

How Electoral Reforms Can Shape Turnout and Democratic Engagement

Authors

Carolina Plescia
André Blais

Abstract

This policy brief examines what voting means to citizens across 13 countries and how those meanings relate to electoral institutions and regime type. Based on surveys of more than 25,000 respondents conducted ahead of national elections in 2022 and 2023, the analysis shows that proportional electoral systems and compulsory voting are associated with more positive orientations toward voting. Electoral autocracies, by contrast, consistently display weaker supportive meanings. The findings suggest that institutional reforms oriented toward broader inclusion may, over time, contribute to a democratic culture in which citizens view voting as genuinely meaningful, though context, history, and political trust all shape how far any given reform can reach.

Keywords

voting systems, meanings of voting, democracy, compulsory voting, form of representation, democratic attitudes



***The Normative Implications:
Taking stock of meanings in
designing voting systems***

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Executive Summary

A challenge many countries face today is a decline in electoral participation (Kostelka and Blais 2021). Several countries have enacted electoral reforms or are actively considering them, in part to address the problem of low and unequal turnout. Because institutional inertia and resistance to change are strong (Bowler and Donovan 2007; 2013), such reforms are rarely enacted. Nonetheless, several countries have undertaken substantial changes. Germany implemented a significant reform in 2023 to address the growth of the Bundestag, which had become the second-largest parliament in the world. For the 2024 European Parliament elections, Belgium lowered the voting age to 16, a practice already in place in Germany and Austria, and introduced compulsory voting. New Zealand and Japan shifted in 1993 and 1994 from majoritarian to proportional and mixed electoral systems, respectively (Gallagher and Mitchell 2005). In the United States, beyond ongoing debates over gerrymandering, voter suppression, and campaign finance, there are growing calls to adopt ranked-choice voting (Nielson 2017).

Yet designing reforms that work requires understanding not just whether citizens vote, but why they vote and what they think voting is for. Evidence suggests that specific voting systems, such as compulsory voting, can influence political behaviour (Dassonneville et al. 2023; Singh 2019) and are often associated with a stronger sense of civic duty (Chapman 2019; Feitosa et al. 2020; Quintelier et al. 2011).

This policy brief examines whether people living under different electoral systems (proportional versus majoritarian), compulsory voting rules, and different regime types (democracy versus electoral autocracy) tend to see voting differently, that is, whether they attach different meanings to the act of voting. The study was conducted across 13 countries holding national legislative elections between 2022 and 2023 (Plescia 2025).

When citizens view voting as meaningful, those meanings can take many different forms. Some citizens see voting as a civic duty; others experience it as an expression of loyalty to their country or national identity; still others view it as a tool for holding governments accountable or influencing public policy. We call these “meanings of voting”. These categories are not mutually exclusive: citizens may hold several meanings at once, or none at all. Some meanings are more supportive of democratic health than others, specifically, certain meanings are positively associated with support for democracy and confidence in electoral processes. Understanding where these supportive meanings are more prevalent, and under what institutional conditions they flourish, is essential for reform debates because the same institutional arrangement can be associated with very different citizen orientations.

Key findings:

- Proportional systems tend to be linked to higher supportive meanings of voting across different national contexts, compared to majoritarian systems.
- Compulsory voting is also positively associated with supportive meanings and enhances participation; despite some concerns about its coercive nature, it appears to contribute to the legitimacy of electoral democracy.

- Electoral autocracies exhibit fewer supportive meanings, and gains in these settings are constrained without broader political reforms that go well beyond electoral rules.
- Finally, when systems strive to reflect diverse viewpoints and give losers a stake in the process, citizens across very different cultures and geopolitical contexts are more likely to hold supportive meanings of voting.

What Our Research Shows

This policy brief is based on data collected approximately two months before general elections in the following 13 countries: Türkiye, Sweden, Colombia, Brazil, United States, Australia, Italy, Hungary, Tunisia, Estonia, Nigeria, Serbia, and Kenya (Plescia et al. 2025). We surveyed more than 25,000 people in total, using both online and face-to-face interview methods.

To compare countries in terms of how positively citizens think about voting, we constructed a summary measure we call the “support” index. It captures the average across items measuring what voting means to respondents and highlights where supportive versus unsupportive views are more prevalent. Table 1 ranks countries by their mean support score; higher values indicate a stronger supportive orientation toward voting. Countries that independent democracy indices classify as electoral autocracies, meaning competitive elections exist in formal terms but are structurally skewed in favour of the incumbent, appear at the lower end of the ranking.

Table 1. Countries ranked by mean value of supportive meaning.

Country	N	Mean	SD	Proportional	Compulsory	Electoral Autocracy
Türkiye	2006	0.742	0.146	1	1	1
Sweden	1548	0.737	0.188	1	0	0
Colombia	1373	0.731	0.127	1	0	0
Brazil	2000	0.730	0.151	1	1	0
US	4030	0.726	0.199	0	0	0
Australia	1502	0.706	0.186	0	1	0
Italy	1561	0.704	0.162	1	0	0
Hungary	3826	0.677	0.216	1	0	1
Tunisia	1508	0.671	0.224	0	0	1
Estonia	1492	0.669	0.123	1	0	0
Nigeria	1476	0.651	0.255	0	0	1
Serbia	1506	0.644	0.221	1	0	1
Kenya	1489	0.610	0.267	0	0	1

Note: N: number of respondents. SD: Standard Deviation. The electoral autocracy dummy is derived by dichotomizing the liberal democracy index taken from V-Dem (2023). The index ranges from 0 to 1 and within our sample from 0.12 in Türkiye to 0.87 in Sweden. Countries that score below the 0.5 mean are considered electoral autocracy. The source for the electoral system is IDEA 2022. Italy and Hungary have mixed proportional representation.

Türkiye ranks first, followed by Sweden, Colombia, and Brazil. All four use proportional electoral rules, and two, Türkiye and Brazil, have compulsory voting. Among the top six countries in Table 1, three mandate voting: Australia, Brazil, and Türkiye. Proportional systems occupy the top positions regardless of how consolidated democracy is in a given country, ranging from a long-established democracy like Sweden to a still-consolidating one like Colombia and an electoral autocracy like Türkiye. It is worth noting that the 2023 elections in Türkiye offered the opposition an unusual degree of openness compared to previous cycles, which may partly explain its high score

At the bottom of the ranking are countries that score poorly on independent democracy indices and that we classify as electoral autocracies: Nigeria, Serbia, Tunisia, and Kenya. Two exceptions are worth flagging. The United States uses majoritarian rules, and voluntary voting yet ranks relatively high. This is likely because national identity is strong there and closely associated with what we call “allegiance” meanings, a sense of commitment to the political system and national values that sustains participation independently of institutional design. Estonia, by contrast, ranks low despite being a consolidated democracy. This may reflect limited power alternation over many years, which can foster political alienation, combined with comparatively weak nationalism and a long history of minority exclusion that dampens civic engagement among a significant share of the population.

Policy Options Compared

The findings suggest that certain institutional features are associated with more supportive orientations toward voting, but they do not imply that changing electoral rules will straightforwardly transform how citizens feel about democracy. Electoral institutions are embedded in broader historical, social, and political contexts, and their effects are typically gradual and contingent. What the evidence does support is that reforms making citizens feel more genuinely included in political outcomes tend, over time, to be associated with stronger meanings attached to the vote.

Proportional representation is associated with a more widespread sense that voting matters. Proportional systems give more voters a stake in the outcome: minority viewpoints are more likely to gain representation, and losing a vote does not necessarily mean losing all influence. Where full-scale electoral reform is not immediately feasible, intermediate measures such as ranked-choice voting or multi-member districts may begin to approximate some of these benefits by reducing the problem of votes that seem to count for nothing.

Compulsory voting presents a more nuanced picture. The evidence shows that mandating participation is associated with higher turnout and more supportive meanings of voting, but it is not a solution in isolation. In countries where citizens already feel alienated from political institutions, compelling them to vote without addressing underlying grievances risks generating resentment rather than engagement.

For electoral autocracies, the findings are sobering. Supportive meanings of voting are systematically lower in these settings, and adjusting electoral rules alone is unlikely to close that gap. Where competition is structurally constrained and electoral losers are excluded from any meaningful share of power, citizens have reasonable grounds for viewing their vote with

scepticism. Meaningful change in these contexts requires credible commitments to electoral integrity, judicial independence, and protections for political opposition.

Across all contexts, the consistent pattern in our data is that citizens are sensitive to whether their political system genuinely strives to include diverse voices and translate votes into influence. Reforms that credibly signal this commitment, whether through the design of the electoral system, the accessibility of the voting process, or the fairness of how results are managed, are the most likely to be associated with stronger meanings citizens attach to their vote and, with it, the broader legitimacy of electoral democracy. No single reform achieves this alone, but each step toward more inclusive institutions contributes to a democratic culture in which voting feels worth doing.

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About the Researchers

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André Blais

André Blais is Professor and Research Chair in Electoral Studies at the Department of Political Science at the University of Montreal. His primary research expertise is in the fields of electoral systems, voter behaviour, and political parties. He has extensive experience in survey design and has led several major research grants working with economists, political scientists, and psychologists.



Carolina Plescia

Carolina Plescia is Associate Professor in the Department of Government at the University of Vienna. She is the PI of the ERC starting grant project [DeVOTE](#) (2021-2026) which examine the meanings of voting for ordinary citizens, their causes and consequences. She is also co-leading (with [Jan Maly](#)) a project funded by the [WWTF](#) on citizen-centered democratic innovation, which aim to understand citizen preferences for participatory budgeting algorithms.