Chapter 4
DEMOCRACY AND MIGRATION

As rates of international migration grow, democracies may increasingly contend with questions about whether and how to design and implement systems for out-of-country voting.

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, this chapter of the report examines the relationship between migration and democratic participation, addressing a core question that democracies face in an age of large-scale migration—how to extend the franchise to citizens residing outside the physical territory of their country of origin or nationality. As rates of international migration grow, democracies may increasingly contend with questions about whether and how to design and implement systems for out-of-country voting (OCV). Indirectly, the report explores whether resilience in democracies is better served by expanding the demos or safeguarding its internal coherence.

The issue of migration is only set to grow in importance, as global migration flows are almost certain to increase in the coming decades—driven by conflict, climate change, inequality and digital mobility. Given the ever-increasing numbers of people living outside their home countries, the inclusion of non-resident citizens in political processes is a pressing democratic question, not a peripheral one. Electoral management bodies (EMBs) and legislators must act now to ensure that systems are fit for purpose, as enfranchisement across borders becomes a defining issue for the future of democratic legitimacy. This report intends to help them navigate that challenge.

The report focuses on the technical, legal and institutional dimensions of voting rights for citizens residing abroad (for a note on terminology, please see Box 4.1). It provides an overview of where OCV exists, explains how it works in practice and examines levels of participation. It also provides a set of policy recommendations for legislatures that may consider adopting or amending OCV systems, for EMBs and other agencies that are responsible for implementing and overseeing OCV, and for civil society organizations (CSOs) that advocate for OCV reforms.

International migration raises political debates around citizenship and identity that are complex and often contentious. Although International IDEA has examined the ways in which immigrants can and cannot participate in the political processes of host countries—for example, in a context of resident non-citizen voting (International IDEA 2025c) or recent US deportation policies (International IDEA 2025s), these are topics that are beyond the scope of this report. Instead, the analysis is confined to the institutional mechanisms for electoral inclusion of citizens living abroad, not addressing the broader political or normative considerations surrounding citizenship and the political inclusion of immigrants in host countries. It also examines some of the key debates related to extending the franchise across borders, including questions around what may and may not justify inclusion, as well as the financial, administrative and logistical challenges to implementing OCV procedures.

While migration intersects with many political and social dynamics, this report remains anchored in three decades of International IDEA's core area of expertise—the institutional and procedural dimensions of democratic participation, especially in relation to electoral enfranchisement for citizens abroad. The report builds on International IDEA's data resources, including trends identified in the GSoD Indices and in the Democracy Tracker, especially related to metrics of Social Group Equality, and data on electoral processes and OCV, including the design of OCV modalities, diaspora voter turnout data and context-specific OCV experiences (Ellis et al. 2007; Aman and Bakken 2021; International IDEA 2022b). International IDEA's most recent work on this topic includes case studies on the challenges to enfranchisement in the context of mobility in South Asia (International IDEA n.d.a) and a report on the practice of out-of-country campaigning by political parties in Europe (Otiashvili et al. 2025). In addition to the above, the report uses international migration data primarily from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). A to track long-term trends in migrant stock by region, income group and over time. It also relies on International IDEA's Voting from Abroad Database, which includes legal provisions and practices regarding OCV across 216 countries, including data on voting methods, eligibility criteria and regulatory gaps, as available. Additional data from the GSoD Indices, particularly regarding performance in the category of Representation, compare migrant stocks with democratic quality in origin and destination countries. Turnout data collected by International IDEA from 210 national elections between 2002 and 2025 are analysed to assess levels of diaspora participation. The empirical findings are supported by references to academic literature and country case examples to contextualize the data and explore normative implications.

While international data sets and electoral reports provide valuable comparative insights, data availability and quality remain uneven. Turnout and registration figures for OCV are inconsistently collected and reported, with limited disaggregation by voting method or eligibility category. Legal provisions do not always translate into meaningful access, and implementation gaps, particularly in lower-capacity or conflict-affected settings, are often poorly documented. Widely used migrant stock figures include non-voting populations and do not capture variations in citizenship retention or political

engagement. These limitations point to the need for more comprehensive and policy-relevant research, including on the credibility and accessibility of OCV mechanisms, perceived barriers among diasporas, the role of political parties and campaigning across borders, and host-country responses to extraterritorial representation. Expanding and standardizing data in these areas would enable more informed policy decisions and help ensure that diaspora enfranchisement supports democratic resilience in both sending and receiving countries.

Box 4.1. **Terminology**

Discussing migration and democracy requires specialized terminology that reflects more than the emigrant/immigrant distinction and emphasizes matters of citizenship and residence. We use the term 'non-citizen residents' when discussing voting rights with reference to migrants' country of destination and mirror this term with 'non-resident citizens' when discussing voting rights in the country of origin. A key concern of this analysis is 'diaspora enfranchisement', meaning the legal and practical ability to participate in political processes—especially elections—for non-resident citizens.

The remainder of this section provides an empirical overview of migration flows, regime characteristics of origin and destination countries, and comparative experiences with OCV. The report concludes with a set of recommendations to support context-appropriate OCV system design.

The boundary problem

As people traverse state boundaries and forge transnational identities, the so-called boundary problem, first raised by Robert Dahl (1970: 60) more than half a century ago, is again relevant. What determines who 'the people' of a state are? Answering this question is pivotal, largely because it determines who does and does not 'belong' and who can legitimately claim rights to equal participation—an issue at the heart of democratic systems (Dahl 1998: 65; Song 2012: 41). Today, this question is no longer abstract: countries must now define electoral and participatory rights for growing numbers of non-resident citizens in diasporas around the world.

Even though the borders of many modern-day countries were not democratically drawn, the assumption has long been that these borders define the citizenry. The resulting tautology, however, presents a problem: if the people determine the boundaries of a country, then the boundaries cannot, in turn, define the people (Zilla 2022: 1524). International migration and the transnational identities and relationships it generates pose a further challenge—determining how democracies conceptualize 'the people' and their rights to participation and representation when identities and affiliations stretch across borders. For countries of origin, international migration raises practical questions. For example, how can non-resident citizens—whether long-term emigrants, temporary workers, students, exiles or leisure travellers—continue to participate in national elections? What legal and institutional

frameworks exist to ensure this participation, and how does such participation affect both emigrants and those who remain?

While there are many drivers of migration and several categories of migrants that are based on those drivers, such classifications are primarily relevant to analysis that focuses on migrants' rights in destination countries, where they are immigrants. In contrast, the present analysis focuses on participation in migrants' countries of origin, where the reasons for and contexts of their departure have less impact on the laws and mechanisms established by origin-country authorities to ensure their continued political participation.

4.2. **GLOBAL TRENDS IN MIGRATION**

The human experience with migration encompasses two superficially contradictory truths. First, our species has always engaged in migration, often at a significant scale (Manning and Trimmer 2020). Second, most humans throughout history have never travelled very far from the place where they were born—a pattern that remains true today. This reality is reflected in 2024 data: while international migration is an important political issue in many countries (both sending and receiving ones), the number of international migrants worldwide in 2024 was estimated at 304 million people, or 3.7 per cent of the global population (UNDESA 2025). In other words, 26 of every 27 people alive today still make their home in the country of their birth. Moreover, when people do migrate internationally, the majority stay within the continent of their birth (see Figure 4.1).

However, the trend over the past three decades has been towards ever higher levels of international migration (see Figure 4.2), and this trend is expected to continue (Azose and Raftery 2015; Dao et al. 2021). In 1970, the share of the global population who had migrated internationally was only 2.3 per cent (McAuliffe and Oucho 2024). The change in terms of the percentage of the global population is modest compared with the absolute increase, growing to 2.9 per cent in 1990 and 3.7 per cent in 2024 (McAuliffe and Oucho 2024; UNDESA 2025). However, as Figure 4.2 illustrates, the total number of people who have migrated internationally grew from just over 150 million in 1990 to more than 300 million in 2024.

Domestic migration has also been a key demographic phenomenon in the 21st century, as patterns of urbanization continue apace, and this trend is particularly notable in developing countries (UNDESA 2018). However, the focus of this report is on international migration, given its distinct implications for participation and enfranchisement across borders.

Drivers of migration
Those who migrate internationally do so for a variety of reasons—many by choice, but many others do so owing to factors outside their control. The International Organization for Migration, for example, describes a continuum

26 of every 27 people alive today still make their home in the country of their birth.

Figure 4.1. **Migrant stocks in 2024, by region**
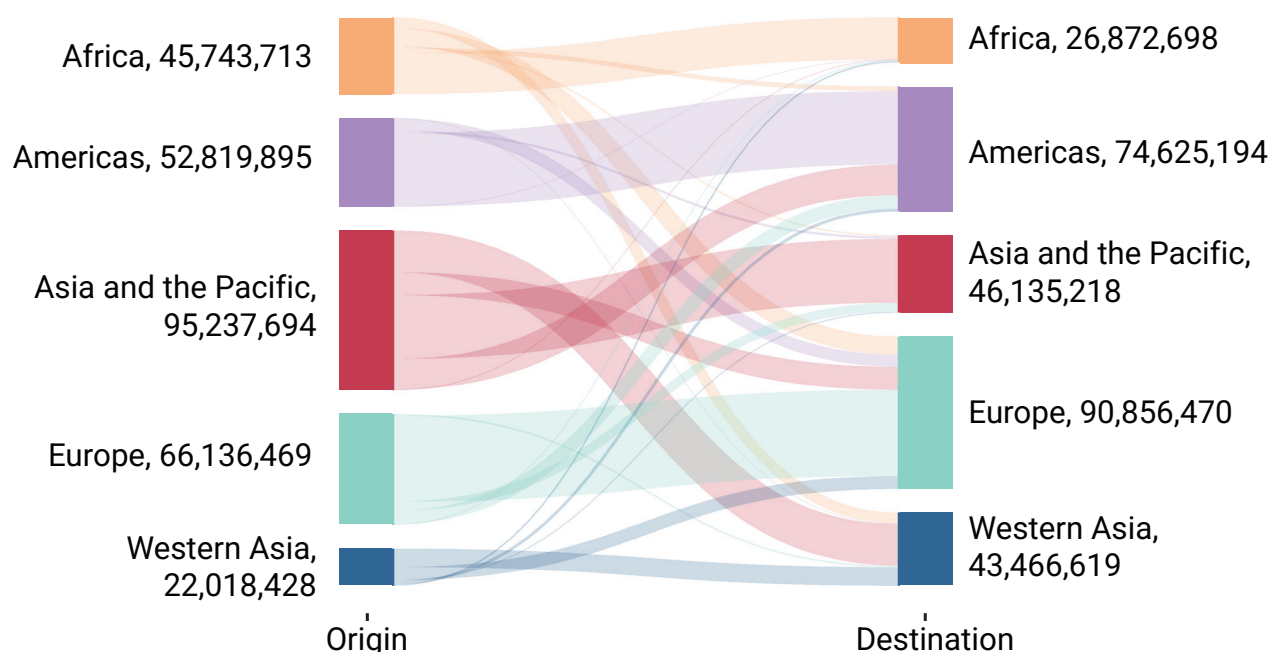
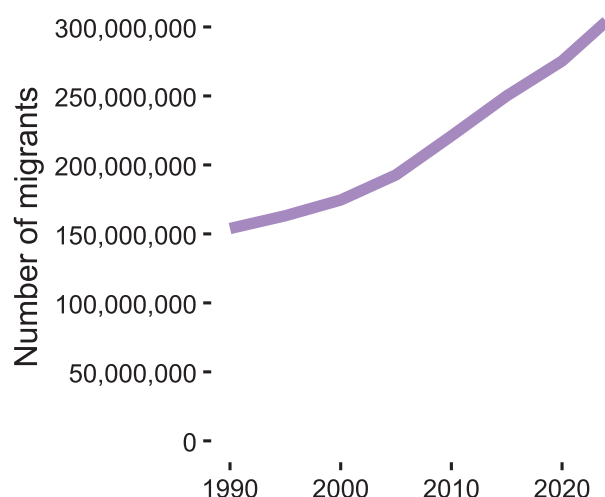*Sources:* UNDESA, International Migrant Stock 2024, [n.d.], <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>, accessed 13 July 2025; and International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, 1975–2024, version 9, [n.d.], <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/about-the-gsod-indices>, accessed 30 July 2025.

between voluntary and forced migration (IOM n.d.b). Factors that drive the decision to migrate are commonly grouped into five categories—political, demographic, economic, social and environmental (IOM n.d.b).

It is important to note that the data on migration presented here are estimates of migrant stock from UNDESA in both sending and receiving countries (country dyads).[7] This means that long-term migrants are counted alongside recent movers, without distinction. Still, stock data can reveal patterns that have important economic and democratic implications. First, migration from low-income countries to high-income countries is much rarer than commonly perceived and accounted for only a small portion (5 per cent) of the total migrant stock in high-income countries in 2024. While high-income countries are the destination for the majority of migrants, a large proportion come from other high-income countries, and the majority come from middle-income, not low-income, countries (see Figure 4.3). This dynamic is consistent with long-standing empirical research on migration, dating back to the 19th century (Ravenstein 1889) but especially formalized in the second half of the 20th century (Zelinsky 1971).

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[7]   Most of the data that we use in this report are migrant stock data, which counts all forms of international migration (including refugees and asylum seekers) without differentiation (UNDESA 2025). Moreover, stock data are not intended to inform us about the flow of migrants.

Figure 4.2. **Total number of migrants, by year (world)**

Second, economic opportunities remain the most significant driver of migration decisions, but politics and political regimes have also become important factors over the last half century (Breunig, Cao and Luedtke 2012). One economic concern that has received growing attention is the departure of skilled professionals from middle-income countries (Docquier, Lohest and Marfouk 2007). Migration has different impacts on the labour market in high-income and low-income countries. For example, rising inequality has been shown to lead to more restrictive immigration laws in low-income countries but less restrictive ones in high-income countries (Peters and Shin 2023).

4.3. **MIGRATION AND DEMOCRACIES**

There is a well-established, strong and positive correlation between national wealth and democratic performance (Lipset 1959; Przeworski et al. 2000). It follows, then, that the patterns of international migration also reflect this relationship, as the majority of migrants have settled in countries with both higher levels of development and higher levels of democratic performance. Figure 4.4 illustrates this relationship by connecting migration stocks to performance in the category of Representation, which includes indicators commonly associated with many core attributes of representative government (such as credible elections, free political parties, effective parliaments and other aspects of representative government) in both the country of birth and

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Figure 4.3. **Migrant stocks, by country income group**
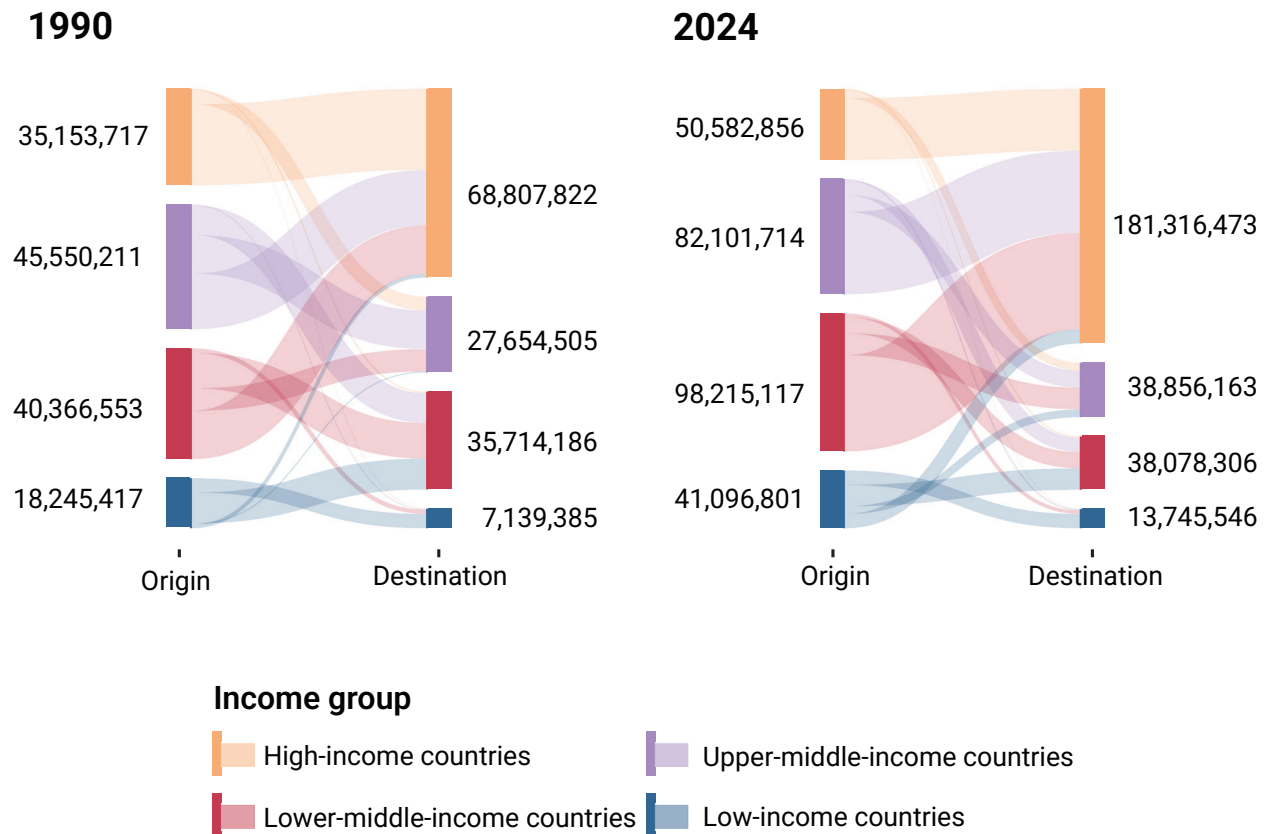
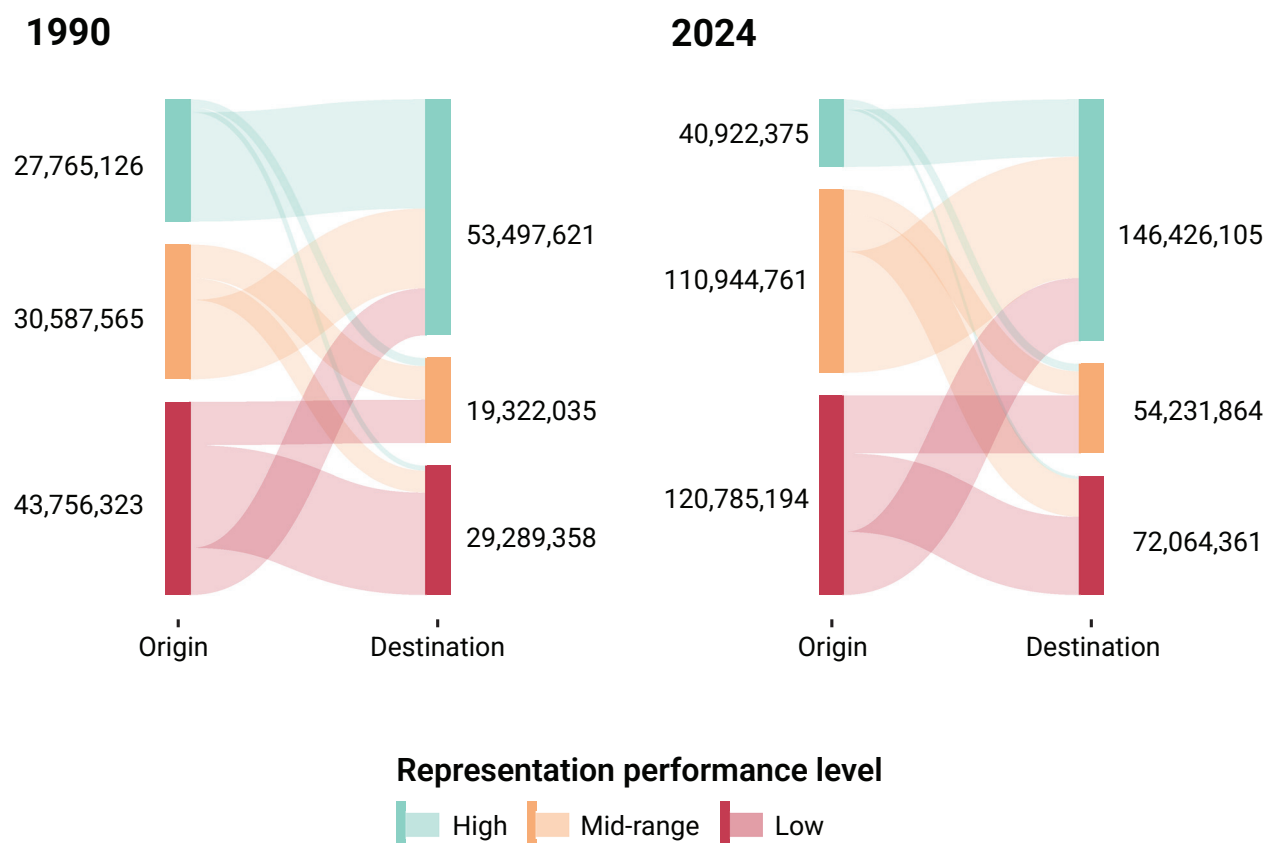*Source:* UNDESA, International Migrant Stock 2024, [n.d.], <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>, accessed 15 July 2025.

the country of residence for migrants in 1990 and 2024. Tens of millions of people have migrated between high-performing countries, but relatively few people have migrated from high-performing countries to mid-range-performing (4.5 million people) or low-performing ones (1.7 million people) (see Figure 4.4).

This aspect of the relationship between migration and democracy raises two important issues that merit closer examination. First, since high-performing countries host relatively larger numbers of immigrants, the major challenge they face concerns the scale and meaningfulness of the inclusion of non-citizen residents in their democratic institutions and processes. In Australia, for example, immigrants from non-democratic contexts may struggle to understand how to meaningfully exercise their rights and express their preferences (Cultural & Indigenous Research Centre Australia 2006; Yim 2025). Second, as mid-range- and low-performing countries are the countries of origin of a relatively larger number of emigrants, their primary challenge concerns the inclusion of their non-resident citizens in domestic democratic institutions and processes. The first issue involves questions around the expansion of the franchise and the conditions under which immigrants

Figure 4.4. **Migrant stocks, by performance in the category of Representation (1990 and 2024)**

1990

27,765,126

30,587,565

43,756,323

53,497,621

19,322,035

29,289,358

Origin   Destination

2024

40,922,375

110,944,761

120,785,194

146,426,105

54,231,864

72,064,361

Origin   Destination

Representation performance level

High   Mid-range   Low

Sources: UNDESA, International Migrant Stock 2024, [n.d.], <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>, accessed 13 July 2025; and International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, 1975–2024, version 9, [n.d.], <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/about-the-gsod-indices>, accessed 30 July 2025.

can gain citizenship through naturalization. This is an area with important normative considerations, and for which there is less empirical basis for policy recommendations.

The second issue is more straightforward for many countries. If a polity decides (as many have) that non-resident citizens should retain the right to vote, the issue shifts from one with normative burdens to an essentially logistical problem. As we discuss in this report, there are multiple methods by which non-resident citizens can vote, and countries across a broad range of economic and political contexts have found ways to make this possible.

While economic factors are far more important to most immigrants than democracy (Breunig, Cao and Luedtke 2012), the correlation between wealth and democratic performance implies that many people want to immigrate to democracies. However, given the large number of people who have migrated internationally, there are also tens of millions of people who have migrated to a country with worse democratic performance than the country of their

birth. This often occurs in the context of what has been called 'South–South migration' (Schewel and Debray 2024).

Migration, democracy and resilience

Regardless of how 'the people' are defined, empirical research has found that voting rights contribute to a sense of belonging, referred to here as both knowing the rules and being involved in their creation (Mijić 2022: 1111–12). Some research links this sense of belonging to greater support for democracy and finds that the possession of the right to vote confers social standing and dignity (Shklar 1991, as cited in Song 2009: 607). Voting rights have also been found to reinforce loyalty to diaspora groups' home countries (See Box 4.2) (Wucker 2004).

This connection between enfranchisement and civic belonging can be particularly evident in the case of countries experiencing large-scale displacement due to conflict. In Ukraine, for example, many of those forced to flee following the Russian invasion have maintained a strong sense of national identity and a desire to remain engaged in the country's democratic and recovery processes. However, surveys consistently find that a majority of those who have left the country would prefer to stay abroad permanently (IOM 2024; *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2024; Mykhailyshyna et al. 2025). Ensuring meaningful voting rights for citizens abroad can thus serve as both a symbol of and a mechanism for inclusion, ensuring that they remain integral members of the national community as well as supporting post-war recovery and long-term social cohesion.

Belonging has also been linked to democratic resilience, with some studies suggesting that people who feel a stronger sense of belonging are more likely to promote 'principled support' for democracy (Fitzgerald et al. 2023: 237 and 248). In this way, a sense of inclusion promotes resilience, defined by International IDEA as the ability to 'cope, survive and recover from complex challenges and crises that represent stresses or pressures that can lead to a systemic failure' (International IDEA 2017; Sisk 2017: 5). The properties that make up this resilience are flexibility, recovery, adaptation and innovation. A resilient democracy is one that can leverage these properties to effectively navigate complex challenges and overcome crises, ensuring its survival and continuity without compromising performance (Sisk 2017). The resilience of democratic systems can be exhibited in two overarching ways: (a) through robust institutions and through mass demand, in the form of CSOs and free media; and, when these avenues fail, (b) through the public exercise of the right to associate, speak and protest. Previous GSoD reports referred to this network of institutions as 'countervailing institutions' (International IDEA 2023a).

Members of diaspora communities may feel a transnational sense of belonging, characterized by attachment to both their countries of origin and their host countries (Schlenker and Blatter 2013). However, questions remain about the extent to which they should participate in national decision making in their countries of origin—particularly when emigrant populations are large or unlikely to return.

Box 4.2. **Enfranchisement leads to greater resilience**

Voting

Sense of inclusion

Support for democratic norms

Active participation or resistance to authoritarianism

A high diaspora turnout cannot strengthen democratic resilience on its own, especially if domestic turnout is low or if diasporas are politically manipulated.

Regardless of countries' motivations to extend the franchise to diasporas, it is important to consider how this expansion may impact resilience. Given that large diasporas can skew electoral outcomes as well as deepen or soften domestic divides, does resilience come from expanding the demos or from protecting social cohesion through territorial coherence?

4.4. DIASPORA ENFRANCHISEMENT: NORMATIVE AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

Why countries extend voting rights to diasporas

Countries extend voting rights to their diasporas for a range of historical, symbolic, economic and strategic reasons. While the legal frameworks vary, a comparative view reveals several recurrent motivations.

In some cases, these extensions reflect recognition of changes in national borders that have excluded co-ethnics who now live outside the current boundaries. In other cases, transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy have prompted the enfranchisement of exiles who remained committed to democracy in their homelands. Some countries have extended voting rights to citizens abroad in recognition of wartime sacrifice, while others have linked diaspora voting to tax obligations of citizens residing abroad. In some cases, countries may have multiple motivations for extending the franchise, including the hope that expatriates will support a specific political party (Bauböck 2005: 684).

First, diaspora enfranchisement can be a nation-building tool, reinforcing symbolic ties between a country and its citizens abroad. For countries that have undergone conflict, authoritarian rule or colonialism, extending the franchise can be part of a broader project of inclusive citizenship. For example,

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Tunisia's extension of voting rights to non-resident citizens followed the 2011 revolution and was framed as an act of democratic renewal and unity. Similarly, France has long treated its expatriates as integral members of the nation, granting them representation in the legislature and creating the Assembly of French Citizens Abroad—highlighting the symbolic inclusion of its global citizenry.

Second, economic motivations play a role in the extension of voting rights to diasporas. In addition to the argument that non-resident citizens' tax obligations justify their continued voting rights, remittances can be a vital source of revenue for countries of origin. Some countries have granted enfranchisement specifically because they understood the benefits of remittances and wanted to cultivate a continued sense of membership among those non-resident citizens (Bauböck 2005; Gamlen 2006). Evidence shows also that there is a significant correlation between dual citizenship and financial inflows to the country of origin (Cisterino 2012). In Samoa, for example, most citizens (both migrants and foreign-born citizens) live abroad and have historically been engaged in politics through campaigning for and donating to candidates and political parties (Godfrey 2021). The country is also heavily dependent on remittances, which make up about 20 per cent of its gross domestic product in most years (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2024). Whether or not to extend the franchise is a subject of contentious debate, both domestically and in the diaspora (Fonua 2024). This debate can raise a question of democratic legitimacy: if political systems continue to benefit economically or symbolically from their emigrants, do they not also have an obligation to meaningfully enfranchise them?

For countries recovering from conflict or repression, granting voting rights to exiles and refugees can help repair broken ties and support legitimacy.

Third, transitional-justice contexts provide a distinct rationale. For countries recovering from conflict or repression, granting voting rights to exiles and refugees can help repair broken ties and support legitimacy. For example, South Africa's first democratic election, in 1994, included provisions for overseas voting as a way to reconnect with citizens forced into exile during apartheid.

Finally, some governments have extended voting rights strategically to strengthen their electoral base. Hungary's decision to enfranchise ethnic Hungarians abroad—many of whom are strong supporters of the ruling party—demonstrates how diaspora enfranchisement can be shaped by partisan calculations. Similarly, Turkey's Government has benefited electorally from the votes of citizens abroad, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands.

These motivations often overlap, and they manifest differently depending on national histories, migration patterns and political incentives. Recognizing this diversity is essential to understanding the complexity of diaspora enfranchisement policies.

Normative debates on diaspora voting

There are no definitive answers to the questions of whether and in what ways non-resident citizens should participate in elections in their countries of origin. Several debates illustrate the challenges involved.

First, while many emigrants may maintain strong ties with their home countries, some experts argue that they do not directly experience the consequences of domestic political decisions and are insufficiently affected to have the right to participate.

Second, while it is true that remittances may play pivotal roles in national economies, poverty reduction and development, diasporas contribute these funds voluntarily without necessarily reflecting a sense of civic obligation or entitling the diaspora to electoral participation.

Third, while proponents of diaspora voting argue that it helps strengthen national unity, critics contend that large overseas communities may distort electoral outcomes and influence policies in ways that may favour overseas voters' interests over those of the domestic population.

Fourth, some supporters argue that enabling diaspora voting can help counter globally declining turnout trends and broaden political engagement. Opponents claim that historically low turnout rates among overseas communities make it hard to justify the financial and administrative costs of these mechanisms (Song 2009; Abizadeh 2010; Spinelli forthcoming). OCV systems may be resource-intensive, in terms of both administrative and operational burdens as well as financial costs. Factors that contribute to these costs include the design, delivery and retrieval of election materials, the development and execution of voter education campaigns, training, transportation and other costs related to preparing staff, the development and maintenance of IT systems, the development and implementation of security arrangements, the processing of registration applications and votes, and the planning and coordination of strategies and monitoring of OCV as well as interactions with other agencies (both domestically and in host countries).

The costs can also be thought of in terms of risk. Proxy voting, which is one of the lowest-cost options, is often considered inadvisable because it may create substantial opportunities for vote buying, coercion and misuse of authority. Online voting, on the other hand, is costly to establish but may be one of the most user-friendly options in the long run (Ehin et al. 2022). At the same time, it can be difficult to balance transparency and security requirements in an online environment (Aman and Bakken 2021).

Mitigation strategies may include a threshold requirement for the implementation of OCV. For example, Senegal requires that at least 500 citizens resident in a foreign country register to vote from abroad before polling stations are established in that country. This decision reflects evaluations of the costs and benefits of facilitating OCV for small communities residing overseas (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network n.d.a). Another mitigation

Some supporters argue that enabling diaspora voting can help counter globally declining turnout trends and broaden political engagement.

strategy is providing for OCV through postal voting, which is a low-cost option, in terms of both financial and administrative burdens.

These tensions reflect deeper normative questions over who constitutes 'the people' in an age of transnational belonging. Still, enabling diaspora participation may serve as a tool for democratic resilience, extending norms of inclusion and accountability beyond borders.

Chapter 5

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND METHODS OF OUT-OF-COUNTRY VOTING

## 5.1. LEGAL PROVISION OF VOTING METHODS

Types of out-of-country voting

The provision of opportunities for emigrants to vote from abroad has a long history. For example, Australia introduced postal voting for its citizens living abroad more than a century ago (Aman and Bakken 2021). Today, there are many ways in which countries can facilitate out-of-country voting (OCV), including in-person voting (often at consulates or embassies abroad), postal voting, proxy voting and online voting (International IDEA n.d.d; Ellis et al. 2007). As communications technology has rapidly improved over the past century, electoral management bodies (EMBs) have introduced new methods for voting from abroad. Nonetheless, in-person voting at a polling station abroad remains the most common method of OCV (Pearce Laanela 2021).

International IDEA's Voting from Abroad Database collects data on the forms of OCV provided by 216 countries (International IDEA n.d.d). As illustrated in Figure 5.1, only 52 (approximately one quarter) of these countries do not provide any means of voting from abroad (13 in Africa, 17 in the Americas, 14 in Asia and the Pacific, 4 in Europe and 4 in West Asia). The majority of countries that do provide for voting from abroad allow only for in-person voting (for example, at diplomatic missions), while a large number provide for multiple methods. Electronic means of voting (e-voting) are more common than Figure 5.1 would seem to indicate: while only 3 countries provide e-voting as their sole method (Armenia, Namibia and Oman), 18 others provide for it along with other options. However, these figures may overstate effective access: in some jurisdictions, access to OCV is limited to non-resident citizens in particular circumstances (such as being an employee of the government or a member of an employee's family, a military service member or a student studying abroad).

There are many ways in which countries can facilitate OCV, including in-person voting (often at consulates or embassies abroad), postal voting, proxy voting and online voting.

Figure 5.1. **Methods of out-of-country voting**
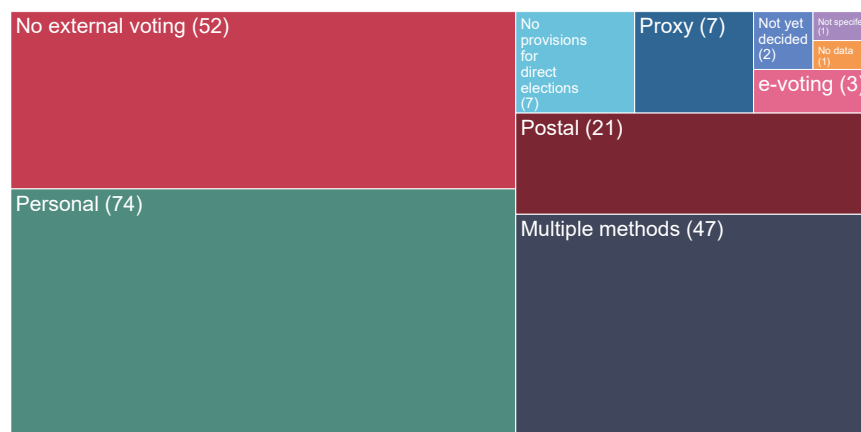
Source: International IDEA, Voting from Abroad Database, [n.d.], <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voting-abroad-database>, accessed 13 August 2025.

Methods of voting from abroad have been relatively stable since International IDEA began collecting such data in 2007 (see Figure 5.2). Note that, unlike in Figure 5.1, each form of voting is treated separately in Figure 5.2, so some countries appear, for example, in both the 'Personal' and 'Postal' lines.

Proxy voting has become somewhat less common in 2025 than it was in 2007. However, the share of countries with no provision for OCV has remained fairly steady. Likewise, despite the interest that online voting attracts, its use in OCV has increased very little over the past two decades, and it has actually declined in domestic voting (Darmawan 2021). At present, only about 7 per cent of countries provide for some form of e-voting in OCV (not necessarily using the Internet). E-voting in the context of OCV may take place in an essentially in-person format through the use of an electronic voting machine at a polling place abroad. However, online voting, which would be the most accessible option, poses significant challenges relating to cybersecurity, inequities in access and technical challenges, as well as the potential for coercion, undue influence and breaches of the secrecy of the vote, including by people present with voters (Gibson et al. 2016).

In addition, many countries that have OCV allow for more than one method. For example, the combination of in-person and postal voting is quite common.

The breadth of access to out-of-country voting

The distinction between legal availability and meaningful access to OCV is important in assessing its democratic inclusiveness. For example, even if a country allows for OCV via post, it may be the case that only citizens in special circumstances (as noted above) are permitted, in practice, to vote from abroad. This approach creates unequal tiers of citizenship, where access to the franchise depends not only on where citizens live but also on their professional or legal status or their economic means. Equal attention must thus be given

Figure 5.2. **Methods of voting from abroad, by year**

Personal

Postal

No external voting

e-voting

Proxy
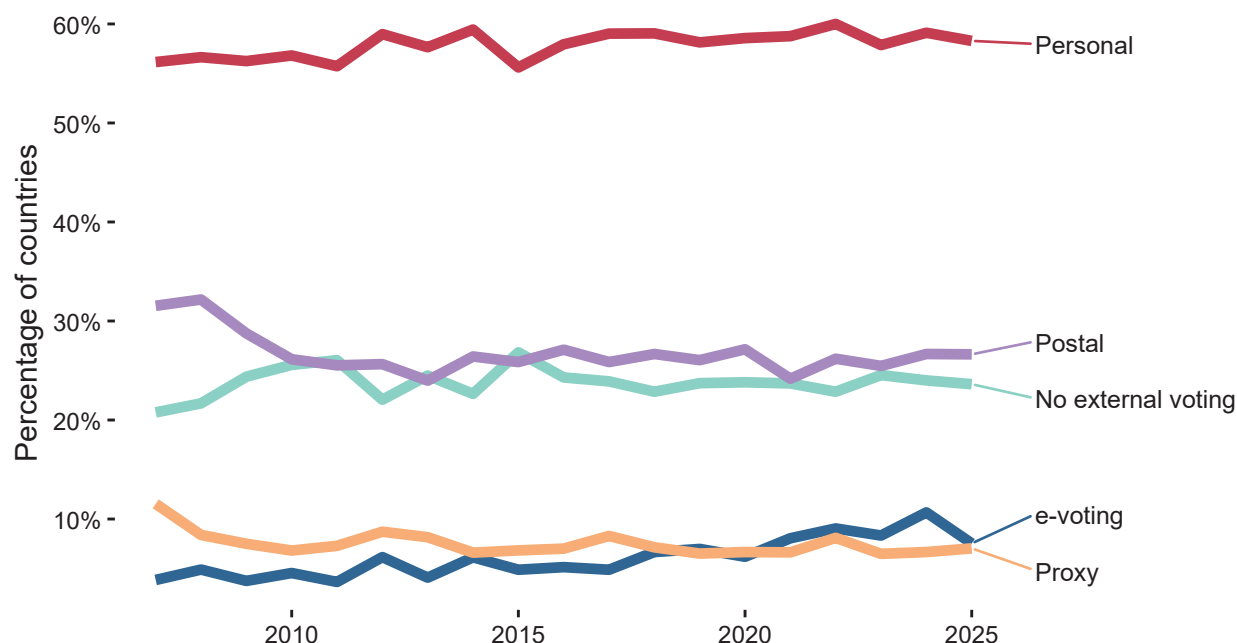
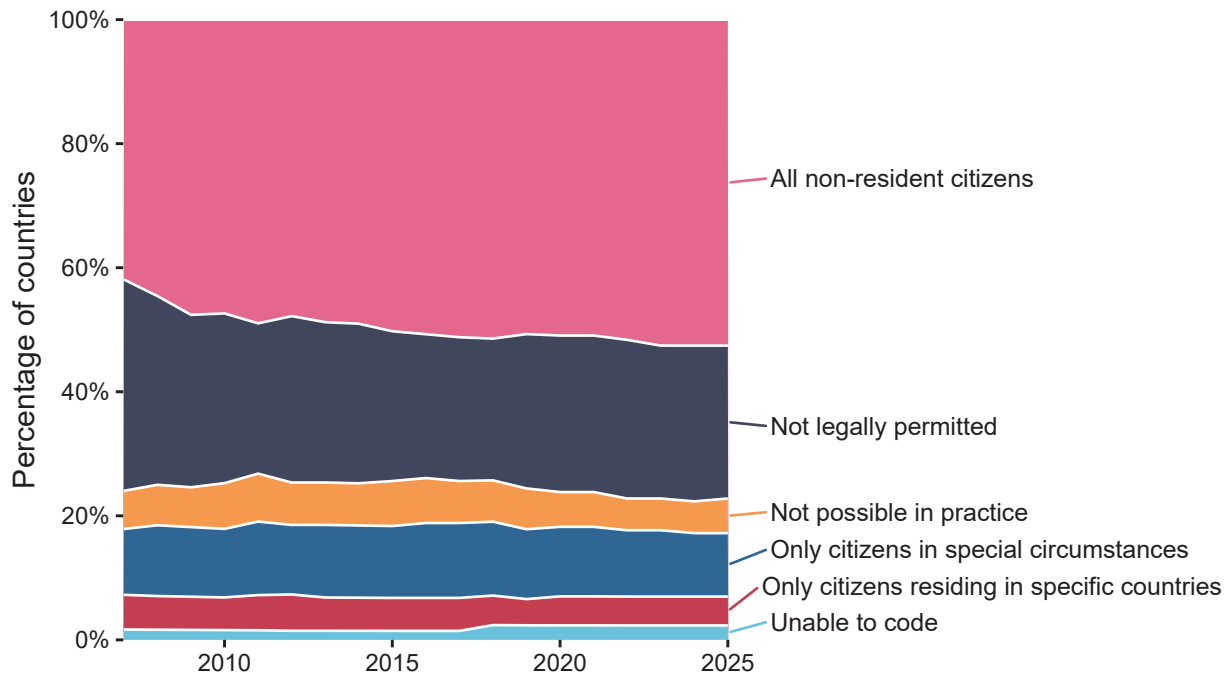*Source:* International IDEA, Voting from Abroad Database, [n.d.], <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voting-abroad-database>, accessed 13 August 2025.

to the extent to which access to OCV meaningfully extends to all non-resident citizens.

Figure 5.3 illustrates the trends and status of this part of the regulation of OCV. Since 2007, there has been a slow increase in the share of countries that allow all non-resident citizens (and sometimes even those temporarily outside the country, such as tourists) to utilize OCV. This expansion corresponds to a decline in the share of countries that do not have a legal provision for OCV. Notably, however, the proportion of countries that allow only citizens in special circumstances to use OCV has remained steady.

It is possible to assess how these legal regulations governing the external exercise of voting rights affect people by connecting migrant stocks with the usage of these various methods. Figure 5.4 connects methods of OCV with the extent to which access to these methods is restricted across the out-of-country population. This figure also includes UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) estimates of the size of the emigrant population. It should be stressed that the emigrant population and the number of people eligible to vote are not the same. In addition to the fact that children are included in the emigrant population, some emigrants will have given up their citizenship in the years since they left their countries of origin. However, the size of the emigrant

Figure 5.3. **Voting eligibility of non-resident citizens**

Sources: Developed by the authors, based on International IDEA, Voting from Abroad Database, [n.d.], <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voting-abroad-database>, accessed 13 August 2025; and UNDESA, International Migrant Stock 2024, [n.d.], <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>, accessed 13 July 2025.

population is a cross-nationally available measure that helps to visualize and compare the number of people who are potentially affected by these laws.

When these data are compared, several insights emerge. First, there are many emigrants who come from countries that enable all citizens living abroad (sometimes even those on holiday) to access multiple methods of OCV. Second, the practical applicability of provisions for postal voting is lower than one might expect, as postal voting is restricted to a small subset of citizens abroad (often government employees, as in India and Ireland), suggesting a gap between the legal availability and functional accessibility of certain voting modalities. Third, there remain a large number of people who are affected by a situation in which an electoral law has provided for in-person OCV, but OCV is not possible in practice due to a lack of action to facilitate such voting (for example, in Bangladesh and Ghana) or due to political crises that have affected electoral processes domestically as well (for example, in Niger, Sudan, Syria and Yemen). Such cases underscore the importance of implementation capacity and political stability in realizing the promise of extraterritorial enfranchisement.

The Ukrainian case highlights the need for alternative or complementary approaches to ensure meaningful access to OCV. While Ukraine currently

provides for OCV at diplomatic missions, the displacement of millions of citizens across Europe and beyond has placed new demands on the electoral system. Relying solely on embassy-based voting may no longer be sufficient to ensure inclusive participation. This situation illustrates the potential value of additional modalities, such as temporary polling stations in host countries. Implementing such options requires early planning, legal authorization, cross-border cooperation and significant logistical coordination.

Figure 5.4. **Voting eligibility of non-resident citizens, by voting method**
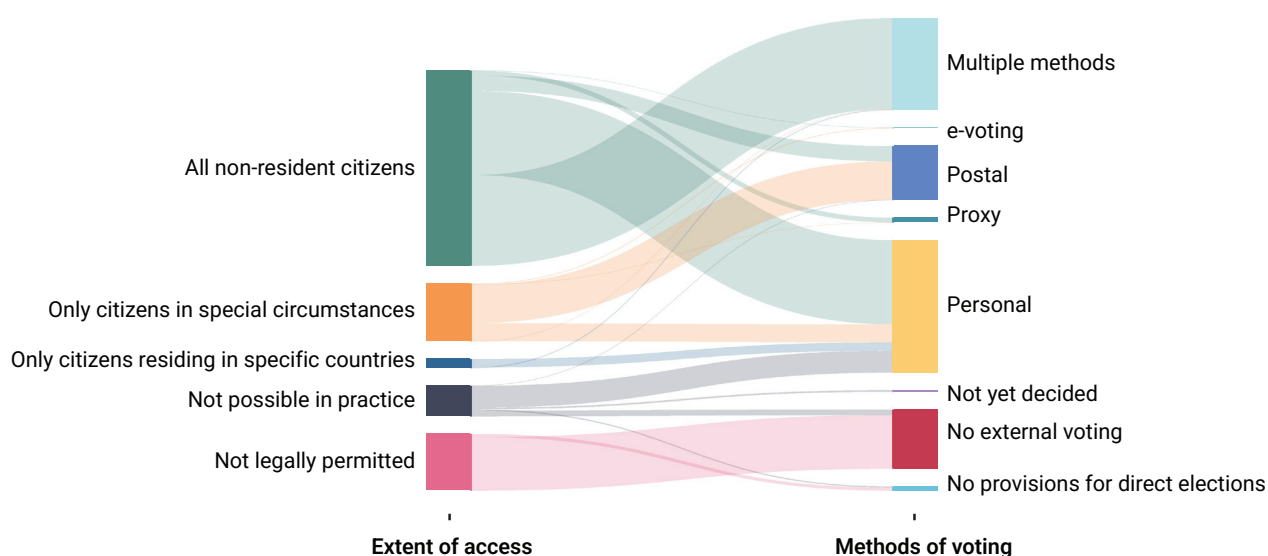
Sources: Developed by the authors, based on International IDEA, Voting from Abroad Database, [n.d.], <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voting-abroad-database>, accessed 13 August 2025; and UNDESA, International Migrant Stock 2024, [n.d.], <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>, accessed 13 July 2025.

5.2. ALLOCATION AND COUNTING OF DIASPORA VOTES

Electoral districting options

Countries may also choose how to allocate or count diaspora votes, including through external electoral districts, reserved legislative seats for diaspora communities or the integration of diaspora votes into home constituencies.

When using external electoral districts, non-resident citizens vote within separate constituencies, and winning representatives advocate for this community in the national legislature. Countries such as Colombia, France and Italy use this model.

In a reserved-seats system, a fixed number of parliamentary seats are reserved for diaspora representatives. These representatives may be elected by non-resident citizens or appointed through alternative mechanisms. Countries such as Cabo Verde, Portugal and Tunisia use this system.

When diaspora votes are integrated into home constituencies, non-resident citizens do not have separate representation. Instead, they are included as voters within their last place of residence in their home country, and their votes are counted within those home constituencies. Countries such as India, the UK and the USA use this approach (Spinelli forthcoming). In some cases, the votes of non-resident citizens are counted as part of specific constituencies, regardless of the voter's last place of residence. In Poland, for example, diaspora votes are added to the electoral district of Central Warsaw. Dutch citizens residing abroad may vote for representatives to the non-residents' electoral college for the upper house of parliament. Their votes count in the Municipality of The Hague (Umpierrez de Reguero, Bauböck and Wegschaider 2025).

5.3. **GAPS BETWEEN LAW AND ACCESS**

The legal provision of OCV has little meaning if practical access to the ballot is limited. Figure 5.5 maps GSoD Indices data on performance levels in the Representation category for the origin countries of emigrants against the number of people with access to the various methods of OCV. For example, we can see that, while seven countries allow only proxy voting, the number of people affected by this type of provision is very small. High-performing countries account for the smallest share of emigrants (as also shown in Figure 4.4), and these countries often offer multiple methods for OCV. Only five high-performing countries offer no means for OCV (Jamaica, Malta, Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay).

In countries with a mid-range level of performance in Representation, large numbers of people either have access to multiple methods or are confined to only personal voting (meaning voting in person abroad, most often at a diplomatic mission) (Ellis et al. 2007). Twenty-nine mid-range-performing countries provide only personal voting options for emigrants. While some scholars have excluded countries that limit opportunities for OCV to government employees (such as diplomats and military service members) from their data sets (Umpierrez de Reguero, Yener-Roderburg and Cartagena 2021), the International IDEA data set used here does not take this approach.

For countries with low levels of Representation, the most common approach is to offer only personal voting. The combination of this method and the larger political context of some of these countries suggests that this option is of little practical value—for example, for emigrants who may not be willing to vote at a diplomatic mission of a country that may have engaged in repression. Further research could assess the perceived credibility and safety of such voting options among diaspora communities from authoritarian or conflict-affected contexts.

A good example of the challenge inherent in the exercise of the franchise in these contexts is the situation of migrant workers in the countries of the Gulf

Figure 5.5. **Access to methods of OCV, by Representation performance level**
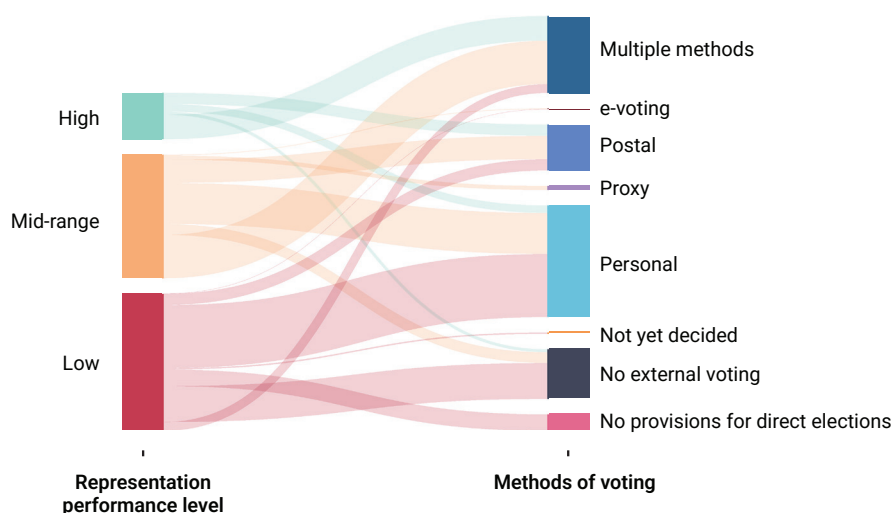
Sources: International IDEA, Voting from Abroad Database, [n.d.], <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voting-abroad-database>, accessed 13 August 2025; International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, 1975–2024, version 9, [n.d.], <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/about-the-gsod-indices>, accessed 30 July 2025 and UNDESA, International Migrant Stock 2024, [n.d.], <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>, accessed 13 July 2025.

Cooperation Council. For example, the only chance for the 3.4 million Indian citizens who live and work in Saudi Arabia to vote in 2024 was to travel back to their home constituency in India in time to vote in person (Yeung, Gupta and Tikekar 2024). These migrant workers constituted the largest group of potential voters in Saudi Arabia last year, but their access to the means of voting was difficult and expensive (for most, prohibitively so). In this way, the decision to emigrate negatively impacted their ability to participate in democracy. Worldwide, only 2,958 non-resident Indian citizens travelled back to India to vote in the 2024 Lok Sabha election (Press Trust of India 2024). Bangladeshi emigrants also face limited options; while there is legislation for OCV in place, it has never been implemented. This situation also has implications for democratic representation, as limited participation by diaspora communities makes electoral outcomes less representative.

The complex interactions between migration and democracy demand closer scrutiny. The possibility that the liminal status of migrants might leave them in a position where they are unable to fully participate in democratic practices in either their country of origin or their country of destination presents a transnational challenge for democracy. While it is outside the scope of this report, a related challenge is intranational. In many countries, voters who are outside of their home constituencies also cannot vote (Spinelli forthcoming).

The complex interactions between migration and democracy demand closer scrutiny.

Chapter 6

PARTICIPATION PATTERNS AND POLITICAL EFFECTS

6.1. LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE

Once legislation has been passed that provides for mechanisms through which citizens living abroad (or temporarily out of the country for other reasons) can vote, the question of how many of those eligible will actually participate in an election takes on both practical and political importance. Data on turnout from abroad is difficult to collect systematically. In both its 2022 data project (International IDEA 2022b) and in this updated effort, International IDEA has sought to collect as much data as possible on the number of votes cast from abroad in national elections. The Institute's data presently cover 210 elections that took place between January 2002 and June 2025. Data coverage appears to have improved over time (possibly due to improved EMB publications) and includes 12 elections from the first six months of 2025 and 38 (out of 74 total) from 2024. These data complement the coverage of enfranchisement and legal barriers to participation that are included in International IDEA's Voting from Abroad Database (International IDEA n.d.d).

The analysis of participation rates among non-resident citizens faces significant data limitations. Most notably, turnout and registration data from abroad are incomplete, and the potential bias introduced by this missing information remains unclear. In many cases, the availability of data depends on the capacity of EMBs and whether they systematically publish disaggregated figures. Moreover, differences in how EMBs categorize and handle out-of-country voting (OCV)—often grouped with other special voting arrangements like domestic absentee voting—can hinder cross-national comparability and obscure structural inequalities in access.

Despite these limitations, the data collected provide valuable insights into the contemporary experience of OCV. To better understand participation levels, this report compares the number of votes cast from abroad with three reference points:

1. *Votes from abroad as a share of the total emigrant population, compared with domestic turnout as a share of the voting-age population*. This comparison illustrates the broader relationship between emigration and electoral participation. While not all emigrants are eligible to vote (due to age or legal exclusions), this method helps reveal the extent to which national laws and procedures limit OCV access to certain types of non-resident citizens.

2. *Votes from abroad as a share of registered OCV voters, compared with domestic turnout as a share of registered voters*. Because registration for OCV typically requires active steps by the voter—unlike domestic registration, which is automatic in roughly half of countries (James and Garnett 2024)—this comparison highlights participation among those already enfranchised but may overstate engagement among diaspora voters due to self-selection effects in the registration process.

3. *Votes from abroad as a share of the total national vote*. This measure indicates the overall electoral weight of OCV participation and helps assess its potential impact on election outcomes, particularly in contexts where non-resident citizens may influence results in close contests.

The first point of reference is presented in Figure 6.1 for each of the 38 elections for which 2024 data are available. The average level of participation from abroad was only 13.2 per cent of the emigrant population. By contrast, the average level of turnout as a share of the voting-age population was 61.5 per cent. The two measures are not directly comparable, but the difference still helps us to contextualize the extent to which those who have left their country of birth continue to participate in politics in that country.

For many countries, the diaspora represents a significant economic and social asset, evidenced in the flow of remittances and the upskilling that can take place when citizens work or study abroad. The diaspora could contribute to democratic resilience, provided they remain connected to democratic practices in their country of origin. Yet persistently low rates of participation through OCV suggest that this potential remains underutilized. These low rates may stem from contextually diverse factors such as the accessibility of OCV, diaspora political engagement strategies, the salience of elections or trust in electoral institutions—factors that vary considerably across contexts. Understanding and addressing these challenges would not just ensure more inclusive representation but would also make it possible to harness diaspora communities as a meaningful force for democratic resilience.

As Figure 6.1 shows, these measures reveal no correlation between domestic and overseas participation rates. This finding invites further inquiry into whether low diaspora turnout reflects systemic barriers to participation, a weaker sense of political connection or simply differing priorities among emigrant populations.

The diaspora could contribute to democratic resilience, provided they remain connected to democratic practices in their country of origin.

Figure 6.1. **Comparison between OCV turnout as a share of the estimated emigrant population and the total turnout**
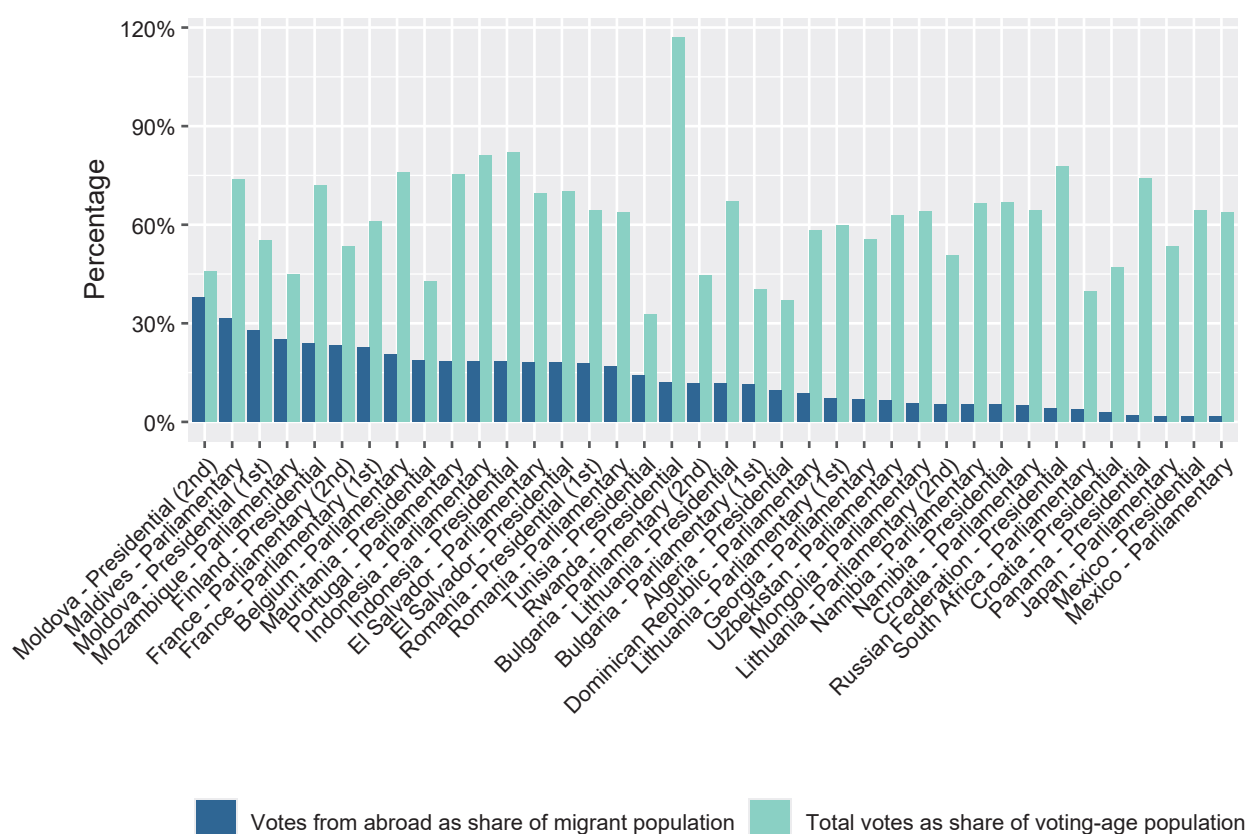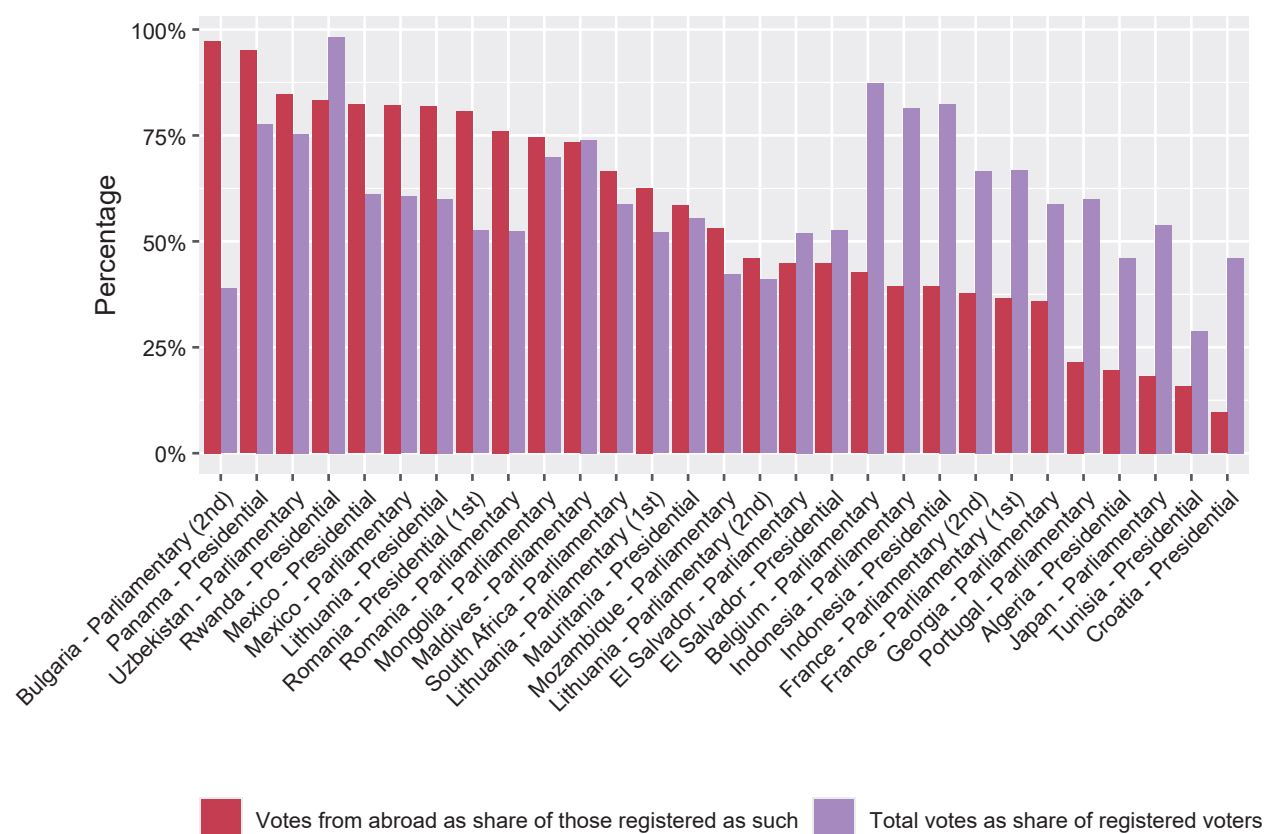

Sources: Developed by the authors based on unpublished data set on out-of-country voting technology and voter turnout; and UNDESA, International Migrant Stock 2024, [n.d.], <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>, accessed 13 July 2025.

Data on the number of voters registered to vote from abroad, the second measure, are somewhat less readily available than data on turnout, due to a range of reporting and classification challenges. In some instances, published registration data are not disaggregated by voting method; in others, out-of-country registration is not published at all. However, both registration and turnout data were compiled for 29 out of 74 elections held in 2024. As shown in International IDEA's earlier research on OCV, most countries require emigrants to complete an administrative step to register to vote from abroad (International IDEA 2022b). This registration must often be completed well in advance of election day, suggesting a relatively high level of intentionality among out-of-country voters who do participate. In some cases, registration is not necessary to vote in person at a polling station set up abroad but only to receive a postal ballot. However, any of these requirements can also impose additional procedural burdens that unintentionally limit participation.

The data that are available provide a useful basis for comparison with domestic voter registration and turnout.

Figure 6.2 compares total voter turnout (including domestic and overseas votes) as a percentage of all registered voters with overseas turnout as a percentage of those registered to vote from abroad. While the latter does not account for eligible voters who have not registered—including those who might be able to vote without formal registration—it remains an important measure of the extent to which registration requirements influence effective participation by non-resident citizens.

Figure 6.2. **Comparison between OCV turnout as a share of those registered to vote from abroad and the total turnout as a share of all registered voters**

Votes from abroad as share of those registered as such   Total votes as share of registered voters

Source: Developed by the authors based on unpublished data set on out-of-country voting technology and voter turnout.

Although notable outliers exist—such as Belgium and Indonesia, where domestic and overseas participation rates differ significantly—there is a weak but positive correlation between the two measures of participation. The average domestic turnout for these 29 elections was 60.4 per cent, while the average turnout for registered voters abroad was 55.3 per cent. In contrast with the low rate of voting as a share of the total emigrant population, most

people who register to vote from abroad do follow through and cast a ballot. This suggests that where registration hurdles have already been cleared, emigrant voters are relatively likely to follow through and vote. Turnout was higher abroad than at home in almost half of the countries (14 of 29), with significantly higher out-of-country turnout in Bulgaria (Republic of Bulgaria 2024) and Romania (Republic of Romania 2024).

However, these findings also raise important questions. High turnout among registered overseas voters contrasts with the generally low overall participation rate when viewed against the full emigrant population. This discrepancy suggests that a large number of potential voters are either legally excluded or administratively deterred from registering. Where registration is a necessary precondition for voting, especially when required well in advance of an election, it may disproportionately restrict access to emigrants with sufficient time, information or connection to the electoral process. Interestingly, low turnout among registered voters does not always correspond to the type of voting method offered. Of the five countries with the lowest level of OCV turnout, two provide for in-person voting only (Croatia and Tunisia), while three provide for multiple methods (Algeria: in-person and proxy; Japan: in-person and postal; and Portugal: in-person and postal). There is also a connection with the mechanism for representation for the lowest-turnout (as a share of those registered to vote from abroad) countries. Of the bottom 10 countries, 5 have special representation (designated constituencies) for non-resident citizens—Algeria, Croatia, France, Portugal and Tunisia (Umpierrez de Reguero, Bauböck and Wegschaider 2025). The low level of participation in these diaspora constituencies could raise a question about democratic legitimacy: when systems provide representation for diaspora populations, but few actually vote, does such limited engagement risk distorting democratic accountability or undermining the intent behind these mechanisms?

Assessing the relationship between available voting methods and turnout rates among non-resident citizens is complex, as outcomes may also be shaped by other factors such as registration requirements and the presence of the special representation mechanisms noted above. Figure 6.3 presents three different ways of contextualizing the level of out-of-country electoral participation discussed above, with data for the three most common legal regimes—only postal voting, only in-person voting and a mix of methods (usually both of the first two) across all the elections for which data are available. When the OCV turnout is measured as a share of the estimated emigrant population, countries providing multiple voting methods tend to show higher participation, with an average turnout rate of 15.0 per cent. In contrast, when OCV turnout is assessed as the share of those registered to vote from abroad, postal voting far outperforms the other methods, with an average participation rate of 81.2 per cent. This high figure can be largely attributed to the fact that, while in some countries one can vote in person without prior registration, receiving a postal ballot will almost always require advance registration.

While data on OCV turnout over time remain limited, longitudinal information is available for at least 6 elections in 10 countries (see Figure 6.4). Although

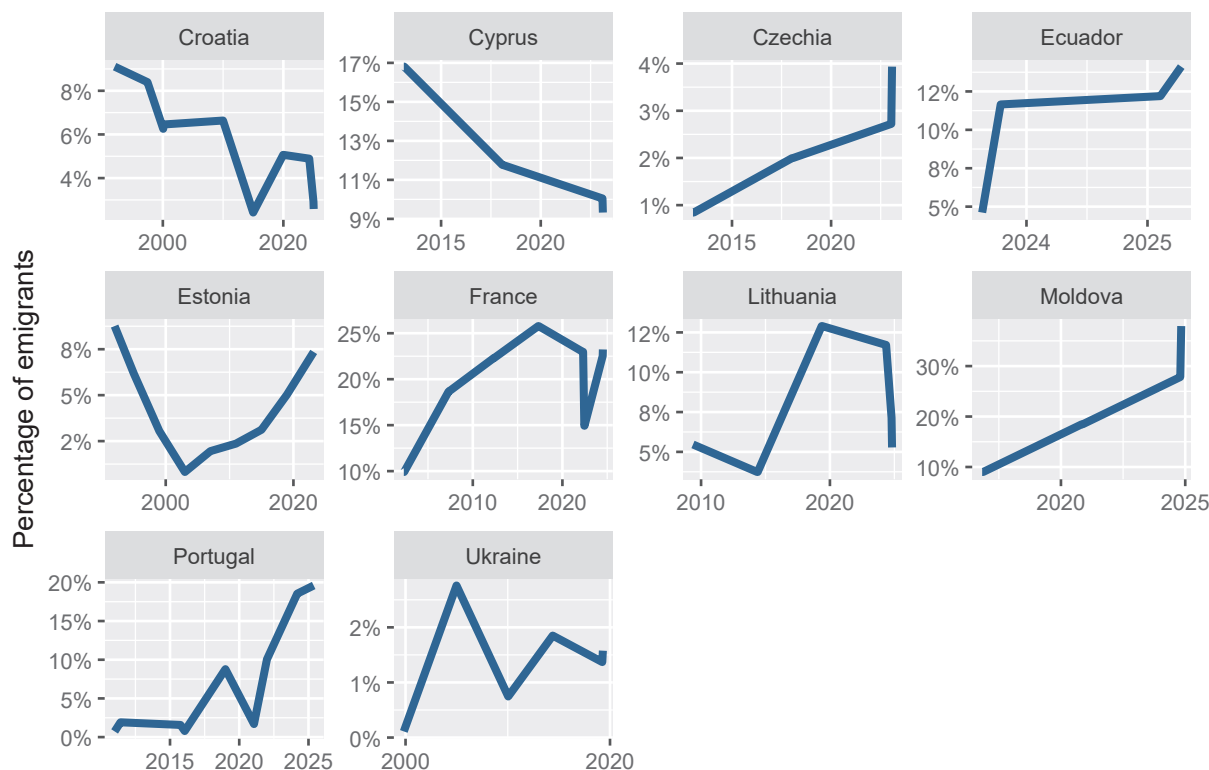Figure 6.3. **Average OCV turnout by voting method**
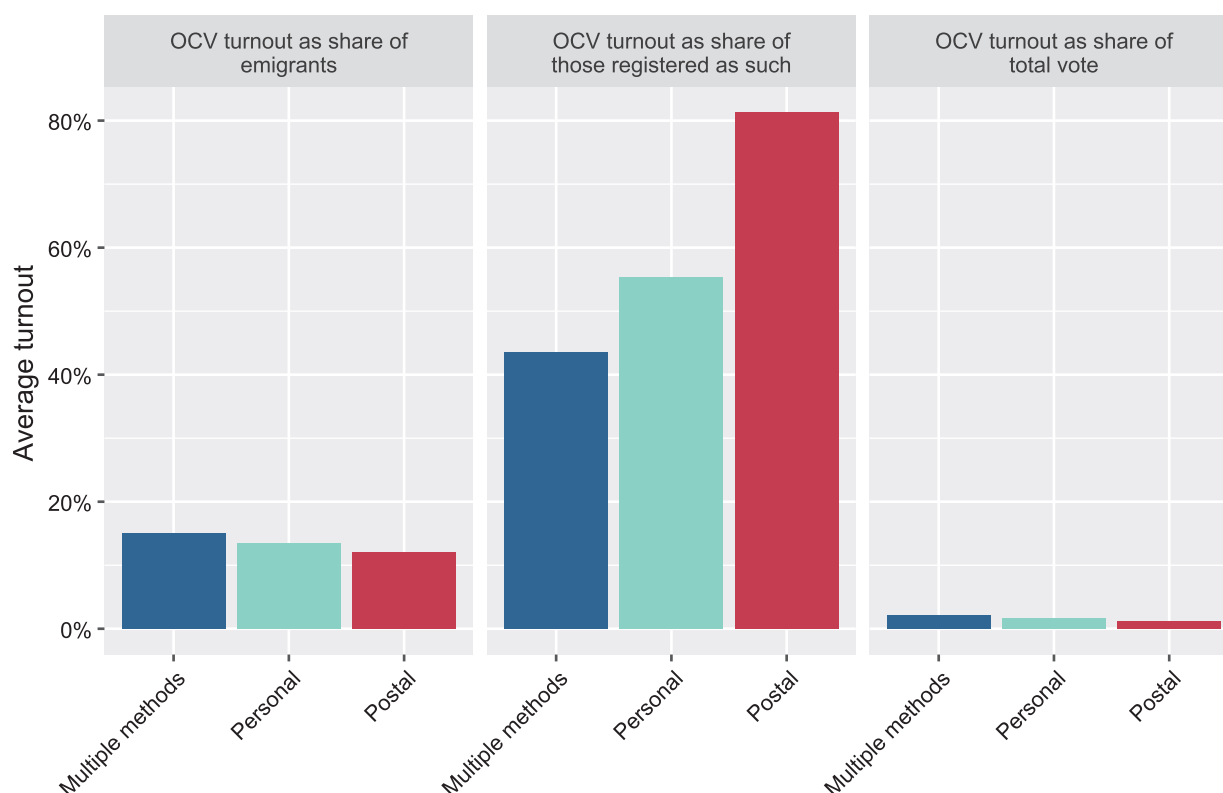
Sources: Developed by the authors based on unpublished data set on out-of-country voting technology and voter turnout; International IDEA, Voting from Abroad Database, [n.d.], <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voting-abroad-database>, accessed 13 August 2025; and UNDESA, International Migrant Stock 2024, [n.d.], <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>, accessed 13 July 2025.

this sample is relatively small and covers diverse political and administrative contexts—with time spans ranging from two years in Ecuador to over two decades in France—it still offers valuable insight into participation trends. Notable increases in OCV participation, measured as a share of the emigrant population, are observed in countries such as Ecuador, France, Moldova and Portugal. This measure enables broad comparison across cases but should be interpreted in light of methodological differences in data collection, definitions of emigrant populations and registration procedures. Despite these variations, the patterns suggest that sustained efforts to expand access, improve administrative procedures and strengthen diaspora engagement may contribute to gradual improvements in participation from abroad.

Just as with domestic turnout, OCV turnout rates can be influenced by both practical and political matters. For example, turnout may be higher when an election is understood to present an opportunity for an important turning point, or when new voting procedures make it easier for people to vote (for example, through expanded early voting or postal voting). Just as the actions of political

Figure 6.4. **Turnout as a percentage of the emigrant population over time**

Source: Developed by the authors based on unpublished data set on out-of-country voting technology and voter turnout.

parties can influence turnout rates domestically, political party engagement with emigrants has also been shown to increase turnout abroad (Burgess and Tyburski 2020). There is currently limited evidence regarding the effects of the introduction of Internet-based voting. However, trials of this method of voting in eight Swiss cantons have demonstrated that, at least in some circumstances, it can increase turnout among those living abroad (Germann 2021).

6.2. **POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DIASPORA VOTES**

There is variation in how the votes of emigrant citizens are counted, as discussed above. In most countries, votes from abroad in legislative elections are counted as if they were cast by resident citizens—for example, in contributing to the vote totals of a large district in proportional representation systems or to the votes for individual candidates in single-member district plurality systems. This approach reflects an assumption of parity between resident and non-resident citizens in their representational role, but it may obscure distinct diaspora interests or geographic dispersion. Also, this method

of facilitating OCV can have political implications that have been exploited by governing parties to extend their electoral advantages, as has been the case, for example, in Hungary and Turkey (Pogonyi 2014). The decision to expand access to OCV has at times appeared motivated by political self-interest and has generally benefited governing parties—though, in some cases, diaspora voters have shown stronger support for opposition parties (Turcu and Urbatsch 2020).

Hungary presents a notable example of how OCV arrangements can serve partisan interests. In 2010, legislation sponsored by the ruling Fidesz party granted citizenship to ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries, followed by the extension of voting rights in 2011. These new non-resident citizens—most of whom had no prior residence in Hungary—are allowed to vote by mail and overwhelmingly support Fidesz (Bodnár 2015; Molnar 2024). In contrast, Hungarian citizens living abroad who were born in Hungary must vote in person, either at designated polling stations abroad or in Hungary itself (Waterbury 2025). This distinction in voting modalities effectively makes participation easier for a group that favours the ruling party, raising concerns about the use of OCV design for political advantage.

However, the extent to which the enfranchisement of diasporas has an influence on electoral outcomes is dictated to some extent by the share of the total votes that are cast from abroad. Across the 210 elections for which OCV turnout data are available, the highest share of the total votes cast by out-of-country voters was 19.5 per cent, in Moldova's second round of the presidential election in 2024. Only six countries (Bulgaria, El Salvador, Hungary, Moldova, Portugal and Romania) have had elections in which the vote from abroad accounted for at least 5 per cent of the total vote. As shown in Figure 6.3, the average percentage of votes from abroad remains very low.

6.3. **REPRESENTATION AND LEGITIMACY**

While the average percentage of votes from abroad remains low, OCV can, in a few countries, have a significant influence on electoral outcomes. This influence—particularly when the diaspora vote sways results in tightly contested elections—raises questions about how best to integrate or manage non-resident representation in democratic systems. One institutional response to this potential impact is to establish special constituencies for overseas voters, thereby channelling diaspora participation into designated forms of representation.

At least 21 countries have created special constituencies to represent overseas voters (Umpierrez de Reguero, Bauböck and Wegschaider 2025). In these cases, there are seats in the legislature that are assigned to represent emigrants either as a global class or differentiated by region of residence (such as in Cabo Verde and Italy). Such special representation may allow for the different interests of non-resident citizens to be effectively represented in the legislature, sometimes in a highly differentiated way. It may also be preferable

While the average percentage of votes from abroad remains low, OCV can, in a few countries, have a significant influence on electoral outcomes.

in cases in which the share of the total votes from abroad is significant enough to have an outsize influence if not channelled in this way (Umpierrez de Reguero, Bauböck and Wegschaider 2025).

In addition to the issues of belonging and citizenship that arise regarding OCV in general, the existence of such overseas constituencies raises more fundamental questions about the connection between national territory and the definition of the polity (Collyer 2014). The countries in which such voters live may also object to having people living in their territory explicitly represented in foreign political institutions (as, for example, Canada objected to Canadian citizens with dual citizenship having special representation in the legislatures of France and Tunisia) (Umpierrez de Reguero, Bauböck and Wegschaider 2025). These concerns speak to broader normative debates about democratic legitimacy, consent and jurisdiction. At the same time, such mechanisms illustrate evolving conceptions of political community in an era of transnational mobility. Rather than converging towards a single model, countries continue to develop varied legal and institutional responses to OCV that reflect distinct histories, migration trajectories and political priorities.

Chapter 7
THE WAY AHEAD

7.1. KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Intraregional migration rates dwarf interregional migration. Policymakers may wish to consider that, while international migration rates between regions are increasing, the majority of migration occurs within regions. While evidence indicates that migration rates will continue to increase in the coming years, ways of addressing migration and the challenges it poses should reflect its geographic characteristics.

Political participation contributes to democratic resilience. A range of factors (such as the size of the diaspora population, the cost of designing and maintaining out-of-country voting (OCV) systems, diaspora communities' economic contributions to origin countries, etc.) will result in different decisions across contexts, but evidence indicates that OCV helps promote a continued sense of belonging, which can contribute to long-term democratic resilience.

The legal and administrative design of OCV systems—including registration requirements and voting methods—strongly affects participation rates. Broad-based enfranchisement requires attention to both turnout and registration inclusion. Simplified procedures and accessible voting modalities can reduce structural barriers and enhance inclusion.

OCV offers potential benefits for countries of origin. These include the spread of democratic norms across borders, a greater sense of belonging among diaspora communities and lower barriers to reintegration for those migrants who return to their countries of origin. Research has shown that migrants' participation in both formal and informal political processes in their host countries can help transfer democratic norms from their host country to their country of origin through return migration, contact between emigrants and their home country, or the creation of political or civic associations while migrants

are living abroad (Docquier et al. 2016). This participation can also strengthen ties between expatriate community members—increasing their sense of belonging in their new home—and facilitate integration (Bekaj et al. 2018).

Despite the benefits, diaspora turnout rates are relatively low. While there are gaps in the available data, turnout as a share of all registered voters for those 29 elections in 2024 for which we do have data was on average 60.4 per cent, while the average turnout for registered voters abroad was 55.3 per cent. However, when calculated as a share of the emigrant population, the average turnout rate was 13.2 per cent.

Disparities in diaspora representation and procedural access reflect broader questions about equality and legitimacy in democratic systems. Equity in enfranchisement should be a guiding principle for OCV reform.

Data on OCV remain limited and uneven. More disaggregated data are needed, particularly on the number of eligible diaspora voters, the number who are registered to vote from abroad and the number who vote. The varied approaches of electoral management bodies (EMBs) to categorizing overseas voting data make cross-national comparisons challenging. Improved data collection and standardization are essential for evidence-based OCV policy design.

OCV design can be influenced by political incentives. Safeguards are needed to ensure that enfranchisement does not become a tool for partisan gain.

OCV systems can be expensive, though detailed data on the cost of existing systems are not widely available. It is difficult to compare available data, given countries' differing administrative capacities, the varying size and composition of their respective diasporas, and numerous other factors. However, postal voting is a relatively low-cost option, as the main costs are associated with the delivery and retrieval of election materials. Other systems require expenditures related to security, training, education materials and staff.

7.2. **RESPONDING TO THESE TRENDS**

How can policymakers—especially legislators, EMBs and civil society—respond? While there is no one set of ready-made policy choices, it is critical to approach both the opportunities and challenges posed by migration through a democratic lens. The following recommendations provide actionable steps for policymakers, EMBs and civil society groups considering, implementing or advocating for OCV options.

Recommendations for policymakers
1. *View OCV as a tool for democratic resilience*. OCV can strengthen democratic legitimacy by reinforcing migrants' sense of civic belonging and sustaining their political engagement with their country of origin.

Policymakers should recognize OCV not as a peripheral policy but as an investment in long-term democratic resilience—especially in contexts of displacement, conflict and structural emigration.

2. *Consider the broader integration benefits of diaspora engagement*. Facilitating diaspora participation in elections may also generate benefits for host societies by promoting transnational democratic norms and reducing barriers to reintegration upon return. These dynamics contribute to social cohesion and democratic development across borders.

3. *Ensure diaspora inclusion in the national political community*. Legal frameworks should be guided by inclusive understandings of citizenship that recognize the legitimate stake non-resident citizens have in the political future of their countries of origin (Bauböck 2007). Policymakers should anticipate the growing importance of transnational political membership in the context of global migration, climate change and digital connectivity.

4. *Balance political representation with electoral equity*. Where diaspora populations are large, special mechanisms such as reserved parliamentary seats may help channel their votes without distorting domestic electoral outcomes. Weighting mechanisms or capped seat allocations—as used in countries like Cabo Verde (see Box 7.1)—may provide models for balancing diaspora representation and legitimacy.

Box 7.1. **Diaspora voting in Cabo Verde**

Cabo Verde has been profoundly shaped by emigration. The West African island nation has experienced over two centuries of mass outward migration—driven by famine, poverty, colonial repression and a lack of economic opportunity—that has produced a diaspora estimated to be twice the size of its resident population (IOM n.d.a; Carling and Åkesson 2009). Members of the diaspora have maintained strong ties with their homeland, contributing to its socio-economic development through money, goods, knowledge and ideas (Resende-Santos 2015). Migration and transnationalism feature prominently in Cabo Verde's national culture and identity; mobility is viewed as natural and necessary, and emigrants have long held the right to vote in presidential and legislative elections (Carling and Åkesson 2009).

Diaspora voting was introduced in Cabo Verde's first multiparty elections in 1991, when overseas citizens cast ballots as part of the country's transition to democracy (Ellis et al. 2007; Hudson 2023). Then, as now, these voters were divided into three electoral districts for the legislative elections: (a) Africa; (b) the Americas and Europe; and (c) the rest of the world. Initially, each district elected one representative to the National Assembly but, later, this was increased to two, making the ratio of overseas to domestic representatives (6:72) the highest

in the world, along with Tunisia (Ellis et al. 2007; Mendes Borges 2022). To prevent the diaspora from dominating elections, the electoral system includes a weighting mechanism that caps overseas votes at no more than one fifth of those cast in-country (Ellis et al. 2007). This institutional design reflects an attempt to balance recognition of emigrants as full political members with concerns about electoral equity and domestic legitimacy.

Yet persistently low turnout among diaspora voters has so far obviated the need for the weighting mechanism. Low participation is likely due to socio-economic constraints, geographic dispersal and declining engagement in Cabo Verdean politics from second and subsequent generations of overseas citizens (Mendes Borges 2022). Turnout notwithstanding, however, the diaspora vote played a decisive role in the 2001 and 2006 presidential elections. These cases suggest that diaspora participation, even when numerically limited, can shape electoral outcomes in tightly contested races. For the scholar Aleida Mendes Borges (2022), the presidential candidates' and domestic voters' acceptance of the 'emigrant advantage' in these elections reflects the broad social consensus that overseas voters are legitimate members of Cabo Verde's political community.

5. *Prioritize legal clarity, cross-border coordination and long-term planning*. Effective OCV systems require early legislative action, legal clarity on eligibility and procedures, and coordination with host countries. Policymakers should explore mechanisms such as bilateral agreements and regional frameworks to support operational delivery of OCV.

6. *Adopt a cost-effective and inclusive approach to OCV modalities*. Postal voting and multiple voting methods (e.g. postal and in-person) are both effective and relatively affordable, especially when supported by sustained investment in electoral infrastructure and diaspora outreach. New approaches—such as online voting—should be explored with attention to integrity, accessibility, digital literacy, security and reliability.

7. *Invest in better data for better decisions*. Sound policymaking requires more systematic and disaggregated data on eligible voters, registration and participation abroad. Standardized reporting obligations for EMBs should be considered to improve cross-country comparability and evidence-based electoral reform.

Recommendations for electoral management bodies

1. *Recognize OCV as a core electoral function, not a technical add-on*. Designing and delivering OCV is not merely a logistical task; it is central to ensuring that democratic processes remain inclusive in an era of transnational mobility. EMBs should integrate OCV into standard electoral planning cycles, with dedicated budget lines, personnel and long-term capacity development.

2. *Simplify registration procedures to lower participation barriers*. Evidence shows that requiring in-person or overly burdensome registration procedures significantly reduces participation. EMBs should streamline diaspora voter registration—for example, via online platforms, embassies and consulates, or automatic enrolment where feasible—while ensuring security and accessibility.

3. *Diversify voting methods to improve access*. Offering multiple voting options (postal, in-person and, where appropriate, electronic) has been associated with higher participation. EMBs should assess which combinations are most suitable based on diaspora size, geographic dispersion, administrative capacity and the integrity risks of each method. Kosovo's recent reforms provide an example of how more and simpler options can motivate turnout (see Box 7.2).

4. *Strengthen integrity through transparency and communication*. Clear information on registration, deadlines, voting options and eligibility is essential for building trust in OCV. EMBs should develop targeted communication strategies—using diaspora media, civil society partnerships and multilingual materials—to ensure that voters abroad are informed about and confident in the process.

Box 7.2. **Ballots beyond borders: Kosovo's diaspora enjoys expanded voting rights for the first time**

Kosovo has one of the world's largest diasporas relative to its population, a powerhouse in political influence and economic support, with remittances fuelling around 15 per cent of its gross domestic product and growth in foreign direct investment (Republic of Kosovo 2023; GERMIN 2024; The World Bank 2024; Gap Institute 2025). In Kosovo's 2025 parliamentary election, the diaspora exercised, for the first time, expanded voting rights granted under the 2023 Law on General Elections (Republic of Kosovo 2023). While some observers have described the reform as a self-interested strategic move by the ruling party, which enjoys significant diaspora support, many see it not only as a moral imperative to recognize the diaspora's contributions but also as a broader goal of promoting democratic inclusion, ensuring political equality and enhancing the legitimacy of the electoral process (A2 CNN 2025; Koha 2025; Radio Evropa e Lire 2025). The reform simplified registration by easing documentation requirements and establishing a quick online process (Telegrafi 2024). Voting options received a major upgrade: beyond postal voting in Kosovo, diaspora voters could send ballots to post office boxes set up in 22 countries or vote in person at Kosovo's diplomatic missions. The new system is far more accessible and efficient than the old one, which was often unreliable and costly for voters (Telegrafi 2019; Kallxo 2021). The measures put in place were widely hailed as a milestone, with diaspora voter turnout reaching over 75 per cent, according to Kosovo's Central Electoral Commission (CEC)[1]—a new record and a 20 per cent increase compared with the previous high set in the 2021 elections.

The CEC noted vague legal language—in this case on eligible voting locations abroad—as a major cause of politicization (Koha 2024). It stressed that logistics and procurement issues must not be underestimated, as setbacks can derail planning and force ad hoc fixes. When postal contracts for ballot transport collapsed due to tender complaints, the CEC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs transported ballots in institutional vehicles, often escorted by police or diplomats (Telegrafi 2025). The CEC viewed these as first-time implementation obstacles, not structural failures, and stressed that improved access and turnout by far outweighed the costs. An important lesson learned was that, while in-person diaspora voting proved more demanding to organize, it offered stronger electoral integrity safeguards compared with postal voting, which continues to face concerns (Aliu 2025).

Critics[2] argue the reforms are premature because inadequate infrastructure could lead to manipulation. They point to bloated voter rolls due to flawed civil records and to the limited impact on turnout, raising cost–benefit questions (European Union Election Observation Mission 2025). Another cited risk was tipping the scales towards the ruling party, which enjoys strong diaspora backing (Ahmeti 2025). Some argue that the diaspora should not vote at all, highlighting the unfairness of allowing those who do not face the day-to-day consequences of government decisions to exert potentially decisive influence over its political direction (Djordjevic 2024).

Yet many of these risks exist in domestic voting too. If voters at home are not excluded, why draw the line at the diaspora? As younger generations expect simplicity, easier access is key to lasting engagement. Kosovo's reform sends a clear message: the diaspora matters, and their voice strengthens inclusion and unity.

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1   International IDEA consulted Kreshnik Spahiu, Director of the Information Technology Department at the CEC, and Lirik Krasniqi, acting Director of the Division for Voter Services.
2   International IDEA consulted Albert Krasniqi, Director of Programs at Democracy Plus.

5. *Institutionalize cooperation with consular services and other agencies*. Effective OCV delivery depends on interagency collaboration. EMBs should establish formal agreements with foreign ministries, postal services and diaspora affairs agencies to define roles, share resources and avoid duplication. Examples from countries like the Philippines illustrate how multi-institutional coordination supports implementation (see Box 7.3).

6. *Anticipate and mitigate political and logistical risks*. Diaspora voting can become politicized, especially where it is seen to benefit one party. EMBs should ensure that procedural rules are applied impartially and that logistical risks—such as ballot delivery failures or ambiguous eligibility rules—are proactively addressed, with contingency plans in place.

7. *Improve data quality and reporting standards*. Currently, data on OCV registration and turnout are often incomplete, inconsistently categorized or not disaggregated. EMBs should publish standardized data on registration, ballot distribution, turnout and invalid ballots to support transparency, policy learning and international comparability.

Box 7.3. **Online voting introduced for Filipino diaspora for the first time**

The Philippines took a significant step towards enhancing democratic participation by implementing an online voting system ahead of the 12 May 2025 midterm elections. As of 14 April 2025, over 77 Online Voting and Counting System hubs had been activated, which remained open until election day (International IDEA 2025v; Mendoza and Spinelli, forthcoming).

Previously, overseas Filipinos had to cast their ballots in person at designated embassies or consulates, or rely on mailed ballots. The Commission on Elections indicated that this new initiative was designed to make overseas voting more accessible and inclusive, potentially impacting 1.2 million Filipinos living overseas and improving historically low turnout rates among this group.

Despite these efforts, preliminary data indicate that only 221,284 (18.1 per cent) of the anticipated voters chose to cast their ballots online, a slight decrease from the previous midterm elections' turnout of 18.5 per cent (Abad 2025). While election observers noted that the online voting process ran smoothly, challenges remain in increasing voter engagement and effectively communicating the new voting options available (ANFREL 2025).

Dr Imelda Deinla, a Senior Lecturer of law at the University of New England, underscores that the initial implementation of electoral reforms and mechanisms often falls short of producing desired outcomes:

'For Filipino migrants, electoral participation frequently competes with more immediate priorities—securing employment, adapting to unfamiliar socio-cultural environments, and establishing new lives abroad. Without compulsory voting requirements or deeply ingrained civic consciousness among diaspora communities, low electoral participation will likely persist as the default pattern. Strategic community engagement initiatives that connect democratic participation with migrants' values and aspirations will be essential to elevate the perceived importance of electoral rights within Filipino transnational communities.'[1]

Dr Deinla's analysis highlights the importance of coupling technical reforms with broader efforts to build electoral habits and trust among emigrant voters—especially when civic ties to the country of origin may be attenuated.

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[1]   Email communication 28 May 2025.

Recommendations for civil society actors

1. *Advocate for equitable access to OCV*. Civil society organizations (CSOs) can play a key role in ensuring that the expansion of OCV is inclusive—not limited to certain groups or geographies. Advocacy efforts should focus on removing discriminatory barriers in laws or procedures and promoting enfranchisement for all eligible non-resident citizens.

2. *Monitor OCV implementation and support electoral integrity.* Diaspora-focused CSOs and independent observers should be engaged in monitoring the implementation of OCV, from registration to vote counting. Their oversight helps enhance trust and transparency, especially where governments or EMBs lack credibility or where diaspora votes may significantly affect outcomes.

3. *Build awareness and civic education among diaspora communities.* Low turnout among registered diaspora voters points to a need for more active engagement. CSOs should develop non-partisan voter education initiatives—using diaspora media, digital outreach and community events—to raise awareness of registration processes, voting options and election timelines.

4. *Facilitate inclusive participation by addressing practical barriers.* Partnering with diaspora networks, CSOs can identify and mitigate logistical and informational barriers to participation, especially for migrants with limited digital access, insecure legal status or lower literacy. Tailored outreach can help ensure that OCV is not only available but meaningfully accessible.

5. *Encourage inclusive policy debate on diaspora enfranchisement*. OCV raises important questions about belonging, accountability and representation. Civil society can create space for inclusive public debate—within both origin and host countries—on the role of diaspora voters, their rights and responsibilities, and how democratic systems can evolve in response to transnational citizenship.

6. *Forge alliances across borders*. Many challenges related to OCV—such as legal harmonization, voter education or postal logistics—span multiple jurisdictions. Civil society actors should connect across borders to share lessons learned, coordinate advocacy and build regional or global coalitions to support diaspora political rights.

Areas for continued and further research

There are several pending normative and practical questions related to OCV.

1. *Further research is needed to understand what drives participation or abstention among different diaspora groups*. Research should include an examination of how factors such as time since emigration, generation, legal status, security concerns, access to information, prior experience with voting or the perceived relevance of home-country elections influence voter behaviour.

2. *More comparative research and more data could clarify how voting method design affects both participation rates and electoral integrity*. While some evidence suggests that postal voting often shows higher turnout among registered voters, cross-country comparisons are limited by variations in registration requirements and implementation.

3. *There is a need to assess how diaspora participation influences close races, party platforms or governance outcomes*—particularly in countries where OCV turnout constitutes a meaningful share of the electorate or where diaspora preferences diverge from domestic voters. These issues may take on more salience as candidates and parties increasingly utilize digital modes of outreach and campaigning, including to diaspora communities.

4. *Host-country cooperation in the implementation of OCV is crucial but understudied*. Further research could examine how legal frameworks, diplomatic relations and administrative arrangements shape host-state roles in supporting or obstructing OCV, including through bilateral agreements or regional coordination mechanisms.

5. *There are pending questions on the role of online OCV systems*. With some countries experimenting with online and hybrid systems, more comparative studies are needed that illustrate what similarities and differences exist between OCV and domestic online voting security, accessibility and trustworthiness. This angle could add important new data to the already rich literature on online participation mechanisms.

6. *More time-series data on diaspora turnout, registration and political attitudes may help clarify whether OCV fosters sustained political engagement across migration waves* or whether participation declines over time or across generations. It will also be important to conduct long-term studies on the turnout and political attitudes of circular migrants and other individuals who choose to spend regular periods of time outside of their countries of origin.

7. *Despite the fundamental importance of the costs of implementing different types of OCV systems—postal, in-person, online or hybrid—comprehensive, updated and accessible data are unavailable*. The absence of data is especially important in light of the relatively low rates of participation among non-resident citizens in many countries. Future studies could benefit from in-depth case comparisons or cost assessments drawn from EMBs, which were beyond the scope and timeframe of this report.

Chapter 8
CONCLUSION

The question of migration is ultimately a question of the meaning of belonging in a democratic society. It challenges democracies not because human migration itself is inherently destabilizing but because it compels challenging questions about if and how to reconsider the boundaries of the polity. As migration rates continue to increase, democracies are increasingly confronted with questions of whether and how to include their non-resident citizens in political processes. Resilient democracies are inclusive, but what considerations should be made to determine whether or not non-resident citizens may continue to influence political decisions in their countries of origin? If out-of-country voting (OCV) systems are implemented, which mechanisms are best suited to particular contexts?

Key questions arise—how to quickly and effectively adapt to an environment that is increasingly marked by immigration and emigration, even as amending legal frameworks and equipping agencies and voters with the information and resources they may need takes time and negotiation; whether and how to use new voting modalities to facilitate turnout, which is persistently low; how to balance the availability of new technology with old infrastructure; and how to include diaspora communities while protecting domestic democratic legitimacy.

Some of the considerations are technical. OCV requires significant planning and administration, and can be resource-intensive. Other considerations are political, especially when diaspora communities are large or when one political party stands to disproportionately benefit from the use of OCV. Countries must also consider the ways in which OCV can contribute to democratic resilience. Embracing a transnational conception of belonging may help people feel like they have a stake in the future of their countries of origin, thus incentivizing them to stay connected and committed. At the same time, however, it is important not to lose sight of the views and priorities of resident citizens.

The question of migration is ultimately a question of the meaning of belonging in a democratic society.

The work of democracy is also never finished: as the scale and shape of migration evolve, democracies will have to maintain and regularly re-evaluate institutional frameworks.

Democracy requires patience, maintenance and, at times, reinvention in order to persevere. The work of democracy is also never finished: as the scale and shape of migration evolve, democracies will have to maintain and regularly re-evaluate institutional frameworks—including, as discussed in this report, the meaning, boundaries and mechanisms of involving non-resident citizens in political decision making. There is no single right answer; the best approaches will reflect local histories and contexts. What remains universally true is that the long-term resilience of democratic institutions will depend on deliberate, inclusive and regular reflection and solutions that are tailored to context-specific problems and priorities.