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Compulsory Voting and Political Engagement (Beyond the Ballot Box): A Multilevel Analysis

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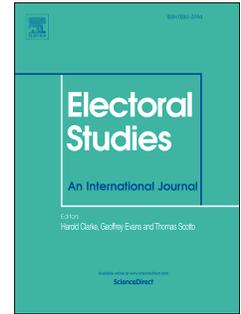
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**Title:** Compulsory Voting and Political Engagement (Beyond the Ballot Box): A Multilevel Analysis

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**Compulsory Voting and Political Engagement (Beyond the Ballot Box): A Multilevel Analysis****Abstract**

Proponents of compulsory voting argue that this institution leads to higher levels of political engagement. Opponents of mandatory voting instead argue that forcing people to vote can increase feelings of political alienation and generate lower levels of political engagement. The empirical record on this issue is scarce and inconclusive. This paper revisits this question with a series of multilevel models that evaluate the impact of compulsory voting on different forms of political engagement, using data from all the waves of the Americas Barometer Survey (2004-2014). The results suggest that compulsory voting has a negligible effect on political engagement. However, the results also reveal an interesting interaction. Citizens with low levels of education are more likely to be cognitively engaged with the political process when voting is mandatory.

Compulsory voting is increasingly being advocated by analysts and policy-makers as a way to combat low levels of electoral participation in contemporary democracies. The possibility of adopting compulsory voting is often proposed in the aftermath of elections with low turnout rates, such as EU elections (Ennis, 2009; Mann, 2009; Tin & Wiewiorka, 2011). In many countries that do not require citizens to vote, prominent political leaders have embraced compulsory voting as a means to mobilize apathetic voters and generate more legitimate democratic institutions. In France, for instance, 13 bills have been introduced since the early 2000s seeking to make the vote compulsory (Maus, 2015). In the United Kingdom and Canada, government ministers have publicly supported compulsory voting in recent years (Birch, 2009) and several reports have explored the advantages and disadvantages of this institution (Ballinger, 2006; Harb, 2005; Keane & Rogers, 2006).

The resurgence of interest in compulsory voting as a possible solution for low electoral participation has also generated a lively academic debate on the desirability of such an institution and its implications for democracy. The scholarly debate has been mostly normative and philosophical. It opposes a group of communitarian and neo-republican scholars who support the idea (Brennan, 2014a; Engelen, 2007; Hill, 2002; Lacroix, 2007) and a group of liberal/libertarian thinkers who reject the institution (Brennan, 2014a; Lever, 2009, 2010; Saunders, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

At its core, the two groups in this debate fundamentally disagree about the implications of compulsory voting for democratic liberty. Those who oppose compelling citizens to vote argue that mandatory voting unduly violates individual freedoms which are the foundation of any democratic system, such as the freedom to participate and the freedom of conscience. Proponents of compulsory voting argue that this individual freedom could be easily preserved by giving voters the option to abstain by issuing a null or blank vote. More importantly, scholars who favor compulsory voting have a different conception of democratic liberty. They conceptualize liberty as absence of domination, and they argue that political participation is a constitutional condition of liberty.

Another source of disagreement between proponents and opponents of compulsory voting concerns the behavioral consequences of mandatory voting for citizens' political engagement, and this will be the focus of this paper. While there is little doubt that compulsory voting increases electoral participation (Carreras & Castañeda-Angarita, 2014; Fornos, Power, & Garand, 2004; Jackman, 1987; Panagopoulos, 2008), there is no consensus regarding the impact of compulsory voting on other forms of political engagement (beyond the ballot box). Although this issue has been debated by critics and supporters of compulsory voting, the empirical work on this question is sparse and inconclusive. This paper will attempt to fill this gap by evaluating the effect of compulsory voting on different forms of political engagement.

The paper will proceed as follows. First, I will present the normative debates regarding the consequences of compulsory voting for political engagement, and I will discuss the arguments made by the critics and the proponents of this institution. Then, I will discuss previous empirical studies addressing the behavioral consequences of compulsory voting and I will identify a few limitations in the existing literature. From this discussion, I will propose a series of hypotheses that will be tested in the empirical section. Then, I will present the data and research design. The following section will present the results, and the final section will conclude and present the main implications of the findings.

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<sup>1</sup> For a good summary of this debate, see Malkopoulou (2015).

### **The behavioral consequences of compulsory voting**

The academic literature on compulsory voting sharply disagrees on the consequences of mandatory turnout for the political engagement of citizens. Critics of compulsory voting argue that compelling people to vote is deleterious for democratic systems because it results in an increase in the proportion of uninformed and uninterested voters (Brennan, 2014b; Jakee & Sun, 2006). Ballinger (2006: 13) observes that “there is no certainty that forced participation at elections will reconnect voters with a process which they have abandoned,” and he gives the example of Australia where voter apathy remains high despite a long history of compulsory voting. Other scholars go further, arguing that a high turnout generated with mandatory voting lowers the quality of the electorate “increasing the participation of the apathetic, uninformed, and uninterested” (Twomey, 2013: 27) who “pollute the polls” (Brennan, 2009) with ill-informed votes. According to Brennan (2014b: 106), “forcing everyone to vote is like forcing the drunk to drive.” Low turnouts are then seen as a potential “blessing in disguise” (Rosema, 2007).<sup>2</sup> Although these scholars are primarily interested in the quality of the electorate as a whole and in the electoral outcomes that can be produced by compulsory voting, these arguments have clear implications for the research question studied in this paper. Implicitly, all these works suggest that compulsory voting has no impact on the political engagement and political sophistication of citizens. Citizens’ political interest and political engagement are determined prior to (and regardless of) their electoral participation.

This view is rejected by the proponents of mandatory voting, who argue that compelling citizens to vote has a transformative effect on their political engagement. In the words of Lijphart (1997: 10), “compulsory voting may be able to serve as an equivalent, but much less expensive, form of civic education and political stimulation.” Compulsory voting can increase political engagement in at least two ways. First, people who are forced to vote might become more politically interested and make an effort to become more informed and to acquire more knowledge about the issues and the candidates. It is argued that the decision to become informed is influenced by whether or not an individual expects to participate (Hill, 2014; Keaney & Rogers, 2006; Matsler, 2003; Shineman, 2015). In order to obtain political information, citizens compelled to vote might discuss politics more often and pay more attention to news on the media (Loewen, Milner, & Hicks, 2008; Milazzo, 2008).<sup>3</sup> Second, compulsory voting might stimulate more political participation beyond the ballot box (Keaney & Rogers, 2006; Lijphart, 1997). As pointed out by Berelson and Steiner (1964: 422), “people who participate in politics in

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<sup>2</sup> These works have clear anti-democratic overtones and are reminiscent of the classic elitist theories of democracy of the post-war era which portrayed the masses as ignorant and self-interested, and concluded that mass participation in politics was potentially destabilizing (Lipset, 1963; Mayo, 1959; Schumpeter, 1942). According to these elitist theories, low civic engagement was the sign of a robust democracy because it was considered that most citizens lack political information and political interest (Jones, 1954).

<sup>3</sup> This optimistic view of the impact of the suffrage on citizens’ political education is rooted in the work of classic liberal thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. John Stuart Mill (1991: 321) argued that one of the benefits of electoral participation is the “education of the intelligence and of the sentiments which is carried down to the lowest rank of the people when they are called to take part in acts which directly affect the great interests of the country”. Benjamin Constant (1997: 617) similarly argued that political liberty “enlarges [the citizens’] spirit, ennobles their thoughts, and establishes among them a form of intellectual equality” (cited in Lacroix, 2007). In her more recent theory of democratic participation, Pateman (1970: 63) also suggests that voting may increase awareness and interest in politics.

one way are likely to do so in another.” If citizens who are compelled to vote become more efficacious (Finkel, 1985) and have more interest in politics, they might become more engaged in other political activities as well; such as contacting politicians, working for parties, and attending meetings of political organizations.

In addition to the “self-development” effect that is expected to occur when uninterested citizens are compelled to vote, mandatory voting can increase citizens’ political engagement in two other ways. First, this institution alters the incentives of political parties and makes them more attentive to the interests and demands of marginalized voters who would abstain under a voluntary voting system (Lacroix, 2007: 194; Lijphart, 1997; Rogers, 2006). Citizens are more likely to become politically engaged when they perceive that the political elites address their concerns. Second, compulsory voting might displace civic duty to other arenas (Wertheimer, 1975). When only a fraction of the electorate turns out to vote, voters might feel they are performing an important civic duty. When almost everyone votes because voting is compulsory, citizens might need to engage in other (more demanding) political activities to obtain a similar feeling of having performed a civic duty.

To sum up the discussion so far, a series of studies suggest that compulsory voting has virtually no effect on the political engagement of citizens; while other works argue that compulsory voting is an institution that stimulates citizens’ political engagement. A third group of scholars also argue that compulsory voting can affect citizens’ political engagement but in a very different way. Instead of stimulating citizens to become more politically interested, mandatory turnout might further alienate uninterested and disenchanting citizens (Ballinger, 2006: 16-17; Lundell, 2012: 222). In the words of Ritchie (2006: 26), “forcing people to join in what they see as politicians’ silly games may only heighten people’s distaste for contemporary politics.” Many disenchanting voters are alienated by a political system that they consider to be very remote and incapable of solving their problems. Forcing these disenchanting citizens to show up at the polls might very well exacerbate feelings of alienation and powerlessness (Ballinger, 2006; Lever, 2009). Moreover, voting may not be an efficient mechanism of political education when it is compelled by a discredited political regime. Gratschew (2002: 106) points out that mandatory voting “may discourage the political education of the electorate because people forced to participate will react against the perceived source of oppression.” The high rate of blank, invalid, and protest votes that are observed in countries with compulsory voting indeed suggests that compelling alienated citizens to vote might not only fail to engage them, but also increase their disenchantment with politics (Power & Garand, 2007).

### **Previous empirical studies**

The vast literature on compulsory voting has been dominated by normative debates regarding the impact of this institution on democratic principles. Empirically, the only certainty about compulsory voting is that it significantly increases electoral participation (Blais & Dobrzynska, 1998; Franklin, 2004; Hirczy, 1994; Jackman, 1987). Compulsory voting increases turnout in national elections by 10 to 15 percentage points on average. Two recent studies of turnout in Latin America find a similar effect of mandatory voting on electoral participation. The predicted probability of voting (when all other variables are held at their mean values) is 14 points higher when voting is compulsory and enforced. Enforced compulsory voting also conditions the effect of other individual traits on the decision to vote (Carlin & Love, 2015; Carreras & Castañeda-Angarita, 2014).

The ability of mandatory voting to stimulate other forms of political engagement was seen by one of the major proponents of this institution as mainly “speculative” (Lijphart, 1997: 10). However, a number of studies have recently started to address this question. This section will review the main findings (and the limitations) of this emergent literature.

Bilodeau and Blais (2011) assess whether compulsory voting has a “political socialization” effect on the electorate which may lead to increased levels of political engagement. They analyze data from four waves of the World Values Surveys for 16 European countries, and they find that there is no visible correlation between compulsory voting and the aggregate levels of political discussion and political interest. Although suggestive, this analysis is not conclusive because Bilodeau and Blais do not include any control variable that might be related with political engagement at the aggregate level.

Several other studies using survey data look into the potential link between mandatory voting and citizens’ cognitive political engagement (i.e. political interest, political information, political knowledge, and party identification). Using Eurobarometer data, Gordon and Segura (1997) and Berggren (2001) find that compulsory voting increases citizens’ political sophistication.<sup>4</sup> However, these studies were criticized on methodological grounds because they combine characteristics of both voters and countries, but are performed at the individual level. The effect of compulsory voting disappears when the models are specified correctly (Selb & Lachat, 2009: 592). Selb and Lachat (2009) use a different research strategy to analyze a similar question. They take advantage of an item in the 1995 Belgian Election Study which asked respondents whether they would turn out if voting were voluntary.<sup>5</sup> They show that voters who would likely abstain if voting were voluntary have substantially less political knowledge and political interest than voters who declare that they would continue to vote even if mandatory voting was eliminated. This study suggests that compelling citizens to vote did not lead to a generalized increase in cognitive political engagement in Belgium. On the other hand, Lundell (2007) shows using survey data from Europe that mandatory voting has a positive impact on the strength of partisanship (for a similar argument see Mackerras & McAllister, 1999: 229-230).

The impact of compulsory voting on political information and political knowledge was also assessed using field experiments. Loewen, Milner, and Hicks (2008) surveyed 121 university students in Quebec at two points in time: immediately after the 2007 Quebec provincial election was announced, and in the final days of the campaign. In order to approximate a compulsory voting treatment, the researchers told the treatment group that they would receive \$25 but only if they voted in the election. The control group was paid \$25 upfront. The results suggest that compelling individuals to vote does not cause them to become more politically knowledgeable and to discuss politics more often.<sup>6</sup> Shineman (2015) conducted a similar field experiment before and after the San Francisco municipal election in November 2011 with very different results. The findings indicate that individuals in the treatment group are substantially more likely to be knowledgeable about the candidates and the issues, and to pay attention to candidate debates. However, the treatment in this field experiment combined both a decrease in the costs of voting –voters received a mobilization handout that made it easier for them to register– and a financial incentive to participate –which was intended to mimic the sanctions imposed by compulsory

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<sup>4</sup> Political sophistication was measured in these studies as the capacity of voters to correctly place political parties on the ideological spectrum.

<sup>5</sup> Belgium was one of the first European countries to adopt compulsory voting (1919).

<sup>6</sup> Although the research design is creative, this study suffers from important methodological flaws. The level of electoral participation in the baseline group was high (77.8%) and the treatment only produced a 4% increase in turnout. As a result, the estimates in the analysis are imprecise (Shineman, 2015: 9-10).

voting systems—. The mobilization treatment in this study is so broad that we can not know for sure what is really driving the results. Moreover, it is not clear whether the financial incentives offered in these field experiments are a good proxy for the institution of compulsory voting, which may or may not be associated with enforceable financial sanctions.

The most comprehensive study of the effect of compulsory voting on political engagement is the book published on this subject by Sarah Birch (2009). This pathbreaking book reviews the literature regarding the consequences of compulsory voting on political engagement, and then conducts a series of empirical analyses using data from the second module of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems Project (CSES). Against the conventional wisdom, the book does not find a clear link between mandatory voting (regardless of whether it is sanctioned or not) and different forms of political engagement. The results suggest that mandatory voting does not influence political political knowledge or political conversation. Similarly, it does not increase the likelihood that citizens will contact politicians, work with others to solve political problems, identify with political parties, or engage in campaign activities. The only two significant findings are somewhat counterintuitive: compulsory voting appears to decrease feelings of efficacy and to increase the likelihood of participating in protests and demonstrations. These results are in line with the normative works that suggest that compulsory voting has either a null or a negative effect on political engagement.

The results of the existing empirical analyses are rather mixed, but only a few studies suggest that mandatory voting stimulate political engagement. However, there are some important limitations in these previous works that will be addressed in the empirical analysis in this paper. First, the existing literature ignores possible interaction effects and appears to assume that the impact of compulsory voting on political engagement is constant across all circumstances and across all population groups. This is problematic because mandatory voting might have a stronger effect on certain demographic groups. In particular, in this paper I consider the potential interaction between compulsory voting and education on political engagement. Previous studies suggest that compulsory voting might have an enlightening effect on citizens (Lijphart, 1997). If that is the case, the effects should be particularly strong for citizens who lack a good (civic) education.

The second limitation of the existing studies is related to the way they operationalize mandatory voting. Compulsory voting is only a formal obligation that could be ineffective if it is not accompanied by strong sanctions (Panagopoulos, 2008). There are several countries in which voting is formally an obligation, but this obligation is not enforced (Birch, 2009: 36; Gratschew, 2002: 109). Several previous studies have used dummy variables to assess the impact of compulsory voting on political engagement (Berggren, 2001; Birch, 2009; Gordon & Segura, 1997), thereby conflating very different institutional settings into one category.<sup>7</sup> In the analyses below, I will distinguish between three different institutional scenarios (voluntary voting, unenforced compulsory voting, and enforced compulsory voting).

The final limitation of the existing literature is that it only provides snapshots of the possible relationship between compulsory voting and political engagement, without providing the whole picture. Previous

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<sup>7</sup> Most studies use one dummy variable to measure compulsory voting, giving a value of 0 to voluntary voting systems and a value of 1 to all types of compulsory voting (enforced or not). Birch (2009) runs the analyses in her book with an additional dichotomous measure of compulsory voting, giving a value of 0 to voluntary voting and unenforced compulsory voting and a value of 1 to enforced compulsory voting). This operationalization also combines two institutional settings (voluntary voting and unenforced compulsory voting) that might have different effects on political engagement.

studies have looked at the effect of mandatory voting on a few forms of political engagement, using very different samples and methodological approaches. These works often reach contradictory conclusions regarding the behavioral consequences of compelling citizens to vote. Political engagement is a multifaceted concept, and it is possible that compulsory voting affects differently various forms of engagement. For instance, mandatory turnout might decrease citizens' participation in politics beyond the ballot box, but at the same time increase citizens' attention to news during election years. The empirical analysis in this paper will assess the impact of compulsory voting on different forms of political engagement using an identical research design which allows the results to be compared and contrasted.<sup>8</sup>

### **Different Forms of Political Engagement**

Political engagement is a broad concept that captures very different attitudes and behaviors. In this paper, I will try to disentangle the impact of compulsory voting on different aspects of political engagement. For this purpose, I will distinguish between two different forms of engagement: 1) cognitive political engagement, and 2) active engagement in the political arena beyond the ballot box.

Cognitive political engagement refers to citizens' psychological attachment to the political system. A citizen who is cognitively engaged should be politically interested, seek political information, and is more likely to be attached to one of the political parties. As discussed above, there is an unresolved debate regarding the impact of compulsory voting on cognitive political engagement. While supporters of compulsory voting argue that this institution should increase citizens' political interest, opponents of mandatory voting suggest that it can increase citizens' apathy. The first set of hypotheses in this paper is derived from this theoretical debate.

H1.1: Compulsory voting decreases citizens' cognitive political engagement.

H1.2: Compulsory voting increases citizens' cognitive political engagement.

H1.0: Compulsory voting does not influence citizens' cognitive political engagement.

The second aspect of political engagement that will be analyzed in this paper is active political engagement beyond the ballot box. There is little doubt that compulsory voting increases electoral participation, but it remains unclear whether this translates into more political engagement in between elections. The classic liberal view suggests that voting leads to a more politically educated citizenry over time. This might result in citizens that are actively engaged in the political process and diligently defend their policy interests in the political arena. An active political engagement beyond the ballot box should manifest itself, for instance, in a higher probability of contacting politicians, attending meetings of political parties, and participating in town meetings. However, if compulsory voting leads to a more disgruntled and disenchanting citizenry, this institution might actually lead to a decline in citizens' political participation in discredited political institutions. The second set of hypotheses of this paper follows from this discussion.

H2.1: Compulsory voting decreases citizens' active political engagement beyond the ballot box.

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<sup>8</sup> In her important contribution, Birch (2009) uses a similar research strategy but her work suffers from the two problems mentioned above (dichotomous measure of compulsory voting, and lack of estimation of potential interactive effects in the models).

H2.2: Compulsory voting increases citizens' active political engagement beyond the ballot box.

H2.0: Compulsory voting does not influence citizens' active political engagement beyond the ballot box

Previous research has not explored the possibility of interactions between compulsory voting and certain individual-level characteristics. In this paper, I argue that whatever influence compulsory voting has on political behavior, the effects should be stronger for individuals with low levels of education. The SES model of political participation suggests that education is a key resource for political engagement. Individuals with a high level of education are more likely to be politically engaged because they possess civic skills that are essential to political activity. These citizens write well and are comfortable in front of a group. They are also more likely to understand the issues at stake in political debates (Brady, Verba, & Scholzman, 1995). While Lijphart (1997) expects compulsory voting to stimulate citizens and to serve as an equivalent of civic education, the effects should be particularly strong for individuals with low levels of education who lack the resources they need to participate effectively in the political arena. For those highly educated individuals who have the required skills to participate in political activities, it might not make a difference whether the vote is compulsory or not. The last set of hypotheses of the paper follows from this discussion.

H3.1: The impact of compulsory voting on political engagement is stronger for citizens with low levels of education.

H3.0: The impact of compulsory voting on political engagement is uniform across all education groups.

## **Research Design**

### **Data**

Data for the subsequent empirical analysis are drawn from the 2004-2014 waves of the Americas Barometer. The survey is administered every two years by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University.<sup>9</sup> The sampling process involves multistage stratification by country and then substratification within each country by major geographic region to increase precision. Within each primary sampling unit (PSU), the survey respondents are selected randomly.<sup>10</sup> The dataset includes 189,840 individual observations from surveys conducted in 21 Latin American and Caribbean countries over a period of ten years.

The region of Latin America and the Caribbean is an ideal setting to test the impact of compulsory voting on political engagement because there is variation in the independent variable of interest (compulsory voting). As can be observed in Table 1, six countries have compulsory voting systems with enforced sanctions, seven countries have compulsory voting systems but do not impose (or do not enforce)

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<sup>9</sup> LAPOP surveys are not conducted around elections which is problematic for studies of electoral participation. However, this is not a serious drawback for my analysis because none of my dependent variables measure electoral participation. The main IV (compulsory voting) is an electoral institution but the effects —if there are any— should be visible in “off-cycle” periods.

<sup>10</sup> More technical information can be obtained from the website <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.php>.

sanctions against citizens who abstain on election day, and eight countries have voluntary voting systems. There is also a relatively even distribution of the respondents in the sample in these three types of institutional scenarios. 27.3 % of respondents in the sample live in countries with compulsory voting and enforced sanctions, 37.3 % of respondents live in countries with compulsory voting but no (enforced) sanctions, and 35.3 % of respondents live in countries with voluntary voting systems. LAPOP is also ideal to assess the impact of compulsory voting on political engagement because it includes several questions that can be used to gauge the different aspects of political engagement. The surveys also include a battery of relevant items that can be used as control variables in the statistical models.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

In this paper, the influence of compulsory voting on political engagement will be analyzed by looking at two different facets of political engagement: 1) cognitive political engagement, and 2) active political engagement (beyond the ballot box). Four variables will be used to capture citizens' cognitive political engagement: political interest, attention to political news, partisanship, and political discussion. Three variables will be used to measure active political engagement: attending party meetings, contacting local officials at the municipality, and involvement in community affairs. All these variables are described in Table 2.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

To examine the effect of compulsory voting on aggregate electoral behavior, I paid special attention to the government's capacity (or willingness) to enforce the legal mandate. As mentioned above, compulsory voting is only a formal obligation that could be ineffective if it is not accompanied by strong sanctions. In all the models below, I include two dummy variables (unenforced compulsory voting and enforced compulsory voting), with voluntary voting as the reference category. The information to create this variable comes from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's (IDEA) compulsory voting database.<sup>11</sup> In order to test hypothesis 3.1 regarding the stronger impact of compulsory voting on less educated individuals, I also estimate models with an interactive term (compulsory voting \* education) capturing this effect.

The empirical models also include a battery of control variables that are traditionally associated with political engagement. The socioeconomic status (SES) model of political participation has consistently shown that income and education are positively associated with political engagement at the individual level (Brady et al., 1995). Hence, all models will include a measure of respondent's income and education. Previous research has also shown that sex and age are related with political engagement. Male and older citizens are more likely to engage in political activities (Nie, Verba, & Kim, 1974; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997). I will also include these two sociodemographic characteristics (age and sex) in the statistical models below. Citizens' political engagement might also be associated with their insertion in mobilization networks, such as the workplace or dense urban areas. Therefore, I will control for respondents' employment status and place of residence (urban vs. rural). Finally, I will include in the models a measure of citizens' satisfaction with democracy because respondents disenchanted with the way democracy works might be less likely to participate in politics.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This database is available online: [http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory\\_voting.cfm](http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm).

<sup>12</sup> All these variables are described in Table A1 in the online appendix. The appendix is available in the following website: [Author's website].

I also include in the empirical models important institutional and economic factors that might explain aggregate levels of political engagement at the country level. I consider the effect of three institutional and contextual variables (in addition to compulsory voting) that are often mentioned in the literature: the level of democracy, federalism, and gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. The level of democracy is measured by using the Polity IV score, federalism is measured using the Gerring-Thacker federalism index (Gerring & Thacker, 2004), and GDP data was obtained from the World Bank Indicators. Political engagement might also be higher shortly before or after an election because political issues are more salient during election years. In order to capture this effect, I include a dummy variable coded as 1 if the survey was conducted up to 6 months before or after an election, and 0 otherwise.

### **Model Estimation**

The empirical models in this paper apply *multilevel techniques* that distinguish between three levels, i.e. the individual level, the country-year (survey) level, and the country level. The multilevel approach takes the layered character of the data into account. Most of the variables used in the analysis capture individuals' characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors. These individuals are nested within surveys, and three contextual variables (GDP per capita, level of democracy, and election year) vary within countries from survey to survey. Other variables that affect political engagement (compulsory voting and federalism) do not vary over time. Hence, there are three nested levels in the analyses below: individuals, country-years (surveys), and countries.

Multilevel models are quickly becoming standard in political science (Snijders & Bosker, 1999) and are usually estimated using either Bayesian simulations or quasi-likelihood methods (Goldstein, 1995). The most important feature of these models for the purpose of this article is that the estimates of variances and their associated standard errors provide direct tests of the impact of measured contextual effects on political engagement. Hierarchical models also allow for a more precise estimation of individual-level factors because they control for important contextual factors that may bias the results (Gelman & Hill, 2006; Steenbergen & Jones, 2002). Therefore, this analysis proceeds using a series of multilevel models. Because two of the dependent variables used in the empirical analysis are binary (party identification and contacting municipality officials), these models were estimated using a multilevel logistic regression. The other models were estimated using mixed effects random intercept models.

### **Results**

Table 3 presents eight multilevel models estimating cognitive political engagement at the individual level. Four different forms of cognitive political engagement are analyzed: political interest, attention to news, party identification, and political discussion. Four models assess the impact of cognitive political engagement without considering any interaction, while four additional models include a cross-level interaction between an institutional feature (compulsory voting) and the respondents' level of education.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The first interesting finding is that the models without interactions do not show a clear effect of compulsory voting (either enforced or not) on most forms of cognitive political engagement. The only coefficient reaching statistical significance is the one capturing the impact of enforced compulsory

voting on political discussion. The null results reported here are in line with previous findings, such as those reported by Birch (2009). However, it is still possible that compulsory voting influences the political engagement of less educated individuals. This is exactly what the interactive models suggest. Most of the interactive terms (compulsory voting \* education) in Table 3 are statistically significant. In order to find out whether these significant coefficients are substantively important, I estimated the marginal effects and the discrete marginal effects of this interaction on political interest, attention to political news, and political discussion.<sup>13</sup> The estimation of the discrete marginal effects (presented in Table 4) suggests that the only differences that are statistically significant are the ones that exist between voluntary voting and enforced compulsory voting. When mandatory voting is not enforced, it has no impact on cognitive political engagement.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

The substantive impact of enforced compulsory voting on cognitive political engagement can be observed in Figures 1 to 3 which present the marginal effects of the interaction between compulsory voting and education on cognitive political engagement.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Table 4 shows that the only statistically significant difference in political interest (when comparing voluntary voting and enforced compulsory voting) is the one that exists between individuals who have only attended primary school (education=1 in the 0-3 scale). Compulsory voting produces a decline of .15 in the 1-4 political interest scale when it is enforced, as can be observed in Figure 1. In sum, citizens with low levels of education appear less likely to be politically interested when voting is compulsory and enforced. This result is in line with previous works which suggest that compulsory voting might increase citizens' feelings of political alienation.

However, the estimation of the marginal effects also shows that enforced compulsory voting tends to increase citizens' attention to news and their efforts to discuss about politics in their social networks. Figure 2 shows that citizens with no formal education pay more attention to news when voting is compulsory and enforced. Citizens with no formal education who live under systems that make voting mandatory and enforced have a level of attention to news that is higher in 0.15 points (in a 1-5 scale) than citizens who live in voluntary voting systems.<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting, however, that compulsory voting does not influence the level of attention to news of more educated individuals.

Compulsory voting also increases the likelihood that citizens will engage in political discussions, as can be observed in Figure 3. Interestingly, however, this effect is visible for citizens at different levels of education. The impact of compulsory voting on political discussion is substantively important. The estimation of the marginal effects shows that there is an average difference of 0.25 points in the 1-5

<sup>13</sup> Marginal effects measure the expected change in the dependent variable as a function of a change in a certain explanatory variable while keeping all the other covariates constant. Discrete marginal effects measure whether these expected differences are statistically significant.

<sup>14</sup> This difference falls just short of statistical significance according to the discrete marginal effects reported in Table 4 ( $P > \chi^2 = .070$ ).

scale of political discussion between respondents living in countries with voluntary voting and respondents living in countries with enforced compulsory voting.

Model 3 in Table 6 also shows an interactive effect of education and non-enforced compulsory voting on partisanship. In order to gauge the substantive importance of this effect, I estimated the predicted probabilities of being identified with a political party at different levels of education when voting is voluntary and when voting is mandatory (but not enforced) –holding all other variables at their means–. As can be observed in Figure 4, compulsory voting appears to noticeably increase party identification, and the effect is particularly strong for individuals with low levels of education. The predicted probability that citizens with no formal education are identified with a political party increases from .22 to .37 when we move from countries with voluntary systems to countries with compulsory voting (non enforced). It is surprising that the data do not reveal a similar effect for enforced compulsory voting systems. This surprising finding might be related to the fact that three of the six countries with enforced compulsory voting systems (Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru) have collapsed or uninstitutionalized party systems (Mainwaring, 1999; Mainwaring, Bejarano, & Leongómez, 2006) which might bias the estimations. Although the results shown here are suggestive, more research is necessary to determine the exact impact of compulsory voting on party identification.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

In sum, the results reported in the previous paragraphs provide strong support for the null hypothesis, but also reveal an interesting interaction between mandatory voting and citizens' education. Compulsory voting does not have a uniform impact on cognitive political engagement, but it appears to influence citizens with low levels of education. When confronted with the obligation to vote, citizens with low levels of education make efforts to obtain political information by paying more attention to political news and by discussing about politics more frequently. Moreover, the results appear to indicate that citizens with low levels of education are more likely to identify with a political party when they live in countries with compulsory voting systems. Interestingly, however, the results also suggest that individuals with lower education are less politically interested when they live in countries with enforced compulsory voting systems. Forcing citizens to vote might make them more engaged with the electoral process, but not necessarily more interested in political debates.

These findings are puzzling because they appear at first contradictory. Poorly educated voters are more likely to become informed about politics when voting is compulsory but at the same time they become less politically interested. I postulate that becoming informed may increase the political disenchantment of poorly educated citizens. The mass media constitute the most important source of information about politics and current affairs (Gunther & Mughan, 2000). Previous research has shown that there is a "negativity" bias in the media, as negative news (in areas such as crime and the economy) tend to receive much more coverage than positive news (Harrington, 1989; Hetherington, 1996; Soroka, 2006, 2014). During election campaigns, the coverage of politics as "horse race" tends to generate political disillusionment and "malaise" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). These negative effects should be particularly strong among poorly educated individuals who are less likely to engage critically with media messages. This might help explain why mandatory voting might lead poorly educated voters to become informed, but at the same time more politically alienated.

Table 5 presents a series of models estimating the impact of compulsory voting on political participation beyond the ballot box. The three outcome variables analyzed capture different aspects of political

engagement: attending party meetings, involvement in community meetings to solve pressing problems, and contacting municipal authorities.

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

The main finding that can be derived from Table 5 is that compulsory voting has no uniform influence on political participation (beyond the ballot box). The non interactive coefficients in models 9, 11, and 13 do not reveal any statistically significant difference in political engagement between respondents living in countries with voluntary voting systems and individuals living in countries with compulsory voting systems. The results in Table 5 also reveal that some of the interaction terms (compulsory voting \* education) are statistically significant. In order to find out whether these significant coefficients are substantively important, I estimated the discrete marginal effects of this interaction on attending party meetings, and community involvement. This additional estimation (presented in Table 6) suggests that compulsory voting has a negligible effect on active political participation. The discrete marginal effects show that the differences in political participation between respondents living in countries with voluntary voting systems and individuals living in countries with compulsory voting systems are very small, and never reach standard levels of statistical significance. Overall, then, the results provide strong support for the null hypothesis (H2.0) that compulsory voting does not influence political engagement beyond the ballot box.

[TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Compulsory voting is increasingly being debated as a potential solution to the widespread political disenchantment affecting contemporary democracies. Proponents of mandatory voting argue that compulsory voting might lead citizens to be more cognitively engaged with politics and more active in the political arena. While previous research has shown consistently that compulsory voting significantly increases turnout, we still know relatively little about the impact of this institution on cognitive political engagement and active political participation (beyond the ballot box). This paper addresses these questions with a series of multilevel models using several waves of the Americas Barometer Survey (2004-2014).

The main conclusion to be derived from the analyses conducted in this paper is that *compulsory voting has a negligible effect on political engagement*. Out of 14 coefficients measuring the (unconditional) effect of compulsory voting on political engagement, only one is statistically significant. The only exception is that enforced mandatory voting considerably increases citizens' efforts to discuss about politics with other persons in their social networks. This finding provides some support for hypothesis 1.2. When they are compelled to vote, citizens engage more frequently in political discussions in order to obtain the information they need to understand political debates and to vote correctly. All the other models in the paper provide support for the null hypotheses. Compulsory voting does not have a uniform impact on political participation or cognitive political engagement.

Previous research suggests that compulsory voting should be particularly influential for citizens with low levels of education (Lijphart, 1997). In order to address this possibility, I also estimated all the models in the paper with interactive terms (education \* compulsory voting). The results of these models are mixed. In line with my expectations, compulsory voting has a stronger impact on the cognitive political engagement of individuals with lower education. Poorly educated individuals are significantly more likely to have a party identification and to pay attention to political news when they live in countries

with compulsory voting systems. Citizens with a low level of education lack the resources that are needed to make a meaningful electoral choice. Adopting a party identification or seeking more political information facilitate the voting decisions of poorly educated individuals when they are compelled to turn out. However, this increase in cognitive political engagement does not make poorly educated individuals more politically interested when voting is compulsory. If anything, the results indicate that citizens with a low level of education are slightly less likely to be politically interested when voting is mandatory and enforced. Finally, the results do not reveal an interactive effect of compulsory voting and education on active political participation (beyond the ballot box). Citizens are not more likely to be active in the political arena when voting is compulsory, regardless of their level of education.

In sum, compulsory voting only affects the political engagement of individuals with low levels of education. Forcing poorly educated citizens to vote makes them slightly less politically interested, but it also increases the likelihood that they will become more informed before making an electoral decision. For most people, however, mandatory voting does not have any effect on their political engagement. Compulsory voting is certainly not the panacea described by proponents of this institution, but neither is it the threat to the democratic system described by scholars who oppose it.

**Table 1.** Summary of the Data (Source: LAPOP 2004-2014 & IDEA)

	<b>Country</b>	Argentina	Belize	Bolivia	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Costa Rica	Dominican Rep.	Ecuador	El Salvador	Guatemala
	<b>Surveys in the sample</b>	4 surveys (2008-2014)	4 surveys (2008-2014)	6 surveys (2004-2014)	5 surveys (2006-2014)	5 surveys (2006-2014)	6 surveys (2004-2014)					
	<b>Voting system</b>											
	Voluntary		N=6,101				N=9,001				N=9,426	N=9,264
	Compulsory (not enforced)			N=18,198				N=9,035	N=8,557			
	Compulsory (enforced)	N=5,920			N=8,193	N=8,151				N=14,914		
	<b>Country</b>	Guyana	Honduras	Jamaica	Mexico	Nicaragua	Panama	Paraguay	Peru	Uruguay	Venezuela	<b>Total</b>
	<b>Surveys in the sample</b>	5 surveys (2006-2014)	6 surveys (2004-2014)	5 surveys (2006-2014)	6 surveys (2004-2014)	6 surveys (2004-2014)	6 surveys (2004-2014)	5 surveys (2006-2014)	5 surveys (2006-2014)	5 surveys (2006-2014)	5 surveys (2006-2014)	<b>114 surveys (2004-2014)</b>
	<b>Voting system</b>											
	Voluntary	N=8,695		N=7,601		N=9,504					N=7,510	<b>N=67,102</b>
	Compulsory (not enforced)		N=9,492		N=9,333		N=9,375	N=6,846				<b>N=70,836</b>
	Compulsory (enforced)								N=7,500	N=7,224		<b>N=51,902</b>

**Table 2.** Operationalization of Dependent Variables (LAPOP Surveys, 2004-2014)

Variables	Survey Items
<b>COGNITIVE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT</b>	
Political Interest	How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none? (recoded into 1=none, 2=little, 3=some, 4=a lot)
Attention to Political News	About how often do you pay attention to the news, whether on TV, the radio, newspapers or the internet? (recoded into 1= never, 2= rarely, 3= a few times a month, 4= a few times a week, 5= daily)
Party Identification	Do you currently identify with a political party? (recoded into yes = 1, no=0)
Political Discussion	How often do you discuss politics with other people? (recoded into 1= never, 2= rarely, 3= a few times a month, 4= a few times a week, 5= never)
<b>ACTIVE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT (BEYOND VOTING)</b>	
Attending Party Meetings	Meetings of a political party or political organization? Do you attend them...? (recoded into 1= never, 2= once or twice a year, 3= once or twice a month, 4= once a week)
Community Involvement	Meetings of a community improvement committee or association? Do you attend them...? (recoded into 1= never, 2= once or twice a year, 3= once or twice a month, 4= once a week)
Contacting Municipality	Have you sought assistance from or presented a request to any office, official or councilperson of the municipality within the past 12 months? (recoded into yes = 1, no=0)

**Table 3.** Determinants of Cognitive Political Engagement, Multilevel Models.

	Political Interest		Attention to News		Party ID		Political Discussion	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	<i>b</i> /( <i>se</i> )							
<i>Unenforced Compulsory Voting</i>	.020 (.071)	.097 (.073)	.003 (.052)	.044 (.054)	.434 (.345)	.698* (.346)	.086 (.106)	.129 (.109)
<i>Unenforced Compulsory Voting * Education</i>		-.044** (.008)		-.023* (.010)		-.151** (.019)		-.026 (.015)
<i>Enforced Compulsory Voting</i>	-.091 (.078)	-.231* (.080)	.009 (.061)	.125* (.063)	-.077 (.361)	-.153 (.362)	.251* (.120)	.139 (.124)
<i>Enforced Compulsory Voting * Education</i>		.070** (.009)		-.061** (.011)		.029 (.022)		.057** (.017)
Male	.160** (.005)	.161** (.005)	.074** (.007)	.073** (.007)	.149** (.013)	.151** (.013)	.277** (.011)	.277** (.011)
Education	.196** (.003)	.193** (.006)	.167** (.005)	.193** (.008)	.123** (.009)	.175** (.014)	.318** (.007)	.314** (.011)
Age	.034** (.002)	.034** (.002)	.078** (.002)	.078** (.002)	.209** (.005)	.209** (.005)	.083** (.004)	.083** (.004)
Income	.033** (.003)	.033** (.003)	.039** (.004)	.039** (.004)	.036** (.007)	.036** (.007)	.040** (.006)	.040** (.006)
Employment Status	.047** (.005)	.045** (.005)	.029** (.007)	.030** (.007)	.122** (.013)	.120** (.013)	.098** (.011)	.097** (.011)
Urban	-.023** (.006)	-.020* (.006)	.132** (.007)	.130** (.007)	-.090** (.014)	-.087** (.014)	.051** (.011)	.052** (.011)
Satisfaction with Democracy	.100** (.003)	.100** (.003)	-.001 (.004)	-.001 (.004)	.242** (.009)	.242** (.009)	.021* (.007)	.021* (.007)
Level of Democracy (Polity IV)	-.011 (.020)	-.010 (.020)	.012 (.017)	.012 (.017)	-.207** (.018)	-.205** (.018)	.013 (.045)	.015 (.045)
GDP per capita (logged)	.104 (.082)	.107 (.082)	.177 (.110)	.175 (.108)	-.173* (.052)	-.162* (.052)	-.494* (.223)	-.505* (.223)
Federalism	.016 (.047)	.019 (.047)	-.066 (.039)	-.069 (.038)	-.139 (.203)	-.139 (.202)	.213* (.089)	.219* (.089)
Election Year	.078* (.024)	.078* (.024)	.026 (.040)	.025 (.039)	.343** (.014)	.343** (.014)	.182* (.057)	.180* (.056)
Constant	.900* (.296)	.886* (.296)	2.981** (.345)	2.924 (.330)	-.018 (.436)	-.172 (.436)	2.317** (.643)	2.338** (.643)
N individuals	123,309	123,309	79,029	79,029	121,801	121,801	43,517	43,517
N country-years	96	96	61	61	94	94	34	34
N countries	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21

\*\* p&lt;0.01 \*p&lt;0.05

**Table 4.** Contrasts of Predictive Margins of Compulsory Voting \* Education on Political Engagement

		<b>Political Interest</b>	<b>Attention to News</b>	<b>Political Discussion</b>
<b>Compulsory Voting</b>	<b>Education</b>	<i>Contrast/(se)</i>	<i>Contrast/(se)</i>	<i>Contrast/(se)</i>
CV (non enforced) vs VV	0	.061 (.078)	.093 (.065)	.115 (.120)
CV (non enforced) vs VV	1	.061 (.071)	.009 (.051)	.092 (.107)
CV (non enforced) vs VV	2	.003 (.071)	-.008 (.051)	.084 (.106)
CV (non enforced) vs VV	3	-.043 (.072)	.000 (.053)	.025 (.109)
CV (enforced) vs VV	0	-.065 (.090)	.151 (.083)	<b>.381**</b> <b>(.150)</b>
CV (enforced) vs VV	<b>1</b>	<b>-.154**</b> <b>(.078)</b>	.054 (.060)	.171 (.121)
CV (enforced) vs VV	2	-.105 (.077)	-.013 (.059)	<b>.262**</b> <b>(.120)</b>
CV (enforced) vs VV	3	-.018 (.078)	-.017 (.061)	<b>.283**</b> <b>(.123)</b>

\*\* p&lt;0.01 \*p&lt;0.05

**Table 5.** Determinants of Active Political Engagement (Beyond Voting), Multilevel Models.

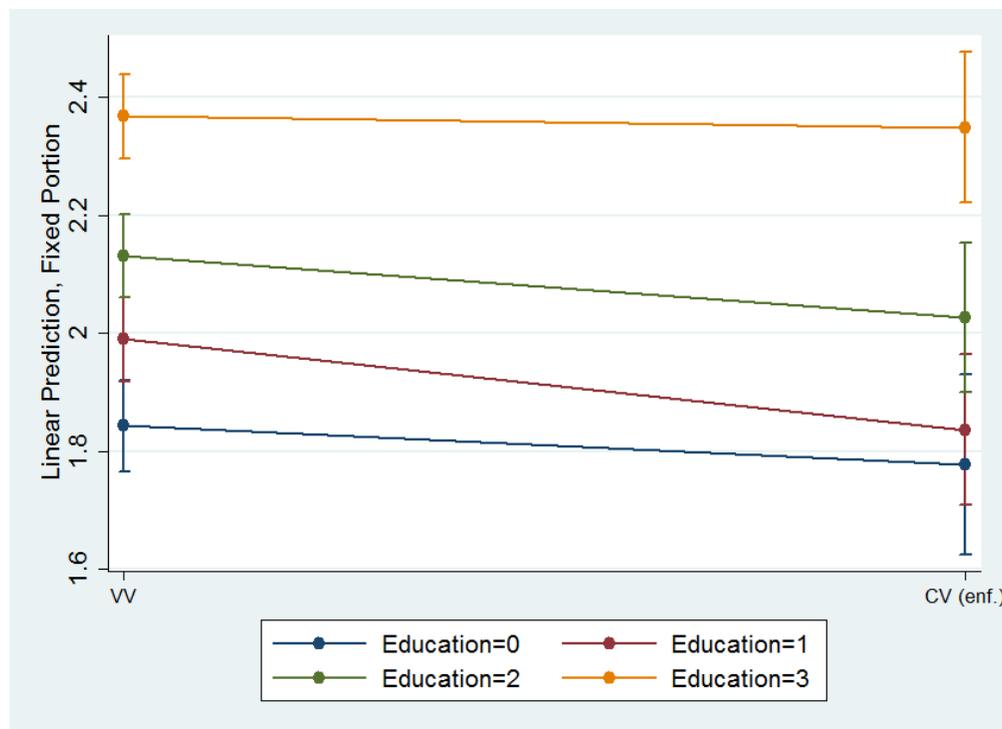
	Attending Party Meetings		Community Involvement		Contacting Municipality	
	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
	<i>b/(se)</i>	<i>b/(se)</i>	<i>b/(se)</i>	<i>b/(se)</i>	<i>b/(se)</i>	<i>b/(se)</i>
<i>Unenforced Compulsory Voting</i>	.023 (.053)	.004 (.054)	.073 (.062)	.088 (.063)	-.110 (.104)	-.183 (.115)
<i>Unenforced Compulsory Voting * Education</i>		.010* (.005)		-.008 (.007)		.041 (.026)
<i>Enforced Compulsory Voting</i>	-.093 (.057)	-.127* (.058)	-.040 (.067)	-.054 (.068)	.228 (.116)	.243 (.127)
<i>Enforced Compulsory Voting * Education</i>		.018* (.005)		.006 (.007)		-.005 (.027)
Male	.051** (.003)	.051** (.003)	.030** (.004)	.030** (.004)	.006 (.017)	.006 (.017)
Education	.038** (.002)	.029** (.003)	.022** (.003)	.024** (.005)	.180** (.012)	.168** (.019)
Age	.012** (.001)	.012** (.001)	.057** (.002)	.057** (.002)	.140** (.007)	.140** (.007)
Income	-.008** (.002)	-.008** (.002)	-.009* (.002)	-.009* (.002)	-.141** (.010)	-.141** (.010)
Employment Status	.028** (.003)	.028** (.003)	.075** (.005)	.075** (.005)	.155** (.018)	.155** (.018)
Urban	-.049** (.003)	-.049** (.003)	-.210** (.005)	-.210** (.005)	-.369** (.019)	-.370** (.019)
Satisfaction with Democracy	.028** (.002)	.028** (.002)	.034** (.003)	.034** (.003)	.023 (.012)	.024 (.012)
Level of Democracy (Polity IV)	-.006 (.013)	-.006 (.013)	-.024 (.016)	-.024 (.016)	.067* (.034)	.066 (.034)
GDP per capita (logged)	-.001 (.048)	-.001 (.048)	-.098 (.060)	-.097 (.060)	-.224 (.163)	-.224 (.163)
Federalism	-.024 (.034)	-.023 (.034)	-.016 (.040)	-.015 (.040)	.129 (.074)	.129 (.074)
Election Year	.058** (.014)	.058** (.014)	.014 (.017)	.014 (.017)	.024 (.054)	.024 (.054)
Constant	1.156** (.189)	1.172** (.189)	1.827** (.229)	1.822** (.229)	-2.106** (.533)	-2.079** (.534)
N individuals	122,849	122,849	123,087	123,087	121,680	121,680
N country-years	96	96	96	96	95	95
N countries	21	21	21	21	21	21

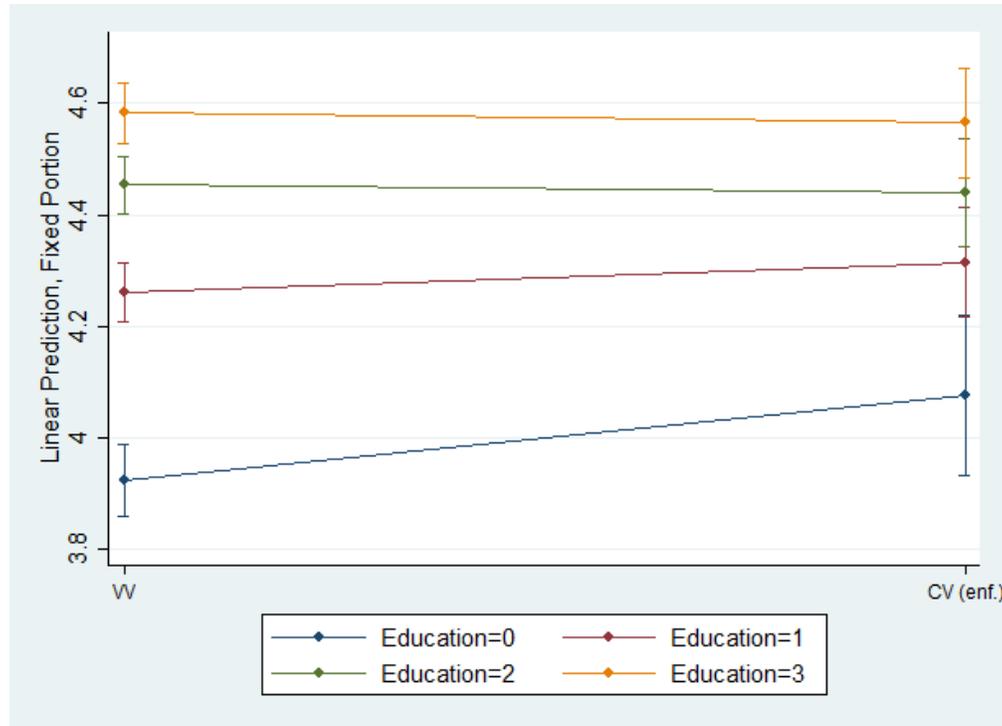
\*\* p&lt;0.01 \*p&lt;0.05

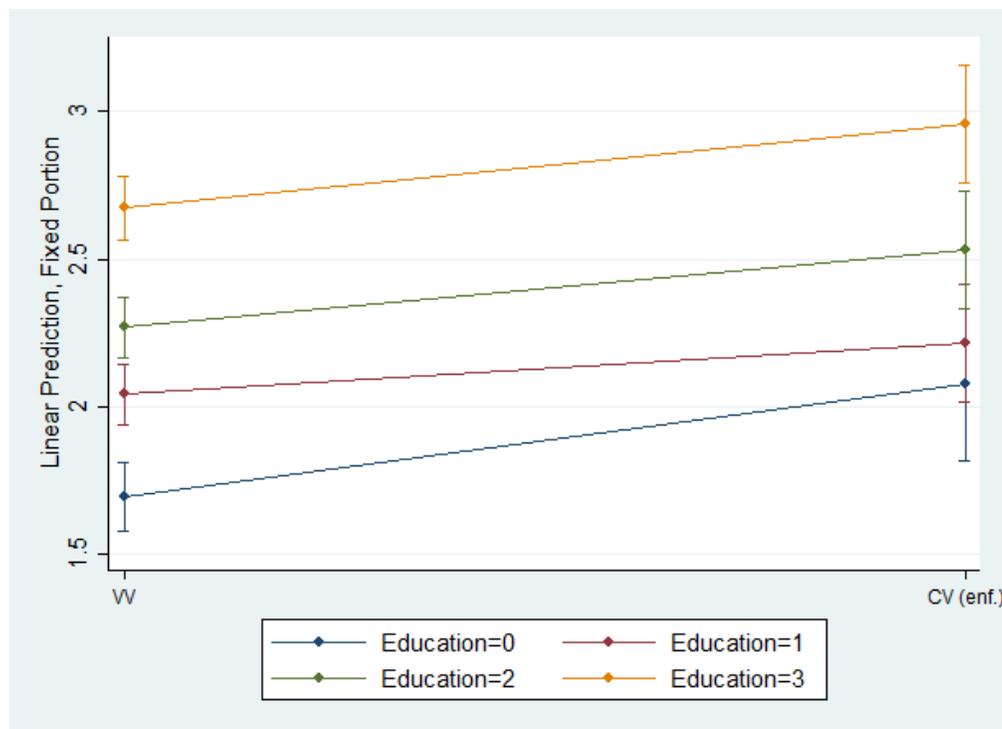
**Table 6.** Contrasts of Predictive Margins of Compulsory Voting \* Education on Political Engagement

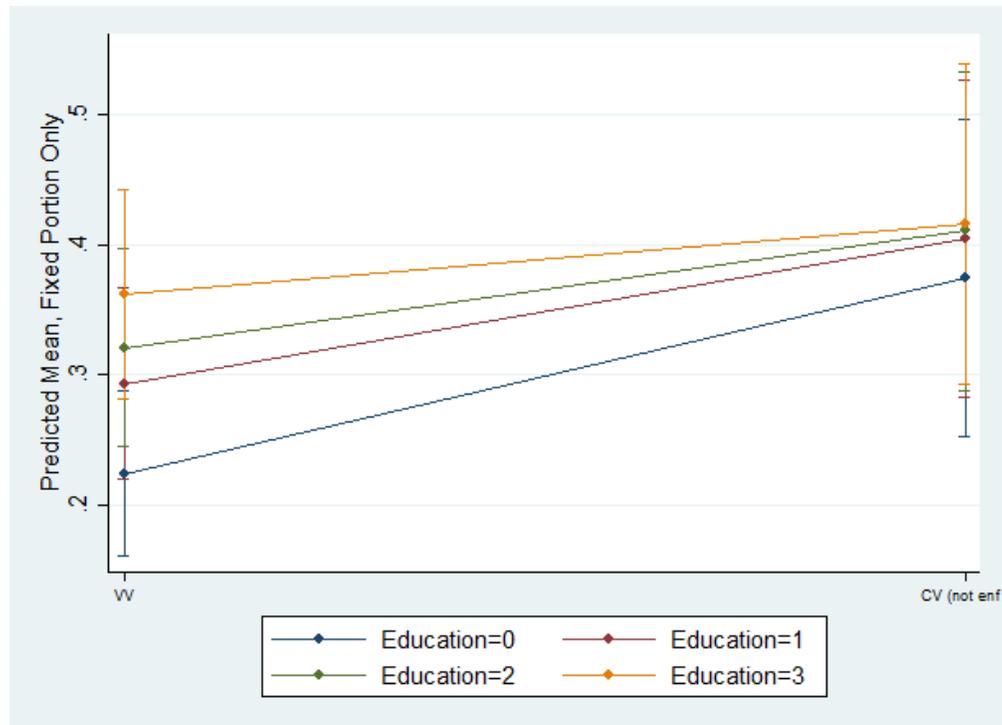
		<b>Attending Party Meetings</b>	<b>Community Involvement</b>
<b>Compulsory Voting</b>	<b>Education</b>	<i>Contrast/(se)</i>	<i>Contrast/(se)</i>
CV (non enforced) vs VV	0	.034 (.057)	-.022 (.068)
CV (non enforced) vs VV	1	.017 (.053)	.095 (.062)
CV (non enforced) vs VV	2	.015 (.053)	.069 (.062)
CV (non enforced) vs VV	3	.047 (.054)	.053 (.063)
CV (enforced) vs VV	0	-.093 (.064)	-.099 (.078)
CV (enforced) vs VV	1	-.104 (.057)	-.053 (.067)
CV (enforced) vs VV	2	-.098 (.057)	-.032 (.067)
CV (enforced) vs VV	3	-.068 (.057)	-.047 (.068)

\*\* p&lt;0.01 \*p&lt;0.05

**Figure 1.** Predictive Margins of Compulsory Voting \* Education on Political Interest

**Figure 2.** Predictive Margins of Compulsory Voting \* Education on Attention to News

**Figure 3.** Predictive Margins of Compulsory Voting \* Education on Political Discussion

**Figure 4.** Predictive Probabilities of Having a Party Identification

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## Online Appendix

**Table A1.** Operationalization of Independent Variables (LAPOP Surveys, 2004-2014)

Variables	Survey Items
Income	Into which of the following income ranges does the total monthly income of this household fit, including remittances from abroad and the income of all the working adults and children? [10 deciles based on the currency and distribution of the country] (no income=0...maximum income=10)
Education	How many years of schooling have you completed? (recoded into 0=no education, 1=primary school, 2=secondary school, 3=higher education)
Age	Recoded into 1=18-24, 2=25-34, 3=35-49, 4=50-64, 5=64 and older
Gender	Recoded into 1=male, 0=female
Employment Status	How do you mainly spend your time? Are you currently... (1) Working? (2) Not working, but have a job? (3) Actively looking for a job? (4) A student? (5) Taking care of the home? (6) Retired, a pensioner or permanently disabled to work (7) Not working and not looking for a job? (recoded into working=1&2, all the other options=0)
Urban/Rural	Recoded into 1=urban area, 0=rural area
Satisfaction with Democracy	In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in country? (recoded into 1=very dissatisfied, 2=dissatisfied, 3=satisfied, 4=very satisfied)

## Compulsory Voting and Political Engagement (Beyond the Ballot Box): A Multilevel Analysis

### Highlights

- I examine the impact of compulsory voting on different forms of political engagement
- Compulsory voting has a negligible effect on most forms of cognitive political engagement
- Compulsory voting does not increase active political participation (beyond the ballot box)
- Compulsory voting is associated with an increase in efforts to obtain political information (especially among poorly educated individuals)