Does Compulsory Voting Work Because Citizens Fear Punishment? Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Belgium

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Abstract

Compulsory voting is one of the most effective institutional tools for increasing electoral turnout. Yet, it remains unclear why it works so well, particularly in countries where sanctions for non-voting are weak or unenforced. One possible explanation is that citizens are misinformed about the consequences of abstention and incorrectly believe that non-voting is still punished. We test this argument using a pre-registered survey experiment in Belgium, a country with compulsory voting but without meaningful enforcement of sanctions for more than two decades. Respondents were randomly assigned to a control condition, a treatment informing them about the legal fine for non-voting, or a treatment additionally informing them that these fines are no longer enforced. We find that informing citizens about the existence of the fine significantly increases turnout intentions. This effect is largely attenuated when respondents are additionally informed about the absence of enforcement. However, turnout intentions in this group remain statistically indistinguishable from those in the control condition. These findings suggest that beliefs about enforcement contribute to the effectiveness of compulsory voting, but are insufficient to explain the persistently high turnout observed in systems with weak or absent enforcement. More broadly, the results indicate that the effects of compulsory voting cannot be reduced solely to fear of punishment and point toward the importance of alternative mechanisms such as civic duty and norm internalization.

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Introduction

High electoral turnout is widely considered essential for representative democracy, as it produces election results that closely mirror the preferences of the voting population (Dahl, 1971; Pitkin, 1967; Powell, 1982). Although such results may also be achieved under low turnout, participation is known to be unequal: certain groups in society are less likely to vote in elections than others (Blais et al., 2020; Lijphart, 1997; Verba et al., 1978). As electoral turnout decreases, such unequal participation is likely to be greater. As a result, low electoral turnout may lead to a mismatch between citizen preferences and elected politicians, which in turn may lead to a discrepancy between desired policies and enacted policies (Çakır, 2025; Gilens, 2012; Lindqvist et al., 2025; Schakel, 2021).

As such, the decline in electoral turnout in democracies worldwide over the last decades is problematic. This trend has stimulated a large research agenda on the sources of this decline (Blais, 2006; Blais & Rubenson, 2013; Blais et al., 2004; Kostelka, 2017; Kostelka & Blais, 2021; Smets & Van Ham, 2013), as well as the potential tools to combat it (Blais & Carty, 1990; Green & Gerber, 2019; Sondheimer & Green, 2010; Stockemer, 2017). One of the most effective drivers of electoral turnout, however, is institutional: countries with compulsory voting have vastly higher levels of electoral turnout than countries with voluntary voting (Birch, 2009; Kostelka et al., 2022; Singh, 2021; Stockemer, 2017). Not only has research established that the implementation (or abolishment) of compulsory voting directly increases (or decreases) turnout (Irwin, 1974; Miller & Dassonneville, 2016), the aforementioned global turnout decline has also been absent in countries that held their elections under compulsory voting throughout the same period (Kostelka & Blais, 2021).

Yet, whereas the effectiveness of compulsory voting is relatively undisputed, it remains largely unclear why compulsory voting drives voters to the ballot box. One strand of literature points to the impact that compulsory voting has on a civic duty to vote (Chapman, 2019; Feitosa et al., 2020). Another, rather straightforward interpretation of the effectiveness of compulsory voting points to the legal obligation to vote in such systems. The idea here is that citizens do not want to face the legal penalties abstentees face after the election. However, this explanation fails to account for the fact that there are large

differences regarding the legal consequences among the set of countries with compulsory voting. Whereas in some countries citizens can indeed expect a penalty for non-voting – often a small monetary fine – in many countries legal consequences are either entirely absent, or not enforced and thus virtually absent. Importantly, research has shown that even in such systems "toothless" compulsory voting turnout is much higher than in systems of voluntary voting (Kostelka et al., 2022; Rajan & Singh, 2025). This raises the question: If compulsory voting works because citizens fear punishment, why does it continue to produce high turnout in countries where sanctions are not enforced?

An important explanation for this may be that citizens are simply misinformed about the legal consequences of compulsory voting. If citizens living under compulsory voting without legal consequences are under the impression that they risk a penalty for non-voting, they may indeed equally turn out as citizens living in countries where compulsory voting is enforced. Indeed, research has shown that citizens in three compulsory voting countries are largely misinformed about the consequences of non-voting. If correcting such misperceptions decreases turnout, the effectiveness of compulsory voting can indeed (partially) be attributed to the fear of the legal enforcement of compulsory voting.

In this paper, we address this question by studying whether beliefs about the consequences of compulsory voting drives the decision to cast a vote. In a pre-registered survey experiment, we provide citizens in Belgium with factual information about the consequences of abstaining. Belgium has a long history of compulsory voting, with monetary fines for citizens who do not vote without a valid reason – yet without enforcement for more than 25 years. Compared to a control, we examine whether providing citizens with the information about the fine (Treatment 1) as well as the additional information about the non-enforcement (Treatment 2) changes their likelihood to turn out at the next election.

We find that informing citizens about the existence of the legal fine for non-voting significantly increases turnout intentions. This effect, however, is largely attenuated once respondents are additionally informed that these sanctions have not been enforced for more than two decades. At the same time, turnout intentions in this latter group remain statistically indistinguishable from those in the control condition. Together, these findings suggest that beliefs about enforcement contribute to the effectiveness of compulsory

voting, but are insufficient to explain the persistently high turnout observed in compulsory voting systems where sanctions are weak or absent. Rather, the results indicate that compulsory voting continues to exert a strong influence on turnout intentions even when citizens are informed that legal sanctions are effectively unenforced.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. We first discuss existing explanations for the effectiveness of compulsory voting and derive our hypotheses regarding the role of legal sanctions and their enforcement. We then describe the research design and experimental treatments before presenting the results of the survey experiment. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for theories of compulsory voting and electoral participation more broadly.

Why does compulsory voting work?

Although the positive effect of compulsory voting on electoral turnout is well established, there is considerably less agreement regarding the mechanisms through which compulsory voting increases participation. Existing explanations can broadly be grouped into two perspectives. The first emphasizes the long-term normative consequences of compulsory voting. According to this view, compulsory voting strengthens a civic duty to vote, reinforces participatory norms, and socializes citizens into viewing electoral participation as a normal and expected behaviour (Chapman, 2019; Feitosa et al., 2020; Singh, 2021). In this perspective, compulsory voting affects turnout not primarily through legal sanctions, but because citizens internalize voting as a civic obligation.

A second explanation focuses on the legal obligation to vote itself. Compulsory voting imposes a formal cost on abstention through legal sanctions, most commonly monetary fines. From this perspective, compulsory voting increases turnout because citizens seek to avoid the negative consequences associated with non-voting. The threat of punishment changes the cost-benefit calculation of participation and thereby encourages citizens to turn out on election day.

While both explanations are plausible, the sanctions perspective faces an important chal-

lenge. Comparative research has shown that compulsory voting continues to produce substantially higher turnout even in countries where sanctions are absent, weak, or effectively unenforced (Kostelka et al., 2022; Rajan & Singh, 2025). If citizens only vote because they fear punishment, turnout should decline substantially once sanctions lose their credibility.

One possible explanation for this apparent contradiction is that citizens are misinformed about the actual consequences of abstention. Even when sanctions are not enforced, citizens may continue to believe that non-voting carries legal risks. In that case, the deterring effect of compulsory voting may persist because citizens respond to their perceptions of enforcement rather than to the actual probability of punishment. Recent evidence indeed suggests that citizens in several compulsory voting systems are poorly informed about the legal consequences of abstention (Dassonneville et al., 2023).

If this interpretation is correct, informing citizens about the existence of sanctions should increase turnout intentions. Conversely, informing citizens that these sanctions are not enforced should reduce turnout intentions by removing the perceived costs associated with abstention. Finally, if misinformation about enforcement is a key mechanism through which compulsory voting operates in toothless systems, correcting these misperceptions should reduce turnout intentions below the level observed among respondents who receive no information about sanctions at all.

We therefore test the following pre-registered hypotheses:

> H1: *Informing citizens about the legal fine for non-voting increases turnout intentions relative to a control condition.*
>
> H2: *Informing citizens that the legal fine is not enforced decreases turnout intentions relative to the control condition.*
>
> H3: *Informing citizens that the legal fine is not enforced decreases turnout intentions relative to respondents who are only informed about the existence of the fine.*

Case

In order to test the effects of information about compulsory voting rules, we fielded a survey experiment in Belgium. The country is a suitable case for our research question for two core reasons. First, Belgium has a long history of compulsory voting that traces back to 1893, when it was included in the constitution. Since then, all federal elections have been held under compulsory voting, which directly had the intended effect, elevating levels of turnout above 90 percent. This effect has endured over time, and all federal elections in the 21st century had turnout levels around 90 percent. Essentially, citizens in Belgium do not know better than to cast a vote on election day.

Second, there has been no enforcement of compulsory voting in the last 25 years. Officially, Belgian voters risk a fine ranging between 40 to 80 euros if they do not turn out to vote for federal elections. However, this fine has not been issued to any voter since at least 2001, and public prosecutors have openly voiced that they will not prosecute voters who failed to cast a ballot on election day. As such, it is a typical case of "toothless" compulsory voting, where compulsory voting is present but without enforcement, yet still very effectively raising turnout levels. Importantly, research has shown that voters are largely misinformed about the absence of the enforcement of compulsory voting (Dassonneville et al., 2023).

These features of the Belgian case are important to our design. If penalties would still be enforced, it would be difficult for us to manipulate the perception of enforcement, as it is likely that (some) of our respondents would know about it. In Belgium, the circumstances allow us provide factual information to respondents, without needing to deceive them in any way.

Research design

We test the effect of knowledge of compulsory voting rules on turnout with a pre-registered survey experiment.[1].

Samples

We recruited two samples in November 2025 in the two main regions of Belgium, the northern part of Flanders and the southern part of Wallonia, via the online survey vendor Bpact. The surveys were, besides the language (Dutch in Flanders and French in Wallonia), identical. In each region, we used quota samples for gender and age (interlocked) as well as education to collect representative samples of the voting age population. The pre-registered sample size was set to 3,000 respondents (1,500 in each region). To maximize statistical power, we did not close the quotas once they were reached. Moreover, respondents were removed from the sample and did not count toward our quotas if they failed either of the two pre-treatment attention checks. The final sample size consists of 3,411 respondents (1,686 in Flanders, 1,725 in Wallonia). Before starting the survey, all respondents gave their informed consent, and the study was approved by the ethics committee of the ULB.

Experimental design

To increase the precision of our estimates, we followed recommendations by Clifford et al. (2021) and implemented a pre-post design. Before treatment assignment, we asked respondents a question very close to our post-treatment dependent variables – how likely it generally is that they turn out to vote during federal elections. Although repeated measurement designs may attenuate treatment effects through consistency pressures, they generally yield substantial gains in statistical power – especially because we expected small treatment effects a priori (Jordan et al., 2026). Still, to minimize the risk of

[1]The pre-analysis plan can be found at the OSF https://osf.io/qabjn/overview?view_only=baa91114150044838df413affe35540a

consistency pressures among respondents, we placed the pre-treatment measure as early as possible before the treatment, after which a range of other items were included before proceeding to the treatment (specifically 10 items, of which 9 questions).

Following the pre-treatment variables and after passing the second attention check, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions (see Table 1). In the control condition, respondents were simply given the information about the date of the next federal elections. In Treatment 1 (T1), respondents were additionally informed about the potential legal consequences of abstention. In Treatment 2 (T2), we additionally provided respondents with information about the absence of enforcement of this fine in the last 25 years.

Respondents in all treatment groups were subsequently presented with two turnout questions. The first question asked how likely they believe it is that they will vote in the 2029 federal elections (0 = I will definitely not vote; 10 = I will definitely vote). We then asked how likely they believe it is that they will vote in all federal elections in their life (0 = I will never vote; 10 = I will always vote). We included this second measure because we expected that the general turnout likelihood in the control condition would already be very high, which risks ceiling effects. Since this second measure has a conceptually more extreme end (voting in every future election is a stronger sign of turnout than only in

Table 1: Experimental vignettes

	Vignette text
Control	As you may know, the next **federal** elections under compulsory voting will take place in 2029.
Treatment 1	As you may know, the next **federal** elections under compulsory voting will take place in 2029. If you fail to vote without a valid reason, you can legally be fined 80 euros.
Treatment 2	As you may know, the next **federal** elections will be held in 2029. If you fail to vote without a valid reason, you can legally be fined 80 euros. But the chance of receiving this fine is very small. The College of Attorneys General, the leadership of the Public Prosecutor's Office, has been saying for years that voters who do not vote will not be prosecuted. As far as is known, no Belgian voter has been prosecuted for abstaining since 2003.

the next election), we expected a somewhat lower mean, and thus more room for upward manoeuvre among respondents in T1.

Power analysis

We estimated the sample size in the pre-analysis plan to be able to detect small treatment effects. With a pooled sample of $N = 3,000$ and $N = 1,000$ per treatment condition, we have 80% power to detect treatment effects as small as $d = 0.125$ (alpha = 0.05). With the true sample size of roughly $N = 1,333$ per treatment group, the minimum detectable effect size decreases to $d = 0.118$.

We expected the minimum detectable effect size to decrease further due to the pre-post design of the study. The exact gain in precision depends on the correlation between the pre- and post-treatment measures. In the control group, the correlation between the pre-treatment turnout measure and the two post-treatment dependent variables is 0.805 and 0.800, respectively. Under the same assumptions and with the realized sample size, the minimum detectable effect size decreases from Cohen's $d = 0.118$ to $d = 0.071$, a reduction of roughly 40%. In the control group, the standard deviation of the two post-treatment dependent variables is 2.321 and 2.383, respectively. Accordingly, the design is powered to detect treatment effects of approximately 0.168 and 0.169 units on the 0–10 scales of the dependent variables.

Analytical strategy

As pre-registered, we use the linear regression model specified below to test our hypotheses. We estimate the same model for both post-treatment dependent variables (likelihood to vote in the next federal elections; likelihood to vote in all future federal elections):

$$Y_{\text{post},i} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T1_i + \beta_2 T2_i + \beta_3 Y_{\text{pre},i} + \gamma_r + \epsilon_i$$

$Y_{\text{post},i}$ is the outcome of interest Y_{post} for respondent i. β_0 is the intercept and denotes the mean likelihood to turn out for respondents in the control condition, holding the pre-treatment dependent variable at its mean. β_1 denotes the effect of reading the information on the potential legal consequences of abstention (T1), and β_2 denotes the effect of reading, in addition, the information on the non-enforcement of these legal consequences (T2). β_3 denotes the effect of the pre-treatment measure of the dependent variable, i.e. general likelihood to turn out at federal elections. Finally, γ_r denotes region fixed effects (Flanders = 0), and ϵ_i is the heteroskedasticity-robust error term at the individual level (equivalent to cluster-robust standard errors given individual-level randomization).

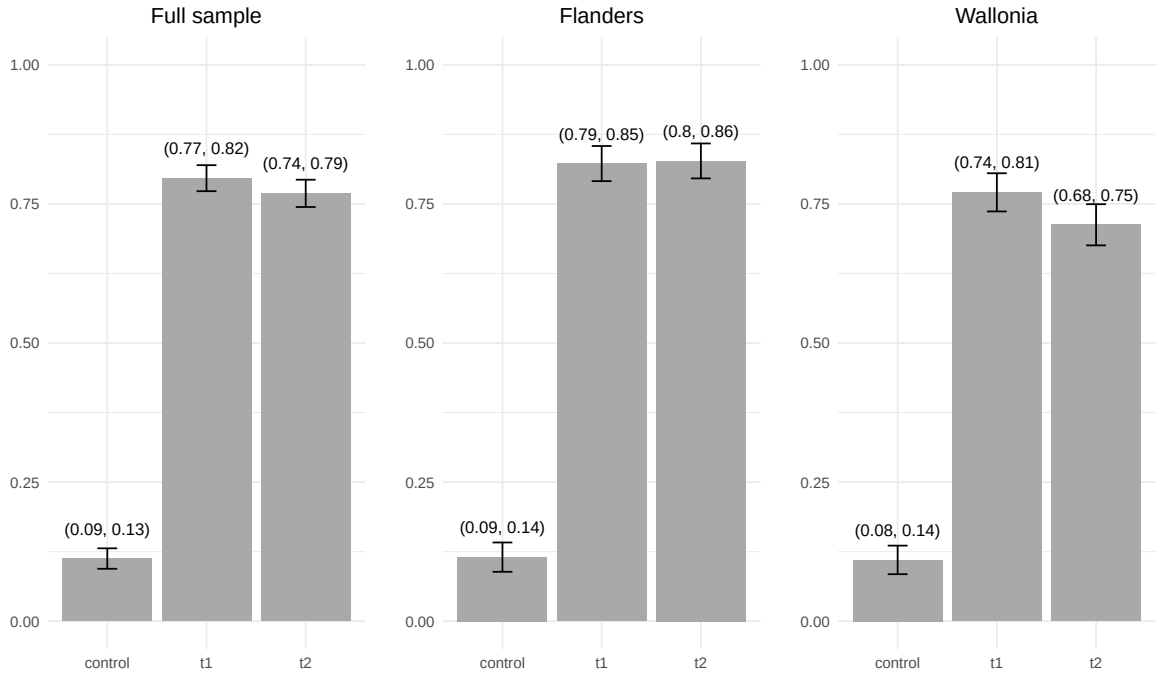
H1 is supported if β_1 is positive and statistically significant at the 0.05 level (two-sided test). H2 is supported if β_1 - β_2 is positive and statistically significant at the 0.05 level (two-sided test). H3 is supported if β_2 is negative and statistically significant at the 0.05 level (two-sided test). We examine support for the hypotheses for both dependent variables.

Results

Manipulation checks

To examine whether our manipulation worked as intended, we included two post-treatment manipulation checks. In the first manipulation check, we asked respondents what the amount of the fine is for abstention in Belgium (6 answer options including a "don't know"). Whereas a considerable share of the electorate may be aware of the fact that the penalty for abstention is a monetary fine, we assumed that the knowledge of the exact fine was very low. As per our treatments, the manipulation worked if respondents in T1 and T2 answered correctly significantly more than respondents in the control group. In Figure 1, we dichotomize the answers, coding those that answered correctly as 1 and those who did not as 0. We indeed find that respondents in both treatment groups were significantly more correct about the fine than respondents in the control group, also when disaggregated by region.

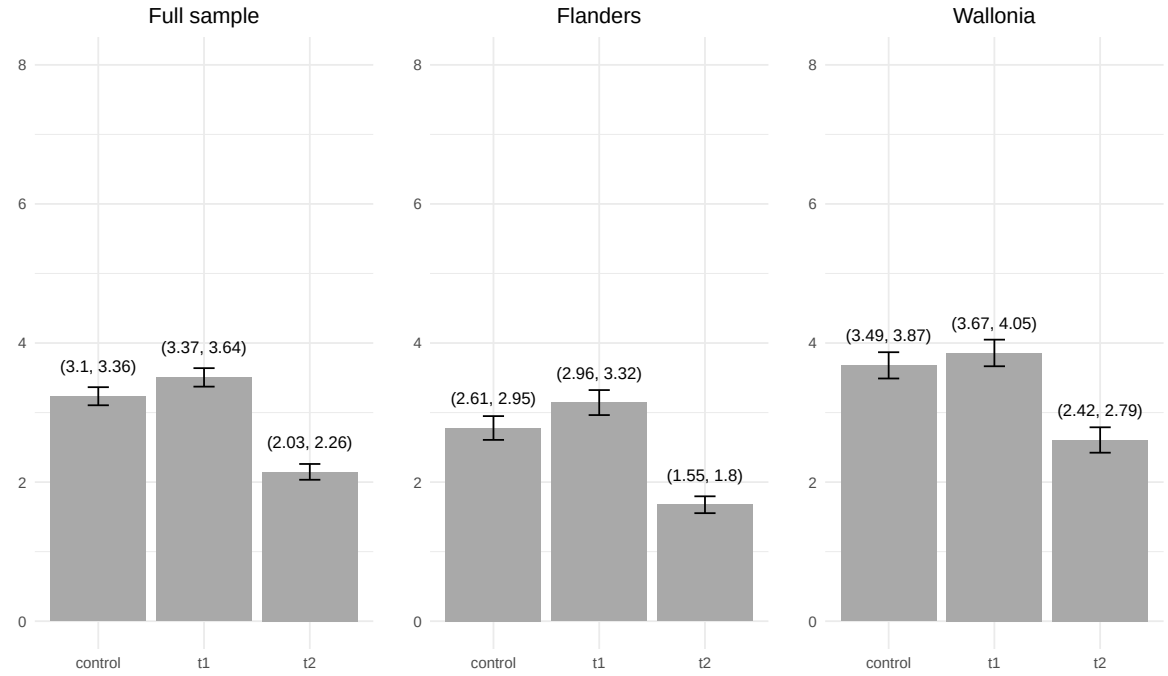
Figure 1: Manipulation check 1



Note: Figure depicts how many respondents correctly identified the amount of the fine for non-voting, including 95% confidence intervals. T1 and T2 received that information. 0 = wrong answer, 1 = correct answer.

In the second manipulation check, we asked respondents how likely they believe it is that non-voters actually receive such a fine in Belgium (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely, 8 = don't know). As per our treatments, only respondents in Treatment group 2 received that information. In Figure 2, we show the mean values per treatment group including 95% confidence intervals. In both regions, the treatment worked as intended: respondents in T2 believed significantly less that non-voters receive a fine for their abstention. Two additional patterns are worth noting. First, respondents in the control group were already relatively sceptical about enforcement, with a mean value below the midpoint of the scale. Second, respondents in T1 reported slightly higher expected enforcement than respondents in the control group, suggesting that information about the existence of a fine may also increase beliefs about its enforcement. We return to these patterns when discussing the treatment effects.

Figure 2: Manipulation check 2

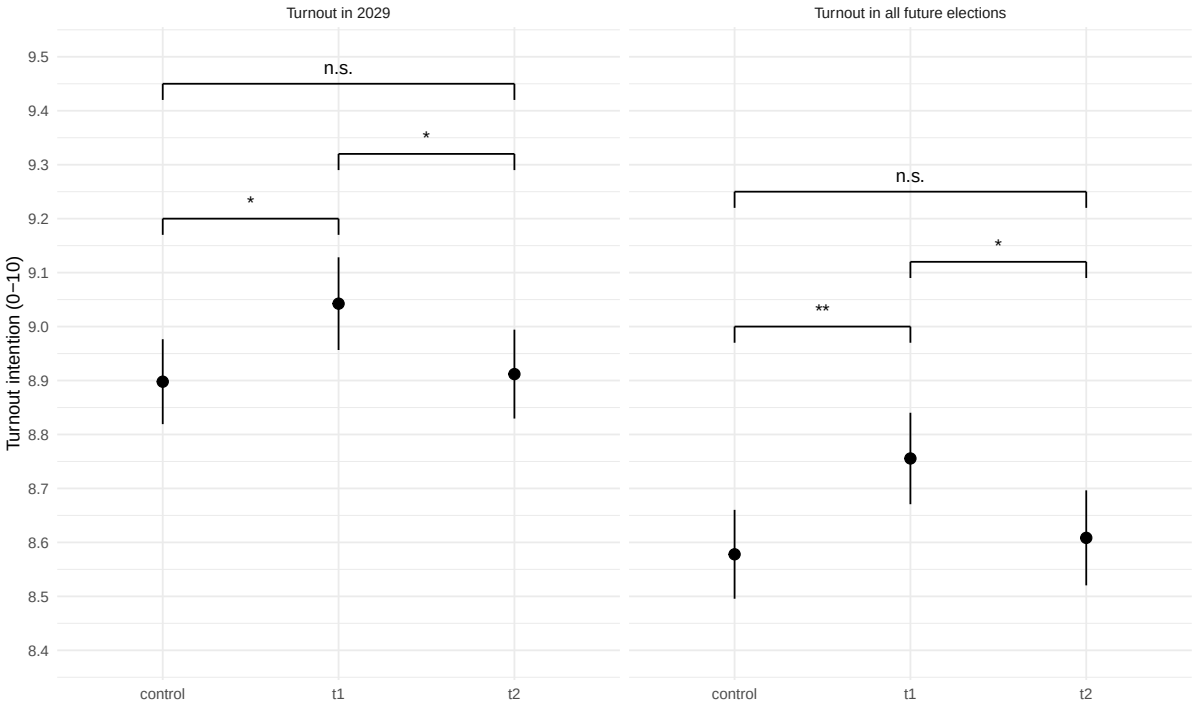


Note: Figure depicts to what extent respondents believe it is likely that non-voting will indeed lead to a fine, including 95% confidence intervals. T2 received that information. 1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely, 8 = DK

Experimental results

We present the experimental results for both dependent variables in Figure 3. The Figure presents the adjusted means of the model linear regression model specified in the previous section. As expected, intended turnout in the control group is already very high. For the next 2029 federal elections (DV1), the mean level of intended turnout in the control group is 8.898. For all future elections (DV2), turnout intention in the control group is also high at 8.578.

Figure 3: Experimental results



Note: Figure depicts mean level of turnout intention for each treatment group, including 95% confidence intervals. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

Compared to the control, specifying the fine in T1 has the expected positive effect on turnout intention for both dependent variables (DV1: $b = 0.145, p = 0.016$; DV2: $b = 0.178, p = 0.003$). When respondents are additionally informed about the non-enforcement of the fine in T2, levels of turnout intention essentially drop back to levels in the control group. Compared to the control, respondents in T2 report essentially no difference in turnout intention (DV1: $b = 0.014, p = 0.810$; DV2: $b = 0.030, p = 0.621$). Compared to T1, respondents in T2 are less likely to vote (DV1: $b = -0.131, p = 0.030$; DV2: $b = -0.147, p = 0.018$).

Regarding our hypotheses, we find strong support that informing citizens in a country of compulsory voting about the potential legal consequences of non-voting significantly increases their likelihood of turning out (H1). We also find similar evidence that this effect is almost completely attenuated once citizens additionally find out that such penalties are not enforced by the government (H3). Interestingly, however, information about the non-enforcement basically resets turnout levels back to the control group where no

information about penalties or enforcement was available. Specifically, non-enforcement does not lead to a drop in turnout compared to the control group, which leads us to reject H2. We thus fail to find evidence for the idea that misinformation about the enforcement of the legal consequences of compulsory voting drive voting in such systems. Rather, it supports the notion that "toothless" compulsory voting has a very strong impact on turnout, even if respondents are completely aware about it.

Conclusion

Compulsory voting is one of the most effective institutional tools to increase electoral turnout. Yet despite decades of research demonstrating its effectiveness, there remains considerable uncertainty regarding the mechanisms through which compulsory voting motivates citizens to participate in elections. In particular, the continued success of compulsory voting in countries where legal sanctions are weak, absent, or not enforced poses an important puzzle for theories that emphasize the deterrent effect of penalties for non-voting.

In this paper, we examined whether beliefs about the legal consequences of abstention help explain turnout under compulsory voting. Using a pre-registered survey experiment in Belgium, we provided citizens with information about the monetary fine for abstention, as well as information about the absence of enforcement of these sanctions over the last decades. The experimental manipulations successfully changed respondents' beliefs about both the existence and enforcement of the fine.

The results provide evidence that sanctions matter. Informing respondents about the existence of the legal fine increased turnout intentions, suggesting that knowledge of potential penalties can encourage electoral participation. At the same time, this positive effect largely disappeared once respondents were informed that these sanctions are no longer enforced. Citizens therefore appear to respond to compulsory voting partly because they believe sanctions are enforced. However, the results also indicate that the effectiveness of compulsory voting cannot be reduced solely to fear of punishment. While information about non-enforcement lowered turnout intentions relative to respondents

who were only informed about the fine, turnout intentions did not fall below the baseline level observed in the control group. Put differently, correcting misperceptions about enforcement did not lead respondents to become less likely to vote than citizens who received no information about sanctions at all.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of compulsory voting. On the one hand, they suggest that beliefs about enforcement contribute to the effectiveness of compulsory voting and should not be ignored. On the other hand, they provide little evidence that such beliefs are sufficient to explain the persistently high turnout observed in compulsory voting systems where sanctions are not enforced. Sanctions matter, but they appear insufficient to account for the enduring impact of compulsory voting in "toothless" systems.

Future research should therefore continue to examine alternative mechanisms through which compulsory voting shapes electoral participation. If turnout remains high even when citizens know that sanctions are effectively absent, explanations centred on civic duty, norm internalization, habit formation, or other long-term consequences of compulsory voting may prove crucial for understanding why citizens continue to vote under such systems.

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