Compulsory or Committed?

Decoding youth voting patterns in Argentina

[Working Paper September 2024]

Miriam Malament

Yale University

Abstract

This study examines the impact of Argentina's compulsory voting laws on youth electoral participation. In Argentina, voting is mandatory for citizens aged 18 to 70, with a minor fine of 50 pesos for non-compliance, and optional for those aged 16 to 18. Leveraging a regression discontinuity design and panel fixed-effects models, I analyze individual-level voting data for youths around the age of majority. My findings reveal that voter turnout increases significantly among those just above the age of 18, who face mandatory voting laws, compared to those just below this threshold. Specifically, individuals just over 18 are 19.7% more likely to vote. Additionally, youths who voluntarily vote at ages 16 or 17 are 15% more likely to vote in future elections. These results suggest that early voting experiences foster long-term electoral engagement.

JEL Classification: D72, D91, C23

Keywords: Compulsory voting, Electoral participation, Regression discontinuity design, Early voting experiences.

*miriam.malament@yale.edu

*This draft: September 6, 2024. I am deeply grateful for the insightful comments and mentoring from Martín Rossi and the continuous support from the Department of Economics at Universidad de San Andrés. This working paper will be further developed at Yale University during the academic year 2024-2025, with the generous support of the Fox International Fellowship.

1 Introduction

Voting is a fundamental democratic right and civic duty, integral to the functioning of representative democracies. Ensuring high voter turnout is essential for the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic systems. High participation rates indicate a healthy democracy where citizens actively engage in the selection of their representatives and the shaping of public policy.

In Argentina, voting is mandatory for citizens aged 18 to 70. Since the enactment of Law No. 26.774 in 2012, it has been optional for those aged 16 to 18. This legislation expanded the electorate to include younger voters, who represent approximately 2.5% of the voting population and hold significant potential for influencing the political landscape. However, enforcement mechanisms in Argentina are notably lax. Non-compliance fines are set at a nominal value of 50 pesos, equivalent to around five cents USD, due to inflation and currency devaluation. This raises questions about the actual impact of mandatory voting laws on voter turnout, particularly among the youth.

Studies suggest that compulsory voting may foster greater political awareness and engagement among young voters. For instance, Blais (2006) support the idea that mandatory voting can enhance political engagement. Additionally, Lijphart (1997) and Franklin (1999) argue that compulsory voting laws can significantly increase turnout and reduce turnout inequality. These findings underscore the importance of early voting experiences in fostering long-term democratic engagement.

Further evidence of the impact of compulsory voting comes from Kostelka et al. (2024), who analyzed data from over 1,400 elections across 116 countries. They concluded that mandatory voting laws significantly increase voter turnout when enforced, finding that credible threats of penalties can prevent long-term declines in voter turnout and increase participation by nearly 20 points compared to 8-10 points without sanctions. This highlights the potential of effective enforcement to boost democratic participation.

The inclusion of 16 to 18-year-olds in the electoral process provides a unique opportunity to study the effects of early voting experiences on long-term political engagement. This period, often referred to in the literature as the 'impressionable years,' is critical for forming civic beliefs and behaviors. The experiences and habits formed during this time can have lasting impacts on individuals' views on civic duties and their behavior in society. Hoffman et al. (2017) explored the effects of compulsory voting on turnout in Austria, finding that such laws increased turnout by roughly 10%, drawing less politically interested and lower-income individuals to the polls. Panagopoulos (2008) and Singh (2011) further reinforce that stricter enforcement of compulsory voting laws can increase voter turnout.

Despite these insights, there is a significant research gap on how compulsory voting laws truly affect voters, especially when these laws are not strictly enforced. When studying young generations, it is of utmost importance to understand the impact these laws may have on medium and long-term political engagement. Previous studies, such as Fowler (2013), indicate that compulsory voting laws can significantly increase turnout and shift political outcomes. Additionally, Jaitman (2013) found that in Argentina, compulsory voting laws significantly increased turnout among older voters, reducing the socioeconomic gap in political participation. However, the lack of understanding of how these laws affect youth voter turnout is a critical void that this paper aims to fill.

To address this gap, it is essential to explore the voting patterns of young Argentinians and assess the behavioral impacts of these voting laws on youth participation. This paper aims to decode the voting patterns of young Argentinians, examining how the transition from optional to compulsory voting at the age of 18 affects their likelihood of participating in elections. Understanding these dynamics is not just crucial, but also holds the potential to guide policymakers in enhancing democratic participation and ensuring that young voters are effectively integrated into the political process.

By examining the impact of early voting experiences and minimal enforcement mechanisms, this research offers insights into how nominal incentives and early engagement strategies can promote civic responsibility among the youth, ultimately enhancing democratic participation.

2 Natural Experiment

Argentina's electoral system has a long history of promoting voter participation. Mandatory voting was introduced in 1912 with the Saenz Peña Law, making Argentina a pioneer in compulsory voting globally. Suffrage was extended to women in 1947, and today, all citizens over the age of 18 are required to vote under Law No. 19,945. Since the enactment of Law No. 26.774 in 2012, citizens aged 16 to 18 have the option to vote, significantly broadening the electoral base.

Citizens are automatically registered to vote within their city of residence and are included in lists separated by gender. They must vote at designated polling booths on election day, which are typically located near their declared addresses. Voting is compulsory for citizens between 18 and 70 years old, with abstainers facing collateral sanctions unless they satisfy

one of several exemption criteria[1]. Individuals who fail to vote without justification are listed in the Registry of Offenders and face restrictions on certain administrative procedures and eligibility for public office, including the inability to be hired as a public employee for three years and restrictions on obtaining or renewing a passport[2]. Despite these requirements, enforcement is minimal, and the associated penalties can be avoided by paying a fine of just 50 pesos, now equivalent to less than five cents USD[3].

Public awareness of the compulsory voting requirement and associated fines is high, with major news outlets across all political spectra consistently report on the fine [4]. In fact, several news outlets have highlighted the minimal nature of the fine, noting that the collateral sanctions are largely unenforced[5]. So, the symbolic nature of the fines and the lack of enforced sanctions mean that the actual impact on voter behavior is primarily behavioral rather than punitive. The government does not strictly enforce payment of the fine, and there are no significant real-world consequences for those listed as offenders.

Despite the minimal enforcement, the voter turnout in Argentina present a fascinating case study on the impact of compulsory voting laws, particularly among young voters. Figure 1 illustrates voter turnout by age for City of Buenos Aires in November 2021. The Figure 1 reveals a notable increases in voter turnout at age 18, where voting becomes mandatory.

Furthermore, voter turnout remains relatively stable for adults up to the age of 70, after which it gradually declines. This decline coincides with the end of mandatory voting at age 70, underscoring the influence of compulsory voting laws on sustained voter engagement. While the gradual decline has been previously studied (Jaitman, 2013), the sharp increase in voter participation at age 18 and its potential long-term consequences remain underexplored in the literature.

The figure clearly demonstrates the behavioral impact of compulsory voting on voter participation. Despite the minimal fines and lack of strict enforcement, the mandate alone appears sufficient to encourage higher turnout among those legally required to vote. This suggests that the declaration of mandatory voting, even without stringent enforcement, can

[1]The valid reasons for not voting include judges and their assistants who must keep offices open, individuals under 18 or over 75, those more than 500 kilometers away with justified reasons, the sick or incapacitated verified by medical professionals, and public service personnel whose duties prevent them from attending, with employers notifying the Ministry of the Interior and Transportation ten days in advance.

[2]Art. 125, Código Electoral Nacional, Law No. 19,945

[3]As of the 2023 exchange rate, 50 pesos is less than five cents in US dollars, and it has been less than a dollar for over a decade.

[4]La Nación, Infobae, Página 12, Clarín

[5]"*In practice, the weight of the electoral law is not felt, and as LA NACION could confirm, people who did not vote appear as delinquent on the list of offenders, and did not experience obstacles when carrying out procedures such as renewing their passport, national identity document, or driver's license. There are also high-ranking officials who took office in the state even though they are listed in the Public Registry of Offenders to the Duty to Vote.*" Source: La Nación (2023)

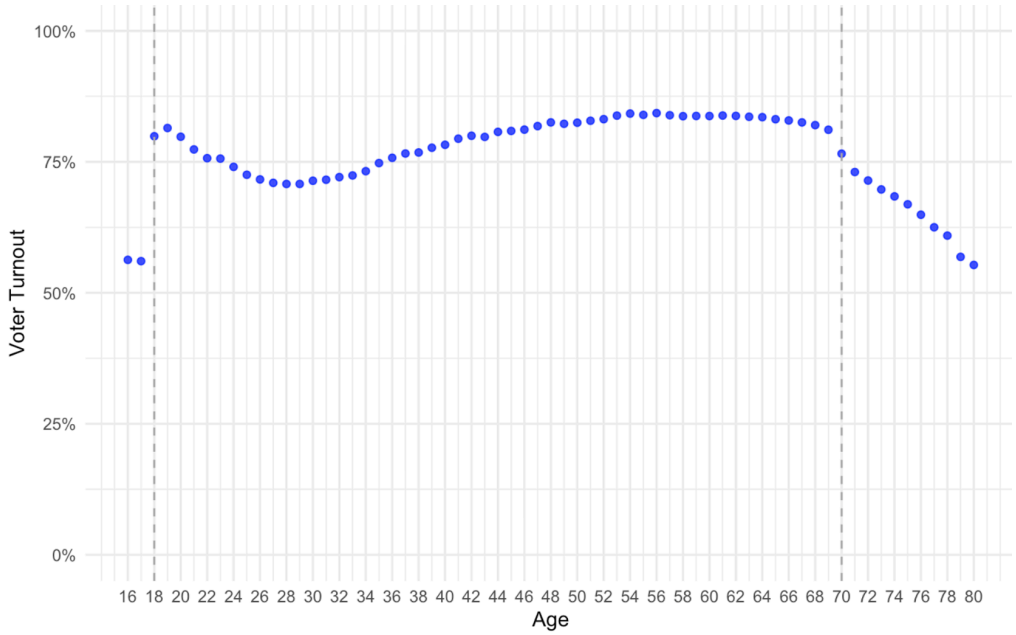


Figure 1: Voter Turnout by Age for CABA in November 2021

significantly enhance voter participation, providing a crucial insight for the analysis presented in this paper.

3 Data

To investigate the impact of mandatory voting on youth voter turnout in Argentina, I utilize two robust datasets: the electoral roll and the offender registry. These datasets provide comprehensive information on voter participation and compliance with voting regulations, allowing for a detailed analysis of voting behavior.

The electoral roll[6] dataset contains rich, individual-level data on registered voters. This includes each voters National ID Number (DNI), full name, electoral district, circuit, section, voting school (georeferenced), table and order, and records of fines for various elections[7]. Additionally, the dataset provides the year and approximate date of birth derived from the DNI, enabling precise demographic analysis. This granularity allows to track voter behavior over multiple election cycles, providing a unique longitudinal perspective on voter engagement.

The offender registry[8] dataset complements the electoral roll by providing detailed information on individuals who failed to vote and the corresponding fines. The registry employs

[6]https://www.padron.gob.ar/

[7]August 2015, October 2015, August 2017, October 2017, August 2019, October 2019, September 2021, November 2021, August 2023, October 2023, and November 2023

[8]https://infractores.padron.gob.ar/

a color-coded system to categorize offenders [9]. This coding system facilitates a clear understanding of compliance and non-compliance patterns, allowing to analyze the deterrent effects of fines and other penalties[10].

The integration of these two datasets creates a powerful tool for analysis. I leverage this data in several key ways:

First, I perform an individual-level analysis for each election. By combining the detailed voter information from the electoral roll with the compliance data from the offender registry, it can be observed and analyzed the behavior of each voter over time. This approach provides a granular view of how mandatory voting laws influence voter turnout at a personal level.

Second, I generate a running variable based on the distance from the cutoff date (the voters 18th birthday). This allows to employ a regression discontinuity design (RD), a quasi-experimental technique that exploits the exogenous variation introduced by the age cutoff for mandatory voting. The RD compares individuals just below and just above the age threshold, providing robust causal estimates of the effect of mandatory voting on voter turnout.

Third, the longitudinal aspect of the datasets, which spans from 2015 to 2023, enables to track individuals across multiple election cycles. This long-term tracking is crucial for understanding how early voting experiences impact future voter behavior and for examining the persistence of these effects over time.

Fourth, I conduct robustness checks and placebo tests to ensure the validity of my findings. By considering various elections and employing different bandwidths around the cutoff, it can be confirm that the results are not driven by specific contexts or methodological choices but reflect genuine behavioral responses to mandatory voting laws.

While these datasets offer rich information and methodological rigor, they do have some limitations, particularly in distinguishing between individuals who did not vote and paid the fine and those who did vote. However, this is not a significant issue because very few people actually pay the fine; in practice, individuals responsible enough to address their absence typically justify it beforehand, thus avoiding fines altogether. Despite these limitations, the datasets provide several significant advantages. The granularity of the data allows for precise and detailed analysis, while the longitudinal perspective offers valuable insights into the long-term effects of early voting experiences. Additionally, the use of RDD and panel data techniques ensures robust causal inference.

[9] green for those who voted or paid the fine, grey for those who neither voted nor were fined, blue for those who justified their absence, and red for those who did not vote and have an outstanding fine. The fines are cumulative and can range to 500 pesos.

[10] A balanced sample of 20,000 voters born between 1998 and 2004 in City of Buenos Aires was collected from the electoral roll, along with their infraction status in elections between 2015 and 2023.

4 Identification Strategy

The identification strategy employs two primary methods: Regression Discontinuity (RD) Design and Panel Fixed Effects. The RD Design evaluates the direct effect of mandatory voting by comparing voter turnout just below and above the age threshold of 18. The model can be represented as:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta \times \text{Mandatory}_i + \text{Age}_i + \epsilon_i$$

where Y_i represents the voting decision of individual i, Mandatory_i is a dummy variable that takes the value 1 if the individual is 18 years or older, and 0 otherwise, and Age_i captures the underlying relationship between age and the probability of voting.

This strategy is crucial for determining the causal impact of mandatory voting on voter turnout. The identification assumption is that individuals near the threshold are nearly identical, and their assignment to either side of the threshold is random. Importantly, the date of birth is random and completely uncorrelated with voter turnout in any way relevant to this analysis. The cutoff is based on the age on the day of the elections, making voting mandatory for those above 18 and optional for those below.

In addition, it is used a panel data approach with fixed effects to analyze voting dynamics over time. This method allows to control for unobserved individual heterogeneity and examine the impact of early voting behavior on future participation. The model is formally written as:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta \times \text{Voted_16_17}_{it} + \gamma_i + \epsilon_{it}$$

where Y_{it} is the voting decision of individual i at time t, Voted_16_17_{it} is a dummy variable that equals 1 if the individual voted at ages 16 or 17 and 0 otherwise, γ_i are individual fixed effects, and ϵ_{it} is the error term.

This second part provides an additional dimension to the RD results by examining the persistence of voting behavior acquired at a young age. Consistent with the impressionable years literature, it is assumed that these early experiences have long-lasting effects on beliefs and civic responsibility. Although this effect cannot be considered causal, as individuals are opting to vote at a young age and therefore, there is a selection bias, it remains a relevant finding because it demonstrates the potential of early voting experiences to influence long-term electoral participation patterns.

5 Results

5.1 Regression Discontinuity Estimates

To estimate the causal effect of mandatory voting on youth voter turnout, a regression discontinuity approach is used. The results reveal that mandatory voting significantly increases voter turnout among youths. Specifically, individuals just above the age of 18 are 19.7% more likely to vote than those just below this age threshold. This effect is visually represented in Figure 1.

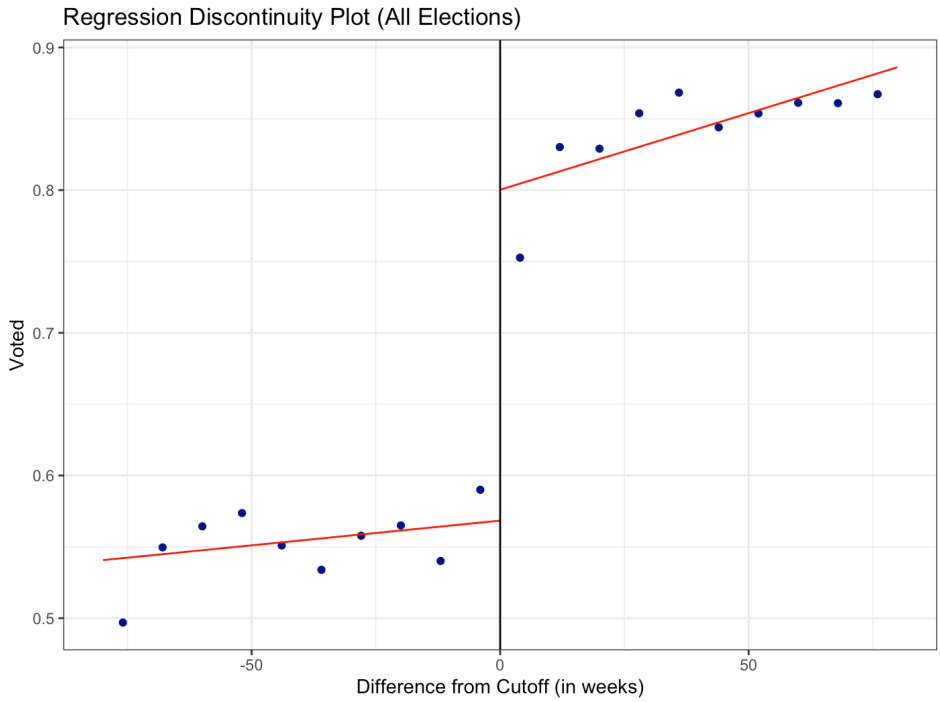


Figure 2: Results for Pool All Elections

Additionally, Table 1 provides sharp regression discontinuity estimates. These findings indicate that the transition to mandatory voting at age 18 leads to a substantial increase in voter turnout. The robustness of this effect is further supported by various placebo tests and cutoff tests, which are detailed in the annex. This ensures that the observed increase in voter turnout is not due to other confounding factors but rather the result of the compulsory voting policy.

Method	**Coefficient**	**Standard Error**
Conventional	0.197***	0.050
Robust	0.197***	0.050
Description	**Below 18**	**Above 18**
Number of Obs.	8910	7133
Effective Number of Obs.	1254	1112
Order Estimation (p)	1	1
Order Bias (q)	2	2
Bandwidth Estimation (h)	3.913	3.913
Bandwidth Bias (b)	7.220	7.220
rho (h/b)	0.542	0.542
Unique Observations	399	391

Table 1: Sharp RD Estimates

5.2 Fixed Effects Analysis

The fixed effects analysis supports the RD findings, indicating that individuals who first voted at ages 16-17 are significantly more likely to vote in subsequent elections. Specifically, these individuals are 15% more likely to vote, as shown by the coefficients of 0.143 and 0.150 for the 2023 general and primary elections, respectively, both significant at the 1% level (see Table 2).

The table presents the fixed effects regression results, which estimate the impact of having voted at ages 16-17 on the likelihood of voting in the 2023 general and primary elections. The dependent variables are the probabilities of voting in the general and primary elections of 2023.

	Dependent variable:	
	General 2023	Primary 2023
Voted 16-17	0.143***	0.150***
	(0.008)	(0.008)
Observations	10,222	10,222
F-Statistic	311.137	322.326
Note:	p<0.1; p<0.05; p<0.01	

Table 2: Fixed Effects Results for Voting Behavior

The persistence of voting behavior over time is illustrated in Figure 2, which shows the voting rates in the most recent 2023 election. This analysis confirms that the patterns observed in earlier elections persist, indicating a medium-term trend of increased voter turnout among those who voted at ages 16-17.

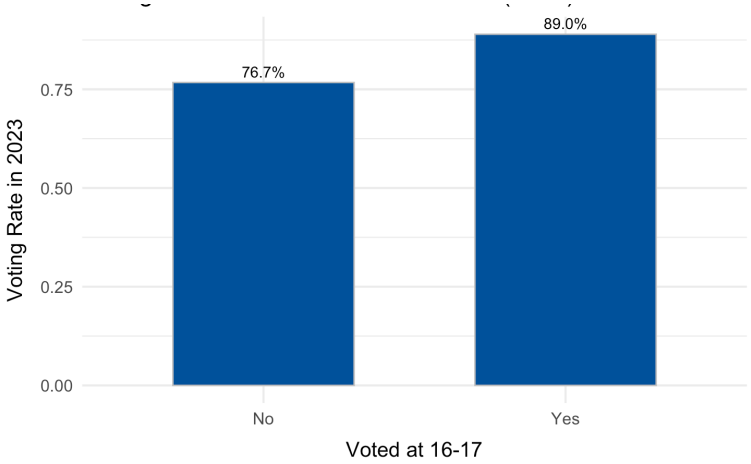


Figure 3: Voting Rates in Most Recent Election (2023)

Note: The results are consistent across different specifications (voting at 16/17 in 2017 only, 2015+2017, voting in 2023 only, 2023+2021, and pooling all years). All results reflect a medium-term trend.

5.3 Mechanisms

The observed increase in youth voter turnout in Argentina, despite minimal enforcement of compulsory voting laws, can be explained through several mechanisms rooted in behavioral economics.

First, behavioral economics posits that individuals are influenced by how choices are framed. In the context of Argentina's compulsory voting law, the framing of voting as a mandatory civic duty, rather than an optional activity, significantly impacts voter behavior. The law serves as a nudge, altering perceptions and encouraging participation. This framing effect is particularly potent among young people.

Empirical evidence supports this explanation. The regression discontinuity analysis shows that individuals just above the age of 18 are 19.7% more likely to vote than those just below this age threshold. This sharp increase suggests that the mere designation of voting as mandatory, regardless of enforcement, significantly influences voter turnout.

Additionally, this effect can be understood through the lenses of social norms and loss aversion. Social norms compel individuals to conform to behaviors perceived as standard within their community. When voting is framed as mandatory, it becomes a social expectation, prompting individuals to participate to align with societal norms. Loss aversion further reinforces this behavior; individuals are more motivated to avoid the social and psychological costs of non-compliance, such as social stigma and a sense of failing to fulfill a civic duty, than to achieve the equivalent gains of compliance.

The symbolic enforcement of the law also plays a role. Despite the nominal fines, the law's presence as a mandate signals its importance and legitimacy, thereby exerting additional pressure on individuals to comply.

Furthermore, fixed-effects analysis indicates that early voting experiences have a lasting impact on future voting behavior. Individuals who vote voluntarily at ages 16 or 17 are more likely to continue voting in subsequent elections. This finding suggests that early engagement in voting fosters a sense of civic duty and establishes habitual voting behavior. The transition to mandatory voting at age 18 reinforces this trend, as those who have already developed a voting habit are more likely to persist in this behavior.

In conclusion, the increase in youth voter turnout can be attributed to the framing of voting as a mandatory duty, the influence of social norms and loss aversion, and the long-term effects of early voting experiences. These mechanisms collectively underscore the significant impact of compulsory voting laws on voter behavior, even in the absence of strict enforcement.

6 Conclusions

The findings of this study significantly contribute to the understanding of electoral behavior and the effectiveness of voting laws. By exploring the impact of early voting experiences and minimal enforcement mechanisms, this research reveals how nominal incentives and early engagement strategies can promote civic responsibility among youth, enhancing democratic participation.

The results underscore the importance of early voting experiences, social norms, civic duty, accessibility, and voter education in shaping voting behavior. These insights are crucial for policymakers aiming to develop effective policies that foster sustained electoral engagement. Early voting experiences, even under minimally enforced compulsory voting laws, significantly increase voter turnout among young people. Furthermore, youths who vote voluntarily at ages 16 or 17 are more likely to vote in future elections, indicating that early engagement fosters long-term electoral participation.

In conclusion, this study provides robust evidence that compulsory voting laws, even with minimal enforcement, can significantly increase voter turnout among young people. Early voting experiences have a lasting impact on electoral participation, and understanding the underlying mechanisms can help promote civic responsibility and democratic engagement. Policymakers can leverage these insights to design targeted interventions that enhance voter turnout and strengthen democratic processes.

References

Blais, A. (2006) "What affects voter turnout?" *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.*, 9, 111–125.

Fowler, A. (2013) "Electoral and policy consequences of voter turnout: Evidence from compulsory voting in Australia," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 8 (2), 159–182.

Franklin, M. N. (1999) "Electoral engineering and cross-national turnout differences: what role for compulsory voting?" *British Journal of Political Science*, 29 (1), 205–216.

Hoffman, M., G. León, and M. Lombardi (2017) "Compulsory voting, turnout, and government spending: Evidence from Austria," *Journal of Public Economics*, 145, 103–115.

Jaitman, L. (2013) "The causal effect of compulsory voting laws on turnout: Does skill matter?" *Journal of Economic Behavior Organization*, 92, 79–93.

Kostelka, F., S. P. Singh, and A. Blais (2024) "Is compulsory voting a solution to low and declining turnout? Cross-national evidence since 1945," *Political Science Research and Methods*, 12 (1), 76–93.

Lijphart, A. (1997) "Unequal participation: Democracy's unresolved dilemma presidential address, American Political Science Association, 1996," *American Political Science Review*, 91 (1), 1–14.

Panagopoulos, C. (2008) "The calculus of voting in compulsory voting systems," *Political Behavior*, 30, 455–467.

Singh, S. (2011) "How compelling is compulsory voting? A multilevel analysis of turnout," *Political Behavior*, 33, 95–111.

7 Annex

7.1 Robustness Checks Regression Discontinuity

The Figure 4 assesses the stability of the regression discontinuity design's estimates by varying the bandwidth around the 18-year-old cutoff from one to thirty weeks. This analysis, depicted in the figure below, ensures that the findings are not sensitive to the choice of bandwidth. Each point represents the voter turnout effect estimate at different bandwidths, with vertical lines indicating confidence intervals. The consistent behavior of the estimates across these bandwidths confirms the robustness of the results, showing that the effect of compulsory voting laws on increasing voter turnout is stable and not an artifact of specific analytical choices.

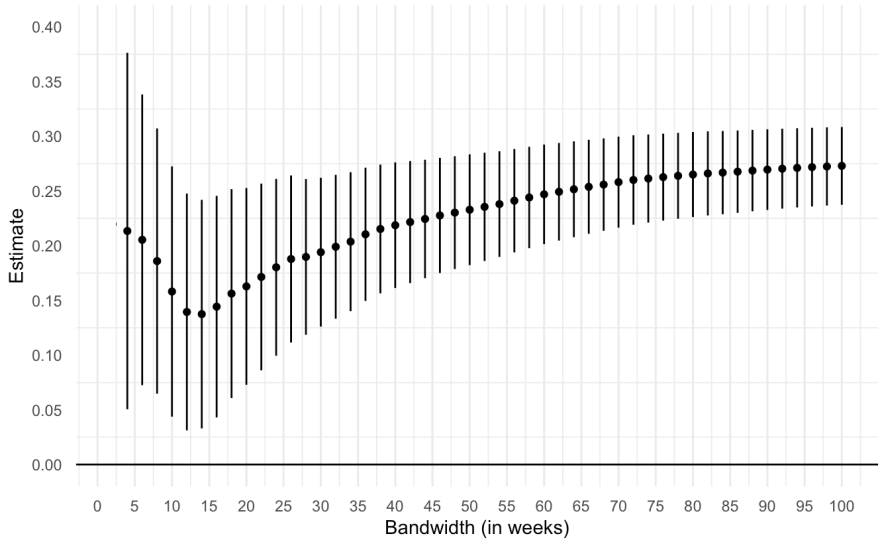


Figure 4: Robustness check of RD estimates at varying bandwidths

Additionally, I conducted two placebo tests at ages 17 and 19 to verify that the observed jump in voter turnout is specific to the age of 18, coinciding with the onset of compulsory voting. These placebo tests, depicted in the figures below, show no significant discontinuities, reinforcing that the effect is uniquely associated with turning 18 and the implementation of mandatory voting laws.

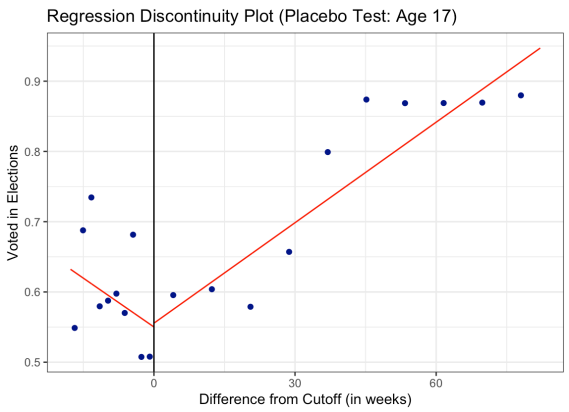


Figure 5: Placebo test at age 17

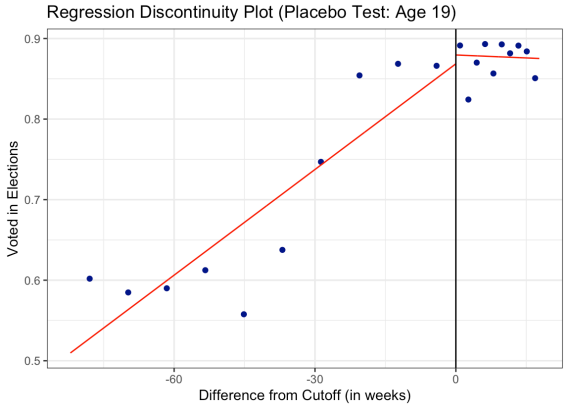
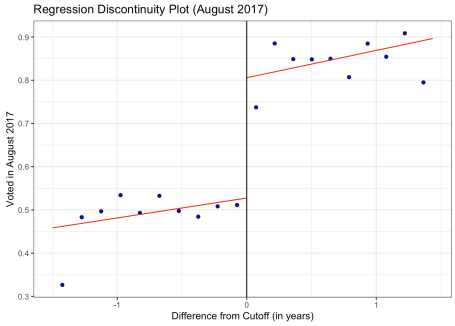


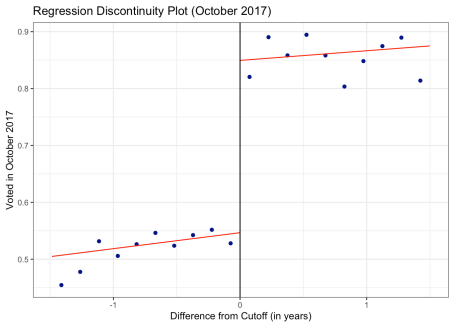
Figure 6: Placebo test at age 19

7.1.1 Regression Discontinuity (In Years)

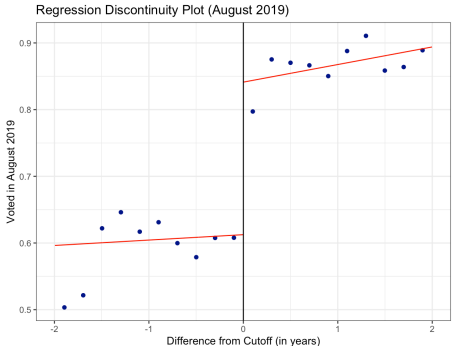
The following figures illustrate the RD analysis conducted for various elections in terms of years. Each plot provides insight into the voter turnout effects just before and after the legal voting age of 18 years is reached, highlighting the impact of compulsory voting. It demonstrate that the regression discontinuity (RD) design maintains robustness across different types of elections, encompassing both primary and general elections, as well as presidential and legislative contests.



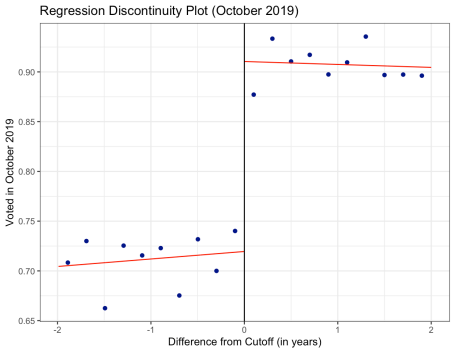
Results for August 2017



Results for October 2017



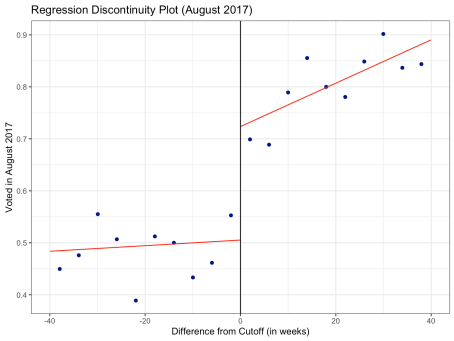
Results for August 2019



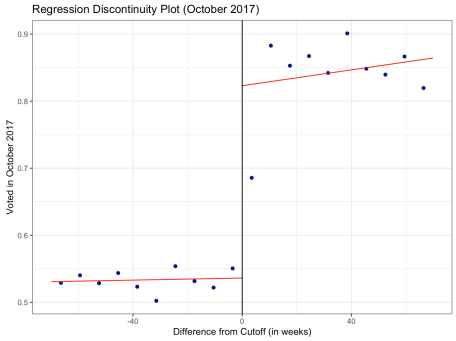
Results for October 2019

7.1.2 Results Regression Discontinuity (In Weeks)

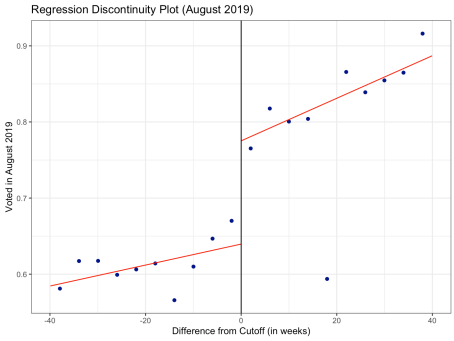
Transitioning to a more granular temporal analysis, the following RD plots are based on weeks rather than years. This adjustment provides a detailed view of voter turnout changes within a narrower time frame around the age cutoff, further underscoring the precision and adaptability of the RD method in capturing the effects of compulsory voting laws.



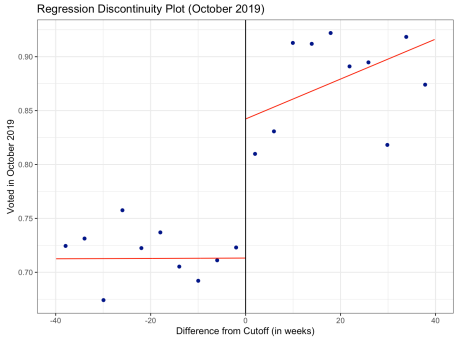
Results for August 2017



Results for October 2017



Results for August 2019



Results for October 2019