefits. (Jackman 2001).

However, political scientists do not unanimously agree on the utility of compulsory voting, rather lots of them (as Dean and Lever) underline its negative sides. In contrast, others consider it helpful to partly solve the problem of abstentionism.

This chapter will be dedicated to analyzing the debate mentioned above, considering the literature's significant contribution and the experts' opinions on the field. Both sides and views will be explained in order to understand the arguments in favor of the measure and those against it, starting with the former.

1.2 The debate on compulsory voting: an introductory explanation

One of the first and major contributions to the issue of abstentionism and compulsory voting comes from Arend Lijphart, who in 1996 sent a document to the American Political Science Association underlying the growing phenomenon of low turnout and defining it as a 'serious democratic problem' (Lijphart 1996). Abstentionism, according to Lijphart, represented the beginning of a vicious circle that leads to inequality in democracy: fewer voters necessarily mean that participation is biased, leading to a distortion of representation since the non-voting population will not find their ideas expressed by the elected politicians. Indeed, the smaller the number of participants in political activity, the greater the inequality in participation (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 238). This distortion usually favors the higher classes since they tend to be the most politicized ones and, therefore, the majority of the voting population.

Studies, indeed, show that turnout and economic status are positively correlated (Gosnell 1927, 98), equally to turnout and high level of education.

Compulsory voting is, by definition, recognized as one of the most functional institutional tools to fight the decline of turnout since it obliges voters to present to the polls to avoid possible sanctions or punishments without imposing the duty to vote since usually blank ballots are permitted. Indeed, it should be correct to talk about compulsory participation rather than compulsory voting.

On the other hand, Lever (Lever, 2010) explains the concept of compulsory voting through six major steps. The first two resume the already mentioned concepts that low turnout means unequal turnout, and, in turn, an unequal turnout reflects and reinforces social disadvantage. These two lead to the validation of compulsion as a proper resolution since it is much more effective than all other possible institutional measures, such as organizing the polls during weekends, that would only slightly facilitate affluence.

The other points will be later analyzed since they discuss the spill over benefits of compulsory voting, the legitimacy of the concerned tool due to the fact that it does not violate the freedom of expression (as already mentioned, the blank ballot is permitted), and solve the problem of free riders, that is, people who do not take the risk of voting but still benefit from the public decision, which is a morally wrong practice according to the author.

Compulsory voting can then be regarded as one of the oldest tools to fight abstentionism. Due to its early introduction, it has developed in several different forms that can vary between just a moral imposition felt by the voter, or economic sanctions if the individual does not present to the polls or even the impossibility of applying to public offices for a determined period of time.

Mandatory voting may seem like a concept that contradicts one of the prerequisites of democracy, that can be defined as a form of government based on freedom of expression and action; however, this tool is widespread worldwide and is even used in European countries familiar to us.

The primary examples are Belgium, Greece, and Luxemburg. The former represents the longest-standing example, but it must be mentioned that the obligation is now becoming more formal in several countries.

For what concerns the rest of the world, the continent where mandatory voting is most widespread, even if in some cases it is not applied, or it is applied without the use of sanctions, is South America, with more than twelve countries.

Nations that still apply economic sanctions, instead, are Brazil and Australia, where a symbolic fine is imposed on non-voters. The different sanctions and their level of enforcement will be discussed later on.

Consequently, compulsory voting has roots in several countries. However, this process of development has not happened without critiques and oppositions on the legitimacy of the instrument and its use: some experts regard it as a preservatory tool for the proper development of democracy, while others see it as an undemocratic imposition on voters that should be left free to decide whether to participate in the civic life or not, but even to use the non-vote as a political protest.

1.3 The debate on compulsory voting: the pros

The debate on compulsory voting has spread worldwide; here, the main arguments supporting its introduction will be exposed. First of all, data show that six out of the top ten countries with the highest turnout percentage adopt the compulsory voting system (De Mucci 2019).

One of the first and utmost positive effects we can assume from the above assumption is, then, that compulsory voting is working correctly, at least in some democracies, which makes it appealing for countries that are experiencing low turnout levels.

One of those countries is the United States of America. In 2015, indeed, former president Barack Obama delivered a speech, talking for the first time publicly about his idea of introducing mandatory voting in America. Obama stated that "it would be transformative if everybody voted" (Obama, 2015) since the categories from which most non-voters come are young, lower-income minority groups, which are, according to him, kept voluntarily away from politics (Obama, 2015).

From this brief intervention, the first main claim of the political debate can be drawn up, that is, the one about equal representation: by imposing the act of voting, everybody will be forced to express his political opinion, which can not be put aside or not taken into consideration anymore. Compulsion, so, will not only lead to higher turnout but also to better representativeness of the population. Moreover, the imposition of voting on the whole entitled population would imply that no class distinction would be made since all social classes would be equally obliged to vote, drastically reducing the inequality in politics. Attention to the participation of minorities and low social classes was also paid by Hillary Clinton during her speech at George Washington University in 2015, where she also underlined how compulsory voting could be useful to fight apathy and abstentionism.

Clinton's words lead to another interesting observation which regards the rising indifference to what concerns the country's political life, which comes from a sense of disappointment towards the system. Political apathy, that can be considered as the disinterest towards political activity, seems to lower with the process of aging, meaning that individuals do not show particular interest towards politics until adolescence; once they turn into adults they tend to be more and more connected with political issues, until they reach 65 years of age, and from then on, they slowly step away again, leading apathy to rise (Dormagen, 2019). However, this trend of detaching from politics would be interrupted with the introduction of mandatory voting: indeed, if the voter had to constantly present to the polls it would be less likely for him to completely alienate from the field in question, since in order to vote it is required to have some sort of political knowledge.

The second point raised by President Obama in the mentioned speech is the influence of money in politics. Indeed, he stated that introducing compulsion would "counteract money more than anything" (Obama, 2015) since it will

tend to marginalize the importance of the element of money in politics: if all the population is required to vote by default, there is no need for parties and interest groups to invest in campaigns to influence it and persuade it regarding the choice of going to the polls, since there is “evidence that compulsory voting influences whether campaign efforts pay off” (Singh, 2021). According to Gosnell, indeed, this would lead elections to be “less costly, more honest, and more representative” (Gosnell 1930, 185). The representative aspect, instead, reflects the fact that parties would be more prone to propose issues that affect a larger number of people since the goal would no longer be to convince the individuals inside a specific voting target, but rather to involve the largest number possible.

Furthermore, the increase in representation would probably eliminate the danger of weak levels of support towards a government created after elections that experience low turnout, such as the 2022 Italian elections. The Meloni government, indeed, took the stage with 44% of valid votes -given a 64% turnout- corresponding to support only by a 28% ($0.44 * 0.64$) of the voting age population. These governments are questioned in their representative nature: Can they respect the definition of ‘government of, by, and for the people’ (Lincoln, 1863) if a great number of individuals do not actually participate in voting for it? The issue of the loss of popular support is one of the most problematic variables in a democratic system, where it should represent its basis.

Another interesting implication is a spill over one: by turning the vote mandatory, the voting population is obliged to get in touch with the political culture of their country and better their education in the area. Political competence is, indeed, defined as the ability to reproduce the specific language of politicians and interpret the logic put in practice in the political field. Political competence and politicization are strictly linked. Usually, those who possess a higher level of competence have access to more information and will develop further competence and interest in the issue (Dormagen, 2019).

The above-mentioned correlation between education and turnout, however, would be overcome and equalized with mandatory voting. Indeed, it may be considered a tool to ‘improve the quality of an individual's vote’ (Jakee and Sun, 2006, 5).

This issue is also raised in several articles in American journals, such as *The Foreign Affairs*' "America Needs Compulsory Voting", which further underlines how compulsion would probably solve the collective action problem, that is, the situation in which everyone would be better off by doing something but they fail to do so (the perfect example is voting), and would also “generate better, fairer, and more legitimate election results and public policies” (Fowler, 2020).

Turning to Lever's theory, we can consider two main assumptions. The first one lays on the fact that compulsory voting de facto does not imply an intrusion in the voter's freedom of expression: even if the individual is physically obliged to vote, he can still abstain from expressing a clear preference by making a blank ballot. In this way, the

state does not command citizens to vote for a specific candidate that the person may not appreciate, even if the turnout would still increase (Lever, 2010).

The second point in favor of Lever's analysis concerns free riding, which is the practice of taking advantage of a public good without participating in its maintenance. In this case, free riders are identified as non-voters, and the public good is the elected government. Free riding is depicted as a 'selfish and immoral' (Lever, 2010) practice that the advent of compulsion would wholly cut off since no one could be represented by someone without taking the risk of choosing a candidate.

1.4 The debate on compulsory voting: the cons

One of the most popular arguments against compulsion, which has already been mentioned in the former paragraph among the points in favor, concerns the issue of mandatory voting as against individual freedom: opposers preserve the nature of voting as a right and not a duty nor an imposition. Compulsory voting would represent an undemocratic imposition since the state can only oblige citizens to conduct determined actions only when not performing them would cause harm to themselves or others. Indeed, not presenting to the polls does not represent a danger to the individual, and this is the reason why, according to the opposers, it must not be made compulsory, since 'the application of such a law would be a violation of the freedom of citizens associated with democratic elections' (De Mucci, 2019).

In an article published by Open Democracy regarding the debate in the United Kingdom, the danger of introducing mandatory voting is underlined as even if it would certainly lead the majority to the polls, it would not eliminate the detachment from parties or politics in general, indeed, "there remains a significant difference between voting and being engaged with parties and supporting their ideas" (Dean, 2007). Moreover, it seems that its introduction would simply shift the attention from political participation to turnout only, without actually paying attention to the re-democratization of the process (Dean, 2007). Finally, the author of the article in question, "Compulsory voting: the case against", underlines how compulsion would completely exclude the democratic freedom not to choose.

Moreover, forcing people that are not interested in politics to vote may also be counterproductive; indeed, the American political theorist Jason Brennan claims that 'making all citizens vote is like forcing the drunk to drive' (Brennan and Hill 2014, p. 5). This is because, according to him, democracy leads the citizens to possess the right also to be ignorant or not informed about issues, such as political ones. Forcing a politically ignorant person to vote would mean obliging him to do something he has no competence or ability to do. Indeed, the competence principle is another issue Brennan uses to evaluate his thesis and confirm the fact that voting should not be made compulsory, and he particularly refers to the fact that voting allows citizens to impose their will or authority on others once they reach a majority.

The idea is that anyone or any deliberative body that exercises power over anyone else has an obligation to use that power in good faith, and has the obligation to use that power competently. If they're not going to use it in good faith, and they're not going to use it competently, that's a claim against them having any kind of authority or any kind of legitimacy (Brennan, 2018).

These arguments against mandatory voting are rooted in Mill's theories about democracy and revolve around two main principles held by people: the self-interest principle and the self-government one.

Putting them in the logic of compulsion, it can be stated that, for what concerns the former, an individual holds several rights related to the right to vote, which implies the right to representation, to join a party, to support a cause, but also the right not to agree with any of the elected politicians, nor to identify with any ideal, and to be dissatisfied by the government. By stating this, it can be deduced that sometimes people have interests that go against voting in that precise situation: either because they claim they do not identify with any candidate in elections or even because they identify with all of them, meaning that they would be satisfied by each of them going to power, so their vote would be unnecessary.

Both possible situations lead us to oppose compulsion since 'unless people have a duty to pursue their self-interest by voting, there is no justification for forcing them' (Lever, 2010).

The debate on compulsory voting in America has brought some exponents to reply to Obama's opinion on the issue, and an example of a counterargument is Ron Paul's. Paul is a former U.S. Representative from Texas, and during an interview, he expressed the idea that compulsory voting would actually make democracy worse because the "51% would become a dictator, and dictate on anybody else", leading the opinions of the minorities to be completely put aside. Paul's point underlines how, by letting individuals decide whether to vote, minor or unheard groups would have more chance to become relevant to public opinion.

Another claim held by opposers of mandatory voting is the one regarding the spectrum of different forms of political participation other than the practice of voting. Considering that a decline in turnout is an existing phenomenon and political dissatisfaction is widespread among the population, "the myth of apathy" (De Mucci, 2019) has developed among experts that describe the growing distance between voters and politics. In this view, citizens are seen as completely uninterested and indolent in taking action against urgent issues such as those concerning the field of politics.

However, as De Mucci analyses, voting is just one way of expressing political participation, 'and, from some perspectives, not an especially important or attractive' (Pateman, 1970).

Even if some portions of the population do not find their way of political expression in the right to vote, this does not correspond to a decrease in democratic values. (De Mucci, 2019) Indeed, individuals still participate in protests, sit-ins, boycotting, and demonstrations, which are a public way of expressing one's personal opinion. In this light, it can be stated that it is not always necessary to vote if the individual finds a path to participate in the country's political life through other means, making the very act of presenting to the polls a marginal one.

1.5 The rise of abstentionism in democracies in the last decades

Trends show that turnout has decreased in twenty-three out of thirty-six established democracies since 1945 (Alfaro-Redondo, Ronald 2017).

Indeed, a study conducted on turnout in established democracies between 1945 and 1999 depicts the decline in turnout, especially in specifically established democracies where elections have been held continuously between 1945 and 1999. Therefore, this study aimed to demonstrate the trend of both the decrease in political participation and, consequently, the rise in abstentionism.

But this trend is also depicted by the data offered by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), which is also helpful to understand that the trend is variable across democracies.

Country	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	Trend
Canada	70	72	68	67	60	56	-
Denmark	78	87	86	85	82	83	=
Finland	76	85	82	79	70	69	-
France	71	67	67	64	61	50	-
Germany	84	83	86	79	74	73	-
UK	79	74	74	73	72	58	-
Iceland	91	89	89	90	87	87	=
Ireland	74	74	82	76	70	68	-
Israel	79	82	81	81	85	86	-
Japan	74	71	72	71	67	62	-
New Zeland	91	84	83	86	79	76	-
Norway	78	83	80	83	76	76	-
Sweedeen	77	83	87	86	81	79	=
Switzerland	61	53	61	40	36	39	-
USA	59	62	54	52	53	55	-
Average	76.1	76.6	76.8	74.1	70.2	67.8	

Figure 2: Levels of Turnout from the 1950s to the 2000s

Table created by the author based on data taken from Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) Voter Turnout Database

As can be deduced by Figure 2, political participation through turnout experienced an alternate path in almost all countries between the 1950s and 1970s, while a clear and constant downward trend happened between 1980 and

2000, as shown by the average values. In the beginning, the average turnout level of the mentioned democracies worldwide was 76.1%, while the latest considered elections registered an average of 67.8%, which means a loss of more or less 8 percentage points from the beginning of the gathered data. However, it must be mentioned that some democracies, such as Italy, Spain and Belgium, are missing from the table.

Moreover, the table's last column shows the trend according to each country, which could be negative if depicted by the sign "-" or positive if depicted by the sign "=". As shown by the table, only three countries out of fifteen analyzed by the study report a growing participation trend, and they are Sweden, Iceland and Denmark.

1.6 To vote or not to vote?

Once it has been ascertained that abstentionism is a real existing phenomenon in democracies around the world, we need to take a step back and, before investigating the reasons why individuals decide not to vote, the variables behind deciding to do it are important to know.

The act of voting can be explained through different models, which are the resource model, the mobilization model, the socialization model, the rational choice model, the psychological model, and the political-institutional model.

Aside from the first one mentioned, the resource model, which links participation to education, income and social status, and will be further investigated in the following chapter, a brief explanation of the others will be done now.

According to the mobilizational model, the main idea behind the choice to vote is that citizens are influenced by parties, politicians, social movements and interest groups to go to the polls (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993).

This means that the population undergoes a process of "politicization", being exposed to a sort of convincing campaign which can either be active by participating in activities which can be religious groups, union membership or passive, that is, receiving informative phone calls or seeing campaign advertisement on social media (Smets and van Ham, 2012).

A similar view also comes from the socialization model and the psychological model. The former links the choice to vote to the influence of parents, friends and individuals around us with whom we have discussed and debated about politics. This debate has led us to acknowledge information and forged our tendency to vote or not (Smets and van Ham, 2012).

The latter, instead, focuses more on the individual's cognitive abilities. Indeed, this model takes as variables directly influencing turnout party identification, political knowledge and political interests, meaning that the more a person decides to educate himself regarding politics, the more it is likely that the individual will vote (Smets and van Ham, 2012). Other issues that it takes into consideration as positively linked to turnout are trust in institutions and in democracy: if an individual has faith in the system he is required to vote for, he will more probably do it (Bélanger and Nadeau, 2005).

On the other hand, we have the rational choice model, which is based on the assumption that voting implies a cost-benefit calculus, and, in order for people to vote, the benefits should outweigh the costs (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). So, the decision to present to the polls comes from an analysis of the circumstances, which also depends on the perceived benefits of doing it, the propensity of the individual, the past turnout, and the economic situation (Smets and van Ham, 2012).

Last but not least, the political-institutional model must be mentioned here and analyzed in depth later on due to its correlation to the main topic of this project, namely compulsory voting. This view, indeed, associates the choice to vote with some institutional variables, such as the closeness of elections, meaning that the more an individual feels like he can influence the outcome, the more likely he will vote (Smets and van Ham, 2012), which also depends on the structure of the political system and the number of parties it presents. Other than voter facilitation rules and compulsory voting itself, that makes it more accessible or even mandatory to vote, depending on which one is applied (Smets and van Ham, 2012).

After this introduction, we can now turn to the central hypothesis that can explain the reasons behind the choice of an individual to abstain from voting.

First of all, it must be restated that the "myth of apathy" (De Mucci, 2019) is a major explicative issue behind the trend: people seem to feel more disappointed and disenchanted with what concerns politics. Furthermore, the perception that their vote would not change the global situation of the country, the unlikeness towards the political system, and the gap between voters and elected remain among the most significant causes behind abstentionism. However, it is not proven in literature the reasons why this feeling of dissatisfaction should bring to the decision not to vote rather than mobilize and try to change the situation (Kostelka and Blais, 2021).

One of the other variables involved in this decline seems, instead, to lay in young initiation (Franklin et al., 2004), that is, the phenomenon of introducing the future voting generation to the field of political participation. Indeed, the very choice behind the vote is assumed to depend also on social linkages:

The acquisition of these linkages lowers the costs of voting for new voters, and the need to drum up support for one's potentially winning coalition motivates established voters (and especially their interest groups) to seek out potential voters and provide them with the social linkages they need (Plutzer, 2002).

Young initiation interferes with this process by prematurely involving young individuals in the electoral field without letting them develop a substantial interest that would lower the cost of voting and lead to a decrease in

the inclination to present to the polls. So, the education of people into the habit of voting is a major influence in future turnouts of the country.

Young individuals are also involved in another hypothesis behind the rise of abstentionism: generational replacement. According to a study conducted by Blais and Kostelka, young individuals tend to be less prone to voting than older individuals, and this trend started from the 1960s. From then on, following also the changes in lifestyles of youth, young individuals started developing different values and social norms, which seem to have partially excluded civic duty and participation through the vote, meaning that, 'in contrast to older generations, new generations consider citizenship more as a right than as a duty and increasingly prefer direct forms of participation, such as protests or boycotts, to voting' (Dalton, 2008; Coffé and Lippe, 2010), leading to the increase in worldwide abstentionism across democracies.

Moreover, another variable taken into consideration to explain abstentionism is the institutional change undertaken by societies: citizens in the last decades, indeed, have experienced a rise in the number of times they are requested to vote due to shorter terms of office, frequent referendums, the introduction of regional and European institutions, etc. (Kostelka and Blais, 2021). This increase in voting opportunities have the opposite effect on voters: 'the more often voters get mobilized, the less powerful the mobilization message becomes' (Kostelka and Blais, 2021), meaning that voters will be less prone to present to the polls frequently, and will feel like if they do it once it will be enough, and will see fewer positive outcomes if they do it often.

Furthermore, another factor mentioned in the public debate is the lack of party cohesiveness: the growing fragmentation between parties in party systems leads to a more significant number of similar proposals among them, leading the elector to have the perception that each of them provides a similar point of view and there would be no functional outcome in voting for one of them rather than the others.

Consequently, this leads to another aspect: the loss of the party's capability to mobilize the population and convince the voters to give them their preferences. People, indeed, are always less persuaded by supporting one faction instead of another because politics seems to be losing its appeal.

This is proven in Wilford's study, which demonstrates how a country's party system influences turnout: "a highly polarized party system with few parties spurs individuals to vote, while a system with low levels of polarization and many parties reduces incentives to vote" (Wilford, 2017).

1.7 Abstentionism and the distortion of representativeness

As previously mentioned, Lijphart and Lever questioned whether abstentionism has a major impact on politics and in which way. According to the former, the distortion of representativeness due to the inequality between participants' social classes is the most urgent side of the phenomena.

The two central claims made by Lijphart are that 'low voter turnout means unequal and socioeconomically biased turnout' and that 'unequal turnout spells unequal political influence' (Lijphart, 1996).

The former statement refers to evidence showing that when turnout decreases, most non-voters form part of lower and, consequently, less educated social classes. At the same time, highly educated individuals tend to preserve their habit of voting.

On the one hand, high-class individuals will keep on being politically active and will be used to being involved in the political field and actively expressing their preferences in this sense.

On the other hand, low social classes, corresponding to the less educated individuals, will not be led to be familiar with voting and tend to be less prone to develop appropriate knowledge and acquiescence.

This circle also confirms the second claim, that is, the one concerning differences in political influence: high social classes, being the majority of the voters, will find their ideas expressed by the representatives and will so see their interests protected by the ruling class.

On the contrary, individuals belonging to lower social classes, being the most inclined to turn into abstainers due to their lack of political education, will be cut off from the decisional and representative process and will find it harder to have their interests safeguarded.

The inequality of representation and influence are not randomly distributed but systematically biased in favor of more privileged citizens-those with higher incomes, greater wealth, and better education-and against less advantaged citizens. (Lijphart, 1996).

Moreover, Lever too restates the main issue by saying that

Lower turnout seems to threaten the legitimacy of a country's government and electoral system because it significantly increases the likelihood that governments will reflect a minority, rather than a majority, of registered voters and of the voting population itself. (Lever, 2010).

The extreme consequence of this distortion in representativeness is the problem with the support towards the elected government when turnout reaches minimum levels. If voters do not reach a decent threshold, it may be questioned whether the representatives have gained enough support and actually represent the country or only a privileged portion of it.

In conclusion of this first chapter, the existence of the phenomena of abstentionism has been stated, together with the reasons why it can be considered a problematic issue that brings adverse effects on democratic systems. This brings us back to the main research question, which investigates the resolution of the issue by introducing a compulsory voting system.

Chapter 2

2.1.1 The decrease in political participation

Political participation, being a fundamental issue in society, has been defined in several different ways, but it can overall be summed up generally as 'citizens' activities affecting politics' (van Deth, 2021), or more precisely, it can be depicted as the set of actions performed by citizens aimed at influencing or supporting government and politics (Milbrath, 1981). The vital element to underline is the effort put in by the population in a political system. Indeed, as van Deth states, political participation is to be seen primarily as an activity, that is, something which involves the action of doing something, then as voluntary, meaning that there is no obligation to perform it; additionally, it can be considered as non-professional, more an amateur activity detached from professional figures; and finally it concerns the political field (van Deth, 2021).

Political participation saw an initial expansion since it first belonged to upper-class male individuals who had the means to educate themselves and access political opportunities other than the right to vote. Later on, with the introduction of universal suffrage, political participation reached not only male citizens of all economic conditions but also all females, who could now present to the polls to express their preferences but also demonstrate and participate in public political events.

In the beginning, then, political participation was seen as a new opportunity to manifest ideas and report certain conditions, engaging the majority of the population who were enthusiastic about taking an active part, in a certain way, in the political process. As already mentioned, indeed, taking Italy as an example, its political participation through the vote used to be between 80% and 95% in the initial period of the Republic, while it reached 64% in 2022.

This data shows that the perception of the importance of participation in political life has evolved in a negative sense over the decades. If initially it was regarded as a precious gift obtained through long-lasting battles aimed at being recognized and acquiring importance in the political stage, it gradually lost its significance in the eyes of the population.

This trend also seems to be confirmed globally by the Report on Voter Turnout by Country 2023 published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), which states that most countries have reported lower voter turnout in the latest elections than in those held 30 years ago. The Report will be later analyzed in depth since it is particularly interesting to understand the similarities and differences between countries concerning participation.

2.1.2 The decrease in turnout in democracies in first order elections

In this paragraph, data on the decrease in turnout in parliamentary elections of European democracies will be analyzed to prove the decline in political participation through the vote.

The countries considered are France, Italy, the Republic of North Macedonia, Romania and Germany. They have been chosen according to the significance of their results and to show the differences displayed between them in the decrease in turnout if they have experienced it.

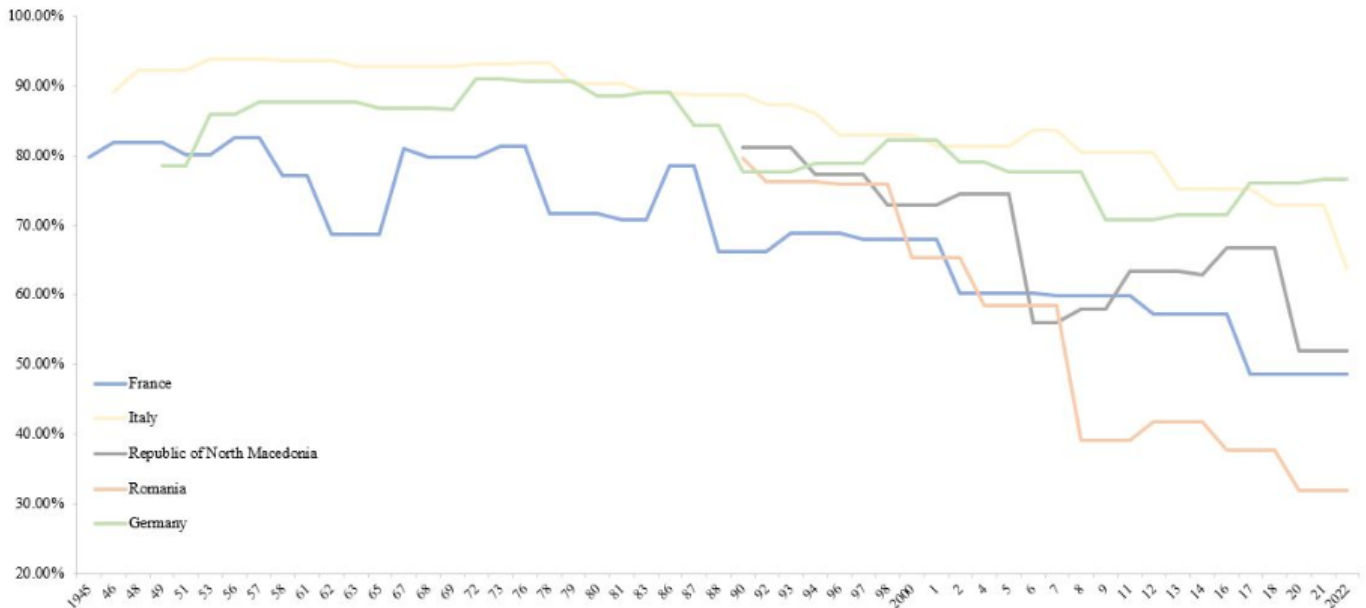


Figure 4: Turnout percentage in European Democracies throughout the years

Graph created by the author based on data taken from Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) Voter Turnout Database

Starting with France, a more or less regular declining pattern can be underlined: the country saw an initial stable turnout that ranged between 82.69% and 68.69% until 1986, while it started decreasing from then on, with lower and lower results. Finally, turnout reached the 60% threshold in 2002, but things did not improve, as shown by the latest development of 48.70% in 2017. France's path is similar to the Italian one.

Italy, indeed, saw initial stability with even higher turnout levels with respect to France: between 1948 and 1979, participation in the Peninsula never went under 90%. Then, from 1983 it started experiencing a constant, even if not immediately drastic, decline, up to 2022's 63.79%, which, however, is still far from the French 48.70%.

The Republic of North Macedonia is another confirmation of the trend, even if we have less available data since it reached independence in 1991 after it detached itself from Yugoslavia. However, the country has always had a

swinging turnout, which ranged between 55% and 77%, with two outliers: the first in 1990, that is, 81.18%; and the second in 2020, that is, 52.02%, which follows the studied phenomenon of decline.

Nevertheless, the most impressive case study is Romania, whose turnout registered a percentage over 75% only between 1990 and 1996, while it has been decreasing ever since until it reached the lowest result of 31.84% in 2020, which raises a fundamental question about popular support.

Lastly, Germany can be used as an opposite example of a country where participation tends to remain constant and high. Indeed, its best performance resulted in 91.11%, while its worst was 70.78% in 2007. Moreover, the country did not experience a constant trend but rather a fluctuation throughout the years, which resulted in the participation of 76.58% in the latest elections, which, as just mentioned, is not the lowest index.

2.1.3 The decrease in turnout in democracies in second-order elections

Second-order elections can be defined as 'elections which do not serve the function of electing the head of government' (Leininger et al., 2018), have experienced a decline in turnout in democracies as well, and even worse than that seen by first-order elections.

Indeed, second-order elections, which will be here intended as regional elections, have always had lower levels of participation (Scantamburlo, 2021), and this is shown in several European countries, such as those that will be here analyzed, that is, Germany and Italy.

Germany is a federal republic divided into several Länder that have been reorganized after the second world war and present specific territorial political cultures that still largely shape the competition between parties and electoral behavior (Bräuninger et al., 2020). These Länder organize elections to choose their representatives who are responsible for administering the territory and fighting for the citizens' interests, which vary according to their regional characteristics and traditions. However, what is interesting for the aim of this research is the comparison between the participation in federal and regional elections, demonstrating that, regardless of the results brought by the former, the latter shows lower turnout levels.

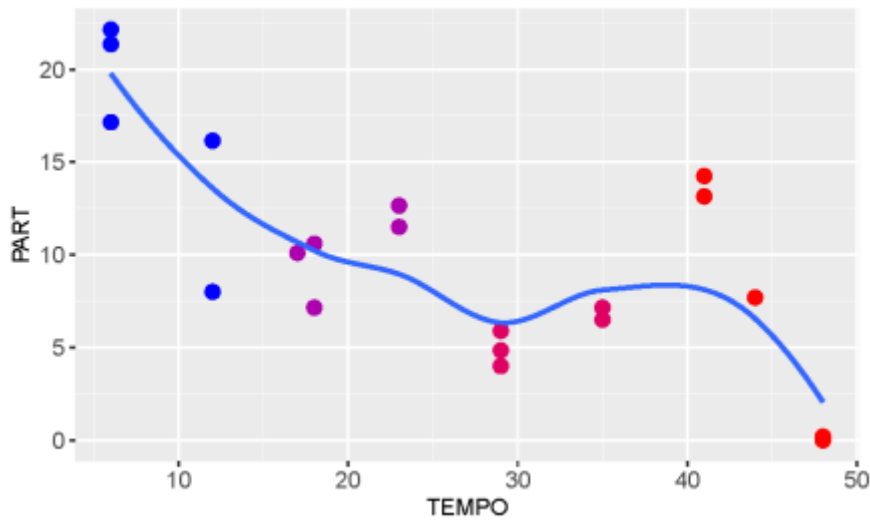


Figure 5: Difference in political participation between federal elections and regional elections 2006-2021 in Germany

Source: Bundeswahlleiter. Scantamburlo, M. (2021). Le elezioni regionali del 2021 in Germania. *Regional Studies and Local Development*, 2(Electoral Reports VOLUME 2/2), 55-69.

For the federal level, the average value of the turnout percentage between the two nearest federal elections (expected percentage) is used. The time is measured in months passed since the previous national election. The study indicates for the four Laender analyzed plus Berlin, in blue is the differential between the average participation in the 2005 and 2009 federal elections in relation to the participation in the 2006 regional elections; in purple is the differential between average participation in the 2009 and 2013 federal elections in relation to participation in the regional elections of 2011; in pink the differential of the average participation in the federal elections of 2013 and 2017 in relation to participation in the 2016 regional elections; in red the differential of the average participation in the 2017 and 2021 federal elections in relation to participation in the 2021 regional elections.

These results show that, even if regional elections that are held simultaneously with federal ones present higher turnout levels and that the general distance between them is diminishing, the trend is a constantly declining one for what concerns turnout for the former (Scantamburlo, 2021).

The second example analyzed here is Italy, which, following its historical path, is intrinsically divided into twenty regions administered by the local institutions cooperating with the central state government.

Elections in the Italian regions are held every five years even if they do not organize them simultaneously. Indeed, the table below uses ranges of time between 1947 and 2015 to compare participation in regional vs state elections.

Elections/Regions	1947-1969	1970-1980	1981-1993	1994-2002	2003-2015
Regional Elections					
North	87,4	92,6	88,4	76,9	68,1
Center	95	92,2	81,6	56,4	
Center-south-South	84,3	85,7	80,8	69,6	61,1
Center-south	85,8	88,1	85,3	73,1	64,7
South	82,8	84,9	78,8	68,4	56,9
ITALY	85,7	88,4	83,5	71,2	62,8
Chamber of deputies					
North	94,8	95,3	91,1	87,7	83
Center	95,8	96,3	92,7	89,1	84,4
Center-south- South	90,2	88	83,5	77,9	75,3
Center-south	91,8	91,6	87,1	83,2	79,4
South	89,5	86,3	81,8	75,4	73,3
ITALY	93,1	92,4	88,1	83,5	79,8

Figure 6: Voting participation according to each geographical area in Italy for regional elections and Chamber of Deputies' elections (average of turnout according to each geographical area).

Source: Fruncillo, D. (2016). LA «MOBILITAZIONE» PERSONALE E LA PARTECIPAZIONE ALLE ELEZIONI REGIONALI IN ITALIA. *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale*, 75, 37–82.

Table 6 groups Italian regions according to their geographical areas and offers the average of their turnouts for regional elections and for elections of the Chamber of Deputies in the chosen periods. Regardless of the specific geographical area, what appears immediately evident is the confirmation that second-order elections, in most cases, lead to a lower turnout than national elections. Moreover, this table underlines how this phenomenon has become more visible in the past few years, going from a general turnout of 85.7% between 1947 and 1969 to 62.8% between 2003 and 2015. This is also confirmed by the latest Italian regional elections in Lazio and Lombardia, whose turnout reached 37.20% in the former and 41.67% in the latter.

To sum up, thanks to these two examples, it can be stated that, even if abstentionism was already an outstanding phenomenon, it is even more visible in second-order elections.

2.2.1 Abstentionism and social status

The following paragraphs will investigate the possible phenomena behind electoral behavior, mainly the correlation between social status and voting preferences.

This correlation, however, can be seen from two different points of view: the first one concerns the direct relation between social class and choice of voting, so whether lower classes tend to vote for a political wing and higher classes for another; the second one, instead, concerns the issue of social status as reflected in different levels of education that may influence the political behavior.

After clarifying voting behavior, attention will be turned to the relation between abstentionism and social status and whether the phenomenon arises in a particular portion of the population and their characteristics.

2.2.2 Social Status and voting preferences

The following discourse is relevant in order to understand the debate that will be introduced later on: the correlation between social classes and voting preferences is preliminary to the inquiry of the possible relation between the former and the phenomenon of abstentionism.

This insight will be dedicated to an inquiry on class voting, that is, the practice according to which voting preferences of individuals are based on the social class they belong to. So, they tend to be united in the choice of vote. The eternal separation was between high social classes voting for the right wing and low working classes voting for the left wing. This means that in the United States, the rich used to vote for the Republican Party, while the poor for the Democrats. In the United Kingdom, the division started with the contraposition between Whigs, the left wing, and Tories, the right wing, that gathered consensus among particular social categories: either the agrarians or workers or the nobility and the church. In Italy, the situation was slightly different since the gap between left and right was more ideology-related due to the advent of fascism, but still, the wealthy population tended to stick to conservative parties, while the less well-off were more prone to the Italian leftist party.

However, the situation seems to have changed over the decades, and it is crucial to understand whether class voting is still a relevant phenomenon.

In one of their studies, Andersen and Heath investigate how essential and influential social status is concerning individual voting in Britain between 1964 and 1997. The paper starts by explaining the theories behind this correlation by referring to the sociological notions developed during the 1900s about social cleavages influencing people and pressuring them into sustaining a precise cause. In particular,

These theories assume that the individual voting decision is not simply a consequence of the individual's own class characteristics but is also dependent on the class positions of the people with whom that individual associates. (Andersen and Heath, 2002).

This means that the more a person interacts with a context, the more he will absorb specific traits. So, different contexts make people acquire different ideals and predispositions. But similar backgrounds will more likely lead to similarities in individuals' thinking (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995: 1). This reasoning has also been held in the political field for a long time.

However, the general idea we perceive nowadays suggests a decline in the intensity of this link between the individual and their social status in the act of voting in the last decades. The reason behind this class dealignment

seems to lay in the erosion of class-based communities and the collectivization of the political experience, which has been replaced by an individualization of the voting choice (Inglehart, 1990). Indeed, in Italy, for example, voting behavior seemed to have wholly overcome the distinction between wealthy and non-wealthy until the social class variable started being considered irrelevant in electoral surveys (De Sio, 2018). But things are only partially going in the direction of individuality.

Indeed, Andersen and Heath found out that there was a weakening of class influence in voting behavior between 1964 and 1997, but the pattern has not disappeared. On the contrary, it is somewhat stronger than we could imagine: the working class still favors the Labour Party, while the salariat still favors the Conservative Party (Andersen and Heath, 2002), as shown in Figure 5.

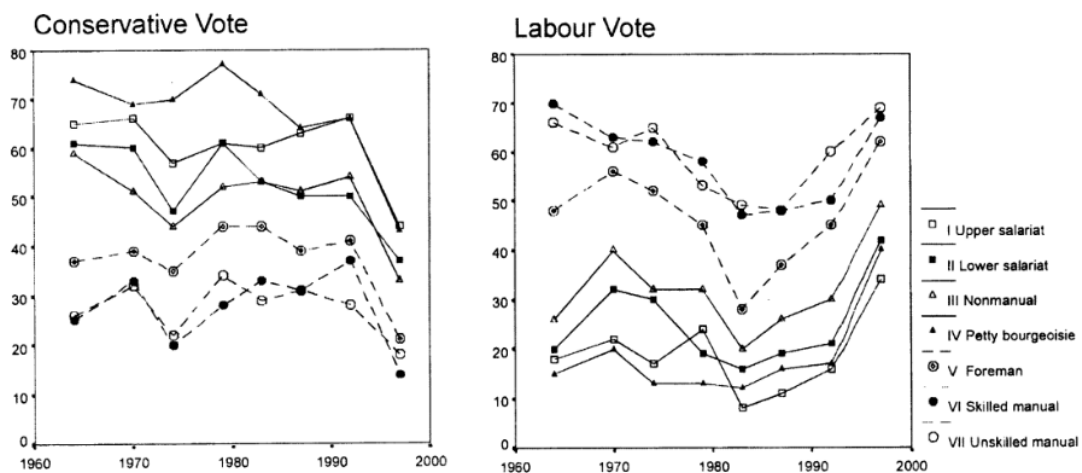


Figure 1. Conservative and Labour vote according to social class, during British General Elections from 1964 to 1997. Data are from the *British Election Studies*, using the same respondents (i.e. excluding non-voters) used in the models of class voting discussed in the rest of the paper

Figure 5: Conservative and Labour vote according to social class in the United Kingdom between 1964 and 1997.

Source: Andersen, R., & Heath, A. (2002). The Persisting Effects of Contextual Social Class on Individual Voting in Britain, 1964-97. *European Sociological Review*, Jun., 2002, Vol. 18(No. 2), pp. 125–138.

Turning to Italy. Instead, a study by Ballarino, Schadee and Vezzoni about the mentioned correlation between 1972 and 2006 is considered. They decided to use as a sample only some of the parliamentary elections organized during the years, taking nearly one for each decade as the main focus.

Anno elettorale	Indice di indipendenza (II)	Kappa (1)	Kappa (2)
1972	10.6	1.5	1.1
1983	11.8	1.1	1.1
2001	8.3	1.2	0.9
2006	10.2	1.1	0.9

Figure 6: Index of the correlation between social status and vote in Italy between 1997 and 2006.

Source: Ballarino, G., Schadee, H., & Vezzoni, C. (2009). Classe sociale e voto in Italia, 1972-2006. *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*.

Figure 6, indeed, demonstrates that the correlation index between social class and voting has decreased, but not enough to state that there is no relation at all. Kappa is the standard deviation of class-per-party interaction parameters voted in a log-linear model. In kappa(1), the calculation is made separately for each year, while for what concerns kappa(2), the values are the same for the following electoral years (1972 and 1983; 2001 and 2006) because in the model class per party, interaction has been constrained to be equal.

What is suggested by the results of the study is that even though the correlation between status and voting choice has evolved over the decades -and this is shown by the fact that in 2001 the working class reversed the classical trend by voting for the Italian right wing- it has not disappeared at all, and it is wrong to state that it is experiencing a decline; we should rather say that it has not followed a linear path towards one specific political side (Ballarino et al., 2009).

Lastly, the United States of America can be seen as one of the most divisive political systems primarily due to its bipartisanship between the Republican party and the Democratic one, which has been depicted as follows:

If we take the simple view that there is, other things being equal, likely to be one party of the rich and one party of the poor, the Republicans fill the bill for the former, and outside the South, the Democrats fill it for the latter. (Beloff)

Even Gelman et al. in a more recent study, conducted in 2010 reports that:

There are sharp differences in partisan voting by income. In national elections, richer individuals are more likely to vote Republican. This difference has persisted with few exceptions since the New Deal era. (Gelman et al., 2010)

From the 1990s, the trend has partially changed, and the separation is not as sharp as before. However, income still influences people's choice, and it can still be said that wealthier states now tend to vote for the Democrats, but, generally speaking, in the United States of America, more affluent people stick to the Republican choice (Gelman et al., 2010).

2.2.3 Social status, education and political behavior

In this paragraph, the correlation between the variable of education provided by different social statuses and political behavior will be investigated by taking into consideration cross-national studies.

The first example will be a study on unequal political participation in Europe by Aina Gallego, which considers education as one of the main variables influencing political choices.

As already mentioned before,

Systematic inequalities in political participation have potentially worrisome consequences for democracy. They might bias the political process in favor of those who are better situated, thus creating a vicious circle where political and social inequalities reinforce each other (Verba, 2004)

Gallego starts from this assumption in order to understand whether inequalities influence European society and whether the level of education may be one of them. According to this view, higher-class individuals are indeed provided with a higher level of schooling, and they will have more chances of developing an interest in politics and the habit of voting. But on the other hand, people from lower classes do not have access to the same commodities, which may lead them to a worse level of education, which may turn into the underdevelopment of involvement in politics and the very act of voting.

This concept is also accepted by Lewis-Beck et al., which further underline that 'with more formal education comes a stronger interest in politics, a greater concern with elections, greater confidence in playing one's role as a citizen, and a deeper commitment to the norm of being a good citizen' (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008).

The result of this inquiry shows that, even if European society is not as polarized as the American one, education "has a significant positive effect on the probability of voting" (Gallego, 2014) in the sense that the higher the level of education the higher the probability that the individual will vote. Indeed, 'the turnout rate rises by 1 per cent with each additional year of education' (Gallego, 2014).

Additionally, Persson conducted a relevant study in the field in 2013, which introduces several views on this relation. The first is considered the conventional view and is also named The Absolute Educational Model. It states that school education positively correlates to the individual's cognitive ability, influencing participation.

Moreover, he says that 'education increases citizens' beliefs that they can effectively play a role in the political process' (Persson, 2013). This theory underlines the individualistic concept of education -the fact that the individual develops critical capacities to understand the importance of their role in society- and its direct connection with participation.

The second theory is named the Pre-adult Socialization Model, and it regards factors such as genetics, personality and intelligence as more affecting political participation than education itself, that, instead, is more relevant in the correlation with socioeconomic status and cognitive ability. However, since it is more difficult to investigate the former factors in surveys, those have always been considered as part of the variable "education" itself, which has been regarded as the most relevant one but is, in this case, seen as just a proxy, as also confirmed by results.

The last view, The Relative Education Model, states that 'there is an indirect effect of education on political participation via social status' (Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry, 1996). This theory aims at solving the paradox of education and participation, that is, even if people with higher levels of education tend to be more politically active, it is not true that providing more education to the population would immediately make participation rise. According to the supporters of the Relative Education Model, this paradox comes from the fact that social status influences participation because a higher social environment would lead to higher competition and more extensive networks that would engage individuals in political activities. On the other hand, lower-class people would face a lower level of education in the environment. As a result, they would experience less political stimuli and narrower access to some social networks. (Persson, 2013).

In conclusion, what turns out from these studies is that education, whether taken directly as a variable or analyzed in its different factors, must be considered an essential tool in the study of political participation, especially if connected to social status and the effects they have in our society and on abstentionism. Indeed, it has been underlined how lower levels of education (however it is considered) can lead to weaker levels of political interest and lower chances of participating in the political process, which in turn means higher levels of abstentionism.

2.2.4 Where does abstentionism come from in society

This paragraph will focus on understanding whether abstensors can be categorized as coming specifically from a particular social class, or better said, whether a social class is more likely to abstain more than another from voting.

In order to conduct this inquiry, some national and international studies will be considered to investigate how turnout changes in time according to the different social categories individuals belong to.

The first interesting work is Heath, which takes the electoral turnout in the United Kingdom as the main variable between 1964 and 2010, mainly focusing on working-class abstentionism. The following graph depicts the result of the study:

Policy Alienation, Social Alienation and Working-Class Abstention in Britain

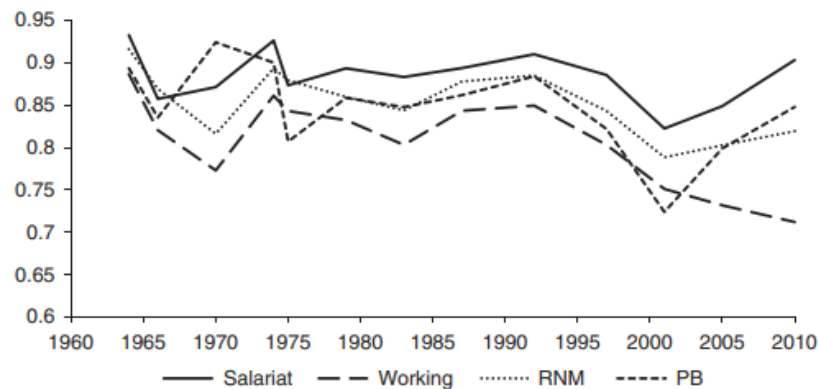


Fig. 1. Reported turnout by class, 1964–2010
Source: BES 1964–2010.

Figure 7: Reported turnout by class in the UK between 1964 and 2010

Source: Heath, O. (2018). Policy Alienation, Social Alienation and Working-Class Abstention in Britain, 1964–2010. *British Journal of Political Science*, 48(4).

As we can deduce from Figure 7, the working class has always produced lower turnout levels than the salariat. Indeed, between 1964 and 2001, the difference between the two remains consistent, even though the trend could be described as swinging.

However, as the author says, 'since 2001 the turnout between the two classes has sharply diverged, and whereas turnout has been on the increase among the middle classes since the low water mark of 2001, turnout among the working class has continued to fall.' (Heath, 2018). Indeed, in 2010 the difference in turnout between the two categories amounted to 19 percentage points, while it used to be less than just five percentage points in 1964. This discovery was significant in this case because class could now be considered more important as related to participation rather than electoral choice. That is, it explains best whether individuals choose to vote rather than who they choose to vote for.

This trend is confirmed by another survey made by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which reports that

People with higher levels of education or higher income tend to have higher trust in their national government than people with lower levels of education or lower income.

(OECD, 2021)

In this case, we must associate people with higher income with individuals belonging to higher social classes that, consequently, have access to higher levels of education. On the contrary, lower-income individuals belong to lower classes and are provided with lower education. While we also need to associate the degree of trust in the national government with the propensity to vote. This leads us to conclude that, in the thirty-six countries that are OECD's members, individuals from lower classes develop a weaker trust towards the Institutions, making them less likely to vote.

Another striking example that validates this thesis is represented by the case of Argentina, where even though compulsory voting is applied -so discrimination should be reduced to the minimum- data on a sample of elections between 1983 and 1999 show that 'manual categories (of workers) abstain slightly more than the non-manual ones, irrespective of mandatory or non-mandatory ages' (Canton and Jorrat, 2022), as reported in the tables below.

TABLE 1a Federal District: Percent Male Non-Voting by Age Group and Occupational Category (joint samples 1983, 1989, 1995, and 1999)

<i>Occupational Categories:</i>	<i>Age Groups:</i>				
	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-64
Unskilled workers	18.2	19.9	17.9	18.1	25.1
Skilled workers	24.4	15.9	13.8	15.5	12.4
Self-employed crafts	19.2	15.5	15.1	13.6	18.4
Shop owners	15.7	15.4	18.4	12.9	11.1
Clerical and sales	16.8	14.4	12.7	12.5	12.5
Entrepreneurs/Professionals/Students	10.3	13.3	12.9	13.3	13.1
<i>Total</i>	12.1	14.5	13.8	13.8	14.7
<i>N</i>	7732	7705	6837	5531	2279

Figure 8: Percentage of non voting individuals according to Age and Occupational Category in the elections between 1983 and 1999

Source: Canton, D., & Jorrat, J. (2003). Abstention in Argentine Presidential Elections, 1983-1999. *Latin American Research Review*, 38(1), 187-201.

TABLE 1b Buenos Aires Province: Percent Male Nonvoting by Age Group and Occupational Category (joint samples 1997 and 1999)

Occupational Categories:	Age Groups:				
	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-64
Unskilled workers	19.7	16.2	15.0	15.9	21.6
Skilled workers	24.1	19.3	16.5	17.0	16.8
Self-employed crafts	16.9	17.5	14.2	16.4	16.8
Shop owners	14.9	15.1	11.0	12.2	12.2
Clerical and sales	17.1	15.3	12.6	11.1	13.3
Entrepreneurs/Professionals/Students	10.4	11.3	10.8	11.6	15.7
<i>Total</i>	14.0	15.2	13.5	14.1	16.0
N	13328	10072	8930	6748	2757

Figure 9: Percentage of non voting individuals according to Age and Occupational Category in Buenos Aires' Province in 1997 and 1999

Source: Canton, D., & Jorrat, J. (2003). Abstention in Argentine Presidential Elections, 1983-1999. *Latin American Research Review*, 38(1), 187-201.

The importance of finding that citizens coming from less wealthy situations tend to abstain more than well-off individuals is particularly relevant, mainly when it is reinforced by the evidence that this also happens in countries where mandatory voting is applied, leading to the conclusion that the correlation between social status and abstentionism is real.

Chapter 3

3.1.1 Can compulsory voting be a possible solution to abstentionism?

After having discussed all the implications and consequences of abstentionism and the decrease of participation in a country's political system, it is now important to focus on the main inquiry of this thesis project, that is, the one around compulsory voting and its effectiveness.

Moreover, all the different variants of compulsory voting will be presented, together with other tools used to contrast the decrease in turnout in democracies.

Lastly, the chapter will end with a literature review of the major supporters of the efficiency of the mandatory voting system. After discussing all the implications and consequences of abstentionism and the decrease in participation in a country's political system, it is now essential to focus on the central inquiry of this thesis project, the one around compulsory voting and its effectiveness.

Moreover, all the different variants of compulsory voting will be presented, together with other tools used to contrast the decrease in turnout in democracies.

Lastly, the chapter will end with a review of the significant supporting issues of the efficiency of the mandatory voting system.

3.1.2 What is compulsory voting?

Primarily, an explanation of what compulsory voting means and what its implications are is needed. Although it is complex to find a definition of mandatory voting system, due to its differences when applied, it may be described as a system where 'voters are forced by law to participate in an election, and failure to do so can result in fines or other legal punishments' (Polyas, 2023).

Nowadays, thirty-six countries in the world have adopted the compulsory voting system, and twenty-seven of them are identified as Democracies. Still, the list is reduced to fifteen nations when we want to analyze fully applying examples (Hill and Louth, 2004).

The mandatory voting system foresees different degrees of application and tolerance for what concerns the sanctions provided to individuals that do not respect the obligation to vote. All democracies applying this tool are listed in the table below, along with the strictness of their sanctions and some comments.

Country	Type of Sanction(*)	Enforced	Year Introduced	Comments
Argentina	1, 2, 4	Yes	1912	Voluntary for those between 16 and 18 years of age.
Australia	1, 2	Yes	1924	-
<i>Austria (Tyrol)</i>	<i>1, 2</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Practiced from 1929 to 2004</i>	The region of Tyrol.
<i>Austria (Vorarlberg)</i>	<i>2, 3</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Practiced from 1929 to 1992</i>	The region of Vorarlberg.
<i>Austria (Styria)</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Practiced from 1929 to 1992</i>	The region of Styria.
Belgium	1, 2, 4, 5	Yes	1892 (men); 1949 (women)	Women in 1949.
Bolivia	1, 2, 4	Yes	1952	Not enforced for those who are over 70 years old, who prove they have been absent from the national territory at the time of voting by a moment of voting, and those who could not vote by force majeure.
Brazil	1, 2, 4, 5	Yes	1932	Voluntary for the illiterate, those over 16 and under 18 years of age, and those over 70 years of age.
Bulgaria	None	No	2016	-
<i>Chile</i>	<i>1, 2, 3</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Practiced from 1925 to 2012</i>	Chile abandoned compulsory voting in 2012.
Congo, Democratic Republic of the	N/A	N/A	N/A	-
Costa Rica	None	No	1959	Although the electoral legislation formally provides for the obligation of suffrage, it is generally understood as a civic duty, without legal sanctions for non-compliance.

<i>Cyprus</i>	<i>1, 2</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Practiced from 1960 to 2017</i>	Cyprus abandoned compulsory voting in 2017.
Dominican Republic	None	No	<i>Practiced till 2010</i>	The Dominican Republic formally abandoned compulsory voting in 2010.
Ecuador	1, 2	Yes	1947 for men, 1968 for both sexes	Voluntary for those between 16 and 18 years of age, those over 65 years of age, Ecuadorians who are members of the Armed Forces and National Police, those with disabilities and those who live abroad.
Egypt	1, 2	No	1956	This is the year from which we have found the earliest law.
<i>Fiji</i>	<i>1, 2, 3</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Practiced from 1992 to 2006</i>	Fiji abandoned compulsory voting in 2014.
France (Senate only)	2	No	1950's or 60's	-
Gabon	N/A	No	N/A	-
Greece	3	No	1926	Administrative sanctions, including prohibition to issue a passport, a driving license or an occupational license, were officially lifted in 2000. Voting is not compulsory for those who are over 70 years old, hospitalized citizens, and those residing abroad.
<i>Guatemala</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>N/A</i>	Guatemala abandoned compulsory voting in 1990.
Honduras	None	No	N/A	-
<i>Italy</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Practiced from 1945 to 1993</i>	-

Lebanon	N/A	N/A	N/A	21 years of age; compulsory for all males; authorized for women at age 21 with elementary education; excludes military personnel.
Liechtenstein	1, 2	Yes	N/A	-
Luxembourg	1, 2	Yes	N/A	Voluntary for those over 70.
Mexico	None	No	1857	-
Nauru	1, 2	Yes	1965	-
<i>Netherlands</i>	-	<i>No</i>	<i>Practiced from 1917 to 1967</i>	-
Panama	None	No	N/A	-
Paraguay	2	No	N/A	Voluntary for those over 75 years of age.
Peru	1, 2, 4	Yes	1933	Voluntary for those over 75 years of age.
<i>Philippines</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Attempt to practice 1972-1986 under martial law.</i>	-
Samoa	2	Yes	2019	First implemented in 2021 General Elections
<i>Spain</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Practiced from 1907 to 1923</i>	-
Singapore	2, 4	Yes	N/A	The non-voter is removed from the voter register until he/she reapplies and provides a reason. Fee applies only if she does not have a valid reason for not voting. She is also disqualified from being a candidate at any subsequent election.
Switzerland (Schaffhausen)	2	Yes	1904	Practiced in only one canton. Abolished in other cantons in 1974.
Thailand	None	No	1997	-

Turkey	1, 2	Yes	N/A	-
Uruguay	1, 2, 4	Yes	1934	Compulsory voting was not in practiced until 1970.
<i>U.S.A</i> <i>(some states)</i>	<i>See comments</i>	<i>No</i>		Georgia and Virginia had legal provisions for imposing fines for not voting in the 18th century; North Dakota (1898) and Massachusetts (1918) amended their constitutions to allow for compulsory voting, but never enacted statutes to implement it.
<i>Venezuela</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Practiced from 1958 to 1993</i>	Venezuela abandoned compulsory voting in 1993. A provision in the Constitution describing voting as a duty remained until 1999. Nevertheless, the elimination of legal sanctions in 1993 marks that year as the end of compulsory voting (Carey and Horiuchi, 2017). Compulsory voting was enforced until 1973.

Table 10: Democracies with compulsory voting systems (now or in the past): Type of sanctions, enforcement, period of time, comments

Source: IDEA, Compulsory voting Database

As shown in table 10, the possible implications of not presenting to the polls vary sensibly according to the different sanctions applied and the level of enforcement.

The numbers indicated under the label "sanctions" correspond to four different tools, which are the following: Level 1 corresponds to explanation, that is, the non-voter must provide a reason for abstention in order to avoid any sanction; level 2 is a fine imposed on the non-voter, which varies according to the country; level 3 amounts to possible imprisonment if the non-voter does not proceed to pay the fine, but no cases have been documented; level 4 is an infringement of civil rights or disenfranchisement, which, again depends by the country but some examples are that

the non-voter, after not voting in at least four elections within 15 years will be disenfranchised in Belgium. In Peru the voter has to carry a stamped voting card for a number of months after the election as proof of having voted. This stamp is required in order to obtain some services and goods from some public offices. In Singapore the voter is removed from the voter register until he/she reapplies to be included and submits a legitimate reason for not having voted. In Bolivia the voter is given a card when he/she has voted so that he/she can proof the participation. The voter would not be able to receive his/her salary from a bank if he/she cannot show the proof of voting during three months after the election (IDEA).

Lastly, sanctions of level 5 correspond to the category of others that may correspond to the difficulty of finding a job in the public sector or of having access to day-care placement for your children.

These variations in the degrees of the strictness of the sanctions need to be taken into consideration when the data of turnouts in the applying countries are analyzed since democracies that apply onerous sanctions will logically demonstrate a higher level of efficiency in terms of turnout percentage. In contrast, if we group non-applying or very moderate-applying democracies and strict ones, data will be invalidated because the former category belongs more to non-compulsory voting systems than the compulsory ones and would not show explicative results (Hill and Louth, 2004).

These differences are also proven by a cross national study conducted by Kostelka, Singh and Blais based on evidence since 1945. The inquiry proposes the following hypothesis:

1. Compulsory voting increases turnout, especially where there exist legally enforced sanctions for abstention

Several former studies, including Panagopoulos, found that a mandatory voting system with no punishment is not as effective as it is when it implies meaningful sanctions (Kostelka et al., 2022). Indeed, in countries with compulsory voting but low levels of enforcement, the majority participate because of the feeling of duty to obey the law; while in countries where the level of enforcement is higher, even those who do not feel motivated to vote will be more likely to do it anyway due to the threat of the sanctions (Kostelka et al., 2022).

2. Legally enforced sanctions for abstention will most sharply increase turnout where state capacity is robust

This is mainly related to the concern of the individual of being penalized, which, in turn, depends - according to Kostelka et al.- on state capacity: citizens who are unwilling to vote may be aware of the

weakness of their state, that is, its incapacity in persecuting them, and will feel safe abstaining; while in a State with strong capacity, abstainers may know that they will more likely be punished (Kostelka et al., 2022).

3. Temporal declines in voter turnout are absent only where legally enforced sanctions exist for abstention. As will later be analyzed in the Belgian case study, compulsory voting does not give the population a culture of participation (Kostelka et al., 2022), and its abolition would lead to an immediate decrease in turnout. This means that 'there must be at least some threat of punishment for abstention if the CV is to prevent turnout declines' (Kostelka et al., 2022) so that citizens will keep on presenting to the polls even if they are not motivated to do so for fear of being penalized (Kostelka et al., 2022).

The results provided by the study can be translated into a "yes" answer, meaning that all three hypotheses have been proven right. Moreover, the study has also estimated that the effects of sanctioned compulsory voting systems are more significant than those stated before, with a percentage of increase in turnout of 14.5–18.5 points, compared to the 12% found by Birch in 2009.

However, Table 10 also includes countries that have applied the mandatory voting system for some time. Indeed, Italy figures among them since it experienced it between 1945 and 1993. Other countries, such as Austria, Switzerland and the United States of America, instead have introduced it only in some of their states or regions. However, it is still helpful to consider them.

That being said, it is now essential to analyze the different turnout levels in those countries to compare them and prove whether compulsory voting works in raising participation.

3.2 Efficiency of compulsory voting system shown in turnout percentages

In order to state the efficiency of compulsory voting, the following paragraph will present two parts. In the first one, five Democracies that deliver the mentioned tool will be taken into consideration, three of them will be chosen among those countries with strict penalties applied to non-voters, and two of them among those with non-strict sanctions used.

In the second part, instead, the results of the first group of countries will be compared to democracies that do not apply mandatory voting to understand whether the data are sensibly different.

For what concerns the first part, the former group is made of Australia, Luxemburg and the Netherlands (until 1967), which are countries with low levels of strictness towards the sanctions applied to non-voters (level 1-2), while the second one is composed of Belgium and Brazil, that correspond to countries that use level 4 or 5 of sanctions.

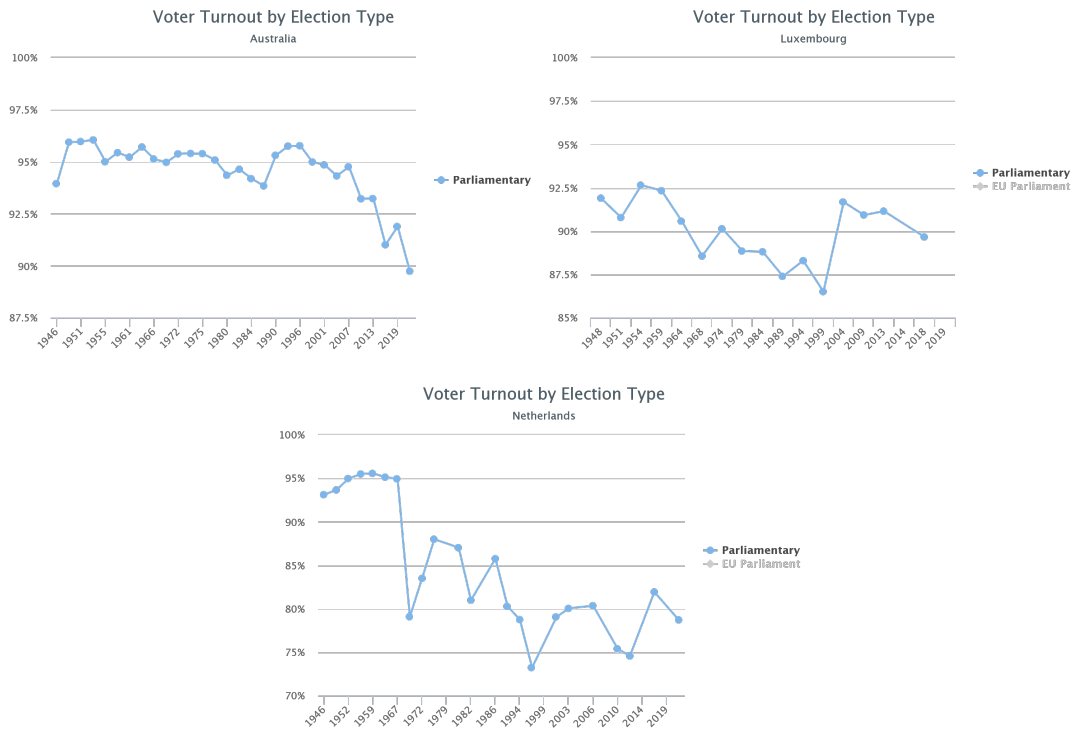


Figure 11, 12 and 13: Elections turnout in Australia, Luxemburg and The Netherlands

Source: IDEA, Compulsory voting Database

As it can be deduced from the above graphs, even though the three countries do not foresee invasive sanctions, the percentage of turnout experienced throughout the years is very high: Luxemburg never showed a turnout lower than 86% (IDEA), and Australia never went under 89% (IDEA). For what concerns the Netherlands, different reasoning must be carried out. Indeed, the country abolished mandatory voting in 1967. This has visibly impacted the turnout rate, which declined from an average of 94% under compulsory voting to a turnout of 79% in 1971, the first election after its abolition. The turnout, then, has never reached the former percentages again. Even if the democracies used above do not involve a high level of enforcement, their average turnouts highly overcome IDEA's average turnout regarding non-compulsory democracies, which is reported as 63% (Hill and Louth, 2004).

Turning to the second category of democracies, those with high enforcement levels of compulsory voting - Belgium and Brazil- two graphs showing their turnout rates will be introduced below and later analyzed.

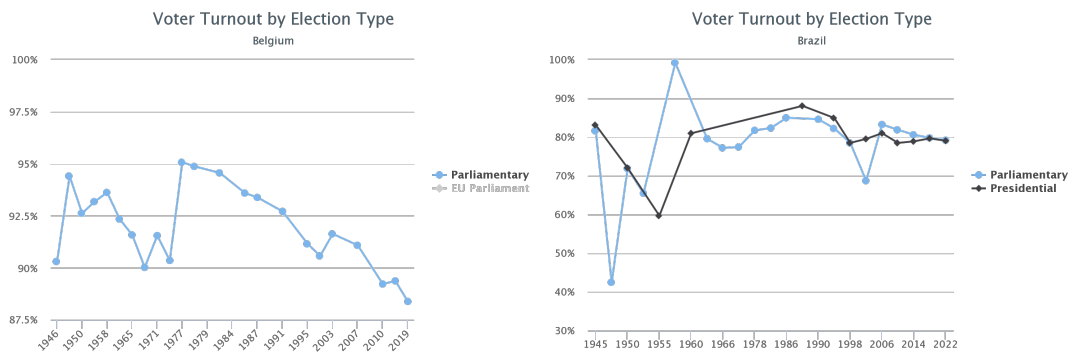


Figure 14 and 15: Elections turnout in Belgium and Brazil

Source: IDEA, Compulsory voting Database

For what concerns Belgium, its mandatory voting system is particularly efficient in maintaining the electoral turnout high because it is kept as straightforward: every Belgian citizen, once he turns 18, is automatically registered to vote, and fifteen days before the election, polling cards are delivered to all registered voters stating that voting is compulsory (Scanlan, 2023). Moreover, sanctions are not limited to providing a fine that ranges between euros 25 to euros 50 to non-voters in the first instance, and between euros 50 and euros 125 in case of a second offense, but additionally 'if a registered voter abstains from voting four times within a 15-year period, that individual -regardless of whether abstention fines were paid- can be stripped of their eligibility for the following 10 years' (Pilet, 2007).

All the circumstances mentioned above, together with a deeply instilled notion of democracy due to the long-lasting stability of the country, contribute to the maintenance of an average turnout of 90.16% (IFES Election Guide).

Instead, Brazil is a helpful example of a country with a troubled history of democracy.

In 1964 a coup d'état was organized by an authoritarian military regime that abolished civil freedoms and the multiparty system (Power and Roberts, 1995).

During this period of time, the overall sentiment towards the institutions and the action of voting was highly depressed and started showing in the growth of invalid votes cast (Power and Roberts, 1995).

It can be stated that the democratic process in Brazil began in 1979 with the military forces due to the economic crisis going on, even though full democracy was completely restored in 1988.

A beacon of hope appeared with the reinstallation of the multiparty system and an indirect presidential election that enhanced democratic rule (Power and Roberts, 1995).

This troubled path is particularly relevant in order to understand whether compulsory voting can be effective in all sorts of fields, even in those where democracy has not yet developed its roots.

As shown by data (figure 15), turnout in elections in Brazil is sensibly lower than in the other democracies analyzed before, either for what concerns the parliamentary ones or the presidential ones, even if to a lower extent. Moreover, even if the level of enforcement is relatively high, sanctions in Brazil are not equally impacting the population: the more straightforward form of sanction is a fine, which amounts to three to ten per cent of the

regional hourly minimum wage (Cepaluni and Hidalgo, 2016), which represents a sustainable number to the majority of the population. What is considered more problematic, indeed, are the complications led by the failure to pay this fee, which leads to the inability to obtain a passport, a government job, participate in civil service exams, attend public universities, or receive loans from state banks (Cepaluni and Hidalgo, 2016). These consequences significantly impact the middle and upper classes, who usually need access to these services provided by the state. So, compulsory voting is mainly respected by the wealthy classes that pay the consequences of the decision not to vote, rather than by the lower classes that would not likewise be interested in those services. However, the latest elections turnouts have kept a high average, and even though the efficiency of compulsory voting has been questioned due to the inequality in participation and the feeling of dissatisfaction towards democracy, it can be said that it has shown positive results, even if implementing it is not an easy endeavour (Scanlan 2023).

3.3 Is compulsory voting discriminatory in Belgium?

In this paragraph, the Belgian case study will be further analyzed in order to provide evidence of the efficiency of compulsory voting against voting discrimination.

Belgium indeed, is ranked among the 20 countries in the world with the highest turnout (Marien, 2007), and this results in several beneficial effects on the political system since higher participation leads to more propensity of the state to facilitate the voting procedure and improve the system (Marien, 2007), indeed, it can be said that mandatory voting and measures aimed at increasing turnout are expected to reinforce each other (Hill, 2002).

Furthermore, another interesting favourable implication of mandatory voting is the minimization of discrimination in electoral participation, which, instead, represents the main problem in democracies with low levels of turnout. Indeed, the low percentage of participants in electoral turnout corresponds to low representativeness of the popular will, mainly because, as discovered before, abstentionism belongs primarily to the lower class, who, by not voting, will not see its interests expressed.

The resolution of this vicious circle comes with mandatory voting because all the individuals allowed to vote are also obliged by law to do it, so the general feeling is to be unwilling to transgress the rule since those that decide not to present to the polls will slip into the legal consequences. Furthermore, the reduction of the non-voting population leads also to a decline in discrimination: the more people vote, the more the choice will be representative of the entire eligible population (Hooghe and Pelleriaux 1998).

Moreover, in its study, Marien created an inquiry on what would happen if voting became voluntary in Belgium, and the results confirm the fact that compulsion holds off discrimination.

Marien's study is based on the different levels of education between individuals and whether or not they would vote even if compulsion were no longer enforced.

Answer	Total population	Educational level					Number of respondents
		1	2	3	4	5	
Always	41.9	25.8	34.3	41.2	53.2	67.0	919
Most of the time	14.8	7.5	11.6	15.6	21.6	18.2	324
Sometimes	14.4	10.8	15.0	17.4	12.7	11.0	315
Never	26.8	52.3	36.2	23.9	10.5	3.3	587
Don't know	2.2	3.6	2.8	1.8	2.0	0.5	49
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	2194

Table 16: Willingness to Vote after Abolishment of Compulsory Voting by Educational Level

Source: Belgian Election Study 2003; (Billiet, Swyngedouw et al. 2004).

Table 16 lists levels of education from the lowest to the highest, meaning that 1 corresponds to elementary education, 2 to lower secondary, 3 to higher secondary, 4 to non-university higher education, and 5 to university education. While on the left, the propensity to vote without compulsion is subdivided by frequency, that is, an individual would "always" vote even without being obliged to by law, he would "most of the time" do it, "sometimes" do it, "never" do it or "does not know" if he would.

As shown in the table, the majority of the individuals willing to always vote even without compulsion (67%) belongs to column 5, which means the highest level of education possible; while the majority of individuals that would never vote without being obliged to (52%) belongs to column 1, that is, the lowest possible level of education.

It must be mentioned that the willingness to vote would depend also on the political interest perceived by the individual: the higher the level of interest, the higher the probability of voting. However, as stated in the previous chapters, this variable can be described as an indirect effect of education since political interest usually grows with schooling itself. Indeed Marien's data show that the just mentioned correlation between higher interest and higher willingness to vote holds for every education level. Generally, lower-educated respondents with the same level of political interest as higher-educated respondents are less willing to vote frequently (Marien, 2007).

This leads to the conclusion that participation in Belgium is so egalitarian, also thanks to the introduction and maintenance of the compulsory voting system, which increases the turnout level and the class bias nearly erased (Marien, 2007). Indeed, as just demonstrated, if compulsion were to be abolished, participation would probably decrease, leading to higher discrimination in political representation.

3.4 Alternative tools to compulsory voting

Alternative tools to compulsory voting have been presented throughout the decades in order to avoid the main critiques addressed to the mandatory system. The most common proposals, that are usually put into practice are

organizing the polls during the weekends, in order to allow working voters to actually have the possibility to show up; establishing polls in common areas such as the malls, so that individuals are more stimulated to vote due to the fact that they can do it while also accomplishing other tasks; and finally, early voting, which is the possibility of casting a vote before the actual election day, usually by postal ballot, but also in person, in order not to discriminate individuals who will not be able to present to the polls in the established election day.

However, other strategies have been tested: Bernard Grofman, for example, after having considered the American problem with low levels of turnout, proposed the Motor Voter solution for American citizens. In the United States, the registration to vote is not an automatic process: individuals, indeed, need to get themselves registered before being allowed to cast a vote, leading to a complexity that deters them from doing so (Grofman, 2000).

In order to avoid this feeling of discouragement, one of the tools presented was the Motor Voter system, which became law in 1993 when the National Voter Registration Act was passed, implying that voter registration can also happen through the interaction with state Departments of Motor Vehicles. This means that the provision requires a driver's license application, renewal or change of address to serve as a voter registration application, which must be transmitted by the motor agency directly to the state elections office within ten days. Initially, this law was only aimed at federal elections, but later on, all states improved the legislation and extended it to state elections as well (Democracy Docket, 2022).

Another tool recently introduced thanks to the internet are the Voting Advice Applications (VAAs), that is, online devices which 'help users casting a vote by comparing their policy preferences on major issues with the programmatic stances of political parties on such issue' (Garzia et al., 2017). Individuals who decide to use VAA simply need to respond to a questionnaire concerning their opinion about several political statements, and after that, their answers will be used to compare the individual's general opinion to the eligible parties, ranking them from ideologically closest to ideologically farthest.

This system is beneficial since it provides citizens with customized political information (Garzia et al., 2017), meaning that it not only spreads political consciousness but also brings the individual closer to his own political view as projected to the modern political panorama.

The effects of this tool are first that VAA's users are more exposed to information, so they are more likely to develop more political interest; secondly that the effort of information gathering is reduced due to the functionality of the questionnaire, leading the comparative cost of voting to sensibly decrease; and finally they are more likely to increase the stimulation of political interests and knowledge of the user.

These variables have proved to increase the probability that an individual will choose to present to the polls and even cast a valid ballot (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Lassen, 2005; Palfrey & Poole, 1987).

For what concerns modalities of voting that facilitate participation, online voting is one of the main proposals due to the fact that it would nearly eliminate the comparative costs of voting since individuals do not need to present to the polls but can express their political preferences directly from their computers at home.

Nevertheless, this issue has raised public debate due to the criticalities it implies with privacy and data sharing. However, internet voting has been tested in many countries, including Canada.

A study conducted there by Goodman and Stokes, indeed, investigates whether providing citizens with the possibility of voting through the internet improves turnout and of how many percentage points.

Canada has introduced online voting in some areas from the very beginning of the 2000s, together with Vote By Mail -which harmed the former's performance. However, the study demonstrated that voting via the Internet led to an increase of 3.5% points in turnout (Goodman and Stokes, 2018).

It can be stated that this tool has helped bring a portion of the population back into the electoral process (Goodman and Stokes, 2018) and that the low increase rate was also due to the fact that this inquiry has been conducted between 2003 and 2014, when the use of the World Wide Web was not as extended as it is now, so, results would be even more consistent if applied to nowadays (Goodman and Stokes, 2018).

3.5 Final considerations about Compulsory Voting

Throughout this project, the main features of political participation, abstentionism and compulsory voting have been assessed. In particular, for what concerns the latter, its main pros and cons have been exposed, together with the examples of the democracies that have introduced it as a system and their turnout percentages.

The effects of low levels of participation have been stated, together with the possible cures provided by compulsion.

Compulsory voting, indeed, has proven to be a powerful tool. Even though it does not always bring the expected results, it surely has some points in favor. Here the most important will be summed up as a conclusion.

First of all, it is vital to restate the function of equality that the mandatory system provides: by taking everyone to the polls, nobody's interests can be left behind. As Birch mentioned, 'Compulsory turnout is the most effective way of ensuring that all voices are listened to equally' (Birch, 2009). This is also crucial since one of the major critiques moved to today's democracies is that they are becoming increasingly dysfunctional and discriminatory. This also depends on the fact that parties know that individuals of low social classes are less likely to vote due to the fact that they feel not taken into consideration, and in turn they are not prone to include them in their party programs, leading to a vicious circle of estrangement (Birch, 2009).

This consideration is connected to the gap between citizens and politics that has lately become a dividing issue: people are becoming more detached from the political sphere and tend to lose -or even not develop at all- their interest towards politics. By introducing compulsion, everyone will be forced to inform himself at least about

what concerns the candidates in elections, to know which one to vote for, spreading political knowledge and also developing a sense of bond between the individuals and the political field.

Furthermore, in a study conducted by Krister Lundell, it is shown that mandatory voting is positively linked to trust in political institutions, meaning in the government, the parliament and the justice system, also leading to the conclusion that it enhances more legitimacy towards the system as a whole (Lundell, 2012). Indeed, if all the voting population actually cast a ballot, the legitimacy provided to the elected ones would be nearly a hundred per cent, and no issue of lack of popular support would be raised.

For these reasons and all the ones mentioned above, together with the results provided, it can be stated that compulsory voting may be a valuable tool to fight against the rising issue of abstentionism in democracies, and it may be interesting to further investigate the efficiency of it if also applied to the Italian system.

Conclusions

This dissertation aimed to determine the role of compulsory voting in the fight against abstentionism in democracies worldwide.

After finding out what political abstentionism means, it has been explained how public opinion is divided on the tool's efficiency due to its positive and negative sides and how it is often perceived as an interference in democratic freedoms.

However, the goal of this thesis was also to investigate further the phenomenon of abstentionism, which has proven to be directly correlated to variables such as social status and education, and indeed, it has been proven that the majority of abstainers come from working classes, and even in periods of times when turnout increased, this gap was still present.

This leads the dissertation to chapter three, where compulsory voting is explained in all its features. A list of all the applying countries enables the reader to become aware of how diffused this system is and how many variants exist. Indeed, the compulsory voting system can be enforced through different levels of sanctions, namely from 1 to 5, meaning that level 1 is the lowest possible level of strictness, which usually corresponds to the requirement of providing an explanation of the reason behind the non-vote. In contrast, level 5 corresponds to the deprivation of some public services, such as finding a job in the public sector or having access to daycare placement for your children. The results underline how a significant level of enforcement of compulsion brings a higher turnout due to the fact that individuals feel like they have more to lose if they do not vote. However, in countries such as Brazil, compulsory voting seems to affect the better-off since the lowest classes would not have exploited public services anyway.

After that, the efficiency of compulsory voting is proved through data on different countries grouped according to similarities. Group one was made up of Australia, Luxemburg and the Netherlands, which are all European democracies with no invasive sanctions but still high levels of turnout. In particular, the Netherlands has only applied compulsory voting until 1967, and it is shown that it has never reached a turnout as high as those before that year.

The second group, instead, was composed of Belgium and Brazil, two countries with a very different democratic history: for what concerns the former, results show that turnout has always been a high percentage; for the latter, instead, results are not as convincing as in the other examples.

Belgium, then, represents the main case study of this project, which demonstrates that compulsion in Belgium consistently fights discrimination: if one day it was to be removed, less educated people would probably vote much less than they do now, leading to less representativeness in the political system.

Lastly, the dissertation proposes some alternative solutions mentioned around the world to fight abstentionism without introducing the compulsory voting system. Some of them, such as online or anticipated voting, are well known but have presented some criticalities in their applications during some tests. In contrast, others have already been introduced, such as the Motor Voters reform in the United States of America, which allows citizens to register for voting directly when they get or renew their driver's license.

Voting Advice Applications are online tools that help the individual discover his political inclination through questionnaires, lowering the information costs that often prevent citizens from voting.

In conclusion, the dissertation ends with some general remarks of both points in favor and against the introduction of the compulsory voting system, that, even if it is a controversial tool, and it can not be stated precisely that it is a functional solution in all cases, it surely represents an interesting topic for further research.

Summary

L'astensionismo è diventato di recente un punto di primaria rilevanza nel dibattito pubblico, a causa della sua emergenza nelle democrazie europee e non. Ero a Bruxelles il 25 settembre 2022, quando i media hanno iniziato a riportare la preoccupante decrescita nel numero di votanti alle elezioni italiane. Ho immediatamente iniziato a sviluppare un interesse per l'argomento, e poco dopo, ho scoperto che il Belgio è stato uno dei primi paesi a introdurre uno strumento contro l'astensionismo stesso: il Voto Obbligatorio.

Questo progetto mira, dunque ad analizzare il voto obbligatorio, le sue implicazioni, i suoi effetti sulla società e le variabili correlate, nonché la sua efficacia nella lotta contro il problema principale, ovvero l'aumento del numero di individui che decidono di non recarsi alle urne.

Il primo capitolo di questa tesi ha una funzione introduttiva: vi è presente la definizione stessa del fenomeno dell'astensionismo politico, oltre all'illustrazione dei differenti cambiamenti di trend di voto nel corso della storia della Repubblica Italiana. Infatti, la partecipazione in Italia non è sempre stata al livello odierno, ma anzi, annoverava percentuali molto alte (tra il 92% e l'87%) sino ai principi degli anni 90. Il paragrafo successivo è dedicato all'introduzione del concetto di voto obbligatorio, fornendo la sua definizione secondo Lever (2010) e numerosi esempi degli Stati in cui viene attualmente applicato.

Segue, quindi, una rassegna stampa riguardante le principali opinioni trovate nella letteratura, sia a favore che contro il voto obbligatorio: in questa parte, importanti contributi di esponenti politici (come Obama, Hillary Clinton), scienziati politici (come De Mucci, Gosnell, Lever, Dormagen) e studiosi sono stati riportati al fine di offrire una visione più ampia possibile per andare oltre l'approccio teorico e comprendere come lo strumento sia percepito nella realtà.

Dopo aver esposto i pro e i contro, il capitolo si concentra nuovamente sui numeri, mostrando l'aumento sostanziale dell'astensionismo che le democrazie hanno sperimentato negli ultimi decenni: anche se i risultati non sono omogenei, la tendenza corrisponde a una diminuzione della partecipazione nella maggior parte dei paesi analizzati.

Da qui in avanti, è fondamentale enunciare le ragioni alla base della scelta di votare o meno che i cittadini devono compiere e quali sono le variabili che possono influenzarla. La decisione può dipendere da diversi modelli, che possono essere correlati all'istruzione, alla socializzazione, all'esposizione alla politica, alla visione razionale, alla sfiducia nelle istituzioni, ecc.

Nella parte finale di questo primo capitolo, è esposta una delle principali cause di preoccupazione per quanto riguarda il problema dell'astensionismo: la distorsione che esso provoca nella rappresentatività. Con questo si intende la poca affidabilità posseduta da un governo votato da una percentuale bassa di cittadini di poter rappresentare al meglio gli interessi della popolazione, o per lo meno, della maggioranza di essa. La rappresentatività è infatti alla base di un sistema democratico e dovrebbe essere preservata il più possibile per garantire il corretto funzionamento di uno stato.

Per quanto riguarda il secondo capitolo, il primo argomento trattato è la partecipazione politica -che può essere interpretata in una chiave diversa rispetto al semplice atto di votare- la sua importanza, e come essa è diminuita in tutto il mondo negli ultimi decenni, come dimostrano i dati forniti dall'Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).

Infatti, i due paragrafi successivi utilizzano i dati del database di IDEA per mostrare la diminuzione nella partecipazione dei votanti alle elezioni di primo e secondo ordine. Per quanto riguarda quelle di prim'ordine - per cui si intende principalmente le elezioni parlamentari - sono state scelte cinque Repubbliche europee (ovvero Francia, Italia, Repubblica di Macedonia del Nord, Romania e Germania) per evidenziare i trend più significativi, che sono negativi per quanto concerne i primi quattro paesi citati, mentre la Germania è l'unica a dimostrare un aumento nel numero di votanti.

Per quanto riguarda le elezioni di secondo ordine -che non sono, quindi, volte ad eleggere il governo centrale- l'Italia e la Germania rappresentano gli esempi principali, grazie alla loro suddivisione territoriale in regioni che possiedono un certo grado di autonomia e un governo decentralizzato creato attraverso elezioni periodiche. In entrambe le repubbliche, viene evidenziato come il trend di partecipazione sia negativo.

La seconda parte del secondo capitolo è interamente dedicata all'indagine sulla correlazione tra astensionismo e status sociale: infatti, il primo è influenzato dal secondo e, all'aumentare dello status dell'individuo, aumenta la probabilità che esso abbia sviluppato l'abitudine al voto; al contrario, più bassa è la classe sociale da cui l'individuo proviene, più incline egli sarà ad astenersi dal voto.

Lo status sociale sembra influenzare anche le preferenze di voto, e infatti, il paragrafo seguente ruota attorno al fenomeno del voto di classe, inteso come quella tendenza che porta le persone appartenenti alla stessa condizione sociale a votare per lo stesso partito o candidato. Questa tendenza, che sembrava essere scomparsa, sembra invece influenzare ancora la società attuale (De Sio, 2018).

La condizione economica e sociale viene analizzata anche attraverso il prisma dei diversi livelli di istruzione, ovvero l'istruzione accademica dei cittadini e gli effetti che essa ha sul comportamento politico individuale: l'obiettivo è quello di capire se i cittadini più istruiti tendono a seguire un approccio particolare alla politica, diverso da quello delle persone meno istruite, e come ciò influisce sulla scelta di votare o meno.

La fine del capitolo è, invece, dedicata alla scoperta di quale classe sociale produce più astensionisti politici - ovvero quella meno abbiente-, con evidenze da studi di classe condotti sia nel Regno Unito che nella popolazione argentina.

Il terzo capitolo, che rappresenta anche il capitolo finale di questa tesi, è interamente dedicato all'esplorazione del sistema del voto obbligatorio: viene fornita una definizione, insieme a un elenco di tutti i diversi livelli di applicazione e le sanzioni adottate in tutti i paesi che hanno introdotto lo strumento nel corso della storia o lo utilizzano ancora. Infatti, il voto obbligatorio può essere imposto attraverso diversi livelli di sanzioni, che vanno dall'1 al 5: il livello 1 corrisponde al livello più basso di severità, che di solito risulta nell'obbligo di fornire una spiegazione del motivo per il mancato voto. Al contrario, il livello 5 corrisponde alla privazione del non votante di alcuni servizi pubblici, come l'impiego nel settore pubblico o l'accesso ai servizi di asilo nido per i propri figli. I risultati evidenziano come un elevato grado di applicazione porti a una maggiore partecipazione elettorale in quanto gli individui sentono di avere più da perdere se non si recano alle urne. Tuttavia, in paesi come il Brasile, il voto obbligatorio sembra influenzare soprattutto le persone più agiate, poiché le classi meno abbienti non usufruirebbero comunque dei servizi pubblici.

Successivamente, viene dimostrata l'efficacia del voto obbligatorio attraverso dati provenienti da diversi paesi raggruppati in base a similitudini. Il primo gruppo è composto da Australia, Lussemburgo e Paesi Bassi, tutte democrazie europee che non applicano sanzioni invasive ma che riportano, in ogni caso, alti livelli di

partecipazione. In particolare, per quanto riguarda i Paesi Bassi, è emerso che, fino al 1967, quando veniva ancora applicato il voto obbligatorio, la partecipazione era ai massimi livelli storici.

Il secondo gruppo è, invece, formato da Belgio e Brasile, due paesi con una storia democratica molto diversa: per quanto riguarda il primo, i risultati mostrano che la partecipazione è sempre stata molto alta; per il secondo, invece, i risultati non sono convincenti come negli altri esempi.

I paesi presi in considerazione appartengono a contesti democratici diversi al fine di comprendere se il voto obbligatorio possa essere efficace anche se applicato in nazioni dove la democrazia ha radici più fragili.

Il Belgio è, poi, utilizzato come caso di studio, in quanto è uno dei primi paesi ad aver applicato il voto obbligatorio. Esso è stato, infatti, introdotto nel 1893 per gli uomini (Nerincx, 2018) e nel 1948 per le donne (Rubio-Marin, 2014). Pertanto, in questo contesto, viene condotta un'indagine per verificare se la presenza di questo strumento, comporti o meno una qualsiasi forma di discriminazione nella rappresentanza. L'analisi ha dimostrato come l'obbligo del voto in Belgio combatta la discriminazione: se un giorno dovesse essere eliminato, le persone meno istruite, probabilmente, voterebbero molto meno di quanto facciano attualmente, portando a una minore rappresentatività nel sistema politico.

Infine, la tesi propone alcune soluzioni alternative menzionate in tutto il mondo per combattere l'astensionismo senza introdurre il voto obbligatorio. Alcune di queste, come il voto online o quello anticipato, sono ben note, ma hanno presentato alcune criticità nelle loro applicazioni durante alcuni test. Al contrario, altre soluzioni sono già state introdotte, come la riforma del "Motor Voters" negli Stati Uniti d'America, che consente ai cittadini di registrarsi per il voto direttamente quando ottengono o rinnovano la patente di guida.

I "Voting Advice Applications" sono, invece, strumenti online che aiutano l'individuo a scoprire la propria inclinazione politica attraverso questionari, riducendo i costi informativi che spesso dissuadono i cittadini dal votare.

In conclusione, la tesi si chiude con alcune osservazioni generali sia a favore che contro l'introduzione del sistema del voto obbligatorio, che, sebbene sia uno strumento controverso e non possa essere affermato con certezza che rappresenti una soluzione funzionale in tutti i casi, può essere definito sicuramente un soggetto interessante per ulteriori ricerche future.

Acknowledgements

Questo progetto rappresenta per me la fine di una fase fondamentale della mia vita, che è iniziata tre anni fa, quando ho deciso di lasciare la mia città e trasferirmi a Roma per seguire i miei sogni e soddisfare la mia ambizione.

Per questo, è doveroso per me ringraziare il Professor De Sio e il Professor Angelucci per avermi permesso di realizzare questo elaborato, seguendomi nel percorso di stesura e fornendomi gli spunti necessari per trattare l'argomento di mio interesse al meglio.

Non posso far altro che dedicare questa tesi, assieme a tutti i traguardi raggiunti nella mia vita, alla mia mamma e angelo custode, che quest'anno manca da otto anni. Sono stati anni difficili senza di te, e sicuramente la tua assenza fisica è stata la più grande difficoltà che io abbia mai dovuto affrontare, ma è stata soprattutto il più grande stimolo per raggiungere tutti gli obiettivi che mi sono prefissata nel tempo. Anche se non sei stata qui con me, non hai mai perso l'occasione di farmi sentire la tua presenza rassicurante al mio fianco. Posso solo provare ad immaginare quanto saresti stata felice, oggi, qui, con il tuo sorriso sereno sul viso, pronta a prendermi la mano, e quanto saresti fiera della mia perseveranza, che ho appreso da te. Spero vivamente di averti resa orgogliosa per la donna che sono diventata, perché tutto è stato fatto, e sarà sempre fatto per te. Non vedo l'ora di poterti vedere di nuovo e abbracciarti forte.

Uno dei ringraziamenti più affettuosi va a mio fratello, che ha la parte più consistente del mio cuore, e che è sempre stato il modello d'ispirazione più rappresentativo per me, oltre che la persona che mi ha insegnato a lavorare sodo per rendere le cose possibili. Ti sarò eternamente grata per camminare con me ogni giorno, permettendomi di posare la testa sulla tua spalla, supportandomi in ogni scelta, e per tutte le volte in cui sei stato, e sarai ancora, il mio porto sicuro. Andre, sono fiera di dire che la pressione che avrebbe potuto distruggerci, ci ha resi diamanti.

Un grande grazie anche alla mia famiglia, ma in maniera speciale a Nonna Rachele, che ha sempre fatto l'impossibile per farmi sentire meno sola in questo percorso, e mi ha riempita di consigli, per come poteva. Zia serenella, mio padre e lei, mi hanno permesso di vivere questa avventura straordinaria. Un pensiero speciale anche a Dani e Daia, che hanno cercato in tutti i modi di ricreare, per me, un ambiente pieno d'amore.

Inoltre, sento il bisogno urgente di ringraziare Greta Bortolotti, per l'amorevole e costante compagnia che mi ha concesso negli ultimi tre anni, durante i quali è diventata una sorella per me. Porterò per sempre nel mio cuore i ricordi di tutte le esperienze, i viaggi e le emozioni vissute assieme, oltre alle immagini della donna sensibile e coraggiosa che sei. So per certo, che il nostro legame non andrà perso.

Un ringraziamento speciale va ai miei amici dell'Erasmus, che hanno reso il mio soggiorno a Bruxelles il periodo più bello della mia vita. Vi devo gli attimi più spensierati e intensi, in cui ho provato gioia e amore nelle loro forme più pure.

In particolare vorrei ringraziare Domenico, per essere così simile e diverso da me, e per avermi permesso di conoscermi meglio solo avendo la fortuna di conoscere te.

Anto, non saprei come spiegare la gratitudine che provo per il modo in cui mi spingi ad essere una persona migliore, solo essendo la più pura che io abbia mai incontrato.

Infine, vorrei ringraziare la mia migliore amica di una vita, Carlotta, per essere stata al mio fianco non solo in questo periodo particolare, ma anche durante gli anni di crescita, in cui ci sono stati momenti difficili, oltre a

quelli felici; e per essere stata una spettatrice entusiasta di tutti i miei traguardi. Inoltre, vorrei menzionare anche i miei amici dell'università, che hanno reso la mia esperienza in Luiss Guido Carli un viaggio indimenticabile.

Un grande grazie,

Greta.

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