

Elections

Sustainable Governance Indicators 2024



Indicator

Free and Fair Political Competition

Question

To what extent is political competition among candidates and political parties free and fair?

30 OECD and EU countries are sorted according to their performance on a scale from 10 (best) to 1 (lowest). This scale is tied to four qualitative evaluation levels.

- 10-9 = There are no barriers, by law or in practice, to effective political competition.
- 8-6 = Existing barriers, by law and in practice, pose no significant obstacles to effective political competition.
- 5-3 = Existing barriers, by law and in practice, pose some significant obstacles to effective political competition.
- 2-1 = Existing barriers, by law and in practice, pose various significant obstacles to effective political competition.

Canada

Score 10

Canada holds regular elections at the federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal levels and is generally considered to have a system that allows for free and fair political competition among candidates and political parties. Citizens and political parties are generally free to express their views, organize political activities, and participate in the political process without undue interference.

Laws and regulations governing elections aim to ensure fairness and equality among political actors. Each major jurisdiction has an independent election authority responsible to the legislature and the public for overseeing elections and ensuring that they are conducted transparently and according to established rules.

Electoral boundary commissions, typically staffed by judges and academics, review census data and set the boundaries for individual (single) member plurality constituencies (Qualter 1970). The Chief Electoral Officer must be satisfied that the information in the application is accurate and that the organization is a political party and may ask for additional documents, including the party's constitution, by-laws, and program, if deemed necessary.

Several checks exist to ensure this system remains open and fair. First, Canada has a multiparty system with several political parties representing a range of ideologies and viewpoints, each monitoring compliance with election rules and regulations. A party that meets minimal administrative requirements is eligible for registration, and its registered status is granted when it nominates at least one candidate in an election. Second, the media are also open and free and monitor election conduct and results. Third, Canada has a strong tradition of protecting political freedoms, including freedom of speech, assembly, and association; these basic freedoms are incorporated into the federal Charter of Rights.

Funding and arrangements governing campaign and party expenses are generally transparent, equitable, and well-policed. Reforms to campaign finance regulations have been implemented in many jurisdictions to reduce the influence of private, especially corporate, donations in elections. These regulations limit individual donations and often ban corporate funding, replacing it with public funds provided to political parties to offset expenses.

However, parties and party leaders control candidate nominations in their constituencies and may block individuals from running for election for any reason they choose. This power is often exercised to silence internal critics within the party. Those individuals may still run for office under other party labels but have a very small chance of winning without major party support or having lost it. Finally, independent candidates (i.e., those not affiliated with a major political party) face a strong electoral disadvantage at both the federal and provincial levels and, under most conditions, are rarely elected.

Citation:

Qualter, T. 1970. *The Election Process in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Estonia

Score 10

The principles of fair and free elections are laid out in the Estonian constitution. Estonia has a proportional representation electoral system, meaning that most candidates are registered within party lists. All 13 registered political parties can submit their list of candidates. The composition of party lists is determined by the internal procedures set by the statute of the political party. In addition to political parties, two or more citizens can form an election coalition to participate in municipal elections. Every citizen who has the right to stand as a candidate may nominate themselves as an independent candidate.

To be eligible as a candidate, a person must be an Estonian citizen. Any citizen of the European Union may stand as a candidate for a local government council or the European Parliament. Candidates for the Riigikogu and the European Parliament must be at least 21 years old, while candidates for local government councils must be at least 18 years old.

Individuals who are active members of the Defense Forces, have been divested of their active legal capacity with regard to the right to vote, or have been convicted of a crime and are serving a sentence in a penal institution cannot stand as candidates. However, individuals with conditional prison sentences may stand as candidates.

A deposit equal to the monthly minimum wage must be paid for each candidate. The eligibility of all candidates is reviewed by an independent body – the National Electoral Committee (NEC) – according to criteria set in the electoral laws.

The disputes that arise during the organization of elections are settled according to the procedures outlined in the election acts. Since election complaints must be resolved quickly, the election acts mandate a pre-judicial procedure. The right to review complaints has been granted to county electoral committees at the first instance and the NEC at the second instance. A resolution or act by the NEC can be contested directly in the Supreme Court. The law sets short time limits for the review of complaints.

Political parties are required to maintain accurate financial records, disclose the nature and value of received donations, and present their accounts quarterly to the Political Parties Financing Surveillance Committee (PPFSC). Additionally, parties and independent candidates must submit their reports on the funding of their election campaigns within one month after elections. All financing reports are publicly available on the PPFSC website. In the event of violations, sanctions are imposed. Illegal donations must be returned to the donor or – if this is impossible – paid to the State Treasury. For example, based on sanctions imposed by the PPFSC and the court ruling, the Center Party paid €843,000 to its former media partner, Midfield LLC, for campaign services in 2009 – 2015 (EPB 2022).

Candidates and parties have fair opportunities to access public and social media; there are no restrictions based on ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, language, religion or social origin. After the 2023 parliamentary elections, the issue of possible influence on election results by politically oriented NGOs has come into the public focus. Such NGOs advocate for particular ideologies by publishing opinion polls or research notes, which arguably may tilt voters' choices. To date, organizations affiliated with political parties (think tanks, parties' youth organizations) are not obliged to report to the PPFSC, meaning some services or benefits that parties receive are not duly declared in campaign reports. The PPFSC and the Riigikogu are expected to discuss relevant amendments to the Act on Political Parties (EPB 2023).

Citation:

Political Parties Financial Surveillance Committee. <https://www.erjk.ee/en/financing-reports/election-campaigns>
Estonian Public Broadcast. 2022. "Keskerakond tasus keelatud annetuse 843 000 eurot. May 2. <https://www.err.ee/1608587518/keskerakond-tasus-keelatud-annetuse-843-000-eurot>
Estonian Public Broadcast. 2023. "Valitsus kavatses poliitiliste sihtasutuste tegevust reguleerida." June 1. <https://www.err.ee/1608995804/valitsus-kavatseb-poliitiliste-sihtasutuste-tegevust-reguleerida>

Finland

Score 10

The electoral process in Finland is free and fair, and the country's constitution grants Finnish citizens the right to participate in national elections and referendums. The registration procedures for candidates and political parties meet standards of transparency and fairness, including requirements such as financial deposits, age, party affiliation and petition signatures (party-only). There are no exclusions based on insolvency, undischarged bankruptcy or criminal record/convictions.

No eligible candidate is prevented from being elected. No candidate is disqualified from registration in a manner that fails to adhere to objectively verifiable legal criteria. If a candidate is denied the right to be elected, they have the right to appeal to a competent jurisdiction capable of reviewing such decisions and correcting errors promptly and effectively.

Parties and candidates must maintain accurate financial records, disclose the nature and value of received donations, and regularly publish their accounts. This process is also carried out de facto. The State Accounting Office manages these activities and monitors party funding. There are no mechanisms that provide significant advantages to specific candidates or parties. Political competition is not affected or distorted by deliberate manipulation through the news media.

Citation:

Orpo, Petteri. 2023. Government Program: A Strong and Committed Finland.

Publications of the Finnish Government. 2023. <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/governments/government-programme/>

Switzerland

Score 10

There are no doubts that Switzerland's formal procedures correspond closely to the democratic ideal. Registration procedures for candidates and political parties meet standards of transparency and fairness. New transparency regulations regarding financial support for political parties became effective for the last national election in 2023 (Federal Council 2022). This mitigates international critique of the opaque financing of political organizations (such as by Transparency International (2019) or GRECO (2017)), although there is still considerable room for improvement with regard to transparency. This lack of transparency can be explained by the liberal stance of the Swiss political system with regard to political-party financing – which in turn means that public authorities need more arguments than elsewhere to justify controlling party organizations. Eligible candidates are not prevented from being elected and are not disqualified from registration in a manner that does not adhere to objectively verifiable criteria set by law. To the best of our knowledge, candidates and parties have not been denied the right to be elected or registered. In any case, Switzerland is a state under the rule of law and decisions by public authorities can be challenged in court. There is no special law on political parties; parties are associations according to Article 60 of the Swiss Civil Code, which says: “The articles of association must be done in writing and indicate the objects of the association, its resources and its organization” (on formal rules see: Schiess Rütimann 2011).

Candidates and parties enjoy fair opportunities to access the media and other communication channels without discrimination, for example, on the basis of ethnicity. The media landscape as a whole offers fair coverage of various political positions (Hänggli and Feddersen 2022, 2023).

The new rules on transparency, in effect since 2023, mandate that “the political parties represented in the Federal Assembly must annually disclose their income, the monetary and non-monetary donations received if their value exceeds CHF 15,000 per person per year, as well as the contributions made by individual mandate holders. The source of the contribution must also be disclosed. In the case of votes and National Council elections, the campaigners must disclose the financing of their campaigns before the vote or election if they have budgeted more than CHF 50,000 for these campaigns. After the vote or election, they must disclose the final accounts. In Council of States elections, the transparency rules only apply to those elected. Campaign leaders must disclose the final accounts. The final accounts must include all income, including any contribution of more than CHF 15,000 per person and campaign, which the campaigners have received to finance the campaign in the 12 months prior to the vote or election. The acceptance of anonymous donations and donations from abroad are now prohibited. Exceptions apply to donations from Swiss nationals abroad and for elections to the Council of States” (Federal Council 2022).

Party funding is monitored by the Swiss Federal Audit Office. There is no gerrymandering. However, in national elections, cantons serve as electoral districts. The smaller the number of seats within an electoral district, the lower the chances of small parties, and the larger the disproportionality of electoral rules. In the six cantons with only one seat in the National Council, the de facto proportional rule is replaced by a first-past-the-post mechanism. There is no evidence that political competition is affected or distorted by deliberate manipulation through new media.

Citation:

Federal Council. 2022. “Neue Transparenzregeln bei der Politikfinanzierung gelten erstmals für die Nationalratswahlen 2023.” <https://www.admin.ch/gov/de/start/dokumentation/medienmitteilungen.msg-id-90040.html>

GRECO (Group of States against Corruption). 2017. Evaluation Report Switzerland. Strasbourg: GRECO. <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016806fceda>

Hänggeli, Regula, and Alexandra Feddersen. 2022. “Medien und politische Kommunikation.” In *Handbuch der Schweizer Politik*, 7th ed., eds. Yannis Papadopoulos, Pascal Sciarini, Adrian Vatter, Silja Häusermann, Patrick Emmenegger, and Flavia Fossati, 491-516. Zürich: NZZ Libro.

Hänggeli Fricker, Regula, and Alexandra Feddersen. 2023. “Media and Political Communication.” In Patrick Emmenegger, Flavia Fossati, Silja Häusermann, Yannis Papadopoulos, Pascal Sciarini, and Adrian Vatter, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Swiss Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 372–388. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780192871787.013.19>

Schiess Rütimann, Patricia. 2011. *Politische Parteien*. Bern and Baden-Baden: Stämpfli/Nomos.

Transparency International. 2019. “Swiss Firms Give Over CHF5 Million a Year to Parties and Candidates.” <https://transparency.ch/swiss-firms-give-over-chf5-million-a-year-to-parties-and-candidates>

Austria

Score 9

Registration procedures for candidates and political parties in Austria meet established standards of transparency and fairness, including specific requirements such as financial deposits, age, party affiliation, and petition signatures. No eligible candidates have been prevented from being elected or disqualified from registration by undue or questionable criteria or practices.

However, it is significantly easier for parties already enjoying parliamentary representation to register for an upcoming election than for genuine newcomers. For example, parties holding seats in the Nationalrat need the signatures of just three members of parliament to launch another candidacy, while parties lacking any parliamentary representation need the signatures of 2,600 citizens for a nationwide candidacy. To be considered eligible for the office of federal president, a candidate needs the signatures of 6,000 Austrian citizens.

The presidential election of 2022 – which featured an incumbent seeking reelection – was widely considered to demonstrate the openness of competition even for the highest political office. Six other candidates secured between 1.6 and 17.7% of the vote, with three of them obtaining 8% or more of the total vote.

Electoral Commissions operate at various levels of the Austrian polity (national, state, and regional), deciding on issues concerning the eligibility of potential candidates. Parties and individual candidates can object to an electoral commission's decision by taking their case to an administrative court. These courts have not hesitated to accept different types of claims and have ruled in favor of candidates.

While every Austrian citizen has an equal opportunity to run as a candidate – at a minimum age of 18 for all parliamentary elections and 35 for candidates competing for the office of federal president – there are significant *de facto* limitations reflecting the nature of a full-blown party government regime. Truly independent candidates tend to play no role in parliamentary elections at the national and state levels; Austrian parties hold an exceptionally powerful gatekeeper position.

Specifically, the Austrian electoral system requires parties to compete for votes and seats with party lists. Recent research on the composition of these lists has identified major shortcomings related to the under-representation of women, younger candidates, and particularly candidates “with a migration background.” In party list regimes, a latent form of discrimination against certain candidates involves their low ranking on a party list. The fact that this has not become a major issue in the public arena underscores the existence of unwritten rules of competition between different candidates, even within a given party.

Parties and candidates are required to maintain accurate financial records, disclose the nature and value of received donations, and publish their accounts regularly. In

2022, wide-ranging changes to the established party finance rules were introduced. These changes came into force on January 1, 2023, and January 1, 2024, respectively. In particular, parties now have several new obligations, such as publishing the names of their donors and the donations received. The threshold for donations not requiring public declaration has been lowered from €2,500 to €500 per year and donor. For funds received from membership fees, the name of the member must be disclosed for any amount exceeding €5,000 per year. Additionally, parties must provide the Austrian Court of Audit with a list of any debts exceeding €50,000 they may have with private loan givers, as well as a list of all organizations closely associated with the party (according to § 5 of the Party Finance Law). Furthermore, parties are required to disclose the exact size of shares they or any affiliated organizations hold in any company. Moreover, there is a new explicit duty for parties to store all records and files for potential inspection for at least seven years. Since January 1, 2023, parties must also report to the Austrian Court of Audit on a quarterly basis any individual donations exceeding €150, disclosing the name of the donor.

These recent changes have been urged and effectively triggered by the Austrian Court of Audit, which implies that Austrian parties have recurrently sought to exploit loopholes in the law to their benefit. The leeway of the Court of Audit has been expanded by recent reforms. Since 2023 the Court has not only the right to insist on a new report by a party if a report is found to be unsatisfactory, as in the past, but also the authority to take the initiative if it suspects any possible violation of the established party finance rules.

There is also a particular agency (unabhängiger Parteien-Transparenz-Senat, UPTS), located in the Federal Chancellor's Office, that has the right to impose fines for violations of party finance rules. Fines can only be imposed after the Court of Audit has taken an initiative. However, the members of the UPTS – who are appointed by the federal president following a suggestion by the federal government – are independent and not subject to any instructions. The possible fines for certain violations have recently been increased. Delays in submitting accounting reports to the Court of Audit can also be fined.

Candidates and parties generally enjoy fair opportunities to access the media and other communication channels. Access to the media is neither restricted nor institutionally denied on the basis of ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, birth, or other status. Also, the media landscape as a whole generally offers fair coverage of various political positions.

In constitutional practice, some limits to the idea of “perfect equality” can be identified. During electoral campaigns, all parties with parliamentary representation have the right to participate in unbiased debates hosted by a public broadcaster. However, this may disadvantage new parties that are not covered by this guarantee. Similarly, while there is an established practice of giving many different candidates –

not just the top candidates of the major parties – a platform by organizing “one-on-one discussions” between candidates from different parties, there has been a strong bias toward candidates from parties enjoying parliamentary representation.

Research on media coverage of women candidates during the 2019 election campaign concluded that: “Throughout the last decade, women politicians in Austria have struggled with the media ceiling and changes have been minimal. A real gender bias still exists in Austrian campaign coverage: Women are considerably less visible in media coverage (...), they have fewer opportunities to impact the political agenda than their male counterparts (...), and they are assigned more often to speak about soft issues” (Hayek et al. 2022). However, the same study suggests that when women are their party’s top candidate – such as SPÖ-party leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner in 2019 – the observed gender-related differences tend to disappear.

There are no formal mechanisms in place that provide significant advantages to specific candidates or parties regarding media access and coverage. However, there has been a long-standing “special relationship” between some top political office holders, or candidates seeking reelection, and the tabloid press. Chancellor Werner Faymann (SPÖ, 2008 – 2016) was well known for enjoying biased support from Austria’s largest tabloid newspaper, Die Kronenzeitung, both as a chancellor candidate in 2008 and throughout his chancellorship. More critical in terms of violating the rules of fair political competition were the practices observed under the chancellorship of Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP, 2017 – 2021; see Wodak 2022). As revealed through both parliamentary and judicial investigations, Kurz and his inner circle apparently bought “fake survey results” and friendly coverage by the widely read free newspaper Österreich using public funds to enhance their status and disadvantage key competitors from other parties.

New media play an increasingly important role in Austria, with different candidates using them in fundamentally different ways. Political parties have started to use new media platforms, including social media, private-party TV channels, and YouTube channels, to spread their messages. These platforms are widely read and are becoming more important over time, but systematic attempts to manipulate political competition in Austria through new media have not yet been proven.

Citation:

<https://www.parlament.gv.at/fachinfos/rlw/Was-ist-neu-im-Bereich-der-Parteienfinanzierung>

<https://www.parlament.gv.at/fachinfos/rlw/Wie-und-von-wem-wird-die-Parteienfinanzierung-kontrolliert>

<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000130585529/rechnungshof-stellt-unregelmassigkeiten-bei-spoe-partei-finanzen-fest>

<https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/themen/unabhaenger-parteien-transparenz-senat.html>

Hayek, Lore, Manuel Mayrl, and Uta Russmann. 2022. “Women Politicians in Austria: Still Not Breaking the Media Ceiling.” *Communications*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2021-0128>

Wodak, Ruth. 2022. “Shameless Normalization as a Result of Media Control: The Case of Austria.” *Discourse & Society* 33 (6): 788-804.

https://www.demokratiezentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/boese_minderheiten.pdf

<https://www.parlament.gv.at/fachinfos/rlw/Was-ist-neu-im-Bereich-der-Parteienfinanzierung>

Belgium

Score 9

Belgium is a parliamentary democracy with a proportional representation system and two linguistic groups, Flemish and French-speaking. There are currently 11 parties sitting in the lower chamber of parliament (Pilet 2021), along with two independent MPs. This is testimony to Belgium's fair and accessible electoral system, despite a 5% electoral threshold since early 2000 (Reuchamps et al. 2014).

Legal restrictions, such as requiring a certain number of signatures before an individual may run, are fair and are effective in controlling the number of candidates running for election. The same holds for parties, which can be relatively easily registered, possibly in a single district (or electoral "arrondissement"). In practice, of course, such restrictions may represent a higher de facto hurdle for smaller or local parties or candidates. Like in any country, established parties developed enhanced knowledge of registration procedures and of the law's subtleties.

Given mandatory voting, established parties typically slate candidates with diverse backgrounds (e.g., regarding age and cultural origins). Additionally, there are strong and effective constraints on gender balance in electoral lists which increased the proportion of women MPs which reached 42.7% at the 2019s election (Talukder, 2023). While these rules are abided by the parties, there remains overall a higher proportion of male candidates at the top of party lists, implying a higher chance of being elected and the way candidates are selected is not that clear (see Vandeleene and Van Haute 2021).

Citation:

<https://elections.fgov.be/toutes-les-faq>

Delwit, P., and De Waele, J. M., eds. 2021. *Les partis politiques en Belgique*. Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles.

Reuchamps, M., Onclin, F., Caluwaerts, D., and Baudewyns, P. 2014. "Raising the Threshold, Fighting Fragmentation? Mechanical and Psychological Effects of the Legal Electoral Threshold in Belgium." *West European Politics* 37 (5): 1087-1107.

Talukder, D. 2023. "Challenging Assumptions: Investigating Measurement Sensitivity in Substantive Representation and Its Effects on Policy Satisfaction." *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 6 (3): 414-432.

Pilet, J. B. 2021. "Hard Times for Governing Parties: The 2019 Federal Elections in Belgium." *West European Politics* 44 (2): 439-449.

Vandeleene, A., and Van Haute, E. 2021. "A Comparative Analysis of Selection Criteria of Candidates in Belgium." *Frontiers in Political Science* 3: 777747.

Czechia

Score 9

Political competition is robust at both the national and subnational levels. Electoral registration procedures are fair and transparent. To establish a political party, three citizens aged 18 or over need to submit the new party's statutes to authorities, backed by 1,000 signatures. The 1991 law on political parties and movements established conditions to exclude parties that lack democratically elected organs or aim to remove the democratic foundations of the state, restrict the freedoms of other parties, or threaten morality and public order.

Ten major parties, coalitions, movements, and many independent candidates competed in the first round of Senate elections in September 2022. There were no conflicts over the registration of candidates.

Since 2012, the president of Czechia has been elected by citizens in a direct election. Any citizen with the right to vote who has reached 40 years of age is eligible to run for a maximum of two consecutive five-year terms. The candidate must gain at least 50,000 confirmed signatures from citizens, 10 signatures from senators, or 20 signatures from MPs. Twelve proposed candidates were rejected for failing to meet these criteria.

According to the OSCE, the 2023 presidential elections were free and fair. Their report stated, "All candidates were able to campaign freely, both offline and online, and fundamental freedoms were respected. The campaign was competitive but divisive, and voters could make an informed choice in both rounds, although in the second round, the campaign became more confrontational, negative and tense" (OSCE, 2023).

The presidential election in January 2023 ended in a run-off between former prime minister and leader of ANO (Akce nespokojených občanů, Action of Discontented Citizens), Andrej Babiš, and independent candidate, former General Petr Pavel. Eight candidates – seven men and one woman – competed in the first round. The two with the highest votes proceeded to the second round.

A funding ceiling was set at CZK 40 million, and the two leading candidates reached this limit. Pavel raised money mostly from various businesses, while Babiš was funded entirely by his own company, the conglomerate Agrofert. Candidates with less financial backing were at a disadvantage. The trade union leader Josef Středula eventually raised CZK 9.7 million, most of which was donated by a businessman and member of the right-wing ODS (Občanská demokratická strana, Civic Democratic Party), who believed there should be some representation for alternative views.

The media landscape enables candidates to freely voice their opinions. In the fall of 2023, Andrej Babiš sold his media consortium Mafra to an entrepreneur. Before this,

he had been widely accused of using media he controlled to support his political campaigning and denigrate opponents. He had owned large dailies *Mladá fronta dnes* and *Lidové noviny*, as well as internet portals.

Citation:

Lenka Bustikova and Petra Guasti. 2023. "The Czech Republic's Flannel Revolution." CEPA <https://cepa.org/article/the-czech-republics-flannel-revolution>

Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. The Czech Republic. Presidential Election. 13-14 and 27-28 January 2023. ODIHR Election Expert Team. Final Report. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/0/545815.pdf>

Lenka Bušířková and Petra Guasti. 2019. "The State as a Firm: Understanding the Autocratic Roots of Technocratic Populism." *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures* 33 (2): 302-330.

Denmark

Score 9

The basic rule for candidacy procedures is laid out in Article 30 of the Danish constitution: "Any person who is entitled to vote at general (parliamentary) elections shall be eligible for membership of the Folketinget, unless he has been convicted of an act which in the eyes of the public makes him unworthy to be a member of the Folketinget." It is the unicameral parliament (Folketinget) itself that ultimately decides whether a conviction renders someone unworthy of membership. Since the 1953 constitution, only twice have elected members been found unworthy to take office. Such a decision applies only to one electoral term, allowing the candidate to present themselves in the next election. This occurred in 1987 when parliamentarian Mogens Glistrup was found worthy of taking office after serving a prison sentence for tax avoidance, which had rendered him unworthy after the 1982 election.

Political parties play a crucial role in selecting candidates for elections (Zahle 2005). Although it is possible to run in an election as an independent candidate, it is extremely difficult to win in that capacity. Given the relatively high number of political parties, it is reasonably easy to become a candidate for a party. There is also the option of forming a new party. To participate in general elections, a new party must collect at least 20,000 voter declarations, which are then verified and approved by the Ministry of the Interior and Health. Parties typically need at least 2% of the votes to gain representation in parliament. This threshold corresponds to four seats. If a party fails to secure enough votes to enter parliament, those votes are effectively lost.

At the regional and municipal level, access to the ballot is more lenient. To be on the ballot in a regional or municipal election, candidates have to secure 25 signatures from voters living in the municipality or region. Consequently, local lists and individuals are elected locally (Ministry of the Interior and Health 2024).

Parties are generously funded in Denmark. Currently, they receive DKK 37 per vote gained in the preceding national election, DKK 8.25 per vote obtained in a municipal

election and DKK 5.25 per vote gained in a regional election (Ministry of the Interior and Health 2024b).

Party financing is relatively transparent in Denmark. According to the law, donations above DKK 25,000 cannot be made anonymously. There are press reports that donors partition their contributions into amounts lower than DKK 25,000 to avoid having to reveal their identities publicly. Another loophole exists in the form of party clubs, where donors pay a membership fee to gain access to top parliamentarians. These clubs are being discussed, but according to most press accounts, amounts flowing into parties are limited, probably due to the generous public funding of parties (Puguntke et al. 2016).

The Danish media landscape is dominated by the Danish Broadcasting Company (DR), which is publicly funded. Albæk et al. find that the reporting in DR is politically unbiased (Albæk et al. 2010). The print press is largely privately owned, and according to some commentators, these media lean to the right, with the exception of the daily Politiken, which self-declares as a center-left newspaper (Winter 2023). Even if the media coverage of electoral campaigns is not subject to strict regulations – for instance, in terms of equitable access – the coverage of issues and candidates before the 2022 general elections was “comprehensive and meaningful” (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2023, p. 9).

Citation:

Albæk, E., Hopmann, D. N., and de Vreese, C. H. 2010. *Kunsten at holde balancen: dækningen af folketingsvalgkampe i tv-nyhederne på DR1 og TV2, 1994-2007*. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag.

Ministry of the Interior and Health 2024. <https://elections.im.dk>

Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. 2023. *Denmark – Early General Elections 1 November 2022*. ODIHR Election Expert Team Final Report. Warsaw: OSCE ODIHR.

Poguntke, Thomas, et al. 2016. “Party Rules, Party Resources and the Politics of Parliamentary Democracies: How Parties Organize in the 21st Century.” *Party Politics* 22 (6): 661-678.

Winter, B. 2023. “Læsere vælger avis efter partifarve - CVAP i Berlingske.” https://cvap.polsci.ku.dk/forskning/valgkamp/presse/L_serne_v_lger_avis_etter_partifarve_-_CVAP_i_Berlingske.pdf

Zahle, H. 2005. *Dansk forfatningsret I: Institutioner og regulering*. Copenhagen: Christian Ejlers' Forlag.

France

Score 9

Political competition for access to power is open and not systematically biased. Overall, political practices and regulations both contribute to fair access and transparency.

Requirements to be a candidate in elections are generally limited (see Aceproject 2024). French nationality is required except for European and local elections; in such cases, being a citizen of an EU country is sufficient, as long as the potential

candidate resides in France. The minimum age of eligibility has been 18 for all elections since 2011, except for the senatorial elections, for which the minimum age is 24. Potential candidates must not have been deprived of civic and voting rights, and must be registered on the electoral rolls. Residence within the electoral district is also expected – although this condition is generally limited to the obligation to pay local taxes in this territory. Candidates then have to deposit a file with the “préfecture” – the local office of the central government – or with the Constitutional Council (for the presidential election).

For presidential elections, this file includes a mandatory declaration of possible conflicts of interest as well as a disclosure of patrimony at the time of the election. Controversially, presidential candidates must also present 500 signatures by sponsors. These signatures can be given by officeholders at the local or national level, and are made public. Although some candidates fail to gather the requested number of signatures, this has not prevented a certain diversity, with 12 candidates participating in the first round of the presidential election of 2022 (Bendjaballah and Sauger 2023).

Over the course of the campaign, whatever the level, all candidate financial activities have to be registered and then reported (CNCCFP 2024). The National Commission for Campaign Accounts and Political Funding (Commission nationale des comptes de campagne et des financements politiques, CNCCFP) is an independent regulatory agency in charge of organizing the collection and dissemination of this data. The data are published in the Official Journal of the Republic. Candidate accounts also must be certified. Donations from firms and organizations to candidates have been banned since the 1990s. Donations from private individuals are still allowed, with a cap set at €4,600 per individual for an election. All donations above €3,000 lead to the disclosure of the name of the donor. Political parties have similar obligations, with the CNCCFP supervising both candidates and parties. For parties, maximum donations are set at €7,500 for an individual and €15,000 for the household as a whole.

In practice, the variety of the background of candidates and the spectrum of policy positions advocated by political parties is very large, from the radical Trotskyist left to the extreme neo-fascist right.

Access to the media is strictly monitored by the national independent agency in charge of mass and new media, Arcom (Authority of the Regulation of Audiovisual and Digital Communication, Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique). Media time accrued by all political actors is accounted for (Arcom 2024). Outside of electoral campaigns, Arcom imposes an allocation rule of one-third of the time for the president and the government, with the remaining two-thirds to be split in a “fair” manner among all parties. Fairness is based on the importance of parties, taking into account past electoral results, opinion polls and all relevant political dynamics. During election campaigns, media time allocation is even more strictly monitored. For presidential campaigns, during the official

campaign – the last weeks of the race – Arcom switches its principle of fairness to a principle of strict equality of time granted to all candidates in the election.

Disproportionate media coverage of individual political actors because of their background characteristics has not recently led to long-lasting discussions. However, the surge of business leaders in the media landscape has triggered more reflections on their role. While many have invested in the written press, the most controversial case is Vincent Bolloré. This prominent businessman has bought print publications and TV groups in recent years, including Canal+. He has been accused of systematic interventions in these media, demanding a more conservative editorial line. The relative success of the radical right Eric Zemmour has largely been attributed to Bolloré's support.

For digital media, the most acute issue stems from the intervention of Russian hackers in electoral campaigns. This has been proven, for instance, in the case of the 2017 election, in which the “Macron leaks” – the publication of several emails from Macron's campaign team – was traced back to two groups of Russian hackers linked to Russian special operations (Vilmer 2020).

The fair media coverage principle and regulations on party and candidate funding are also mostly respected in practice. For instance, the public disclosure of financial accounts is centralized by the CNCCFP, and failure to meet its standards leads to the loss of state public funding, which is crucial for most significant parties. Of course, violations still take place. On the one hand, all pieces of legislation have their loopholes. For example, CNCCFP is currently working to track personal loans to candidates or parties, which are increasing and lack some transparency. On the other hand, scandals regarding the funding of campaigns have tainted several prominent candidates' reputations. Nicolas Sarkozy was notably deemed guilty by courts of submitting fake invoices in his presidential campaign of 2012, and is awaiting trial for receiving funding from the state of Libya in his 2007 campaign. The participation of the audit firm McKinsey in Emmanuel Macron's electoral campaigns of 2017 and 2022 is also currently under scrutiny by the National Judicial Prosecutor's Office.

To some extent, the periodic losses by incumbents demonstrates the openness of the country's political competition. Electoral swings are important, and new credible candidates can emerge in a matter of months at the national level. Even the politicization of the design of the political districts map – which is mostly in the hands of the Ministry of Interior – does not lead to massive gerrymandering but rather to inaction, as actors are worried by the possible accusation of manipulation (Sauger and Grofman 2016). Conversely, the ease of credibly entering political races could be seen as a potential problem in terms of political stability and effective accountability.

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Germany

Score 9

Both independent candidates and candidates from registered parties may run for election to the Bundestag. To qualify for the ballot, political parties and candidates must meet specific registration requirements outlined in the Political Parties Act (Parteiengesetz). These requirements differ based on whether the qualification concerns a party or an independent candidate.

At the subnational level, the State Election Act of a state (Landeswahlgesetz) specifies the criteria for candidates and parties. Non-established parties – those that have not held at least five seats in the Bundestag or a state parliament (Landtag) continuously since the last election – must be assessed for eligibility by the Federal Election Committee (Bundewahl Ausschuss) or, in the case of state elections, by the respective state's Election Committee. These parties must submit various documents, such as a declaration of intent, their manifesto, and a demonstration of their status as a party (Partei Eigenschaft, §2 Abs. 2 PartG).

Additionally, non-established parties and non-partisan candidates must provide a minimum number of signatures from eligible voters in the electoral district where they intend to run for election. Candidates are also required to submit personal information and details about their party affiliation (Bundewahlleiterin, 2021). Rejected parties have the right to appeal the decision up to 75 days before the election (OSCE, 2022: 5).

The Basic Law (§ 21 Abs. 1 GG) mandates that parties disclose their assets and the origins of their financial resources. While parties must identify donors of contributions above €500, transparency is required only for donations exceeding €10,000 from a single donor within one year. In such cases, parties must disclose the donor's name, address, and the total amount given. Furthermore, donations exceeding €50,000 must be reported to the president of the German parliament immediately, and these donations are also made available online (BMI, 2023).

Regarding media access for parties and candidates, the activities of broadcasting media are regulated by the laws of the Länder, with no general media-related regulations at the federal level. However, the Interstate Treaty on Broadcasting and Telemedia (Rundfunkstaatsvertrag) provides a general framework, ensuring the plurality of opinion and balanced coverage of all major political, ideological, and social forces.

All parties with a list in at least one federal state are to receive an “appropriate” amount of broadcasting time. The amount of airtime allocated to each party depends on its performance in the previous general election. While campaigning in public media is free of charge, private media charge for election airtime. The OSCE notes that this could make it difficult for smaller parties to afford airtime, especially for the 2023 Berlin elections, which included more than two elections in one cycle (OSCE, 2023: 9).

In addition to public and private media campaigns, an increasing number of parties and candidates are utilizing social media channels like Facebook and Instagram for electoral campaigns, with a substantial portion focusing on negative campaigning. During the federal elections in 2021, candidates often sought to discredit their opponents through disinformation and hate speech (Ruttloff et al., 2023). In Germany, as in other OECD countries, disinformation spread through social media has been shown to impact voter loyalty, leading to vote switching. For the 2017 federal election, the AfD in particular benefited from the fact that many CDU voters were receptive to disinformation distributed over social media (Zimmermann and Kohring, 2020).

Citation:

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Greece

Score 9

In Greek national and local government elections, there are de jure and de facto no barriers to political party competition. The process for registering political parties is straightforward, as outlined by Presidential Decree 96/2007. Party registration requires a simple statement signed by the party leader and submitted to Greece’s Supreme Court (Areios Pagos). The Supreme Court rarely excludes parties from participating in elections. The law establishes clear, objectively verifiable criteria for

registration, including: a) avoiding the use of a party name already claimed by another party, b) refraining from using Greece's national symbols or emblems as party insignia, and c) collecting at least 200 signatures from citizens supporting the party.

Political parties that surpass the 3% electoral threshold in national parliamentary elections, or obtain at least 1.5% of the vote in European Parliament elections, are granted equal opportunities for media access. Media ownership may influence political alignments, with media owners occasionally shifting their support between the government and the opposition, depending on their business interests. However, during electoral campaigns, laws are enforced to ensure that candidates and parties have relatively equal access to the media.

Party financing is governed by a law first adopted in 2002 and subsequently amended, with all relevant regulations codified most recently in 2022. In practice, parties and candidates are required to maintain financial records, disclose the value of donations received, and regularly publish their accounts. However, the accuracy of these records is sometimes disputed, and some donations are made off the books, evading detection by the independent committee responsible for overseeing party financing (known as the "Control Committee").

The Control Committee is composed of 11 members – three members of parliament and eight senior judges and administrators. Despite its oversight role, the committee rarely imposes strict penalties for violations of party financing regulations. This leniency reflects the broader context of the Greek economy, where tax evasion and undeclared income are widespread.

Political competition in Greece is somewhat distorted by the access of parties and candidates to undeclared funding sources. However, it is not affected by gerrymandering, as the government does not arbitrarily redraw electoral districts. In terms of new media, political parties actively use campaign managers to exploit platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Media pluralism in these domains allows for the verification and debunking of fake news circulated by any single source, as other sources work to confirm the authenticity of the information.

In summary, over the last half-century (1974–2024), despite the often intense polarization in Greece's two-party system, elections have been conducted legally and fairly, without significant challenges being posed to the system by parties or candidates.

Citation:

ACE project. n.d. "Registration requirements for parties – Greece." <https://aceproject.org/epic-en/CDTable?view=country&question=PC001>

The law regulating party financing, first adopted in 2002, was Law 3023/2002. The law's regulations and subsequent amendments were codified in 2022 by Presidential Decree 15/2022.

Ireland

Score 9

Political competition between and among candidates and political parties in Ireland is free and fair, largely due to the Proportional Representation Single Transferable Voting (PRSTV) system. This system facilitates competition for individual independents, small parties and larger parties. Irish electoral law mandates that only candidates stand for election (ACE 2023). While it is not compulsory for a political party to register, registration is required to access state funding. Registration procedures for candidates and political parties meet standards of transparency and fairness, including small financial deposits, age requirements, no party affiliation requirement and no exclusions for insolvency, undischarged bankruptcy or criminal record convictions.

To run as a candidate in Irish elections, individuals must be citizens and over 21. Political parties typically hold competitive selection conventions to choose candidates for each constituency through local ‘one member one vote’ systems, with some variations. National parties accept such nominations and sometimes add to local lists at their discretion. Independent candidates must present a nomination paper to the returning officer in the constituency where they want to stand. Eligible candidates are not prevented from being elected or disqualified from registration except by objectively verifiable criteria set by law. Candidates and parties denied the right to be elected or registered have the right to appeal to a competent jurisdiction capable of reviewing such decisions and correcting errors promptly. Candidates and parties must maintain accurate financial records, disclose the nature and value of received donations and regularly publish their accounts (SIPO 2024).

The Electoral Reform Bill 2021 regulates online political advertising (Lynch, 2017). Candidates and parties generally have fair access to the media and other communication channels, though smaller parties, local or independent candidates, ethnic minorities and women may face uneven access. The media landscape covers various political positions but tends to privilege economic discourse and actors. Party funding is transparently monitored by the Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO), which imposes sanctions for violations and reports after each election cycle. A Registrar of Political Parties accepts notices and applications for party registration, monitored by the Chief Executive of An Coimisiún Toghcháin, the Electoral Commission, who is also the Registrar of Political Parties. Decisions take effect after a 21-day appeal period and are formally notified in the official Irish state newspaper, *Iris Oifigiúil*.

In the next election, there will be 174 members of Parliament, a decrease from 166 to 160 in 2020, then up by 14, representing 43 constituencies, reflecting population growth (Electoral (Amendment) Act 2023). Boundary Commission processes ensure accountable constituency revisions, avoiding significant advantages for specific candidates or parties and preventing gerrymandering. Since 2023, this function is

managed by the Electoral Commission. Political competition is influenced and can be distorted by social media tactics as smaller far-right parties use social media to project fake news and distort debates (HCC 2023).

Citation:

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Italy

Score 9

The Italian constitution and laws establish the conditions for free, fair, and competitive elections that adhere to the principles of a liberal democracy. According to the latest V-Dem data (2022), Italy scores relatively high on the Clean Elections index. This indicates that experts consider Italian elections free from registration fraud, systematic irregularities, government intimidation of the opposition, vote-buying, and electoral violence. Additionally, all parties, including the opposition, can operate freely and participate in elections. Indicators of freedom of expression suggest that the media are generally unbiased and that all parties have access to national broadcasts. Overall, Italy's data is comparable to other European liberal democracies.

The constitution specifies that active and passive electorates do not coincide. Membership in the Chamber of Deputies requires a minimum age of 25, while the Senate of the Republic requires a minimum age of 40 (Articles 56 and 58). These rules reflect the idea that members of the upper chamber should possess different competencies and skills than those of the lower chamber to help improve the quality of legislation. High civil servants, high-ranking military officers, magistrates, and mayors of municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants are ineligible for the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate (President of the Republic Decree 361/1957 and Legislative Decree 533/1993).

Moreover, the offices of deputy or senator are incompatible with positions in elected assemblies at the local or supranational level (European Parliament) (Law 60/1953 and subsequent amendments). Lastly, citizens convicted (after all levels of judgment) of certain crimes and sentenced to more than two years in prison cannot be candidates (Legislative Decree 235/2012).

Parties must submit their symbol to the Ministry of the Interior between 44 and 42 days before the election date (President of the Republic Decree 361/1957 and

subsequent amendments), along with a copy of their statute, a declaration of transparency, and the party manifesto (Law 165/2017). Since the 2018 general election, these documents are published on a Ministry of the Interior website accessible to all citizens. Party lists may be excluded from the competition if the symbol does not meet legal standards. In such cases, they can appeal to the Supreme Court of Cassation, which decides on their admission. In the September 2022 general election, 101 symbols were presented, of which 75 were accepted (Ministry of Interior 2022).

After submitting their symbols, parties must submit their list of candidates. For both chambers, the list must be signed by at least 1,500 and no more than 2,000 voters for each multi-member district into which the territory is divided (President of the Republic Decree 361/1957 and subsequent amendments; see also ACE project data).

Following the 2020 constitutional revision, which reduced the number of members of the Chamber of Deputies from 630 to 400 and senators from 315 to 200, there are now 49 districts for the lower house and 26 for the upper house. Therefore, approximately 73,500 signatures are required to present lists nationwide in both houses. However, in early elections, such as those in September 2022, this figure is halved.

Starting in 2022, political parties established as a parliamentary group in at least one of the two chambers by December 31, 2021, are exempt from collecting signatures (Decree Law 41/2022). This rule poses an obstacle to new parties entering electoral competition, although they can circumvent it by allying with existing parties. Similar obstacles to curbing the proliferation of party lists are common in other democracies. Signatures must be authenticated by several institutional authorities (Law 21/1990). Occasionally, there have been disagreements about the legitimacy of signatures collected by the most prominent political parties, but not during the most recent elections, as most significant parties were exempted from collecting them.

Beginning with the 2022 elections, candidates must submit their CVs and a certificate certifying no pending criminal convictions. These documents are then posted on a Ministry of the Interior website, accessible to all citizens (Law 9/2019). Although this requirement provides voters with better tools to evaluate candidates' competencies and quality, it is ineffective. Voters cannot express a preference for individual candidates because lists are blocked. Additionally, the CV information is highly inconsistent, with some CVs being extraordinarily detailed and others relatively succinct. Selection methods vary from party to party according to their statutes. Only the Five Stars Movement used online closed primaries to select candidates in multi-member districts for both chambers.

To guarantee female representation, Italian electoral law (Law 165/2017) mandates that candidate lists include at least 40% female candidates, following the so-called zipper system, which requires parties to alternate between women and men on their candidate lists. Despite this, women remain underrepresented in both chambers. On

one hand, legal sanctions for noncompliance with this rule are relatively soft (see also the International IDEA Gender Quotas Database). On the other hand, parties can easily circumvent the norm by strategically using the possibility of nominating the same candidate in multiple multi-member districts (up to five, according to the electoral law). Female candidates are usually nominated in multiple districts; however, they often opt for only one district, freeing up seats for male candidates further down the list.

For the election campaign, candidates can spend a fixed amount of €2,000 plus a variable amount depending on the size (in terms of registered voters) of the multi-member constituency in which they compete. Parties may spend a maximum of €1 multiplied by the total number of registered voters in all districts where the party competes (Law 515/1993 and subsequent amendments). Candidate and party expenditures are monitored by the Court of Appeals and the Court of Auditors, respectively. For irregularities, there are mainly financial penalties. The 2014 reform eliminated all public funding for parties (Law 13/2014) (see also the IDEA International Political Finance Database). Transparency issues remain concerning the increasingly influential but less visible role of political foundations.

Social media played a significant role in political communication during the campaign leading up to the September 2022 elections, compared to traditional media such as television and newspapers. This trend can be understood in the context of the specific nature of the most recent general election.

First, these were early elections, giving parties little time to organize their campaigns. Second, the campaign took place during the summer, when citizens traditionally engage less in political matters and watch less television. Finally, all polls had long suggested a victory for the center-right coalition, particularly for Brothers of Italy.

These factors contributed to the campaign's low profile in both public and political debates..

Citation:

Political finance database: https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/country?country=110&database_theme=302

Gender quotas database: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas-database>

Ace project: https://aceproject.org/epic-en/CDCountry?set_language=en&topic=PC&country=IT#PC001

V-Dem: https://v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf

Ministry of Interior: <https://dait.interno.gov.it/elezioni/trasparenza/elezioni-politiche-2022>

Latvia

Score 9

All electoral registration procedures provide equal opportunities for each candidate in elections for the European Parliament, the national parliament, and local bodies. These procedures adhere to standards of transparency and fairness.

Only political parties are authorized to submit candidate lists for EU, parliamentary, and local elections. A political party with at least 500 members or an alliance of political parties can submit a list. An alliance must have been established at least a year before the elections and have a minimum of 500 members.

Any Latvian citizen over the age of 21 is eligible to be a candidate in national elections. However, there are restrictions related to historical justice and the Soviet occupation period. Individuals who served in the Soviet Secret Services are ineligible to be candidates, a restriction that must be substantiated with a certificate from the court.

To ensure compliance with the Saeima Election Law and its candidacy restrictions, registered candidate lists are reviewed by the Directorate of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, the Information Center of the Ministry of the Interior, and the Center for Documenting the Consequences of Totalitarianism. Decisions by the Central Election Commission (CVK) to register or reject a candidate list, or to remove a nominated candidate from a registered list, can be appealed in court within three working days. Once registered, candidate lists cannot be withdrawn. The Central Election Commission can only amend lists to delete candidates who do not meet the Saeima Election Law requirements, based on opinions or court judgments, or to make technical corrections.

The Central Election Commission also oversees and establishes procedures for local elections. Local election commissions handle the submission of candidate lists for these elections.

Latvia's media landscape is pluralistic, with election campaigns covered by TV, radio, online news platforms, social media, and print media, ensuring equal access for all candidates and political parties. There are increasing numbers of public debates between political party leaders, especially for parties polling around and above the 5% threshold.

In 2022, several amendments were made to the Law on Electronic Mass Media, allowing the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) to suspend access to websites that post disinformation or threats to national security. This measure aims to prevent the use of disinformation, inaccurate information, or media manipulation during pre-election campaigns.

The Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) independently monitors the funding and expenses of political parties transparently and imposes sanctions in cases of violations.

Citation:

The Law on Elections of Saeima. Adopted May 25, 1995. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/35261-law-on-the-election-of-the-saeimai>

OSCE. 2023. Latvia, Parliamentary Elections, 1 October 2022: Final Report. ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/latvia/541053>

Law on the Election of Local Government Councils. Adopted Jan. 13, 1994. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/57839-law-on-the-election-of-local-government-councils>

Pre-election Campaign Law. Adopted Nov. 29, 2012. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/253543-pre-election-campaign-law>

Law on Financing of Political Organisations (Parties). Adopted July 19, 1995. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/36189-law-on-financing-of-political-organisations-parties>

NEPLP. 2022. “Vadlīnijas elektronisko plašsaziņas līdzekļu darbībai priekšvēlēšanu aģitācijas perioda laikā.” <https://www.neplp.lv/lv/vadlinijas-elektronisko-plassazinas-lidzeklu-darbibai-prieksvelesanu-agitacijas-perioda-laika>

Lithuania

Score 9

Lithuania’s laws ensure free and fair political competition in national, municipal and European Parliament elections. For a political party to be established, it must have at least 2,000 members. There are minimum deposit requirements for the registration of candidates for all elections and a minimum number of candidates for the Seimas elections. While these requirements might favor established political parties, they are relatively low – starting with a deposit equal to the average monthly wage – and are based on objectively verifiable criteria.

Political parties are eligible to receive state funding if they collected at least 2% of votes during the most recent municipal, parliamentary and European Parliament elections. Taxpayers can also donate up to 0.6% of their personal income tax to political parties. To be eligible to participate in the Seimas elections, candidates must be at least 21 years old; they face additional restrictions related to employment in statutory institutions, criminal records and so on.

Additionally, to be eligible to participate in the presidential elections, candidates must be at least 40 years old and have resided in Lithuania for the last three years. They also have to collect at least 20,000 signatures supporting their candidacy.

Candidates and parties who are denied registration have the right to appeal, and their appeals are reviewed promptly. Parties and candidates must maintain accurate financial records. There is a requirement for a double deposit for any party that in the last elections to the Seimas, municipal councils or the European Parliament nominated candidates but did not furnish a copy of that political campaign’s funding reports and the previous calendar year’s financial statements in compliance with the relevant laws.

Either independent candidates or party-affiliated candidates can stand for election. The so-called public electoral committees, which have been able to participate in municipal and European Parliament elections and compete with political parties since 2015, initially faced less demanding requirements for registration and financial accountability. However, in 2022 these requirements were made stricter to bring them closer to those applied to political parties. Since then, at least 1,000 members have been needed to establish a public electoral committee for participation in European Parliament elections, and at least 0.1% of the population of a particular municipality is required in order to participate in municipal elections.

The territorial boundaries of electoral constituencies have been redrawn based on objective criteria related to demographic changes. In general, neither individual candidates nor parties are discriminated against. The relatively low requirements for establishing a political party and registering candidacies produce a large number of candidates and a broad choice of political alternatives in national, municipal and European Parliament elections. This was again the case in the last municipal elections in March 2023, when 16 parties and 32 public electoral committees were registered for participation, although the number of candidates representing public electoral committees declined compared to the 2019 municipal elections, when 97 were registered (Central Electoral Commission 2023).

Parties and independent candidates have fair opportunities to access the media, particularly through the state-funded Lithuanian public broadcaster, Lithuanian National Radio and Television, which is mandated by law to provide equal access for all candidates to debate and present their election programs. However, the fact that more than half of the mayors in the 60 municipalities were reelected suggests that incumbents may have practical advantages over new candidates in terms of access to local media and other networks that enhance their visibility.

Citation:

The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania. 1992. <https://lrkt.lt/en/about-the-court/legal-information/the-constitution/192>

Republic of Lithuania, Law on the Elections to the Seimas. 1992. (last amended on 22 March 2016 – No XII-2265). art. 37(2), 41(1-3).

Republic of Lithuania, Law on Political Parties. 1990. No I-606, as last amended on 6 November 2014, No XII-1292.

Republic of Lithuania, Law on the Lithuanian National Radio and Television. 2020. No. I-1571, XIII-2929, art. 5.

The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania. 2023. “The Results of the Elections to Municipal Councils in March 2023.” <https://www.vrk.lt/en/savivaldybiu-tarybu-ir-meru-2023/rezultatai>

New Zealand

Score 9

New Zealand is widely considered to have a high degree of fairness and freedom in political competition among candidates and parties (e.g., Garnett et al. 2022).

Electoral registration procedures for candidates and political parties are designed to uphold transparency and fairness. The Electoral Act sets clear criteria and guidelines for registering political parties and candidates. Information regarding the registration process, requirements and deadlines is publicly available.

Political parties and candidates must maintain accurate financial records, disclose the nature and value of the donations received, and regularly publish their accounts. This requirement is governed by the Electoral Act 1993 and subsequent amendments, as well as the Electoral Finance Act 2007 and the Electoral Amendment Act 2010.

Under these laws, political parties and candidates must keep detailed records on their financial transactions, including on donations received and expenditures made. They

are also required to disclose certain information about their donors, including the nature and value of donations above a certain threshold. Large donations must be disclosed publicly, and donors must be identified in financial reports. The Electoral Commission oversees and audits these financial reports to ensure compliance with the law. Failure to comply with reporting requirements can result in penalties or fines.

If a voter believes they have been unjustly excluded from registration or elections, they can appeal to the Electoral Commission, which oversees elections and maintains the electoral roll. The Electoral Commission has procedures to handle appeals and ensure voters are treated fairly and in accordance with the law.

Candidates and political parties generally have fair opportunities to access the media. Public broadcasters Radio New Zealand (RNZ) and Television New Zealand (TVNZ) are expected to provide fair and balanced coverage to all political parties. However, the media landscape is comparatively small, with privately owned newspapers and online news services, as well as privately owned radio stations, outperforming the reach and ratings of public media.

Public debates continue to focus on the fairness of elections, political donations and leaders' debates. For instance, the Independent Electoral Review, published in June 2023, recommended lowering the 5% threshold to 3.5% to make it easier for smaller parties to enter Parliament, among other points (Daalder 2023). With the arrival of a new government, it is unclear how many of these will be implemented. Additionally, ongoing discussions persist about whether and how to guarantee Māori political representation at the national and subnational levels (e.g., Trafford 2023).

Citation:

Daalder, M. 2023. "Electoral review recommends 3.5% threshold, voting age of 16." Newsroom June 5. <https://newsroom.co.nz/2023/06/05/electoral-review-recommends-35-threshold-voting-age-of-16/>

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Norway

Score 9

Any person or group able to mobilize 5,000 petition signatures from eligible voters is entitled to form a political party. The party is registered in a national register and may receive donations from private citizens. All donations and donors are registered and transparent to the public. Any political party that receives at least 500 votes in a single district or more than 5,000 votes nationally will receive economic support from the state. The support level is determined by parliament and is proportionate to

the number of votes. Party representatives may run for office in national and local elections with no specific qualifying conditions if they have the right to vote. All members of parliament and government are required to report any economic interest they may have as owners or shareholders.

Citation:

<https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/political-parties-act/id440680/>

Portugal

Score 9

By law, presidential candidates in Portugal must disclose specific information, such as criminal records and declarations of income and assets. In contrast, candidates for legislative and local elections are only required to provide basic information, including party or group identification, age, address, and party affiliation. Rejected candidates and parties have the right to appeal to the Constitutional Court within two days after the publication of the list (Lei n.º 14/79, art. 30).

Financial transparency is mandated, requiring parties to conduct internal audits of their activities and campaign accounts. The Constitutional Court, along with the independent body Entidade das Contas e Financiamentos Políticos (ECFP), monitors party funding and audits political parties' accounts and electoral campaigns (Lei n.º 19/2003, art. 24). Although there were significant delays in previous years in providing account reports, recent reports up to 2022 are now available on the ECFP website. These delays were primarily due to the ECFP's ongoing lack of essential and adequate human resources (ECFP, 2023).

Regarding media access, all candidates and parties theoretically enjoy equal rights and opportunities. Electoral propaganda is distributed through public and private radio and television stations, including Radio and Television of Portugal (RTP) (Lei n.º 14/79, art. 62). However, the growing use of new media, particularly among Portuguese youth, raises concerns about disinformation and fake news campaigns (MediaLAB Iscte, 2019). Despite high trust in traditional media and a low risk of external disinformation campaigns among the Portuguese population (MediaLAB Iscte, 2019), the potential impact of distorted public opinion perceptions on political competition is a real concern. The misuse of AI models and the creation of fake content are alarming examples (Pereira, 2023).

Obstacles to the representativeness of all parties still exist within the electoral system. The combination of low-magnitude districts and the D'Hondt system creates a majoritarian bonus, hindering new parties and strengthening the two largest ones (PS and PSD). While there is no legal electoral threshold, smaller parties polling below 5% can only aspire to win seats in the largest electoral circles: Lisbon and Porto (Serra-Silva & Santos 2023: 131).

Citation:

Law No. 14/79. 1979. Lei Eleitoral da Assembleia da República.
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<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351046916>

Slovakia

Score 9

Slovak legislation enshrines all standard elements of free and fair elections. Legal provisions regarding the registration of parties and candidates are liberal and ensure a fair process. Registered political parties, movements, and coalitions can nominate candidate lists for parliamentary elections. These nominating organizations must obtain 10,000 signatures and deposit €17,000, which is returned only if they receive at least 2% of the vote. Eligible parties and candidates are not disqualified from registration without adhering to objectively verifiable legal criteria. Those denied the right to be elected or registered can appeal to the Supreme Administrative Court.

The State Commission for Elections and Control of Financing of Political Parties (Štátna komisia pre voľby a kontrolu financovania politických strán) supervises national elections. This commission has 14 members: ten nominated by political parties in parliament, and one member each delegated by the president of the Constitutional Court, the president of the Supreme Administrative Court, the prosecutor general, and the president of the Supreme Audit Office. Parties must maintain accurate financial records, disclose donations, and regularly publish accounts. The State Commission monitors party funding, and each party must submit an annual report to parliament. Although the law on political parties stipulates various fines for noncompliance, these are infrequently enforced, as not all political parties use transparent accounts during elections.

Candidates and parties have fair opportunities to access public media. The public broadcaster, Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS), is legally required to introduce candidates and present their campaigns. Political broadcasting on private

media outlets is free. No official bodies overseeing election campaign fairness reported media manipulation. However, a few days before the elections, a deepfake audio was posted on social media to discredit the leader of Progressive Slovakia (Kóváry, 2023).

Transparency International Slovakia evaluated the transparency and accuracy of financial records of political parties during the 2023 elections. The SaS party performed best in terms of transparency, while the Hlas party performed the worst. The National Criminal Agency (NAKA) is investigating possible manipulation of the 2023 parliamentary elections, particularly concerning the unrealistically high percentage of votes given to OĽANO and its allies in some Roma settlements.

Citation:

Zákon o podmienkach výkonu volebného práva a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov. <https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/2014-180>

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Slovenia

Score 9

In Slovenia, the right to vote is universal and equal. Every citizen aged 18 or older is eligible to vote and run for election, regardless of social, ethnic, economic, or other affiliations. No financial deposit is necessary for registration or candidacy, and citizens are automatically enrolled upon reaching voting age. Slovenia ranked eighth globally in voter registration quality from 2012 to 2022, according to the Electoral Integrity Project (2023).

Political parties and voter groups can nominate candidates for various elections. For the National Assembly, a party may submit lists of candidates in all eight constituencies with the support of at least three National Assembly members or submit a list in a single constituency with backing from at least 100 voters. Alternatively, voters may propose a list in a single constituency with the support of

at least 1,000 residents. Objections regarding the nomination process can be raised with the constituency electoral commission, and decisions are subject to review by the state electoral commission. Similar procedures apply to presidential elections.

In municipal elections, candidates for mayor or council members can be nominated by political parties or voters, with the required support contingent on the municipality's size. The law regulates campaign financing for electoral and referendum campaigns, mandating financial transparency through reporting to the Slovenian Agency for Public Law and Related Services, with oversight from the Court of Audit. However, challenges persist, particularly concerning the regulation of third-party campaigning, including foreign entities.

Public broadcasting must provide equal access to all parties and candidate lists for debates and presentations, although non-parliamentary parties often have limited media access compared to established parties. While television remains a primary source of political information, printed media influence is waning, and online platforms are gaining prominence. Slovenian public television tends to create formats that favor the frontrunners. Media coverage in 2022 faced criticism for political bias, especially following personnel changes in public broadcasting. Nonetheless, media pluralism ensures voters have access to diverse political perspectives.

Citation:

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RTVSLO.si. 2023. "Poročilo komisije o financiranju političnih strank 'se bere kot politični triler.'" <https://www.rtvsl.si/slovenija/porocilo-komisije-o-financiranju-politcnih-strank-se-bere-kot-politcni-triler/689451>

European Parliament. 2022. "EU Youth Survey; The Source of Information of Young Slovenes about Politics." <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/youth-survey-2021>

Spain

Score 9

Registration procedures for candidates and political parties meet international standards of transparency and fairness. Candidates disqualified from registration or prevented from being elected have the right to appeal to a competent jurisdiction. Parties and candidates are required to maintain accurate financial records, and recent elections have not seen significant exclusion or discrimination. Only those convicted in certain criminal cases, always by a court, may lose their political rights. Candidates and parties denied registration or election rights can appeal to the administrative court, whose decisions can further be appealed to the Constitutional Court. Finalized lists are published in the official gazette.

All Congress of Deputies electoral candidate lists must ensure a minimum representation of 40% for each gender. Parliamentary parties are exempt from collecting signatures for candidate nominations, while non-parliamentary parties must gather signatures from at least 0.1% of voters in the respective constituency for their proposed lists. Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE), the major national public broadcaster, is obligated to inform voters about upcoming elections, providing proportional coverage of all contestants and organizing election debates.

All political parties with parliamentary representation have access to public media during electoral campaigns. They are covered by news reports and can participate in candidate debates. However, new parties face restricted access, with airtime in news and elections-related programming distributed based on past electoral performance. This has sparked controversy, particularly regarding the limitations faced by new parties in their first electoral campaign before entering parliament. According to the OSCE, the 2023 elections had fair media access and coverage, but challenges related to disinformation were noted. Concerns have also been raised about certain regional governments' influence over regional public media.

The party financing law was reformed in 2015 as part of an anti-corruption plan to increase transparency and impose sanctions following numerous scandals. It imposes spending limits in electoral campaigns, and business contributions are theoretically subject to limits and conditions. Despite this, recent controversies have emerged regarding certain political parties attempting to evade legal scrutiny. Campaign spending is limited, and third-party financing of election campaigns is strictly prohibited. Candidates must submit a comprehensive report to the audit office detailing campaign income and expenditures within 100 to 125 days post-election. The legislation does not provide for interim reporting.

The Central Election Commission monitors compliance with campaign finance rules. The audit office, responsible for auditing party accounts, is empowered to undertake investigations on its own initiative and upon complaint. The OSCE noted that the audit office has strengthened its capacity for auditing political parties and developed

internal regulations, including online submission of annual party and campaign finance reports. Among other initiatives, the audit office launched a public website providing information on the economic and financial activities of political parties and related entities. In January 2022, the audit office urged parliament to revise the legislation governing party financing, focusing on thresholds for sanctions and issues of disproportionality, but the law remains unchanged.

The OSCE expressed confidence in the legal framework during the 2023 elections, considering it conducive to holding democratic elections. The organization acknowledged widespread confidence in the efficacy of remedies offered by the election administration and courts in addressing election disputes. However, the OSCE recommended reviewing the balance between public and private funding to ensure the system does not disproportionately favor larger, established parties over smaller, local ones. Other recommendations, including enhancing transparency in election administration meetings, reviewing candidate eligibility restrictions, and establishing an independent media oversight authority, remain unimplemented (OSCE, 2023).

The national elections in 2023 faced logistical challenges primarily due to tight deadlines and the holiday season, resulting in difficulties recruiting sufficient polling staff.

Citation:
OSCE/ODHIR. 2023. "Spain Early Parliamentary Elections on 23 July 2023."
<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/2/547184.pdf>

Sweden

Score 9

There is no formal party registration in Sweden, though political parties may register their name to avoid misuse. Candidates are selected and ranked within party organizations with essentially no public rules guiding the process. Political representation in Sweden is overwhelmingly collective representation (Karlsson and Gilljam, 2014). Swedish voters predominantly vote for parties, not individual candidates, as only approximately 25% of the electorate used the personal vote option in the 2022 general election (Gadd et al. 2022).

The Election Authority (Valmyndigheten) is responsible for planning and coordinating general elections, and this planning does not include practices such as gerrymandering. At the subnational level, elections are administered by County Administrative Boards, Municipal Elections Commissions, and Polling Boards.

Both public and private funding is permitted, and parties that participated in elections and received public funding must disclose private donations in a report to the Legal, Financial, and Administrative Services [Kammarkollegiet]. Notably, these reports concern only income; parties are not required to report their expenses, assets, and debts, so public scrutiny has a limited scope.

This practice does not fully comply with international standards and guidelines issued by the Council of Europe’s Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) (OSCE, 2018). Despite intense debate, this rule has not changed. According to the latest data published in 2021, the eight parties of the Riksdag and the Feminist Initiative received a total of SEK 167,955,204, or approximately €15 million. The women’s groups of the eight Riksdag parties received financial support amounting to SEK 14,999,660, or approximately €1.3 million (Sveriges Riksdag 2024).

There is no legal regulation regarding media time allocated to political parties; rather, this is a matter for voluntary self-regulation. Publicly funded TV channels and newspapers are expected to host and promote political debate but also to remain impartial. Private media are not legally obligated to follow this line, but they normally do (OCSE, 2022).

Citation:

Gadd, Elin et al. 2022. *Energivalet 2022, Rapport 2022:9, Valforskningsprogrammet* Göteborgs universitet. https://www.gu.se/sites/default/files/2022-10/2022_9_Energivalet_2022.pdf

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OSCE. 2022. *Sweden. General Elections 11 September 2022. ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report 31 May-2 June 2022.* Warsaw: OSCE ODIHR. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/0/523500.pdf>

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Sveriges Riksdag. 2024. “Verksamhetsredogörelse för Partibidragsnämnden 2020.” https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/redogorelse/verksamhetsredogorelse-for-partibidragnamnden_h804pn1/

United Kingdom

Score 9

There are limited restrictions on who can run for election as a member of Parliament, notably excluding serving members of the police, the civil service and the armed forces, as well as judges, although if someone in one of these groups resigns, they are free to stand. People subject to bankruptcy are also excluded, and any candidate for election must post a £500 deposit, which will be lost if an insufficient share of the vote is not obtained.

In practice, there is lively political competition, and, on occasion, a long list of “fringe” candidates will appear on ballot papers in addition to representatives of the main political parties. Systems are in place to record donations and monitor compliance. Although the media tend to focus most on the established parties, there is no evident bias against any form of minority in coverage. As in many countries, there is concern about social media manipulation. It is also now common for political

parties to use social media to criticize their treatment on broadcast media (Ford et al. 2021, 306).

Broadly similar rules apply for subnational government and the devolved administrations (Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales), with an Electoral Commission overseeing the process.

A “returning officer” has responsibility for ensuring the fair conduct of elections.

Citation:

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/members/electing-mps/candidates/>

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/Part%201%20Can%20you%20stand%20for%20election%20LGE.pdf>

Ford, R., Bale, T., Jennings, W., and SurrIDGE, P. 2021. “Fragmented and Polarised: Broadcasting and Social Media.” In Ford, R., Bale, T., Jennings, W., and SurrIDGE, P., eds. *The British General Election of 2019*. London: Palgrave.

Australia

Score 8

Elections in Australia are fundamentally competitive. The major parties, Labor and the Liberal-Nationals, contend on a relatively balanced playing field. This should be seen as the outcome of long-term processes of bargaining, anticipation and risk mitigation by the major parties.

While barriers to effective political competition are low, some do exist. A significant example is political financing, where minor parties face disadvantages both formally and informally. The primary instrument of electoral regulation, the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918, has undergone several amendments, the latest in 2019. This act provides registered political parties with public funding at each election (see Australian Electoral Commission 2023). Parties and candidates who secure 4% of first-preference votes in an electorate are eligible for a fixed-sum payment, set at AUD10,656 in the 2022 federal election. Parties and candidates can also receive substantial top-up payments beyond that based on the number of votes they receive. The rate is set by legislation (Commonwealth Electoral Act, Section 321) and indexed every six months. For the 2022 federal election, this rate was AUD2.914 per eligible vote.

Overall, competitive conditions are more challenging for minor parties and independent candidates, who face higher formal and informal hurdles in areas like political financing and media exposure compared to major parties and their candidates. The increase in the number of independents at the 2019 federal election indicates that long-standing assumptions about party competition and its regulation in Australia are evolving. Reforms reflecting the growing significance of these minor players are actively debated. Currently, the Restoring Trust Bill, under discussion in the federal parliament, proposes substantial reforms to the electoral landscape,

particularly regarding political financing. Proposed changes include lowering the disclosure threshold (the donation amount that must be publicly declared), introducing real-time donation disclosures, banning donations from government contractors, and limiting taxpayer-funded government advertising before elections (Orr 2023). According to Kate Chaney, Independent Member for Curtin, these reforms will “improve transparency, reduce financial influence and level the playing field in Australia’s elections” (Chaney 2023).

In addition to the balance of competition between major and minor parties, other challenges include transparency issues (such as high national-level disclosure thresholds) and difficulties in combating disinformation during election campaigns (Zhang and Johnson 2023). The political finance bill under consideration in the federal parliament aims to address these and other outstanding issues.

While the ongoing debate has focused on national conditions, the states have been relatively innovative. Political finance disclosure laws are more stringent at the federal level than in any subnational jurisdiction. South Australia has pioneered truth in political advertising laws to tackle disinformation in election campaigns.

Citation:

Australian Electoral Commission. 2023. “2022 Federal Election: Election Funding Payments Finalised.” <https://www.aec.gov.au/media/2022/12-21.htm#:~:text=Parties%20and%20candidates%20who%20received,and%20is%20an%20indexed%20figure>

Chaney, K. 2023. “Restoring Trust Bill.” <https://www.katechaney.com.au/rfb>

Orr, G. 2023. “Proposed Spending and Donations Caps May at Last Bring Genuine Reform to National Election Rules.” *The Conversation* June 20. <https://theconversation.com/proposed-spending-and-donations-caps-may-at-last-bring-genuine-reform-to-national-election-rules-208031>

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Israel

Score 8

The registration procedures for candidates and parties meet the transparency and fairness criteria. Any party can register with the registrar of political parties as long as the party has 100 or more supporters who are aged over 18 and are Israeli citizens. The registration fee is small (ILS 2,400), which enables broad participation. De jure, there are several limitations; a party is not allowed to register if the party’s goals or activities reject the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish, democratic state; incite racism; support the armed struggle of an enemy state or terrorist organization against the State of Israel; or hint at covering illegal activity (Party Registrar).

Before each election, each party submits its list of candidates to the Central Election Committee. Any citizen over the age of 21 can run for office unless a court disqualifies them for promoting racism or denying the right of Israel to exist as a

Jewish and democratic state. Additionally, a citizen who has been convicted cannot run for office for seven years.

De facto, there have been very few cases of candidates or parties being disqualified from running. However, in the last couple of years, members of the Knesset have increasingly attempted to disqualify candidates from Arab minority parties, arguing that they support terror (Shani and Fuchs, 2022). Several cases have arisen in which the Central Elections Committee decided to disqualify Arab candidates, but these decisions were later overruled by the Supreme Court, which reviews Central Elections Committee decisions.

In the most recent coalition agreement, signed in December 2022, the parties agreed to amend the Basic Law: The Knesset clause that defines eligibility for running for office, eliminating racism as a disqualifying factor. To date, the government has not attempted to pass this amendment.

Each party must submit its financial records for inspection by the government comptroller, who publishes reports after every election detailing the violations of each party and the fines they need to pay. The parties are required to provide all information on donations and finances to the comptroller. Parties that violate the party finance law can be sanctioned by the comptroller. However, in many cases, these sanctions are not imposed (State Comptroller).

All parties enjoy free access to the media. However, some candidates often receive more attention than others. In recent elections, the extreme right-wing party leader Itamar Ben Gvir received significantly more media attention than other candidates. This was not due to discrimination but rather the media's interest in extreme views and sensationalism.

In the last few election cycles, the media has focused more on personal issues than the policy positions of candidates. As a result, more policy-oriented parties have received little coverage.

The Israeli electoral system is a single-district proportional system. Therefore, there are no institutional limitations on political participation.

In the November 2022 elections, the Israeli Security Agency (Shin Bet) warned decision-makers about Iranian and Russian interference through social media. However, during the elections, there was no concrete evidence of such intervention (Shuker and Siboni, 2019).

Citation:

Registrar of Political Parties www.gov.il/en/departments/topics/the_registrar_of_political_parties/govil-landing-page
Shani, Yuval, and Amir Fuchs. 2022. "Disqualification of Knesset Lists and Candidates: Q&A." The Israeli Democracy Institute. <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/29669>

Shuker, Pnina, and Gavbi Soiboni. 2019. "The Threat of Foreign Interference in the 2019 Elections in Israel and Ways of Handling it." INSS 3 (1). www.inss.org.il/publication/the-threat-of-foreign-interference-in-the-2019-elections-in-israel-and-ways-of-handling-it

State Comptroller. “Elections financing – The role of auditing.”
<https://www.mevaker.gov.il/En/mimun/Pages/default.aspx>

Japan

Score 8

Political competition in Japan is generally fair and transparent. Only persons who are under guardianship and deemed “incompetent,” those sentenced to prison, and persons who have been found guilty of violating the Public Office Election Law may be banned from standing in elections. The minimum age for candidates ranges from 25 (lower house, city council) to 30 (upper house, governor). The financial deposit required to become a candidate amounts to JPY 3 million (approximately €18,500) in constituency voting and JPY 6 million (approximately €37,000) in proportional representation. Although the deposit is returned after exceeding a certain threshold of votes (in most cases 10%), it constitutes an obstacle for smaller parties and unaffiliated candidates. In April 2023, a pipe bomb was thrown toward Prime Minister Kishida Fumio by a man apparently frustrated he had been denied the right to run in an upper house election for failing to comply with formal requirements.

Japan’s electoral system comprises 289 single-seat constituencies and 189 members elected through proportional representation for the House of Representatives, as well as a mix of single, non-transferable votes and proportional representation for the House of Councilors. While the introduction of the mixed system to the lower house in 1994 aimed to strengthen competition between the two major parties, the LDP has nonetheless won all but one election for the lower house since 1996. The LDP still enjoys some advantage under the new system, and Komeito, its junior coalition partner for over two decades, can reliably mobilize and instruct the members of Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist sect, to vote for LDP candidates in swing districts, which has further fortified the LDP’s position. In the 2021 election, the two parties won a combined 63% of seats, with 47% of votes. The combination of single-seat constituencies and write-in ballots has also exacerbated the problem of hereditary parliamentarianism (Punendra 2023). At present, about 30% of Diet members inherited their constituencies. The advantage of name recognition plus personalized voter support groups incentivizes the LDP to nominate the sons (and in rare cases daughters) of retired lawmakers. This practice has limited opportunities for politicians without familial connections and wealth to gain seats in the Diet as members of the dominant party. Moreover, the government and the Supreme Court of Japan have been reluctant to address the disparity in the value of one vote between rural and urban districts – which exceeds three-to-one – favoring conservative candidates.

A major electoral problem at all levels is the gross underrepresentation of women. Only about 10% of members of the lower house are women, while the number of female cabinet ministers rarely exceeds this threshold. In local elections, female candidates make up only 15% of candidates (NHK 2023). Their representation has

been helped by the fact that municipalities play a large role in the expansion of childcare facilities (Tsuji 2017). Another problem of subnational elections is that they fail to attract candidates, and assemblies are increasingly sidelined by mayors or governors (Nikkei Asia). In the unified April 2013 local elections, 40.2% of mayoral posts, as well as 14% of assembly posts in 2023, went uncontested.

Both political parties and politicians are required to disclose their spending and sources of revenue. Nevertheless, incidents of illegal donations remain frequent. The Political Fund Control Law does not require the consolidation of reports from various committees charged with the financial matters of one politician, which decreases the transparency of political funds. Moreover, not all reports are digitized, their preservation period is only three years and individual contributions below JPY 50,000 (below JPY 200,000 in the case of tickets for fundraising events) do not have to be reported.

Although there are no legal restrictions on media access for candidates, government officials enjoy greater media coverage, especially in public media. The legalization of social media use in electoral campaigns in 2013 somewhat improved access to voters for non-mainstream candidates.

Citation:

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Netherlands

Score 8

Individual voter registration is passive and based on the unified population register maintained by municipalities. Voters residing abroad who wish to vote are required to actively register once. Over 1 million citizens reside outside of the Netherlands, but only some 109,000 requested to be registered for the 2023 elections. With a score of 78 out of 100 points in the 2023 Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index, the Netherlands – after other European countries like Finland (89) and Denmark (score 87) – was ranked 12th among 42 European countries. In 2018, its highest scores came in the categories of electoral laws and electoral procedures; somewhat lower scores were given for voter and party and candidacy registration. Some argue that party membership and selection by party caucus strongly diminish formal equality with regard to accessibility. Political parties with elected members receive state subsidies, while qualifying as a new party necessitates payment of a considerable entry fee. In the November 2023 national elections, two new political parties, the Farmer-Citizen Movement (Boeren Burger Beweging, BBB) and New Social Contract (NSC) participated and entered parliament, respectively winning seven and 20 seats in a 150-seat parliament. Two existing parties, Labor and Green Left, merged.

By buying commercial media time and microtargeting through social media, political parties have some influence on media attention and coverage. In the 2023 national elections, parties spent a total of approximately €2.5 million on microtargeting, mainly based on “lifestyle” cues. Extreme-right parties Forum for Democracy (Baudet) and Party for Freedom (Wilders) relied on the algorithms of general platforms like TikTok and YouTube. Microtargeting through “influencers” on social media platforms opens the door for free publicity by “fans” and possible organized foreign, especially Russian-origin, propaganda.

There are significant problems with the party financing system. Even though minor improvements have been implemented, substantial issues remain, according to the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), the anti-corruption watchdog. Party funding is not transparently monitored, and there is no independent body tasked with reviewing and auditing party finances. The members of the Political Parties Finance Oversight Committee, which advises the minister of the interior on party finance issues, are appointed by the same minister, who is also a partisan. Sanctions are rarely imposed, as much party finance can be hidden by political parties. Foreign donations can still be given to parties through Dutch entities and local branches. Parties do not need to declare expenditures, only formal income. Major parties, including the PVV, currently the largest party, are dependent on foreign funding. The PVV has no membership organization and receives no state subsidies, yet voters cannot verify who funds this major party. Anonymous gifts are still allowed, leaving the system open to foreign influence. Political parties, such as the major right-wing

liberal VVD, organize meetings at which wealthy donors can buy time to sit down with ministers. Gifts in kind are not reported by parties, and local parties and branches/chapters are not covered by the Party Finance Law. Parties can hide sources of income and resources through these branches and ancillary organizations.

Citation:

Follow the Money. 2022. "Toezichthouder partijfinanciën: Geld is te belangrijk geworden in de politiek." June 24.

Krouwel, A. 2021. "Wij zijn het Wilde Westen van het politieke geld." NRC March 19.

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<https://www.transparency.nl/nieuws/2019/10/nederlandse-regels-partijfinanciering-werken-corruptie-lokale-partijen-in-de-hand/>

<https://nos.nl/artikel/2372814-onderzoek-rechts-domineert-de-verkiezingscampagne-op-radio-en-tv>

<https://mediasuitedatastories.clariah.nl/nl/elections-2021-first-results/>

Groene Amsterdammer. 30 November. "Online campagnes. De genegeerde burger."

United States

Score 7

The United States is characterized by a highly decentralized and fragmented system of electoral administration. The Constitution provides broad criteria for federal candidate eligibility, the general structure of the electoral process, and protections for certain categories of voters. Beyond this, however, further electoral criteria and election administration are left to the 50 state governments.

The U.S. Constitution has fairly basic criteria for eligibility to stand for federal office. Specifically, candidates for the House of Representatives must be at least 25 years old, candidates for the Senate must be at least 30, and candidates for the presidency must be at least 35. Additionally, candidates for the presidency must be "natural born" citizens, which has been interpreted to mean that a person must be a U.S. citizen at birth. They must also have been a U.S. resident for at least 14 years. The Constitution specifies that the number of senators per state must be equal (two), and federal statute regulates the size of the House of Representatives and broad features of the system of congressional representation (for example, mandating that each member of the House represents a single-member district).

In addition, the U.S. Constitution guarantees individuals' political participation, both in their ability to vote and in their ability to run for office. For example, the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause is generally taken as a guarantee that a person cannot be barred from running for office based on arbitrary characteristics such as race. The Religious Test Clause prohibits the exclusion of candidates on the basis of religion or lack thereof. There are also protections against

voting discrimination based on race (Fifteenth Amendment), sex (Nineteenth Amendment), failure to pay taxes (Twenty-Fourth Amendment), and age (Twenty-Sixth Amendment).

The formal constitutional criteria to stand for national office in the United States are quite broad and generous. There is no bar, for example, against a criminal or even a prisoner from standing for office. The Supreme Court has confirmed in multiple rulings that additional formal requirements, such as term limits, cannot be placed on candidates for federal office by state governments.

States, however, have greater leeway in restricting the voting franchise. For example, a small number of states impose a lifetime ban on people convicted of crimes from voting (Johnson 2019).

State governments are entrusted with carrying out elections. They also manage ballot access criteria. Since the 20th century, ballots have been printed by states, and parties and candidates have different levels of entitlement to appear on the ballot depending on the state. Some states are extremely inhospitable to minor party candidates. In Alabama, a party must secure a petition equivalent to 3% of the total number of votes cast in the previous gubernatorial election to appear on the ballot. The deadline for submitting this petition is in March. Additionally, the party must win at least 20% of the vote in a statewide election every time to remain qualified on the ballot (<https://www.sos.alabama.gov/alabama-votes/candidates/qualifications-public-office>).

A key challenge to U.S. democracy is widespread gerrymandering, particularly in states where elected officials revise the boundaries of electoral and congressional districts, favoring partisan influence in the process. Redistricting occurs once a decade, and there is strong evidence that it has a deeply corrosive impact on U.S. democracy, including in Congress at the federal level (Kirschenbaum and Li, 2021). Finally, the last time a third party – not the Democrats or Republicans – appeared on the presidential ballot in Alabama was in 2000. In contrast, Louisiana has one of the easiest routes to ballot access. A party need only submit a filing fee of \$1,125 to run for president in that state. Not surprisingly, Louisiana had 32 candidates on its 2016 presidential ballot.

Citation:

https://ballotpedia.org/Ballot_access_requirements_for_presidential_candidates_in_Louisiana

<https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/Pages/voteinor.aspx>

<https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?f=0&year=2000&fips=1>

<https://vip.sos.nd.gov/civics101.aspx>

<https://www.sos.alabama.gov/alabama-votes/candidates/qualifications-public-office>

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<https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?f=0&year=2000&fips=1>

https://ballotpedia.org/Ballot_access_requirements_for_presidential_candidates_in_Louisiana

Poland

Score 5

On October 15, 2023, Poland held parliamentary elections that were free but lacked full competitiveness. Despite a diverse range of parties and candidates, the ruling Law and Justice party had a significant advantage by using state resources, including public companies and media, to support its campaign. Additionally, a government-initiated referendum aimed to amplify the ruling coalition's campaign messages, involving support from state-controlled companies and blurring the line between state and party, potentially bypassing campaign finance regulations.

The Electoral Code forms the comprehensive legal framework for parliamentary elections, but despite recommendations from OSCE/ODHIR, no changes have been made to constituency boundaries since 2011. This lack of adjustment, coupled with the inclusion of all votes from abroad in the Warsaw constituency, raises concerns about the equality of votes.

In March 2023, significant revisions to the Electoral Code included reducing the minimum number of residents per precinct, establishing a Central Register of Voters, and modifying the eligibility criteria for Constituency Election Commission members. However, challenges arose, such as the rejection of some candidate lists due to formal issues, including problems with supporter addresses in the newly implemented Central Register of Voters.

The regulations on electoral campaign financing, as outlined in the Election Code and the Political Parties Act, require political parties to submit annual financial information to the National Election Commission. In 2023, five political parties faced the potential deprivation of public subsidies due to unfavorable verdicts. During the 2023 elections, three factors negatively impacted the accountability and clarity of campaign finances: a lack of detailed financial reporting before election day, unrestrained third-party campaigning and insufficient campaign finance regulations for the referendum.

Public television and radio stations ostensibly met their legal obligations to provide free airtime to all electoral committees. However, the OSCE reported that the public broadcaster failed to ensure balanced and impartial coverage during the presidential (2020) and parliamentary (2023) elections. Additionally, the ruling coalition leveraged Catholic media, including Telewizja Trwam and Radio Maryja, to appeal to traditional conservative voters. The acquisition of Polska Press by PKN Orlen in 2020 granted the PiS party significant influence over regional media. Despite these developments, the Polish media landscape remains diverse, with public television (TVP), TVN and Polsat dominating the television sector.

Most political campaigns occur online, with politicians and parties using platforms like X and Facebook for promotion and commentary. However, the tone of media content – both online and offline – was generally negative, offensive and radical. While unauthorized new media usage and the spread of fake information were present, they did not majorly impact political competition.

Citation:

OSCE. 2020. Republic Of Poland Presidential Election 28 June and 12 July 2020 ODIHR Special Election Assessment Mission Final Report. Warsaw. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/2/464601.pdf>

OSCE. 2023. “International Election Observation Mission Republic of Poland, Parliamentary Elections, 15 October 2023.” Warsaw <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/4/555048.pdf>

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Hungary

Score 4

During the years of the successive Orbán governments (2010 – 2024), the political system in Hungary shifted toward an illiberal regime. Hungary is considered an electoral autocracy, where even the minimum standards of a fully-fledged democracy, such as free and fair elections, are flawed. Legally, there are few obstacles for candidates wishing to run for election and for voters wishing to vote. However, fair political competition is hindered by asymmetrical access to resources such as campaign funds and media access. The primary issue is not campaigning via new media, but rather government control over old media. Moreover, the governing party allocates more resources to buying social media advertisements, which are loosely regulated. In the state-owned or state-controlled media, opposition candidates do not benefit from the same amount of additional airtime as government candidates, despite a guaranteed minimum airtime quota of five minutes for all candidates (Bátorfy et al. 2021). “Journalists” and moderators are often openly biased toward Fidesz. The lack of transparency with regard to donations to candidates and parties is a weak point in electoral law, and has been criticized by the OECD since 2018. Opposition candidates have limited access to traditional Hungarian media due to state dominance over public TV, radio and large parts of the print media. As a result, opposition candidates often have to rely on social media for their campaigns, making it challenging to reach the elderly and less-educated populations.

Election results show that government candidates perform the strongest. Large-scale gerrymandering has been allowed within the terms of the electoral law. The new mixed system of first-past-the-post elements in constituencies and proportional representation in party lists clearly favors the government side, which usually wins almost all constituencies outside Budapest. Consequently, the popular vote won clearly by Fidesz in 2022 often gets blurred, allowing the government to secure a two-thirds majority with half of the votes. The picture is much more balanced in local and European elections, which have stronger proportional leanings.

Citation:

Bátorfy, A., Bleyer-Simon, K., Szabó, K., and Galambosi, E. 2022. "Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the Year 2021. Country Report: Hungary." Florence: European University Institute.

Indicator

Free and Fair Elections

Question

To what extent can all citizens, both in legal terms (de jure) and in practice (de facto), exercise their right to vote?

30 OECD and EU countries are sorted according to their performance on a scale from 10 (best) to 1 (lowest). This scale is tied to four qualitative evaluation levels.

- 10-9 = There are no significant barriers, by law or in practice, that hinder citizens or specific groups in society from exercising their right to vote.
- 8-6 = Existing barriers, by law and in practice, pose no significant obstacles to voting.
- 5-3 = Existing barriers, by law and in practice, pose some significant obstacles to voting.
- 2-1 = Existing barriers, by law and in practice, pose various significant obstacles that substantially hinder voting.

Austria

Score 10

Voting rights are granted to all Austrian citizens living in Austria. Since 2007, all resident Austrian nationals from the age of 16 have enjoyed the right to vote. Austrian residents do not have to register to participate in elections. By contrast, Austrian citizens living abroad have to register with the Austrian county where they lived before they left the country in order to participate in nationwide elections (Nationalrat, federal president, and European Parliament elections). Registrations are valid for 10 years and must be renewed after that.

Austrians convicted of crimes resulting in more than five years of imprisonment, or specific political crimes such as electoral fraud or terrorism with imprisonment exceeding one year, may lose their right to vote for the duration of their imprisonment. The loss of the right to vote requires an individual decision by a criminal court judge.

As Austrians aged 16 and older do not need to register, there is no disenfranchisement resulting from any flawed voter registry.

Non-Austrians have no right to vote in any nationwide election, regardless of the length of their residence, proficiency in German, or other qualifications such as paying taxes. The share of the resident population on Austrian soil has significantly increased over the past decades. Twenty years ago, 580,000 non-Austrian residents had no right to vote; at the most recent nationwide election, the presidential election of 2022, no less than 1.4 million non-Austrian residents – 18% of Austria's population aged over 16 – had no right to vote. However, with the exception of the

state of Vienna, non-Austrians from other EU countries have the right to vote not only in European Parliament elections but also in local elections if their primary address is in Austria. Non-Austrians from non-EU member states do not have any voting rights in Austria.

Individuals who have been denied the right to vote can appeal to the administrative court at the relevant level. The most commonly raised issue involves the status of residence in a given electoral district.

All democratic elections in Austria must be assessed as free and fair. Impartial and effective electoral management bodies operate at the various levels where elections occur. The highest authority in this network is the federal electoral commission, which is reconstituted for each new legislative term and chaired by the federal minister of the interior. In collaboration with Austrian courts, these authorities have ensured high standards for free and fair democratic elections.

There are more than 10,000 easily accessible polling stations for an electorate of slightly less than 6.4 million, including 62,000 non-resident Austrians (figures as of late 2022). Since 2007, Austria has operated postal voting. There have been no incidents of harassment, violence, intimidation, or any other developments violating the principle of free and fair elections. The presidential election of 2016 marked an extremely rare case of a miscalculation of votes. However, the strict ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court – which ordered a repeat election of the second ballot – bore witness to Austria’s firm commitment to free and fair elections.

Citation:

<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000138278942/1-4-millionen-ueber-16-jaehrige-bei-bundespraesidentenwahl-nicht-wahlberechtigt>

<https://noe.orf.at/magazin/stories/3028548/>

<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000132333855/juristische-aufarbeitung-der-bundespraesidentenwahl-2016-immer-noch-nicht-abgeschlossen>

Belgium

Score 10

Voting is compulsory for all Belgians aged 18 and above in all first-order elections (EU, federal, and regional levels). At the local level, voting is mandatory in Wallonia and Brussels, and for the first time in 2024, voting will not be mandatory at the local elections in Flanders. Citizens are automatically registered as voters and receive an official invitation to vote by mail. For the European Elections of 2024, a reform introduced voting rights for citizens aged 16 and 17, with automatic registration, though voting is not compulsory for this age group (elections.fgov.be). Since 2004, non-Belgian citizens with their main residence in Belgium for more than five years can also register to vote in municipal elections. Citizens from other EU countries can register to elect their Belgian European representatives if they decide not to vote in

the EU election in their home country.

The European, national, and regional elections are typically held on the same day to facilitate citizen participation. Voting is compulsory by law, and noncompliance can lead to penalties and the loss of political and civil rights. However, in practice, no one has been charged for abstention since 2003 (Le Soir, May 25, 2019). The latest election was in 2019, with a turnout rate above 88% for both the national and European parliaments. V-Dem's Democracy report 2023 ranks Belgium in the top 10% of most democratic countries, above the Netherlands, Germany, and France but below Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.

Citation:

https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Droit_de_vote_des_%C3%A9trangers_aux_%C3%A9lections_communes_en_Belgique

<https://elections2018.brussels/electeur.html>

Vlaamse regering schrappt opkomstplicht bij lokale verkiezingen | De Standaard

<https://www.lesoir.be/226381/article/2019-05-24/elections-2019-risque-vous-vraiment-des-sanctions-si-vous-nallez-pas-voter>

Denmark

Score 10

All Danish citizens aged 18 or older can vote in national elections. It is very difficult to revoke the right to vote, and this only happens if a judge finds that a citizen is incapable of protecting their personal interests (Danish Institute for Human Rights 2018). This disempowerment happens only in cases of severe cognitive impairment and occurs only rarely. Since voting is centrally planned and information about citizens comes from national registries, there are very few instances where voters are denied the right to vote. When such cases arise, it is due to a lag in bureaucratic processes.

A general election must be held at least every four years, but the prime minister can call for a general election at any time. This should give the prime minister a strategic advantage, although the evidence on whether this advantage translates reliably into electoral wins is unclear. The number of polling stations has been decreasing, which has marginally reduced turnout rates (Hansen 2019). However, turnout rates overall remain high in Denmark, with a recorded turnout rate of 84.2% in the 2022 election.

Elections at the regional and municipal levels run on a four-year interval and take place on the third Tuesday in November of the election year (Ministry of the Interior and Health 2024). The last municipal and regional elections occurred in 2021.

Election results are almost never contested, and reports of violence or harassment at polling stations are very rare. There are no observations of irregularities in vote counting or the withholding of information concerning elections. There has never been a dispute over national election results. At the municipal level, recounts have occurred when controls did not match preliminary results, but there has never been a

recount of votes after results have been made public.

Early voting is available in municipal offices that handle various citizen requests, as well as in hospitals, elder-care facilities and prisons. A resident must provide valid identification in order to vote (Ministry of the Interior and Health 2024). One notable issue in Danish democracy is the participation rates of immigrants, which are consistently and significantly lower than those of native Danes (Bhatti 2018).

Since 2018, citizens have had the power to send so-called citizens' initiatives (borgerforslag) to parliament. These initiatives are posted on borgerforslag.dk, where other citizens can choose to support them. If at least 50,000 citizens support an initiative, it is forwarded to parliament, and political parties may decide to present it as a proposal for parliamentary resolution. However, citizens' initiatives are not automatically presented in parliament even when they reach the 50,000-supporter threshold.

Citation:

Bhatti, Y. 2018. "Valgdeltagelsen blandt ikke-vestlige indvandrere og efterkommere." *Politica*. <https://tidsskrift.dk/politica/article/view/131248>

Danish Institute for Human Rights. 2018. "Staten sagsøges for manglende stemmeret." <https://menneskeret.dk/nyheder/staten-sagsoeges-manglende-stemmeret>

Hansen, K. 2019. "Valgdeltagelsen ved folketingsvalget 2019." https://cvap.polsci.ku.dk/forskning/valgdeltagelse/papers_og_rapporter/valgdeltagelse_fv19.pdf

Ministry of the Interior and Health 2024: <https://valg.im.dk/valg/kommunale-og-regionale-valg>

Ministry of the Interior and Health. 2024. <https://valg.im.dk/vaelgere/brevstemmeafgivning/>

Folketinget. <https://www.thedanishparliament.dk/en/democracy/the-parliament>

Estonia

Score 10

The Estonian constitution and relevant laws guarantee universal suffrage. The voting age is 18 for national and European elections and 16 for municipal elections. About 6% of the population, or 16% of the voting-age population, are non-citizens who cannot vote in parliamentary elections but have the right to vote in local elections. EU citizens residing in Estonia can vote in municipal and European Parliament elections (National Electoral Committee 2023). Estonian citizens residing abroad, about 10% of the electorate, can vote in all Estonian elections either at an Estonian embassy or online. The Referendum Act and the election acts (2021) allow voters to choose the most convenient polling station in their electoral district.

State authorities maintain the voter register based on population-register data. Eligible voters take no action to be included in the voter register. Each registered voter is informed by mail or email about all voting options, including the voting day and the location and opening hours of polling places in their municipality.

Two impartial bodies administer the elections. The National Electoral Committee (NEC) – consisting of seven members, mainly with a background in law – ensures compliance with the principles of freedom, generality, uniformity and directness of voting, as well as the secrecy of voting. The State Electoral Office (SEO) is an independent unit within the Chancellery of the Riigikogu that organizes voting in Estonia and abroad, prepares the ballot papers, and acquires the equipment necessary for conducting the voting. The SEO employs legal specialists and professionals in the area of IT systems and cybersecurity. At the subnational level, voting district committees are established to organize voting at polling places within the territory of a voting district. Half of the members of the voting district committee are presented by the rural municipality or city secretary. The remaining members are presented by political parties, while considering the principle of political balance. Members of the committee must not campaign.

Multiparty elections in Estonia are held every four years according to a set schedule, including elections for local government councils, the Riigikogu and the European Parliament. To facilitate voter participation, Estonia employs advance voting, home voting and internet voting.

Advance voting is available for six days prior to election day. Both advance voting and online voting are gaining in popularity; in the 2023 parliamentary elections, 74% of all votes were cast before election day, while 51% were cast online. The rate of home voting, however, has declined, likely due to the ease of internet voting and the high level of digital literacy in Estonia. For instance, more than 33% of voters aged 75 and above voted electronically (National Electoral Committee, 2023).

The secrecy and cybersecurity of online voting are taken very seriously, and amendments to electoral laws to provide a more detailed description of these aspects are currently in preparation.

In all elections, Estonia uses an open-list proportional system with a simple ballot design where voters write down the number of their preferred candidate, or tick their preferred candidate online. Invalid ballots constitute a minor share of the total, less than 1% of all ballots cast, suggesting that the ballot design is easy to understand (National Electoral Committee, 2023).

The modest degree of engagement by ethnic minorities in election processes has long been a concern. To address this issue, state authorities are providing more voting information in Russian. The National Electoral Committee (NEC) website now offers election information in three languages: Estonian, Russian and English. Additionally, tools for disabled persons have been added to the website.

Citation:

National Electoral Committee. 2023. <https://www.valimised.ee/en/archive/statistics>

Finland

Score 10

Registered political parties have the right to nominate candidates, though all voters can influence the nomination process. Electoral associations of at least 100 enfranchised citizens also have the right of nomination. However, the role of these associations has been marginal.

Candidates for presidential elections can be nominated by any political party represented in parliament at the time of nomination. Candidates may also be nominated by associations of at least 20,000 enfranchised citizens.

Voting rights in municipal elections are granted to all citizens, including those without permanent residence in the country. Felony convictions do not affect voting rights.

There is no disenfranchisement resulting from a flawed voter registry. Individuals who have been denied the right to vote or to register as voters have the opportunity to appeal to a competent jurisdiction, which can review such decisions and rectify errors in a timely and effective manner.

There is an impartial and highly capable electoral management body equipped with sufficient, trained staff and the financial resources to effectively administer elections.

The elections are conducted according to the established schedule. However, during the pandemic, municipal elections in 2021 were postponed for a few months.

The election process in Finland is carried out in an impartial and nondiscriminatory manner. There is an adequate number of polling stations relative to population density. Polling stations are accessible with regard to their location and the availability of free public transport, especially for handicapped citizens. There is also no impartiality or discrimination regarding the voting time frame and date, the comprehensive ballot design, the implementation of the secret ballot, or the provision of voter assistance, such as water supply in waiting lines.

Absentee, email and early voting processes are conducted in a straightforward, impartial and nondiscriminatory manner. There have been no incidents of harassment, violence or intimidation against voters. No irregularities have been observed in the voter registry.

Petteri Orpo's government is committed to enhancing fairness and representation in the electoral system through democratic principles and legislative measures governing elections and political parties. According to the government program (Orpo 2023), the administration plans to address the issue of disproportionality in the electoral system by initiating a parliamentary process to create a new model for electoral regions, specifically targeting electoral districts with a high hidden vote

threshold. The primary focus will be on the Lapland electoral district, which will be combined with the North Ostrobothnia electoral district to form a unified electoral region for the purposes of calculating results.

The approach to distributing seats among parties will be based on the number of votes received by each candidate and the proportion of members of parliament elected from the electoral districts relative to the population. While both electoral districts will maintain their independence and existing boundaries, their regional identity will also be considered. In the future, a similar methodology may be applied to other electoral districts with fewer than eight or seven members of parliament to be elected in the future. The decision on the electoral region model is anticipated to be finalized in 2024, with the goal of implementing the new model in the parliamentary elections of 2031 at the latest.

Citation:

Orpo, Petteri. 2023. Government Program: A Strong and Committed Finland.

Publications of the Finnish Government. 2023. [https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/governments/government-programme/#/](https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/governments/government-programme/)

France

Score 10

The right to participate in elections is fully guaranteed. Every citizen age 18 or older enjoys voting rights provided by the constitution. This includes expatriates and convicts, if no specific deprivation of civic capacity has been pronounced. There is no option to vote by mail, but those not living in France can either vote abroad (in consulates or embassies) or by delegating power to a designated person in France. No progress has been made with regard to extending this right to vote to residents holding foreign citizenship, except in the case of EU citizens for both local and European elections (Service-Public 2024).

Voter registration is easy. It is almost automatic when young people register for the first time. Registration requires only an ID. It is usually estimated that some 10% of the electorate is not registered. This concerns two main groups: those who refuse to vote and those who have changed residence and subsequently neglected to register in their new place of residence. The monitoring of voter rolls has largely improved since 2016, with the creation of the “Répertoire électoral unique” (INSEE 2024) – a national integrated file for electoral registers. The National Statistical Institute oversees the maintenance of this file, a task it performs quite efficiently.

Voting operations are organized at the municipal level under the scrutiny of the Ministry of Interior, which is in charge of the organization of elections. Voting stations are usually easily accessible by foot for most people, but no individualized service is available for those with disabilities. Local authorities sometimes organize stations for institutionalized persons (mostly for those in retirement homes). Prisoners have yet to vote by proxy in most cases.

Proxy voting is the only way to cast a vote without doing so in person. This has been made easier over the years. In 2022, 6.7% of registered voters had voted at least once by proxy voting (Stéphan 2022).

In practice, the organization of elections goes smoothly in most cases. Elections are organized on time and on the basis of well-established directives. Although the COVID-19 pandemic made local organization tasks more complicated, elections were held with limited difficulties even then, aside from concerns about further virus spread. Voting stations are open on Sundays from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. (up to 8 p.m. in large cities). Cheating at the voting booth may exist, but is not widespread. The only actual troubles encountered recently have stemmed from the use of electronic voting devices especially for those living abroad (Conseil Constitutionnel 2024). Major anomalies – such as the fact that a majority of validation codes were been distributed – led the Constitutional Council to nullify results in two districts in the legislative elections of 2022.

The simplicity of the electoral system, the fact that elections are in most cases held one at a time, and the involvement of local authorities and citizen volunteers (especially for counting votes) in the organization of the operations all contribute to making the electoral process transparent and uncontroversial. The absence of an impartial and independent electoral management body has not proved problematic in this regard to date. The decline observed in electoral turnout rates should not be attributed to issues relating to the organization of elections, but rather to more general social and political dynamics.

Citation:

Conseil Constitutionnel. 2024. “Le Conseil constitutionnel annule, en raison des dysfonctionnements intervenus lors du vote électronique.” <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/actualites/le-conseil-constitutionnel-annule-en-raison-des-dysfonctionnements-intervenus-lors-du-vote>

INSEE. 2024. “Le répertoire électoral unique.” <https://www.insee.fr/fr/information/3539086>

Service-Public. 2024. “Élections : droit de vote d’un citoyen européen en France.” <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F1937>

Stéphan, N. 2022. “3,3 millions d’électeurs ont établi au moins une procuration pour les élections de 2022.” INSEE Focus 273. Available at <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/6480276>

Germany

Score 10

According to the Federal Election Act (Bundeswahlgesetz), all German citizens who are at least 18 years old are eligible to vote. German citizenship is defined in Article 116 of the Basic Law. At the state level, analogous State Election Acts are in place. In recent years, several states and their municipalities have reduced the voting age to 16 years. Only at the municipal level and in elections to the European Parliament do non-Germans with EU citizenship have a right to vote.

German citizens residing abroad are eligible to vote if they have lived in the Federal Republic of Germany for at least three uninterrupted months. This stay must occur after the age of 14 and cannot be more than 25 years ago. If no such residency took

place, citizens permanently residing outside of Germany can provide proof that they are personally affected by the political situation in Germany.

German citizens can only be disqualified from voting based on a judicial decision that declares them ineligible to vote (Bundeswahlleiterin, 2021a). This includes convicted criminals with a prison sentence of one year or more (§45 Abs.1 StGB). The exclusion of people incapable of contracting guilt and residing in psychiatric clinics and of disabled citizens needing caregivers for all matters was ruled unconstitutional by the Federal Constitutional Court (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 2019).

Regarding voter registration, it is generally not necessary for individuals to register to vote. Instead, all eligible voters are included in their municipality's electoral roll if they reported their residence within Germany to the registration office at least 42 days before the election. In that case, all entitled voters receive an election notification up to 21 days before the election. If someone erroneously does not receive the notification, they can appeal against the electoral roll within the time frame of 20 to 16 days before the election (BMI, 2023).

The specific procedure for elections is described in the Federal Election Act and by Federal Election Regulations, with similar acts at the state level. This procedure includes the preparation of elections, the elections themselves, and the determination of the results. For supervision, the Federal Election Act prescribes electoral bodies whose members are bound to discretion and to perform their duties impartially. Additionally, the execution of the election in the polling stations is organized by election workers (Wahlhelfer*innen), who are responsible for tasks such as verifying a voter's eligibility based on the electoral roll, counting the votes, and determining the result for the respective district. The role of election workers is honorary; if appointed, the position is obligatory for each eligible voter.

Elections in Germany are always held on a Sunday, with polling stations open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. This schedule ensures that a majority of voters are able to vote in person. German elections follow five electoral principles based on Article 38 of the Basic Law: they are universal, direct, free, equal, and secret.

In addition to voting on Election Day, early voting is available to all eligible voters, either in person or by mail. Voters receive a form to request a ballot paper along with their election notification. This ballot paper can then be used to vote before the election date, either by mail or in person at the responsible municipal authority office. Voters can request ballot papers until the Friday before the election. For the vote to be counted, the ballot must be submitted to the relevant office no later than 6 p.m. on the Sunday of the election.

The Federal Ministry of Interior and Community estimates there are around 90,000 polling stations, given that an electoral district comprises municipalities or districts with up to 2,500 inhabitants. Polling stations should be barrier-free for voters with

disabilities, considering the general accessibility of the location itself and the setup of the polling station. The election notification informs voters whether the polling station is barrier-free in practice. If needed, election workers provide voter assistance to people with disabilities.

The free and fair elections index assigned Germany a value of 0.95, suggesting that government intimidation and election fraud are not particularly present in Germany. Similarly, the clean elections index for 2022 categorizes Germany as having almost no voting irregularities, assuming that any observed irregularities are likely unintentional and not biased toward specific groups' participation (V-Dem, 2022).

Citation:

Bundeswahlleiterin. 2021. "Federal Elections Act." https://bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/dam/jcr/4ff317c1-041f-4ba7-bbbf-1e5dc45097b3/bundeswahlgesetz_engl.pdf

Bundesverfassungsgericht. 2019. "Wahlrechtsausschlüsse für Betreute in allen Angelegenheiten und wegen Schuldunfähigkeit untergebrachte Straftäter verfassungswidrig." Pressemitteilung Nr. 13/2019 vom 21. Februar 2019.

BMI, Bundesministerium des Inneren und für Heimat. 2023. "Ablauf der Bundestagswahl." <https://www.bmi.bund.de/DE/themen/verfassung/wahlrecht/bundestagswahl-ablauf/bundestagswahl-ablauf-node.html>

Bundeswahlleiterin. 2021. "Information für Wahlhelfende." <https://bundeswahlleiterin.de/bundestagswahlen/2021/informationen-wahlhelfer.html#364debfa-09ab-40a9-913f-dc3b483cf432>

Our World in Data. 2022. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/free-and-fair-elections-index?tab=chart&country=~DEU>

Varieties of Democracy. 2022. "https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/"

Greece

Score 10

In Greece, there are no significant legal or practical barriers that prevent citizens or specific societal groups from exercising their right to vote. Citizens face no discrimination or disincentives in this regard.

Until 2023, Greek citizens living abroad had to return to Greece to vote. However, a new law now allows these citizens to vote by mail, which will be tested for the first time in the European Parliament elections in May 2024 (Michalopoulos, 2023).

Since 2016, the minimum voting age in Greece has been lowered to 17 years. Voter registration is automatic and without barriers, as Greeks are registered at birth in the municipality where their family resides. Consequently, municipal records serve the dual purpose of containing demographic data for all Greek citizens and acting as the official list of eligible voters.

However, delays in updating these records – specifically in removing the names of deceased citizens or those who have permanently left Greece – result in over-inflated electoral registers. This inflation leads to a discrepancy between the number of registered voters and the actual number of eligible voters, thus affecting the calculation of electoral turnout. A new bill, expected to be adopted in early 2023, aims to address this issue by regulating the process of cleansing electoral registers.

Elections in Greece are conducted smoothly, thanks to an impartial and highly competent electoral management body composed of senior officials from the Ministry of Interior. These officials are supported by well-trained staff and receive the necessary financial resources to administer elections effectively. Trained civil servants and practicing lawyers from all electoral districts are summoned before election day, provided with instructions, and compensated for their work as polling station managers. Any issues that arise on election day are resolved by local first-instance courts.

Greece adheres to a regular four-year electoral cycle for multiparty elections. In the past, Greek governments occasionally exercised their right to dissolve parliament, leading to snap elections. However, since 2015, elections have followed a predictable four-year cycle.

Greece boasts a high number of polling stations – 21,199 across the country – with an average of 453 registered voters per station. Low-fare public transportation is available in mainland Greece, and polling stations are equipped with facilities for citizens with disabilities.

The ballot design is comprehensive and user-friendly, ensuring that the secrecy of the ballot is maintained without issues. There have been no reported incidents of voter harassment, violence, or intimidation, nor have there been cases of double voting or impersonation. In summary, the election process in Greece is conducted in an impartial and nondiscriminatory manner.

Citation:

Michalopoulos, S. 2023. "Greece to test postal voting in EU elections for the first time." Euractiv.com January 12. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/greece-to-test-postal-voting-in-eu-elections-for-the-first-time>

Data on polling stations is drawn on the official website of the Ministry of Interior: <https://www.ypes.gr/eklogika-tmimata/>

Lithuania

Score 10

All citizens over the age of 18 on election day are eligible to vote. Citizens living abroad may vote if they preregister. Several proposals for the introduction of internet-based voting have been rejected by the parliament, although this issue continues to reappear on the political agenda. Votes can be cast in person on election day, but provisions are also made for early voting, out-of-country voting, voting in special institutions and voting for those who are housebound. According to the Central Electoral Commission (2023), in the municipal elections of March 2023, 9.41% of votes were cast during the period of early voting – that is, before election day on March 5. The elections are conducted according to the established schedule.

In general, the election process is carried out impartially and without discrimination. There are no specific disincentives to voting, although the absence of internet voting

capabilities may limit participation rates for citizens living abroad, as overseas voting must be done in person at diplomatic missions typically located in the capitals or other major cities of foreign countries.

After the 2016 parliamentary elections, alleged cases of vote-buying in rural electoral districts emerged, leading to police investigations and the removal of one elected member of parliament from the party list. No such major cases of suspected vote-buying or other irregularities came to light during the 2019 municipal, presidential or European Parliament elections, the 2020 parliamentary elections, or the 2023 municipal elections.

It should be noted that the parliamentary elections in autumn 2020 took place amid the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. A longer period of early voting was allowed, more polling stations were established and drive-through voting was provided for voters in self-isolation. Social distancing measures were also enacted during voting on election day. As observed by the OSCE/ODIHR (2020), voters were afforded ample opportunities to cast ballots.

Citation:

Central Electoral Commission of Lithuania. 2023. "The Results of the Municipal Elections 2023 (in Lithuanian)." https://www.vrk.lt/savivaldybiu-tarybu-ir-meru-2023/rezultatai?srcUrl=/rinkimai/1304/1/aktyvumasIsankstinis/lt/aktyvumasIsankstinisBendras_balsData-2023-03-04T00-00-00.html?p_p_id=82&p_p_lifecycle=1&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&_82_struts_action=%2Flanguage%2Fview&languageId=en_GB?p_p_id=82&p_p_lifecycle=1&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&_82_struts_action=%2Flanguage%2Fview&languageId=en_GB

OSCE/ODIHR Lithuania. 2020. "Parliamentary Elections, 11 and 25 October 2020: Final Report." <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/lithuania/477730>

OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report on the 2019 presidential election in Lithuania, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/lithuania/433352?download=true>

OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Report on the 2016 parliamentary elections in Lithuania, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/lithuania/296446>

Netherlands

Score 10

This observation period saw three elections: one national election (22 November 2023), combined local and water board elections (16 March 2022), and provincial elections (16 March 2023).

In each election, more than 20 national political parties and many more local political parties fielded candidates. Ballot design had to be changed due to the increase in the number of political parties on the ballot: in 2021, 37 parties fielded 1,579 candidates; in 2023, 26 parties fielded 1,128 candidates. Because of the large number of participating parties, vote counting (by hand, not by computer) took more time. Each election resulted in a different "winner" (meaning the minority party gathering the most votes and seats), which testifies both to the enormous volatility of the Dutch electorate and to the fact that elections are truly free and fair.

All Dutch citizens aged 18 or over residing in the Netherlands are equally entitled to run for election, although some restrictions apply in cases which the candidate suffers from a mental disorder, or when a special court order has temporarily deprived the individual of eligibility for election. Convicts have the right to vote by authorization only; as part of their conviction, some may be denied voting rights for two to five years over and above their prison terms. Convicts have turned to the court to acquire the right to have polling stations inside prisons, but were denied.

Contrary to other civil rights, the right to vote in national, provincial or water board elections is restricted to the 13.3 million citizens with Dutch nationality who are at least 18 years old (as of election day). Since the elections in 2010, each voter has been obliged to show a legally approved ID in addition to a voting card/pass. Legally approved IDs include either a (nonexpired) passport or driver's license. For local elections, voting rights apply to all individuals who have been registered as legal residents for at least five years, and to all EU nationals residing in the Netherlands.

Persons entitled to vote receive an invitation to vote and a voting pass/card at their home address no later than 14 days before the elections. No later than the Friday before voting, eligible voters will receive at home the list of candidates, as well as the addresses and opening times of polling stations and mobile polling stations. In 2023 there were approximately 9,500 polling stations, all wheelchair accessible. Corrected for housing prices, the median distance between a voter's home address and a polling station was 300-400 meters.

Bearing testimony to the high level of trust in election procedures, the law regulates complaints and appeals regarding specific "up-front" parts of the electoral process, such as voter registration, registration of party names, candidate registration and election day proceedings, but there are no specific rules or regulations permitting judicial appeals related to crucial aspects including campaign finance behavior, campaigning or challenges to the election results. Only as late as 2023, in a generally more distrusting public mood, was the ballot counting process made public. In the 2023 election ballot-tallying process, the Election Council ordered one local government to recount due to a difference between the number of voting passes and votes cast.

Persons entitled to vote receive an invitation to vote at their home address no later than 14 days before the elections: a voting pass. No later than the Friday before voting, eligible voters are to receive the list of candidates, as well as the addresses and opening times of polling stations and mobile polling stations at home. Indicative of the high level of trust in election procedures in the Netherlands is the fact that the law regulates complaints and appeals regarding the input and some throughput parts of the electoral process, such as voter registration, registration of party names, candidate registration and election day proceedings, but there are no specific rules or regulations permitting judicial appeals to crucial throughput aspects such as campaign finance and style of campaigning. Nor are there provisions for challenging

the election results themselves. However, election results in 2021 were also checked by volunteers from the Open State Foundation. Except for some aggression directed at extreme right-wing FvD's political leader, Baudet, there were no irregularities reported in 2023.

Citation:

NOS Nieuws. 2023. "Minder stembureaus dan in 2019, maar wel beter toegankelijk." maandag 13 maart.

Kantar Public. 2023. "Evaluatie Verkiezingen. Evaluatie van de verkiezingen van de leden van de Provinciale Staten en van de Waterschappen, 15 maart 2023." Published April 25.

NU.nl. 2023. "Politieke kopstukken geschokt na tweede aanval op Baudet: 'Unacceptabel'." November 20.

Open State Foundation. n.d. "Open Verkiezingsuitslagen 2021."

Norway

Score 10

All Norwegian citizens over the age of 18 have the right to vote in national elections. In local elections, individuals over 18 with at least three years of legal residence in Norway or those who are citizens of another Nordic country also have the right to vote. Elections are held every four years for both the national parliament (the Storting) and the municipal and county councils. Voting rights are generally based on objective criteria, with few disputes over individual voting rights. Municipal electoral committees, appointed by the democratically elected municipal councils (kommunestyret), are responsible for the practical organization and administration of municipal and national parliamentary elections in Norway (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2017).

Electoral campaigns and the voting process are generally considered fair and transparent. Polling stations are traditionally located in primary schools, but other locations – such as old-age care institutions and kiosks in public spaces – are increasingly used. Political parties typically provide transportation to polling stations for those in need. Early voting has become popular; in the 2023 local elections, 42% of all votes were cast early. All voting requires personal attendance. Polling stations are plentiful, and queues are not a problem. The counting of votes is peaceful and typically uncontested. The distribution of seats in municipal and county councils, as well as in the national parliament, follows clearly defined and transparent rules, and electoral outcomes are typically undisputed.

In cases of reported misconduct, mistakes, or other irregularities, the Ministry of Interior may decide to repeal the original result and hold a new election. This rarely happens, but in the local elections in 2023, the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (2023) nullified the county council election results in one municipality due to an inadvertent error in the availability of ballot papers at one polling station.

Citation:

<https://www.valg.no/en/>

Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. 2023. October 4.

Departementet påbyr omvalg i fylkestingsvalget i Moss kommune. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/departementet-pabyr-omvalg-i-fylkestingsvalget-i-moss-kommune/id2997404/>

Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. 2017. "Main Features of the Norwegian Electoral System." <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/elections-and-democracy/den-norske-valgordningen/the-norwegian-electoral-system/id456636/#fire>

Slovakia

Score 10

All citizens, both de jure and de facto, can exercise their right to vote without restrictions. Voting rights are granted to all citizens, including those without permanent residence or with felony convictions. There is no disenfranchisement due to a flawed voter registry since registration is passive. In rare cases of registry errors, citizens can request corrections through municipal administration and appeal decisions to the administrative court.

Elections are organized by three levels of election commissions, headed by the State Commission for Elections and Control of Financing of Political Parties (SEC). These levels include 50 District Election Commissions (DECs) and around 6,000 Local Election Commissions (PECs) serving a country with 5.5 million inhabitants. Voters who are unable to visit polling stations on election day, usually for health reasons, can request to vote via a portable ballot box.

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the Statistical Office support election commissions at all levels. The MoI handles technical preparations and methodological support. DECs and PECs, which are formed before each election, manage voting, counting, and results tabulation. Each DEC and PEC has at least five members nominated by election contestants. The Statistical Office administers results tabulation, sets up units in all DECs and the SEC, and installs a system for electronically processing election results.

The early 2023 parliamentary elections proceeded as scheduled, with minor delays in two PECs due to extended voting times for health reasons. Disabled citizens had the option to vote at home, highlighting issues with access. There were few incidents of harassment, violence, or intimidation against voters and voting commissions during the elections. Six thousand five hundred police officers maintained public order, and out of 123 reported violations before or during the elections, only five were classified as penal code violations. The results from one PEC were annulled due to the manipulation of envelopes by a commission member; this did not affect the overall election outcome.

Citation:

Ministerstvo vnútra SR. 2023. “Štátna komisia pre voľby a kontrolu financovania politických strán vyhlásila oficiálne výsledky volieb do NR SR 2023.” <https://www.minv.sk/?informacie-komisia-pre-volby&sprava=statna-komisia-pre-volby-a-kontrolu-financovania-politickych-stran-vyhlasila-oficialne-vysledky-volieb-do-nr-sr-2023>

OSCE. 2023. “Slovak Republic. Early Parliamentary Elections 30 September 2023. ODHIR Needs Assessment Mission Report.” https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/c/548809_0.pdf

Zákon o podmienkach výkonu volebného práva a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov. <https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/zz/2014-180>

Sweden

Score 10

Eligible voters for the Swedish national elections include Swedish citizens over 18 who are either currently registered as residents or were registered as residents in the past in Sweden. EU citizens living in Sweden, regardless of how long they have been residents, along with residents from other countries or stateless persons who have resided in Sweden for 3 years prior to the election, have the right to vote in regional and local elections (Valmyndigheten, 2024).

The quality and robustness of the electoral system notwithstanding, the Swedish Election Authority has identified weaknesses following the 2022 elections and has made several recommendations, including (i) evaluating and simplifying the ballot system; (ii) demanding more rigor from parties regarding substantive representation in districts, such as implementing tighter registration rules; (iii) reviewing the system for voting from abroad; (iv) allocating more resources to the Swedish Election Authority to investigate complaints; and (v) giving more authority and power to the Election Authority to issue binding regulations (Valmyndigheten, 2023).

Recent work by Högström and colleagues (Högström and Jerhov 2023a; 2023b) highlights that despite robust democracy in Sweden, minor human errors in handling early votes and managing queues at voting places affect poll workers’ perception of the voting process quality, even if no serious errors occurred in the actual conduct of the elections. A recent report concludes that although there were fears about the spread of disinformation and misinformation on social media ahead of the 2022 elections, this did not happen, with the exception of small-scale activity on Twitter (currently known as X) (Svenonius et al. 2023).

Citation:

Högström, J., and C. Jerhov. 2023a. “Complaints Concerning Electoral Fraud and Administrative Inaccuracies: A Study of Complaints About the Parliamentary Elections in Sweden Between 2010 and 2018.” *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 22 (1): 27-44.

Högström, J., and C. Jerhov. 2023. “Köer och röstmottagningens kvalitet vid det svenska valet 2022: En studie med fokus på röstmottagarnas erfarenheter från valet.” *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 125(4): 887–915.

Svenonius, O., Olsson, S., Michélsen Forsgren, M., Dungal, E., and Jarlsbo, M. 2023. *Så Någon Valfusk? Informationsmiljön på Sociala Medier i Samband med Valrörelsen 2022*. FOI Totalförsvarets Institutet. FOI-R – 5429-SE <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI-R-5429-SE>

Valmyndigheten. 2023. "Erfarenheter från Valen 2022." Rapport: VAL-686. <https://www.val.se/om-oss/vart-uppdrag/erfarenheter-fran-val.html>

Valmyndigheten. 2024. "Rösträtt och Rostlängd." <https://www.val.se/att-rosta/vem-har-rostratt/rostratt-och-rostlangd.html>

Australia

Score 9

However, there is noteworthy variation in turnout across the country. Lower turnout rates in regional areas with large Indigenous populations are of particular concern (Central Land Council 2022). Contributing factors to this disparity include lower information penetration, lower levels of educational literacy, and inadequate interpreter and translation services in these regions. Post-election analyses also show higher rates of informal voting – when a vote is submitted but not counted due to errors in ballot completion – in Indigenous communities compared to other areas.

The homeless population also exhibits low levels of electoral participation (Coram et al. 2019). This demographic faces difficulties enrolling to vote and maintaining their enrollment due to frequent changes in accommodation.

Certain minority communities encounter barriers to participation, often related to English language proficiency. For instance, while the rate of informal voting was around 3% nationwide in the 2022 federal election, it was significantly higher in multicultural communities. In the electorate of Fowler in western Sydney, which has large Vietnamese and Chinese populations, the informal vote rate exceeded 10% (Jakubowicz 2023). Additionally, non-citizen permanent residents are not eligible to vote.

Individuals with cognitive disabilities represent another marginalized group. Thousands of Australians have been removed from the electoral roll under the "soundness of mind" clause (Ramcharan et al. 2023). There has been little systematic effort by government agencies to increase the inclusion of people with cognitive disabilities, and there is no requirement for political parties and candidates to provide campaign information in cognitively accessible ways.

Prisoners serving sentences of less than three years, those on early release, or those on parole are entitled to vote via postal vote or prison mobile polling teams, provided they satisfy other voting requirements (Australian Electoral Commission 2023).

Citation:

Jakubowicz, A. 2023. "Will multicultural Australians support the Voice? The success of the referendum may hinge on it." *The Conversation* February 9. <https://theconversation.com/will-multicultural-australians-support-the-voice-the-success-of-the-referendum-may-hinge-on-it-199304>

Ramcharan, P., McVilly, K., Despott, N., and Bloomfield, C. 2023. "Australia Must Include People with Cognitive Disability in Politics." *Pursuit* September 20. <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/australia-must-include-people-with-cognitive-disability-in-politics>

Australian Electoral Commission. 2007. "Fact Sheet: Prisoner Voting." Australian Electoral Commission October. https://aec.gov.au/About_AEC/Publications/Fact_Sheets/fact_sheets/prisoner-voting.pdf

Central Land Council. 2022. "Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into the 2022 Federal Election." Central Land Council. <https://www.clc.org.au/files/SUB-221024-CLC-submission-to-JSCEM-Inquiry-into-2022-Federal-Election-FINAL.pdf>

Coram, V., Louth, J., Hill, L., Tually, S., and Goodwin-Smith, I. 2019. An Exploration of Homelessness and Electoral Participation. University of South Australia and The University of Adelaide. https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/research/files/an-exploration-of-homelessness-and-electoral-participation.pdf

Canada

Score 9

Voting in Canada is free and fair, having been conducted with a universal adult franchise since the 1960s, with female suffrage established at the beginning of the 20th century. Election agencies operate at arm's length from the government and are deemed to be of high quality. Significant efforts are made to facilitate voting through early voting, mail-in ballots, and widespread rural polling in public buildings within small communities.

In Canada, citizens generally enjoy both de jure (legal) and de facto (practical) rights to vote. The most important de jure aspect is universal suffrage. Although earlier in its history the vote was limited to adult male literate property owners, Canada now practices universal suffrage. This means that all citizens who meet certain minimum requirements regarding age and citizenship have the right to vote in federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal elections. The legal voting age in Canada is 18 years old. Citizens who have reached this age are eligible to vote in federal, provincial, and municipal elections. Generally, only Canadian citizens are eligible to vote in federal elections. In some provinces and territories, there are also residency requirements for voting in provincial or territorial elections. Voters are usually required to be residents of the electoral district in which they wish to vote, and sometimes must have resided in a particular location for a set period of time (Blais et al. 2003).

To vote, citizens must be registered on the electoral roll. Registration processes vary by jurisdiction but are generally designed to ensure all eligible voters are included. Registration can usually be completed up to and including the day of voting.

Other de facto (or practical) aspects of the franchise exist. These include efforts to ensure that polling stations are accessible to all citizens, including those with disabilities, and that accommodations are provided in terms of poll locations to facilitate voting in rural and other widespread areas. To accommodate different schedules and situations, provisions for early voting and absentee voting are typically available in some jurisdictions.

Governments and election authorities conduct voter education campaigns to inform citizens about the electoral process, registration procedures, and voting methods through traditional and extensive social media information campaigns.

At the federal level, Canada recognizes both English and French as official languages, and citizens have the right to receive election information in either language. This helps ensure that language barriers do not impede the exercise of voting rights.

While Canada makes significant efforts to ensure broad and inclusive participation, challenges or barriers may still exist and can vary by region. Some groups, such as Indigenous communities or those facing socioeconomic challenges, may encounter unique obstacles to fully exercising their voting rights, including language issues and difficulties voting in thinly populated rural areas.

Citation:

Blais, André, Louis Massicotte, and Antoine Yoshinaka. 2003. *Establishing the Rules of the Game: Election Laws in Democracies*. 2nd ed. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press.

Czechia

Score 9

All adult citizens, including convicted prisoners, can participate in national elections, and voter registration is relatively straightforward. EU citizens who are permanent residents of Czechia can participate in municipal and European elections. As of 2018, EU citizens who are temporary residents of Czechia can also participate in municipal elections. However, while there are special provisions for a mobile ballot box to facilitate voting for the disabled and seriously ill, there is no general ability to vote by mail. Czech citizens residing abroad can only vote at Czech embassies and consulates and must meet a specific deadline for registration. During the period under study, the pressure for a postal ballot – especially for citizens living abroad – has intensified and was included in the program statement of the Fiala government.

The Czech Republic has a dense system of voting locations with voting booths, where one location typically serves 1,000 people. Citizens have easy access to information on where and when to vote. Ballots are mailed to citizens' registered home addresses (domicile), and no voting registration is required, making voting easy and accessible (e15, 2023).

Citizens can use the courts to complain about irregularities, and 1,000 such complaints were raised in early 2023 regarding the presidential election. However, 600 complaints were raised either too early or too late to be considered. Additionally, there were numerous duplicated complaints, indicating organized campaigns. Of the 400 complaints investigated, a number were upheld, identifying errors in counting when the number of ballot papers returned did not match the total number of votes recorded. Small corrections to the candidates' votes were subsequently made.

Citation:

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<https://www.nssoud.cz/aktualne/tiskove-zpravy/detail/souhromna-informace-k-podanim-tykajicim-se-volby-prezidenta-republiky-1>

Ireland

Score 9

Voting rights in Ireland are granted to all citizens, except those without permanent residence and those with criminal convictions. Although there is no population register, an electoral register is compiled by local authorities. To register, a person must ordinarily reside at the address recorded in the electoral register by September 1st of each year. There is some proactive promotion of registration, and there have been no changes in voting and registration rules in recent years. Attempts to update registration data bases need to be continued. All Irish citizens aged 18 and over are entitled to vote in all elections and referendums. British citizens resident in Ireland may vote in parliamentary, European and local elections. Other EU citizens may vote in European and local elections, while non-EU citizens may vote only in local elections. The provision for absentee, email or early voting is limited, with significant restrictions on postal voting.

Although there is little disenfranchisement due to a flawed voter registry, there are inconsistencies, such as outdated records, double registrations and issuance of voting cards for deceased citizens. These issues highlight weak local administrative capacity and a lack of investment, awareness and concern. According to the local autonomy index (Ladner et al., 2015), Ireland ranks as one of the weakest countries in Europe in terms of local autonomy, limiting the potential role of local government in procurement and regional planning. Individuals denied the right to vote or register can appeal to a competent jurisdiction to review and rectify such decisions promptly. The 2023 Electoral Commission is expected to be an impartial and capable electoral management body, equipped with sufficient and trained staff and financial resources to effectively administer elections.

Multiparty elections in Ireland are conducted according to the established schedule, with local elections scheduled alongside EU (every five years), national (at least every five years), and presidential (every seven years) elections. The process is impartial and non-discriminatory, with an adequate number of polling stations relative to population density. Guidelines for electoral districts, accessibility of polling stations (often public schools), voting timeframes and dates (specified by law), comprehensive ballot design and full secret ballots are all in place, with no recent changes. Provisions for voter assistance, such as braille, are available, but could improve.

V-Dem (2023) rates Ireland 6th in its global database, scoring 889 on electoral democracy and 824 on liberal democracy. The OSCE did not recommend monitoring the 2016 or 2020 general elections and expressed high levels of trust in the integrity of the electoral process, including voting and counting procedures on election day. They, however, acknowledged concerns about the absence of a centralized voter registration process, the underregulated field of social media and the need for a permanent electoral commission (now established) to oversee electoral preparations

and guide the conduct of TV debates. There have been no significant recent incidents of harassment, violence or intimidation against voters, nor irregularities observed in the voter registry, such as double voting or impersonation, intentional withholding of voting materials, dissemination of misleading information about voting procedures, ballot-stuffing, or misreporting of votes. Irregularities can be resolved through the Electoral Commission and local authority processes. According to NESC (2023), quoting the national well-being framework, 82% of people were satisfied with how democracy works in Ireland in spring 2023, compared to the EU average of 58% (up from 73% in spring 2017).

Citation:

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Japan

Score 9

The electoral process in Japan is generally free and fair. Voting rights are granted to all citizens above 18 years old, including those living abroad. The only exceptions apply to persons serving a prison sentence and persons who are under legal guardianship and deemed "incompetent." A five-year voting rights suspension also applies to those who have been convicted of violating the Public Office Election Law. There has been a debate about granting the right to vote in local elections to long-term foreign residents, especially Koreans and Chinese living in Japan for many generations, but so far without much result. Only in a small number of municipalities have foreign residents been granted the right to participate in local referendums. This issue will likely become more prominent as the share of foreign residents is increasing and it is attracting more controversy with some politicians campaigning against such measures (Takao 2022).

Voter registration is based on residential address. While this system facilitates participation in elections, it also leads to abuses. In municipal elections, for example, it is not uncommon for voters to change their residence just three months before an election, which makes them eligible for voting in the election. As the differences in votes for different candidates are usually extremely small at the most local level, such practices can distort results.

Elections take place on Sundays and the secrecy of voting is ensured. National elections under the proportional representation system are managed impartially by the Central Election Management Council, which decides on the election schedule,

accepts the lists of candidates and announces results. National elections for constituency voting, as well as gubernatorial and prefectural assembly elections are managed by the prefectural election administration commissions, while municipal election administration commissions manage municipal assemblies and mayoral elections. The ballot design in single-seat constituencies – which requires voters to correctly spell the full name of a candidate – favors incumbents and hereditary politicians. There is no online voting and absentee voting relies on postal services, which sometimes fail to deliver ballots on time. The number of polling stations keeps decreasing due to depopulation, which makes it harder for elderly people in rural areas to vote. A limited number of municipalities provide free transportation to polling stations.

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Latvia

Score 9

All adult Latvian citizens over 18 have voting rights in national elections. EU citizens residing in Latvia can vote in local and European elections. All citizens have access to an effective, impartial, and non-discriminatory voting procedure. Voting procedures ensure that incarcerated persons can also make their electoral choices.

Upon a proposal from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Central Election Commission establishes polling stations in foreign countries in diplomatic or consular missions. Thus, Latvian citizens – including residents of other countries – also have access to voting, as polling stations are created in Latvian diplomatic entities. Voters can vote by mail using the postal voting procedure (Nulle, 2022).

Latvia has a population of non-citizens (approx. 10% or 187,404 persons of the total population in 2023) who do not have the right to vote or stand in elections but are registered and residing in Latvia (Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, 2021). These residents have access to all legal procedures, and the government provides incentives to become full citizens of Latvia.

There are minor obstacles to voting for citizens residing outside Latvia, as diplomatic and consular missions have limited capacity and representation. Thus, Latvian

citizens abroad must often travel long distances to reach Latvian diplomatic missions to vote. Mobile EU citizens can also vote in local and European Parliament elections; however, there is limited information available on voting procedures in other EU languages (Valtenbergs et al., 2021).

Election observers of the 2022 parliamentary elections noted that the elections were competitive and pluralistic, with political contestants able to communicate their messages to voters freely (OSCE, 2023). The legal framework for parliamentary elections ensures the organization of democratic elections.

The local elections are also democratic, impartial and non-discriminatory. Voters can participate in local government elections based on their residence or property ownership. The procedure to switch to a more convenient polling station is straightforward. Polling stations open for early voting at least a week before election day.

A voter register updates and stores information on Latvian citizens who have reached 18 years of age on the day of the election to the European Parliament, the local government council, or the Saeima. No irregularities have been observed in the voter registry, as it contains detailed information on the voters that completely excludes double voting.

Citation:

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Portugal

Score 9

The right to participate and vote in national elections in Portugal is extended to all adult citizens over the age of 18. Early voting options are available for hospitalized, imprisoned, or overseas citizens. Foreign residents in Portugal, hailing from EU member states or specific countries, can register for local elections under certain conditions (CNE, n.da). Brazilian citizens in Portugal with equal political rights can vote in legislative elections (CNE, n.db). Those denied the right to vote can file complaints with the National Elections Commission (CNE) – the independent body overseeing elections in Portugal.

There is typically a good balance between polling stations and population density, with stations in each administrative parish. Free transportation is provided for those

with limited mobility if required. Polling stations operate from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m., usually on Sundays (CNE, n.d.c). The ballot design is accessible, and Braille voting matrices can be provided upon request. However, concerns have been raised by the Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted of Portugal (ACAPO) about irregularities with the Braille matrix (DN/Lusa, 2022).

While the electoral process is generally transparent and non-discriminatory, occasional irregularities occur. Irregularities in the early voting process for emigrant Portuguese communities have been observed, with thousands reportedly not receiving their ballot papers in the 2022 legislative elections (Observador, 2022a). Additionally, irregularities in the European electoral circle led to the unprecedented annulment of 80% of votes by the Constitutional Court, necessitating a repeat of the voting process (Observador, 2022b).

The National Electoral Commission (CNE) and the Constitutional Court are responsible for addressing such irregularities, but the engagement of government ministries and the implementation of legislative changes remain crucial.

Citation:

Lei Eleitoral da Assembleia da República. Lei n.º 14/79, de 16 de maio. https://www.cne.pt/sites/default/files/dl/legis_lear_consolidada_2020-11.pdf

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Slovenia

Score 9

The right to vote in Slovenia is universal and equal. This right extends to people with criminal convictions and, since 2024, to individuals under guardianship due to mental and psychosocial problems. Previously, these individuals faced restrictions based on court rulings regarding their ability to understand the meaning, purpose, and impact of elections, which deprived around 3,000 voters of their right to vote. The law also outlines the conditions under which foreigners have voting rights.

Parliamentary, presidential, and local elections are held regularly. Numerous polling stations throughout the country allow voters easy access without queuing. Voting is

organized in hospitals, prisons, and retirement homes via postal voting. Early voting and mobile voting are available for sick and housebound voters. Special polling stations are set up in each of the 88 districts for voters who are outside their residences on election day.

Voters who are temporarily abroad can register to vote by mail, including via consular offices or at diplomatic missions (embassies). Those with permanent residence abroad have similar options for casting their vote. All voters with a registered permanent residence outside the country automatically receive a ballot paper.

Although the Electoral Integrity Project (2023) rated the 2022 Slovenian elections highly for integrity, certain shortcomings concerning voting from abroad were identified. Some complaints were made about the late distribution of ballot papers to voters abroad due to delays in finalizing candidate lists after appeals were lodged with the Supreme Court.

Elections are administered by election authorities at various levels under the direction of the State Election Commission, which is regarded as capable, professional, and impartial by various organizations (e.g., EIP, OSCE) and enjoys public confidence. The election procedures; vote counting; verification of results; and resolution of complaints are conducted transparently, impartially, and appropriately through official procedures. Nevertheless, in 2022, the commission appealed for more staff and financial resources.

Citation:
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<https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/spmembe-zakona-v-veljavi-volilno-pravico-imajo-odslej-tudi-osebe-pod-skrbnistvom/697859>

Spain

Score 9

Every Spanish citizen aged 18 and older has the right to vote, and this suffrage is exercised without significant exclusion or discrimination. Only individuals convicted of certain criminal offenses may lose their political rights. All citizens are automatically included in the electoral register, which is based on permanent residency and updated monthly using data from municipal and consular population registries.

There has been considerable discussion about the voting rights of Spanish citizens living overseas, who have faced bureaucratic obstacles in participating in elections.

The Organic Law 12/2022, of September 30, introduced new regulations for voting by Spaniards living abroad, establishing conditions for designating new centers authorized to collect ballot box votes.

In the 2023 elections, overseas residents no longer needed to apply to vote. They had to be registered in the Consular Register and the Register of Non-Resident Voters and received ballot papers by mail. Voters could also download ballot papers from the National Statistics Institute Website (Spanish Government, 2023).

The Organic Law on the General Electoral System (LOREG) establishes an independent, hierarchically structured administrative bureaucracy to ensure transparency, objectivity, and equality in electoral procedures. The Electoral Administration includes the Central Electoral Board, the Autonomous Community Electoral Boards, the Provincial Electoral Boards, and the Area Electoral Boards. These boards are well-equipped and financially resourced to guarantee the transparency and fairness of electoral processes.

Electoral boards are composed of three members, including a chairperson, selected by lottery from among registered voters in the respective precinct. Serving on an electoral board is a civic obligation, with exemptions granted only for compelling reasons such as work commitments or health issues.

The 2023 election campaigns were generally peaceful, though there were instances of tension and confrontation. The tone of the campaigns was harsh, with some parties using highly charged language to warn voters that supporting regional contestants might undermine democracy in Spain. Voters were required to register with both the Consular Register and the Register of Non-Resident Voters and received their ballots by mail. Voters could also download their ballots from the National Statistics Institute website (Spanish Government, 2023). Discussions about TV debate formats dominated political discourse during the first week of the national election campaign. There were no reported incidents of harassment, violence, or intimidation against voters (OSCE, 2023).

Some irregularities have been observed in the voter registry for postal voting. The influx of applications for postal votes for the 2023 municipal elections in Melilla prompted the electoral board to require that citizens requesting to vote by post must visit the post office and identify themselves with their ID card when submitting their ballot envelope. To enhance the security of postal voting for the national elections, the Central Electoral Board issued an instruction in early June 2023 requiring all voters to prove their identity when submitting their vote at the post office by registered mail. Some parties have spread misleading information about postal votes. Multiple cases of vote-buying in the local elections in May 2023, implicating various political parties, are currently under judicial investigation.

Spanish Government. 2023. Order AUC/306/2023, of 28 March, establishing the conditions for the designation of the centres authorised abroad for the deposit of votes in ballot boxes in electoral processes called in Spain.

Switzerland

Score 9

Voting rights are granted to all Swiss nationals. Swiss nationals abroad without permanent residence have voting rights. Prison inmates are not excluded from voting rights. Persons who are subject to a general deputyship or are represented by a carer as they are permanently incapable of judgment are ineligible to vote (Federal Act on Political Rights, Art. 2). Foreigners, even those with permanent residence in the country, have no voting rights at the national level. In a few cantons, they are granted voting rights in their canton of residence.

There is no disenfranchisement resulting from a flawed voter registry. Rather, the commune of residence keeps an electoral register; voting documents are sent automatically to those who are in the electoral register. There is an impartial and highly capable electoral management body equipped with sufficient trained staff and the financial resources to administer elections effectively. During the past national election in 2023, a minor problem arose due to technical issues, which were fixed quickly.

Elections are conducted according to the established schedule, and the election process is carried out in an impartial and nondiscriminatory manner; there are no hidden impediments to electoral participation. Voting by mail (but not by email) is an established method, and is implemented impeccably. There are no incidents of harassment, violence or intimidation against voters. Likewise, there is no evidence of irregularities.

The real problem with regard to electoral participation in Switzerland is twofold: the rate of participation in popular votes and in elections is very low (47% in the national election of 2023; about 43% in the most recent popular vote on the national level in June 2023). This may be due to electoral fatigue (Swiss voters are called for popular votes several times a year on the municipal, cantonal, and national level), political dissatisfaction, political satisfaction – which is particularly high in Switzerland – institutional opportunities (citizens know that they may challenge a parliamentary bill in a popular vote if needed), or a lack of political interest or knowledge (Freitag/Zumbrunn 2022: 203; Fatke/Freitag 2015; Lutz 2022; 2023; Sciarini/Tresch 2022; 2023).

The other problem in the field of active and passive voting rights is the obvious challenge that 25% of the total population holds foreign citizenship, a much higher share than in other countries. The strict rules governing naturalization and the sheer size of the foreign population transform the “quantitative” problem of every modern

democracy – that some adult inhabitants face discrimination on grounds of their nationality – into a qualitative problem: If almost one-quarter of the voting-age population is not entitled to vote or to run for public office, the legitimacy of parliament and government to rule on behalf of the total population (which is vastly more than the citizen base) is arguably called into question. Furthermore, criteria and procedures for nationalization vary across cantons and communes, which opens the door to arbitrariness at the local level.

Others argue, however, that while the economy is globalized, democracy functions only based on a national society that identifies itself in terms of citizenship. This includes the (constitutional) right to define who is eligible for citizenship. Hence, migration certainly creates new problems, in that the “demos” and the resident population do not coincide.

The interaction of low political participation among Swiss nationals and the exclusion of about a quarter of the resident population due to their status as foreigners creates very small “decisive majorities”: If 44% participate in a popular vote, this means that 22% of the Swiss nationals have the final say. These 22% represent almost 17% of the total adult population – Swiss nationals and adult foreigners – meaning just 17% of all adults in the nation have brought about a political “majority” decision. In addition, interest in politics and voting participation is correlated with income and level of education (BFS 2021), raising questions regarding de facto equal access to voting.

To date, Switzerland has dealt with these problems somewhat slowly and hesitantly. For example, some notable liberalizing changes were adopted with regard to naturalization (e.g., costs have been substantially reduced) and with regard to passive voting rights in some cantons and local communities.

Citation:

BFS. 2021. “<https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/situation-economique-sociale-population/bien-etre-pauvrete/bien-etre-subjectif-et-conditions-de-vie/politique.html>”

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United Kingdom

Score 9

Citizens must register in their local area to be eligible to vote, but the system is straightforward and fair. Voting in person takes place at local polling stations, which are sufficiently numerous to ensure easy access. The process is simple and free from obstacles or intimidation. Local authority staff check names and addresses to verify voter eligibility. In the most recent local elections held in May 2023, identity checks were implemented for the first time in England. The Electoral Commission (2023) reported that due to these new requirements, 0.25% of voters were unable to vote, 4% decided not to vote, and those without relevant ID, such as people with disabilities, faced higher difficulties. Identity checks will also be used in general elections starting October 2023.

The ballot is secret, and there are measures in place to ensure polling stations are secure. While some campaigners, like the Electoral Reform Society, advocate for more assistance for voters with disabilities to access polling stations, provisions for proxy or postal voting are available.

There are clear procedures for postal voting. Although there have been occasional, isolated allegations of voting irregularities such as double voting or impersonation, these incidents are exceptions. Vote counts are conducted scrupulously.

Citation:

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/voter/voting-person#accessibility>

Electoral Commission. 2023. "Voter ID at the May 2023 Local Elections in England: Interim Analysis." <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/voter-id-may-2023-local-elections-england-interim-analysis>

Italy

Score 8

Until 2021, the minimum voting age for representatives in the Chamber of Deputies was 18, while for the Senate it was 25 (Art. 58 Constitution). Starting with the September 2022 elections, the minimum voting age for the Senate was lowered to 18, aligning it with the chamber. This reform equalizes the bases of representation in

both chambers, contributing to greater congruence regarding the number and size of parties represented.

All Italian citizens, whether residing within national borders or abroad – temporarily or permanently – have the right to vote in general elections. For Italian citizens residing abroad, reserved seats are provided (in 2022, 8 in the Chamber of Deputies and four in the Senate) with specific candidate lists in four special districts for different areas of the world. After registering in a particular registry, these citizens can vote by mail. Voting by Italians living abroad has often been questioned for several reasons: these voters do not pay taxes in Italy, and elected representatives from the special districts often lack clear party affiliation, giving them fewer constraints in parliamentary activities.

Following the 2020 constitutional reform, the number of reserved seats was reduced from 12 to 8 in the Chamber of Deputies and from 6 to 4 in the Senate, decreasing their relevance. Additionally, parties have increasingly structured voting abroad by nominating candidates residing in Italy for special districts abroad. Italian citizens living abroad are not entitled to vote in local (regional and municipal) elections. However, foreign citizens from European Union (EU) member countries residing in Italy have the right to vote in municipal elections. Generally, those sentenced to prison are excluded from voting for the duration of their sentence (President of the Republic Decree 223/1967).

Since citizenship is the fundamental requirement for voting – Italian for all elections and EU for municipal elections – all non-EU foreign citizens permanently residing in Italy are automatically excluded. According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) data (October 17, 2023), about 3.7 million non-EU citizens with legal residence permits in Italy cannot vote in any Italian elections. This exclusion is difficult to justify, especially considering that EU citizens can vote in municipal elections and Italians living abroad, who often have fragile ties with Italy, can vote in general elections. However, similar exclusions are found in other European countries, and the issue remains highly debated.

There are no reserved seats for French- and German-speaking minorities. However, the national legal electoral threshold for parties representing these minorities does not apply. This provision, along with the concentration of language groups in specific territories and districts, ensures safe representation in parliament.

Citizens are notified of their voting rights by mail and can appeal to independent judicial bodies if mistakenly excluded from the voter rolls. Many polling stations are located close to voters' residences, but in 2022 the number slightly decreased to reduce costs (see Ministry of Interior). Unlike regional elections, which are held over two consecutive days, general elections are held on a single day – Sunday. This choice could affect the participation of some voter categories. The September 2022 elections recorded the lowest turnout in the Republican era. (see International IDEA Voter Turnout Database).

Citation:

ISTAT data for non-EU citizens residing in Italy: <https://www.istat.it/it/files//2023/10/REPORT-CITTADINI-NON-COMUNITARI-2023.pdf>

International IDEA Voter Turnout Database: https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/country?country=110&database_theme=293

New Zealand

Score 8

Voting rights are granted to all citizens and permanent residents aged 18 years and older. In national elections, individuals of Māori descent can choose whether to vote on the general electoral roll or the specific Māori roll. In 2020, voting rights were restored for prisoners serving less than three years.

Elections are conducted according to an established schedule. The prime minister has the authority to determine the date of the general election; however, it must be held within three years of the previous election unless special circumstances necessitate an earlier election or an extension of the term.

The Electoral Commission is an impartial and capable electoral management body operating independently from the government and political parties. The Commission's primary role is to administer parliamentary and local government elections as well as referendums, and to conduct voter education and outreach programs to inform citizens about the electoral process, voter registration and voting procedures.

Efforts are made to ensure that voting is accessible to all eligible citizens. Absentee and early voting are conducted in a manner that accommodates various voter needs. Advance voting locations are set up across the country, and voters can apply to vote via the post, which allows them to receive and return their ballot papers by mail. Information about advance voting, absentee voting procedures and eligibility criteria is readily available through the Electoral Commission's website, making it easy for voters to understand their options. However, turnout rates remain lower among non-English-speaking, Māori and Pacific ethnic communities compared to those who are ethnically European.

A report by the Auditor-General published in May 2024 revealed several counting errors, including double counting, in the 2023 general election. These errors were not substantial enough to nullify the results in any particular constituency or the election overall. However, the report's findings tarnished the previously unblemished record of election management in New Zealand. Part of the problems in 2023 were due to coordination issues and the fact that late voter registration had been allowed by the previous government – without, however, providing the Election Commission with sufficient funding to handle the additional workload (Controller and Auditor-General 2024; Edwards 2024).

Citation:

Controller and Auditor-General. 2024. General Election 2023: Independent Review of Counting Errors. Wellington: Office of the Auditor-General. <https://www.oag.parliament.nz/2024/election-2023/docs/general-election-2023.pdf>

Edwards, Bryce. 2024. "Losing Confidence in the Integrity of NZ Elections." Democracy Project, May 9. <https://democracyproject.substack.com/p/losing-confidence-in-the-integrity>

Israel

Score 7

Voting rights are granted to all citizens, including felons, prisoners and newly arrived immigrants. No prior registration is required before voting and all citizens are eligible to vote. The elections are managed by the Central Election Committee, which is chaired by a judge, and operates as an independent body with its own budget and professional administration. The administration of recent elections, including those held during the COVID-19 pandemic, experienced no significant issues. Elections are conducted 90 days after the dissolution of the Knesset. While the schedule is usually followed, the 2023 elections for the local authorities were postponed from October 31, 2023, to February 27, 2024, due to the war with Hamas. During the last elections in November 2022, there were 6,788,804 eligible voters and 12,495 polling stations. These included 222 polling stations in hospitals, 102 in embassies abroad, 55 in prisons, 5,121 accessible polling stations for people with various disabilities, 232 polling stations in care homes and 279 polling stations for people with COVID-19 (Central Election Committee). Public transport was free on election day to facilitate access to polling stations. Regular polling stations were open from 07:00 to 22:00, while polling stations in cities with fewer than 350 voters and those in hospitals were open from 08:00 to 20:00. Because polling stations were located in schools, water facilities and restrooms were available for voters. Voters who used special polling stations, such as those in hospitals or accessible stations, used a double envelope to prevent double voting.

During the 2022 elections, several complaints were made to the Central Election Committee regarding irregularities, such as attempts to vandalize voting ballots. These complaints were infrequent and resolved on site by the polling committee at each polling station.

However, in East Jerusalem, Palestinian residents are considered permanent residents of Israel rather than citizens, a status that grants them certain social rights and the right to vote in municipal elections but not in national elections. In "area C," which is under the full control of Israel rather than the Palestinian Authority, Palestinians do not have the status of citizens and do not have any voting rights.

Citation:

Central Election Committee. Data on elections to the 25th Knesset. <https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/Guides/knesset25-elections-info?chapterIndex=1>

Central Election Committee. "Information." <https://www.bechirot.gov.il/home/>

United States

Score 7

The United States does not have a definitive standard for voting eligibility. The U.S. Constitution contains certain protections against discrimination that, by process of elimination, define the parameters of the eligible voting electorate.

According to the federal Constitution, a person may not be deprived of voting on the basis of race, sex, failure to pay taxes, or age (unless under 18). Federal law also prohibits non-citizens from voting.

States are allowed to enact further restrictions on voting as long as they do not violate any of the aforementioned principles. Consequently, most states deprive individuals of the vote if they are currently or have previously been incarcerated. Additionally, all states prohibit individuals who are not U.S. citizens from voting for state offices.

States are responsible for election administration, including maintaining the electoral rolls of eligible voters. In 1993, the federal government made this a legal requirement for state governments. Over time, if voter rolls are not properly maintained, they can become inaccurate with an increasing number of ineligible voters. States have different rules about how these rolls are maintained. Often, states lack sufficient resources to conduct a detailed analysis of the voter rolls (Johnson 2019).

States have wide discretion in administering election day, including setting polling station locations and rules about campaigning near these stations. However, there are certain federal limitations on states' power to manage elections. For instance, polling station locations cannot be determined in a way that disproportionately excludes voters based on race or disability. The former is governed by the Voting Rights Act and the latter by the Americans with Disabilities Act. In both cases, voters must pursue legal action against a local or state government seen to discriminate against them, which is costly and time-consuming.

Before 2013, the federal government had the power under the Voting Rights Act's Section 5 to "pre-clear" changes to election administration made by jurisdictions with a history of voter discrimination. However, the Supreme Court rendered this part of the legislation inoperable in its decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* (King & Smith 2016).

Citation:

Desmond King and Rogers Smith. 2016. "The Last Stand? *Shelby County v. Holder*, White Political Power, and America's Racial Policy Alliances." *Du Bois Review*.

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Johnson, Richard. 2019. "Racial Policy Under Trump." In *The Trump Presidency: From Campaign Trail to World Stage*, eds. M. Oliva and M. Shanahan. Palgrave Macmillan.

Poland

Score 5

Voting rights, granted to all citizens, require permanent residence in a municipality, with the option to vote in any precinct based on a voting certificate. Polish law allows for the deprivation of public rights, including voting, for a citizen sentenced to at least three years of imprisonment. The 2023 Electoral Code amendments introduced the Central Register of Voters (CRV), replacing 2,477 separate voter registers. Concerns were raised about the CRV's late introduction potentially affecting its accuracy. The CRV assigned voters to polling stations based on their last voting address, allowing one-time changes up to three days before the election. Voter lists, finalized two days before election day, limited public scrutiny to individual inquiries. Errors in voter addresses emerged during candidate registration and on election day. The total number of eligible voters 29,091,621.

In cases of irregularities, citizens were able to address complaints to the mayor or through the government portal, mObywatel, but the 2023 amendments restricted public scrutiny. The National Election Commission (PKW) oversees the process with a three-level structure. Since 2019, the PKW has had stronger political roots, with seven out of nine members appointed by the Sejm. Elections with sufficient resources are administered on the national, regional and local levels.

Under the terms of the Electoral Code, the president calls for parliamentary elections, with the 2023 election having occurred on October 15, 2023. Amendments in March 2023 increased the total number of polling stations to 31,073, additionally providing for free transportation and enhanced accessibility for individuals with disabilities. The voting process, scheduled from 7:00 to 21:00, faced challenges including overcrowded polling stations due to high turnout. The 2023 elections had minor disruptions of public order, but there were no reported cases of double voting or impersonation.

Overall, the electoral process was efficient and well-organized, with amendments expanding the rights of committees and observers to record procedures. Minor irregularities were observed but promptly resolved without impacting the general election result.

Citation:

Kodeks Wyborczy. 2023. Ustawa z dnia 5 stycznia 2011 r. Dz.U.2023.2408 t.j. <https://sip.lex.pl/akty-prawne/dz-dziennik-ustaw/kodeks-wyborczy-17679859>

OSCE. 2023. "International Election Observation Mission Republic of Poland, Parliamentary Elections, 15 October 2023." <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/4/555048.pdf>

<https://www.infor.pl/prawo/nawosci-prawne/6338068.pierwsze-nieprawidlowosci-podczas-wyborow-2023.html>

Hungary

Score 4

Voting rights in Hungary are granted to nearly the entire population of Hungarians, including those living abroad. The voter registry generally meets democratic standards. Elections are held at national, regional, local and European levels in an orderly fashion. While elections are usually free and properly administered, they are far from fair.

The electoral law distinguishes between diaspora citizens without a Hungarian residence and Hungarian citizens temporarily living abroad with a registered address in Hungary. The former group, mainly ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania, Slovakia and neighboring countries, can vote by mail (Tóka 2019). However, mail-in ballots are not available to Hungarians who study or work abroad; they must travel to capital cities and endure long queues at embassies to cast their votes. This discrepancy creates inequality in access. Additionally, the mail ballot system is vulnerable to fraud due to lenient identification protocols and delays in updating the voter registry (see, e.g., Bozzay 2022). The electoral law has undergone frequent and sometimes radical changes and gerrymandering has occurred to the ruling Fidesz party's advantage. De jure, the voting process is administered professionally, but, as noted in the relevant election observation report by the OECD, it does not take place on a level playing field. A lack of transparency in campaign funding, for instance with regard to weak regulation of campaign finance disclosure, asymmetrical access to media outlets favoring government-allied candidates and the misuse of state funds for campaigning, have made it difficult for opposition parties and candidates to match the resources of those running on behalf of Fidesz or the allied Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP).

Additionally, opposition politicians have often been subject to smear campaigns initiated via the government's misuse of state assets. These structural disadvantages were only partially countered by the opposition through the coverage of the party's internal primaries, held in autumn 2021. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 2022, the imbalance between the government and the opposition concerning campaign funding, access to media outlets and organizational capacity became evident.

Against this background, it is unsurprising that Fidesz secured a two-thirds majority with 135 seats out of 199. Fidesz won the popular vote by a large margin of 54.13%. The United Opposition grouping could not replicate the success of the last local elections, in which they were on par with the government.

In addition to the two major political formations, a new party, Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland), secured six seats despite the government's amendments to the electoral law in 2020. The amendment increased the requirement for a party to run nationally from presenting 27 constituency candidates in at least nine counties to 71 candidates

in at least 14 counties. An exception to this rule is granted for ethnic minority representations, and the German minority representative won one seat in the elections.

Citation:

Tóka, G. 2019. "The 2018 Hungarian National Elections." Social Report 314-340.

Bozzay, B. 2022. "Thrown Out Hungarian Mail-In Ballots Found Near Târgu Mureș, Romania." Telex.hu, March 31. <https://telex.hu/english/2022/03/31/thrown-out-hungarian-mail-in-ballots-found-near-targu-mures-romania>

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