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When Voting is Compulsory, Who Opposes It? Evidence from Ecuador and Peru

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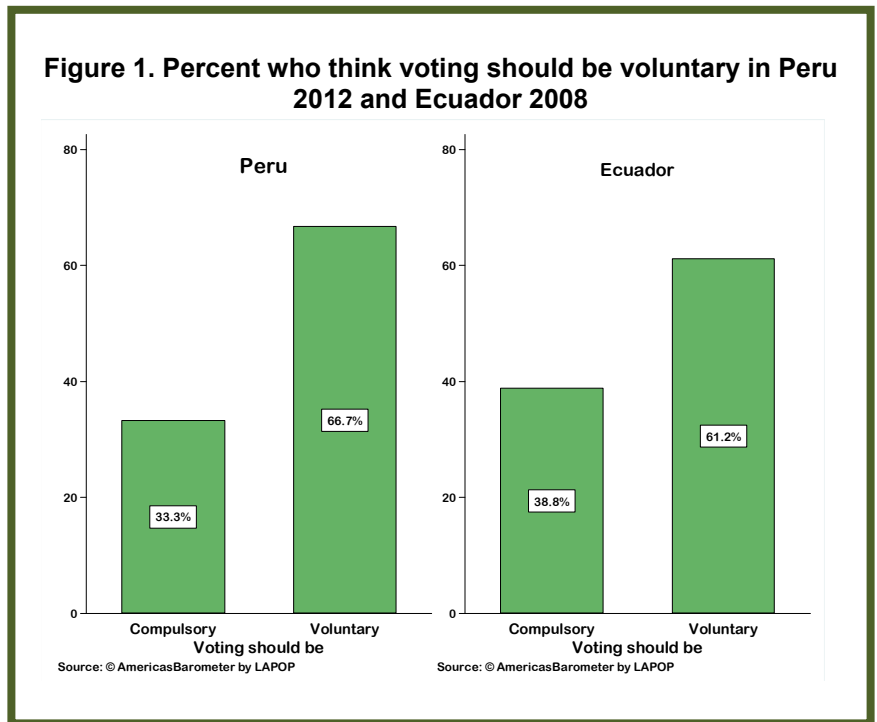
Executive Summary. In Peru and Ecuador, two countries with compulsory voting and relatively strong penalties and enforcement, citizens overwhelmingly support a change to voluntary voting. Why, then, do these electoral rules remain in force if a strong majority opposes them? I find evidence that those who oppose compulsory voting are different from those who support it. This *Insights* report evaluates differences between supporters and opponents of compulsory voting. The results indicate that differences between the two groups lie not in socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, but in how engaged citizens are with the political process. Supporters of voluntary voting are less interested in politics, do not affiliate with a political party, and tend to be on the left of the ideological spectrum. Conversely, those who support a continuation of their country's compulsory voting laws tend to be more engaged in politics and, in the case of Ecuador, more supportive of current president Rafael Correa.

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A higher proportion of countries in Latin America require citizens to vote than in any other region in the world. Indeed, compulsory voting laws—with varying degrees of enforcement—are the rule rather than the exception in Latin America. Recent elections in Peru and Ecuador have brought to the surface a long simmering debate regarding the value of compulsory voting laws for a country's quality of democracy. In Peru's capital city of Lima, a controversial recall election in March of 2013 led one of the country's leading newspapers, *El Comercio*, to call for elimination of compulsory voting laws as a way to provide citizens the freedom to abstain. In Ecuador, on the eve of the country's local elections on February 23, 2014, similar calls for the elimination of compulsory voting were made, with critics pointing to the flaws of the current system that allows voluntary voting for military personnel, citizens older than 65, the disabled, and youths between the ages of 16 and 18, while requiring all other citizens to vote. In an opinion piece in a leading daily, Larreátegui (2013) refers to the compulsory laws as a mechanism that allows neo-populists to bolster their claim of popular support.

Ironically, lost in much of this debate about the possible benefits and drawbacks of voluntary/compulsory voting laws is an understanding of the views of those most affected by these laws – the voters themselves. Little systematic research explores citizens' views towards laws that compel them to exercise their "right" to vote. This *Insights* report¹ examines just that question through an analysis of specific items included in the 2008 AmericasBarometer² survey in Ecuador and the



2012 survey in Peru. In Peru, I also examine the opinions of parliamentarians collected in the last round of surveys by the University of Salamanca's PELA project, a longstanding collaborator of LAPOP.

Peru and Ecuador have compulsory voting laws with relatively strong penalties that are regularly, although not consistently, enforced. This makes them ideal cases with which to better understand how citizens feel about being compelled to vote.

The two AmericasBarometer surveys and the PELA survey include the following items:

Ecuador AB 2008: ecuvb19. Do you think that voting should be voluntary or voting should be kept as compulsory?

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>.

The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>.

² Funding for the 2012 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American

Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University. This *Insights* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of the United States Agency for International Development, or any other supporting agency.

Peru AB 2012: cv2. Some people say voting should be voluntary. Others say it should be compulsory. What do you think?

Peru PELA 2011-2016: ELE4. Do you think voting should be kept as compulsory or do you think people should vote only if they want to?

Figure 1 presents the percentage of people who think voting should be voluntary or compulsory by country in the AmericasBarometer. It is clear from this figure that there is overwhelming support for a voluntary voting system in both countries. This inclination in the mass public toward voluntary voting is consistent with viewpoints expressed in the mass media that regularly voice opposition to the countries' compulsory voting requirements. In Peru, however, elites' opinions are divided. PELA data shows that 51.6% of 91 parliamentarians interviewed support a change from compulsory to voluntary voting.

Analysis of these survey items can help tell us if certain segments of the citizenry support compulsory voting and thus may benefit more or be more instrumental in its continuation. The remainder of this *Insights* report analyzes the determinants of support and opposition to compulsory voting in Ecuador and Peru.

I evaluate the socioeconomic and attitudinal characteristics of supporters of voluntary voting as compared to those who support a continuation of compulsory voting in their country. According to proponents of compulsory voting, this electoral rule helps reduce biases in electoral participation by overcoming the socioeconomic obstacles that tend to skew voter turnout patterns in favor of the middle and upper classes. Empirical evidence supports this notion that there are differences in electoral participation among socioeconomic groups in countries with voluntary voting (Lijphart 1997; Power 2009). However, there remains a debate about how much, if at all, do compulsory voting laws reduce these class biases in voting, or, conversely, do they actually create other types

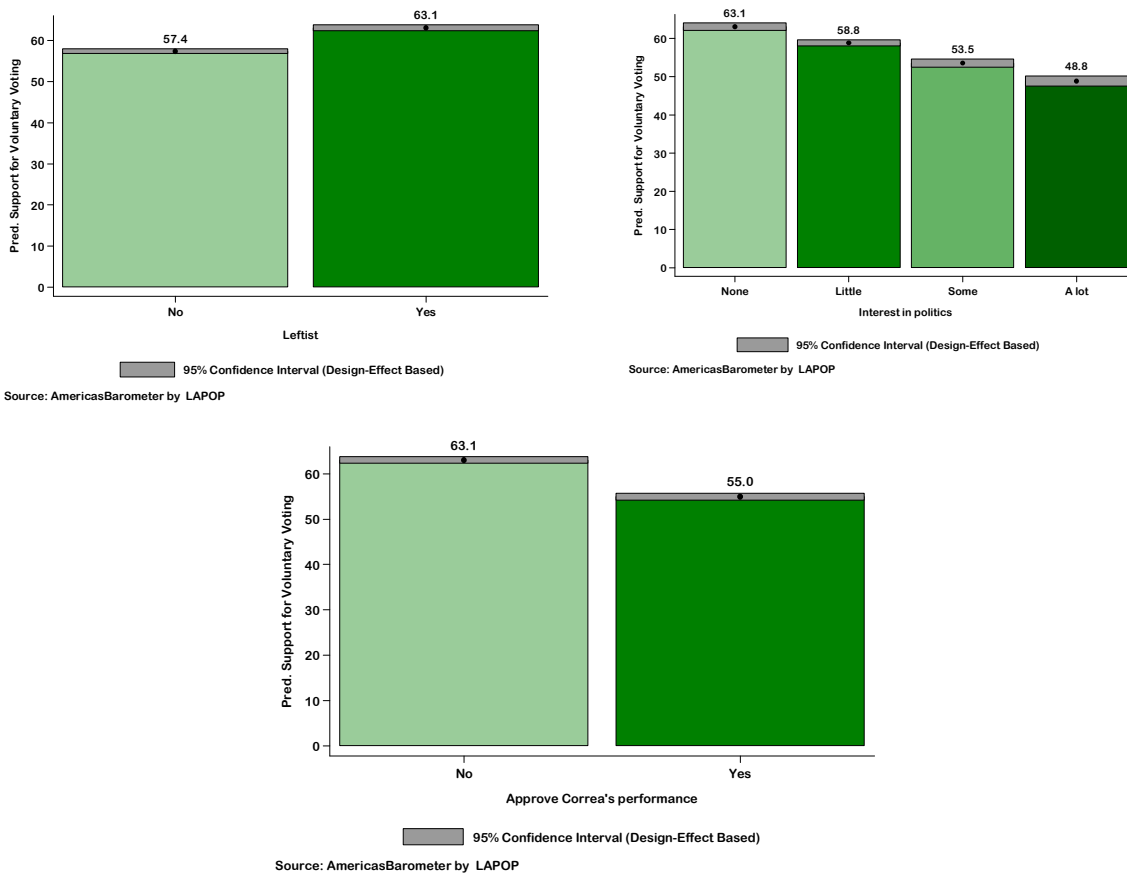
of participation biases within a system (Maldonado 2011).

In theorizing over what might distinguish supporters and opponents of compulsory voting, the literature has identified several demographic characteristics and attitudinal variables that are linked to a willingness to turn out to vote under a voluntary system and which may in turn help explain one's position on compulsory voting (Plutzer 2002; Achen 2012; Carreras and Castañeda-Argarita 2012). Factors related to voters' resources, such as education and income, and the costs they face to cast a ballot, such as residency (e.g., urban/rural), have emerged as important predictors of voter turnout. Attitudinal variables related to the voters' need to express their preferences, such as interest in politics, party identification, and ideology, also have been found to play a strong role in the decision to vote or not.

I expect that those citizens who face stronger barriers to participation and have fewer resources are more likely to think that voting should be voluntary. To this end, I include in the analysis below variables that capture differences in age, gender, place of residence, education, political knowledge, income, marital status, and whether a respondent has children or not. The expectation is that female respondents, those living in rural areas, the less well-educated, those with lower incomes, and those with children will be more likely to oppose compulsory voting and support a move to a voluntary electoral participation law, due to the various obstacles they face when compelled to participate in politics.

Similarly, those who have less interest in politics, limited political knowledge, and no party identification should also be more likely to opt for voluntary voting. An alternative to this perspective is that those respondents who are highly engaged in politics and identify with a political party may be more inclined to support voluntary voting. One motivation for these individuals to support voluntary voting is that it would likely remove their

Figure 2. Socioeconomic and Political Correlates of Voting Should be Voluntary, Ecuador 2008



disinterested and unengaged counterparts from the electoral process, thereby making the electoral voice of those already engaged in politics even stronger.

Evidence from Ecuador 2008

Surprisingly, results from a logistic regression model of support for a return to voluntary voting in Ecuador reveal no significant socioeconomic or demographic differences between proponents of voluntary voting and those who support compulsory voting. There are no statistically significant differences between men and women, those living in urban and those living in rural settings, married or not married, between those more educated and less educated, between those who have children and those who do not, and more significantly I do not find differences among

people with different incomes in their support for voluntary voting (See Appendix: Table1 for more details).

Where I do find significant differences is in the political profiles of supporters of voluntary voting and those who support a continuation of compulsory voting laws. Figure 2 shows the predicted probability values for the three most significant attitudinal characteristics that help distinguish proponents of voluntary voting from those in favor of compulsory voting: self-identification on a left-right scale, interest in politics, and approval of President Correa's performance in office.

For the left-right identification measure, interestingly, those located on the left are more likely to support voluntary voting than those located on the right. When we look at left-right identifications in Ecuador, we find that Correa has a broad base of supporters, including self-

identified left-leaning and self-identified right-leaning citizens. In 2008, 78% of those on the left and 70% of those not on the left reported having voted for Correa in 2006.

To test more directly whether Correa’s supporters prefer or reject voluntary voting, I include a variable that taps approval of Correa’s performance. From this analysis we find that all else equal, supporters of Correa are in fact more likely to support compulsory voting than those who oppose him. This result is consistent with the idea that Correa and his supporters recognize the added electoral value that compulsory voting laws can provide the President. These findings also suggest that Correa’s electoral fortunes might suffer with a return to voluntary voting, and those who oppose him perhaps recognize this additional benefit that may come with elimination of compulsory voting laws. Clearly more research is needed on this issue to better understand the ideological and partisan motivations behind support for either voluntary or compulsory voting laws.

I also find that those with little interest in politics tend to be more likely to support a return to voluntary voting. From one perspective, at least, it is not surprising that those with no interest in politics would prefer to bring to an end a law that requires them to participate in the electoral process. From another perspective, though, it is perhaps surprising that those respondents with a high

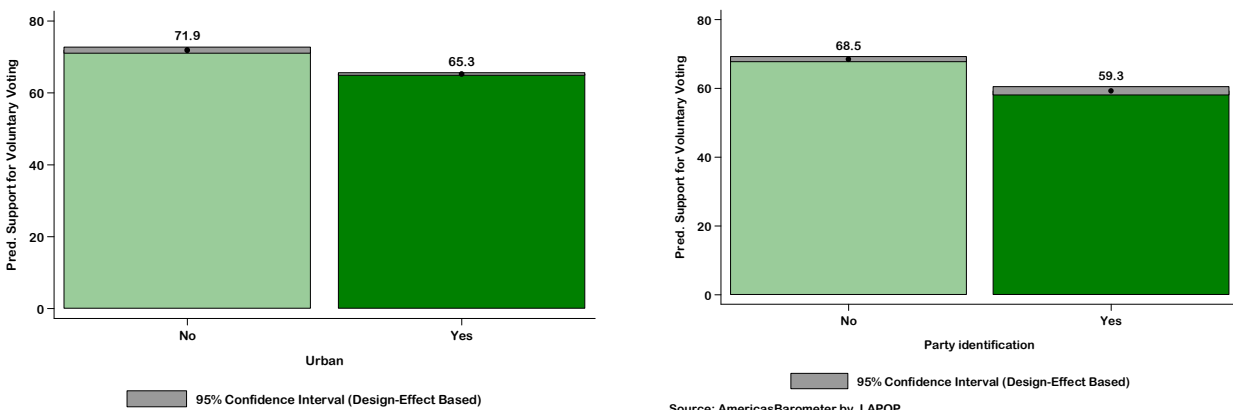
level of interest in politics would support compulsory voting, a measure that theoretically dilutes the participation advantage that the politically engaged have over their more apathetic compatriots.

In sum, it does not seem that socioeconomic or geographic factors influence one’s support for or opposition to compulsory voting. This null finding is striking given the conventional view that citizens who face obstacles in their efforts to vote are those least likely to support a continuation of mandatory voting rules. Rather, I find the most significant factors to be attitudinal characteristics: those individuals most engaged in politics, those on the right, and supporters of Correa are among the most likely to support retention of the current compulsory voting laws in Ecuador. These findings suggest that support for compulsory voting could be driven by deep-rooted principles about the role the state should play in compelling citizens to exercise their right to vote and, as well, about the likely electoral beneficiaries of compulsory voting laws in Ecuador.

Evidence from Peru 2008

Turning to the case of Peru, I ran a similar logistic regression model to explain support for voluntary voting in 2012. From this analysis, two factors emerge as significant: urban residency and party identification (see

Figure 3. Socioeconomic and Political Correlates of Voting Should be Voluntary, Peru 2012



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

Appendix: Table 2 for full results). Contrary to the case of Ecuador, there are no statistically significant differences between those who approve of current president Humala's performance and those who do not.

Figure 3 presents the predicted values of support for voluntary voting for urban residency and party identification, controlling for other covariates. From the party identification variable, it appears once again that it is those who are less engaged with politics, at least in the form of identifying with a political party, who are most likely to support a return to voluntary voting. It seems like these citizens have less interest in politics and therefore may see that a return to voluntary voting would allow them to more easily disengage from politics. This result again helps explain, possibly, why compulsory voting laws remain in effect in Peru. Those most opposed to mandatory voting are also those least engaged in politics to begin with.

With respect to the urban/rural result, it is here where we find evidence for the proposition that those who face structural or socioeconomic barriers to participation will be most likely to oppose compulsory voting laws. Here we see that respondents living in rural areas were significantly more likely to support voluntary voting than those respondents living in urban settings. Most likely, rural citizens encounter greater difficulties in reaching the polls due to distance, transportation costs, or limited political information, and thus prefer a system in which they do not have to struggle with these obstacles.

Interestingly, a survey of Peruvian legislators shows that there is a significant difference between parliamentarians from Humala's party and parliamentarians from other parties in their support of voluntary voting. Legislators from the party in government are far more likely to oppose a return to voluntary voting, with only 34.4 percent of those polled calling for an end to the country's compulsory voting law. Conversely, over 61 percent of opposition party legislators called for a return to voluntary

voting, representing a stark contrast from their counterparts in the President's party. When controlling for other covariates such as gender, marital status, age, education and income, this difference remains statistically significant at a generous level ($p < 0.09$). Further, support for voluntary voting is similar between congressmen and congresswomen, between those who are married and those who are not, and between parliamentarians from different ages and incomes (see Appendix: Table 3 for full results). From this elite level, then, we see a similar outcome in terms of greater support for compulsory voting among those affiliated with the ruling party as we found in Ecuador among supporters of President Correa in society at large.

Conclusion

Overall, in the countries studied here, those who think voting should be voluntary and those who think it should be obligatory are not sharply different in terms of their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Differences do emerge, however, across certain political attitudes that suggest the persistence of compulsory voting in both Ecuador and Peru is, in part, a product of the general lack of interest in politics found in opponents of compulsory voting, while those who support such laws tend to be more interested in and active in their political system. I find that interest in politics, one's ideological position, and party identification help distinguish between opponents and supporters of compulsory voting. Citizens who are less interested in politics, those who self-place on the left of the ideological spectrum in Ecuador, and those who do not identify with a party tend to express greater support for voluntary voting. Conversely, supporters of compulsory voting tend to be more engaged and interested in politics, affiliated with a political party, and residents of urban areas. In Ecuador, those who support president Correa are more likely to support compulsory voting and in Peru we find a similar relationship among parliamentary elites, but not in public

opinion in general. In Peru, legislators belonging to the party in government are more in favor of continuing a system that obliges citizens to vote, but citizens who approve Humala's performance are not different on this issue from those who voice disapproval of his performance.

All of these characteristics, when compared to those of supporters of voluntary voting, seem far more likely to provide a strong and clear voice in favor of compulsory voting, even if that voice only represents roughly 4 out of every 10 members of the voting-age population. What these findings suggest, then, is that there are cases in which the policies and practices of a democratic state do not reflect the will of the majority, but rather the will of an engaged minority, especially when they are on the side of the party in power.

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Appendix

Table 1. Logistic Regression of Support for Voluntary Voting – Ecuador AmericasBarometer 2008

	Coefficient	z-value
Woman	0.070	0.70
Urban	-0.068	-0.66
Married	-0.045	-0.39
Age 26-35	-0.080	-0.68
Age 36-50	0.197	1.27
Age 51+	0.187	0.85
Education	-0.084	-1.02
Income	-0.044	-1.29
Have children	-0.092	-1.05
Interest in politics	-0.152*	-2.56
Rightist	-0.014	-0.10
Leftist	0.363*	2.91
Political knowledge	-0.041	-1.19
Party identification	-0.042	-0.33
Approve Correa's performance	-0.321*	-3.21
Constant	1.295	5.64
<i>Number of Observations</i>	1817	
<i>Pseudo r-squared</i>	0.021	
<i>LR chi2</i>	49.38	

Table 2. Logistic Regression of Support for Voluntary Voting – Peru AmericasBarometer 2012

	Coefficient	z-value
Woman	-0.111	-0.78
Urban	-0.410*	-2.45
Married	0.102	0.54
Age 26-35	0.182	0.86
Age 36-50	-0.038	-0.18
Age 51+	0.191	0.82
Education	0.091	0.81
Income	0.042	1.89
Have children	0.072	0.30
Interest in politics	-0.126	-1.52
Rightist	0.033	0.19
Leftist	0.001	-0.01
Political knowledge	-0.050	-0.53
Party identification	-0.392*	-2.24
Approve Humala's performance	-0.045	-0.32
Constant	0.779	2.11
<i>Number of Observations</i>	1096	
<i>Pseudo r-squared</i>	0.016	
<i>LR chi2</i>	21.55	

Table 3. Logistic Regression of Support for Voluntary Voting – Peru PELA 2011-2016

	Coefficient	z-value
Woman	1.11	1.67
Married	0.488	0.83
Age 41-50	-1.077	0.86
Age 51-60	-0.344	-0.18
Age 61+	-0.042	0.82
Education	0.077	0.81
Income	0.265	1.89
Party	-0.875	-2.24
Constant	-0.485	2.11
<i>Number of Observations</i>	78	
<i>Pseudo r-squared</i>	0.10	
<i>LR chi2</i>	10.83	