

Should compulsory voting be adopted worldwide?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Is compulsory voting the most effective way of ensuring a true democracy? A University of Adelaide study will help address this question and could provide a global solution to addressing declining levels of voter turnout around the world.

Associate Professor Lisa Hill from the University's School of History and Politics will use a \$61,000 Federal Government grant to demonstrate that Australia has one of the best managed voting regimes in the western world.

The issue has been highlighted this week in the wake of a landslide election victory sweeping US Democratic Senator Barack Obama to power, in which record numbers of US citizens cast their vote.

More than 130 million people exercised their democratic right to elect the next President of the United States. In 2000, just 51% of eligible voters cast their ballot.

"This is bucking the trend in industrialised countries worldwide, where poor voter turnout is becoming a matter of serious concern," Dr Hill says. However, the US spike in turnout is likely to be temporary due to the unusually high prominence of the election.

Although Australia is the only English-speaking country in the world to compel its citizens to vote, a number of other established democracies have shown serious interest in the idea, including Britain.

"One MP in the UK has recently introduced a Private Member's Bill for its adoption and some intensive research is being undertaken there to gauge its suitability for the British context," Dr Hill says.

Likewise, there have been calls for its introduction in the US, Canada, New Zealand, Israel and even Jordan.

Dr Hill will look at whether compulsory voting actually violates liberal-democratic principles - as claimed in some quarters - or offers a remedy to one of the most urgent problems facing industrialised democracies worldwide.

"This project is the first systematic assessment of compulsory voting from a practical, efficient, legal and constitutional viewpoint."

The study will reveal whether compulsory voting regimes are perceived to be more legitimate than voluntary regimes, if Australians report higher levels of trust in government than their overseas counterparts and whether there are equally effective non-mandatory means for improving voter turnout.

"There's an important question around whether compulsory voting affects the behaviour of incumbent governments and reduces the role of money in election campaigns," she says.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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