An essential feature of a liberal democracy is a democratic electoral system where:

- elections are consistent and fair
- votes have equal value—once vote, one value
- the will of the majority is achieved
- the interests of minorities are recognised
- there is a high level of voter participation
- voting is accessible.

Australia achieves these through our Constitution, which provides for six-yearly Senate elections and three-yearly elections for the House of Representatives. These elections are administered by the Australian Electoral Commission, an independent statutory authority that ensures elections are conducted properly and fairly.

Under our compulsory voting system, everyone over the age of 18 must enrol and vote.

Compulsory voting was introduced in 1924 and first used in the 1925 elections (although enrolment and voting for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples only became compulsory in 1984). Other nations with mandatory voting include Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Greece, Singapore and Turkey.

Around election time, many people wonder if compulsory voting is fair when the whole idea of democracy is to give everyone the freedom to make their own choices.

Some Australians argue against compulsory voting.

However, the idea of civic responsibility, which lies at the heart of this practice, has produced a stable democracy that recognises the value of its electoral system.

To vote or not to vote

The main arguments in favour of compulsory voting centre on:

- The importance of voter turnout: If only a portion of the population votes, then the principle of democracy is compromised when the government represents only some of the electorate.
- A lesser need for politicians’ to have massive campaign funding because there is not the same imperative to entice people to vote.
- Ensuring politicians represent the views of all citizens rather than targeting specific interest groups or certain people. If everyone votes, candidates must aim to appeal to all sectors of the community, thus promoting democracy.
- Promoting political stability because popularly elected governments are more likely to have a transparent policy platform unaffected by crises or leaders with hidden agendas.
- Valuing the right to vote. If people are obliged to vote, they are more likely to research candidates and/or policies to make sure they select the party or individual that meets their interests. This forces candidates to be transparent and honest in their campaigning.

Those who oppose compulsory voting claim:

- It violates freedom of choice. People should be free not to express their political views through voting.
- Voting for the sake of it defeats the main purpose of an election which is to elect deserving candidates into key positions.
- It is unfair to fine those who do not vote because they have not harmed anyone and the enforcement cost is a waste of money.

In the long run, apathy is not a reason not to vote. Governments are elected through the will of the majority. Those who choose not to vote yet enjoy the benefits of democracy in some ways resemble those who choose not to be union members yet are willing to accept the pay increases and conditions of employment won through the efforts of those who stand up and are counted.

They see nothing wrong with watching as others take a stance only to benefit as a result of their efforts. In the case of non-union members, this is even more distasteful because they also happily fail to pay union fees.

Australia really is the lucky country—not just because we are blessed with so many natural resources and a peaceful, multicultural way of life—but because we maintain institutional structures and practices that safeguard our good fortune.

As citizens, it is one small civic duty we undertake that can affect our lives and our future.

The freedom of our liberal democracy should not be taken for granted. We each have one vote, and we should make it count.