Compulsory voting - for and against

The main arguments for and against compulsory voting in Australia can be organised into six opposed pairs.

1. Citizenship, duties and rights

For
Voting is a necessary part of the duties of citizenship, just like jury duty or paying taxes.

Against
Citizens have the right to choose whether they want to vote. Compulsion is part of a slippery slope to totalitarianism.

2. Legitimate representation

For
Compulsory registration and voting increase the legitimacy of elected representatives. Candidates winning seats in parliament really do win a majority of the people's votes. In countries like the United States, where the turnout can be low, candidates can win with much less than a majority of the eligible vote.

Against
Compulsory registration and voting reduce the legitimacy of elected representatives. Majorities in Australian elections include the votes of many uninterested and ill-informed people who vote just because they have to.

3. Political education

For
Compulsory voting increases the political education of the people. They will tend to pay more attention to politics if they know they have to vote.

Against
Australians seem to be no more politically educated (and are perhaps less so) than citizens of comparable countries (for example, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom) that use voluntary voting.

4. Choice

For
Compulsory voting does not force a choice. People can always lodge a blank or spoiled ballot paper.

Against
Compulsory voting forces people to vote for someone even if they do not like any of the candidates on offer.

5. Bias

For
Compulsory voting means that candidates have to address the needs of all the voters. If voting were voluntary, the experience of countries like the United States is that poorer and less educated people would tend not to vote. This would skew the political system (further) toward the well off and well educated.

Against
Voluntary voting does not necessarily produce bias to the wealthy or well educated. In the United States, candidates like Jesse Jackson have shown that the poor and relatively uneducated can be mobilised in large numbers behind candidates who support their concerns.

6. Responsiveness

For
Compulsory voting keeps the Australian political system responsive to the people. New parties and candidates (like Katter's Australian Party) who lack wealthy backing can contest elections without spending large sums of money just to get the voters to polling booths.

Against
Compulsory voting has made the Australian political system unresponsive. If voting were made voluntary, it would shake up the political system. Parties and candidates would have to do more to convince people of the merits of their policies in order to get voters to the polls.

Questions for Discussion
Is the low turnout in some voluntary local government elections a cause for concern?

Would it be of concern if Australia reverted to voluntary voting and experienced similarly low turnouts in federal and state elections?

Do you think the political parties’ positions on compulsory voting have more to do with principle or trying to win government?