

Democracies Don't Create Legitimacy by Forcing People to Vote

Adam Tugwell | 27 July 2026



Among the sudden wave of policy ideas appearing since the arrival of the new prime minister, one proposal may look trivial compared with the rest - yet it is arguably the most consequential.

The suggestion that voting in elections should once again become a legal requirement is being treated as a minor administrative tweak. In reality, it touches the very core of democratic agency.

Any policy that promises to improve the lives of people failed by the system deserves attention. But policies that affect **agency**, **choice**, and the **right not to participate** deserve even more.

In a genuine democracy, legitimacy does not come from the act of voting alone. It comes from the freedom to choose - including the freedom to withhold support.

What individuals think, feel, and express through countless behaviours matters just as much as the ballot box.

Compulsory Voting Doesn't Strengthen Democracy - It Masks Its Weaknesses

We've been here before. The argument for compulsory voting is always the same: if everyone votes, the result is unquestionably legitimate. But this is a simplistic reading of democracy that ignores both principle and reality.

Not voting is not a failure of citizenship. It is a political act.

People abstain for many reasons:

- **Disengagement and disenfranchisement** - a sense that politics has nothing to do with them.
- **Lack of alignment** - nothing in party manifestos resonates or reflects their lived experience.
- **Powerlessness** - a belief that no vote will change anything meaningful.

These are not trivial excuses. They are **messages** - signals that something is fundamentally wrong.

Forcing people to vote doesn't solve these problems. It simply conceals them.

If politicians truly want higher turnout, they should begin by asking why so many people feel politics is irrelevant to their lives. They should ask why millions do not see themselves reflected in the choices offered. They should ask why people feel powerless.

These questions point to a deeper truth: **the system itself is failing to represent society in any meaningful way.**

The Real Problem: Power Is Too Far Away

People sense - viscerally - that they have no real influence over public policy. Even those who vote often do so out of duty, not belief. They participate because they want to be seen to have tried, even though they doubt their vote will change anything.

This is not irrational. It is accurate.

Our political and electoral system is not meaningfully democratic. It performs democracy convincingly, but it does not deliver it.

The distance between voters and decision-makers grows with every reform, every centralisation, every party-driven selection process.

Representatives do not represent communities. They represent parties. And parties select candidates based on loyalty to the party line, not loyalty to the electorate.

Too much power sits too far away from the people whose lives it shapes. When people feel they have no influence, disengagement is inevitable.

Compulsory voting cannot fix this. It only forces people to participate in a system they know does not listen.

Compulsory Voting Creates False Legitimacy

If people vote only because they are legally compelled to, turnout becomes meaningless. It no longer reflects engagement, belief, or consent. It becomes a statistic - a veneer of legitimacy covering a hollow democratic process.

Compulsory voting:

- **Punishes disengagement instead of understanding it**
- **Manufactures legitimacy rather than earning it**
- **Forces endorsement of a system people do not trust**
- **Eliminates the political meaning of abstention**

Democracy is not strengthened by coercion. It is strengthened by influence.

Real Engagement Comes From Real Power - And Real Power Must Be Local

People will only re-engage with politics when they feel their voice genuinely shapes the decisions affecting their lives. That influence cannot be delivered by distant party structures or centralised government. It can only be delivered **locally**.

Local decision-making creates:

- **Proximity** - representatives who know the communities they serve.
- **Accountability** - decisions made by people with skin in the game.
- **Relevance** - policies shaped by lived experience, not party strategy.

This is not a theoretical fix. It is a practical one. Meaningful democracy begins where people live, work, and belong.

Yes, there are improvements that could make the current system more representative - as I outline in *Officially None of the Above*. But the real transformation will come only when decisions are made by people who genuinely represent the interests of their communities, not by those selected for their ability to conform to party demands.

Conclusion: Democracy Requires Choice - Including the Choice Not to Vote

Compulsory voting does not fix disengagement. It hides it. It does not strengthen democracy. It weakens it by erasing one of the most important political messages people can send: **I do not consent to this system.**

Democracy is not the act of voting. **Democracy is the act of having influence.**

Until people feel they have real influence, compulsory voting is nothing more than compulsory compliance.

If we want a democracy that works, we must build one where power is close enough for people to touch - and where participation is meaningful because it is freely chosen.

Further Reading

1. Foundations of Democratic Renewal

The Way of Awakened Politics: For Good Government

Link: <https://adamtugwell.blog/2025/01/17/the-way-of-awakened-politics-for-good-government-full-text/>

Summary: This work lays out the philosophical and ethical foundations for a healthier democratic culture. It explores how politics can be re-rooted in responsibility, awareness, and service rather than party loyalty or centralised control. Readers will find a clear explanation of why meaningful democracy requires agency, proximity, and genuine representation - themes that underpin the argument against compulsory voting.

2. Understanding Systemic Failure

Officially None of the Above

Link: <http://adamtugwell.blog/2025/03/26/officially-none-of-the-above-full-text/>

Summary: A deep dive into how the current electoral system fails to represent voters and why disengagement is a rational response. This piece explains the structural problems that lead people to feel powerless, including party-driven candidate selection and the illusion of choice. It also introduces reforms that could make elections more representative, helping readers understand why compulsory voting cannot fix a system designed to ignore dissent.

3. Rebuilding Democracy Through Local Power

The Local Economy Governance System

Link: <http://adamtugwell.blog/2025/11/21/the-local-economy-governance-system-online-text/>

Summary: This text presents a practical model for decentralised, community-rooted governance. It explains how shifting decision-making to the local level restores accountability, relevance, and public influence - the very conditions required for genuine democratic engagement. It is the natural next step for readers who want to understand how democracy can be rebuilt so that voting becomes meaningful again.

4. Practical Engagement and Representation

How to Get Elected

Link: <https://adamtugwell.blog/2025/02/26/how-to-get-elected-full-text/>

Summary: A pragmatic guide to standing for public office outside the constraints of party machinery. It shows how individuals can represent their communities authentically and independently, offering a counterpoint to the centralised, party-controlled system discussed above. This piece helps readers see how real representation could emerge from the ground up, *today*.

5. Current Political Context and Democratic Risks

Regional Centralisation: The Rewriting of England's Democracy Without a Mandate

Link: <https://adamtugwell.blog/2026/06/30/andy-burnham-and-regional-centralisation-the-rewriting-of-englands-democracy-without-a-mandate/>

Summary: A timely examination of how regional centralisation efforts - presented as modernisation - can actually deepen the democratic disconnect. This piece shows how power continues to move further away from communities, reinforcing the argument that compulsory voting would only mask disengagement rather than address its causes. It provides contemporary political context for the systemic issues explored above.

Further Information

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www.adamtugwell.blog

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