



# **Voting Reforms for British Overseas Voters**

**Recommendations for the United Kingdom to enable voters living overseas to fully and properly participate in national elections with reference to practices adopted in 20 major and relevant countries**

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**British Overseas Voters Forum**

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## Contents

Summary and conclusions .....	3
Why it is important that British overseas citizens vote .....	5
The main issues regarding voting from overseas .....	6
Issues explained together with recommended solutions .....	7
Comparative study of voting practices in 20 countries — methodology.....	13
Comparative study of voting practices in 20 countries — findings. ....	15
Ranking of countries by effectiveness of voting arrangements .....	24
The Global State of Democracy 2025 Report .....	28

## List of tables

1. Recent improvements by countries in overseas voting arrangements
2. The five potential uses for embassies and consulates shown by country
3. Different ways of exercising the postal vote shown by country
4. Use of internet in the voting process shown by country
5. Different voter registration methods shown by country
6. Different rights to vote given to citizens shown by country
7. The criteria explained for assessing countries for electoral effectiveness
8. BOVF ranking of countries by effectiveness of overseas voting arrangements
9. GSOD global ranking of democracies
10. Overseas voter methods of voting in 216 countries and territories

## Summary and conclusions

### **The systems that UK Citizens overseas rely on are ranked close to bottom in the world**

The 2024 legal reform granted all British citizens who have once lived in the UK the right to vote in national elections. This measure expanded the potential overseas voter base from an estimated 1.4 million to around 3.4 million. Even so, only 191,000 overseas citizens bothered to register in 2024 — a decline from 2019. This low number highlights systemic barriers including low awareness and unreliable or complex voting methods. In essence:

1. Postal voting does not work well enough due to the international postal system. The Electoral Commission reported that just 52% of postal ballots sent to voters overseas were received back in time to be counted. As postal systems around the world continue to deteriorate, the number of successful ballots will only further reduce.
2. Proxy voting assumes voters know someone who can be trusted with their vote, which is often not the case. It is also complicated to set up and, in any case, violates the principle of the secrecy of the vote

In both of the above cases, the voter has no idea if their vote has been counted. This democratic failure demands urgent reform.

### **Study of 20 major countries indicates practices that the UK can and must consider**

Our recommendations are based on our extensive research on the practices of 20 countries. The results of research are only included via summary tables at the back of the report. The research is in fact on going and the results not static as recent elections have often seen an improvement in mechanisms such as in the recent national elections in respect of the Netherlands and Argentina. It can however be made available to policy makers who require it.

Drawing on comparative analysis and lessons learned from 20 countries, this report outlines practical and proven solutions. Key recommendations focus on enabling overseas voters to cast their ballots securely, swiftly, and with confidence, while also reducing the administrative burden on UK local authorities.

**The two most important changes required in the lifetime of this parliament are:**

1. **Allow voters to download ballot papers online.** Local authorities would see their burden reduced at their busiest time. Pre-addressed envelopes could be sent out early and voters could also be allowed to use their own envelopes by following clear instructions.
2. **Allow voters to return ballots directly to embassies and consulates** in person or by local postal mail. These diplomatic missions would forward ballots to the UK using secure diplomatic mailbags, ensuring timely delivery.

**Other Important reforms and practices and cost savings that can and should follow**

Once these above two measures are in place and are functioning effectively, the proxy voting option, which is currently an option not offered by any country in our study, could potentially be abolished, further easing administrative strain on local authorities.

Additional shorter- and longer-term recommendations are detailed in the full report, aimed at both strengthening overseas voter participation and safeguarding democratic integrity. In particular, we recommend that:

**The Electoral Commission runs a major one-off publicity campaign** to inform British citizens overseas of their voting rights.

**UK citizens overseas are given an opportunity to automatically register or update their registration as a voter** at the time of applying for a new passport.

**Appointing a junior minister** specifically for the purpose of looking after overseas based citizens as well as garnering benefits of their presence and activities for the UK

## **Why it is important that British overseas citizens vote**

There is a strong argument that no citizen in the world should be denied democratic participation. Obtaining the vote in national elections in a host country is, it seems, out of the question in almost all countries. Only one country in our study gives the vote to anyone other than its citizens and even then, only to permanent residents under strict conditions. Therefore, the right to vote from overseas needs to be given in the country of nationality. This happens with most countries (sometimes with restrictions).

Many People of all nationalities who go to live in countries other than their own are by nature economically driven and capable. It can take a lot to survive in another country. This group tend to be relatively highly skilled as they often go to fill skill gaps in other economies. They are also generally better educated about world economic and political affairs.

As a group they are disproportionately significant taxpayers in their host countries. And as they are not citizens of the host countries, they are unlikely to be recipients of welfare. All countries benefit from a significant amount of tax paid by non-nationals. It would be a mistake to deny citizens a right to vote just because all, or a majority of their taxes are paid in another country.

A significant number of British citizens living overseas are actively helping to develop British interests in foreign economies. In today's global world, Britain's economic success is at least partly dependent on British citizens moving to live and work overseas.

In addition, there is another group of British citizens living overseas who are highly vulnerable. They may be overseas because they are married to a foreigner and are unable to return to the UK due to not having enough income to meet the requirement to bring their spouse to the UK with them, or they could be a pensioner that is experiencing the UK state pension that they contributed to falling in value in real terms every year i.e. a frozen pensioner. Most are not a burden on the UK in any way, but it is imperative that they are not forgotten and should be represented in our democratic system.

In many countries, including the United Kingdom, attempts have recently been made to improve the workings of democracy as it affects citizens overseas. However, a great deal more needs to be done to make it work effectively in the case of the United Kingdom.

## **The main issues regarding voting from overseas**

Issues addressed by this report are as follows:

1. Who should be entitled to vote?
2. Awareness of the right to vote
3. Ease of registering as an overseas voter
4. Appropriate constituency to be entitled to vote in
5. Giving citizens overseas access to a reliable method of voting
6. Reliably enabling citizens overseas to vote with privacy
7. Assuring citizens overseas that that their votes are counted
8. Criteria for differentiating a domestic registered voter from an overseas voter
9. Means for elected representatives and candidates to contact overseas voters

## Issues explained together with recommended solutions

In this section we summarize our views on each of the aforementioned issues, and make our short-term and long-term recommendations.

### *Issue one:*

#### **Who should be entitled to vote?**

Restricting overseas voters to those who were once resident in the United Kingdom is a reasonable compromise. While a majority of countries in our survey give voting rights to their citizens irrespective of other qualifications, a significant number, including the UK, give it to those citizens who have once been resident in the country. Three countries go further and demand proof of recent visit. We see the UK position as reasonable and not difficult to administer.

### *Issue two:*

#### **Awareness of the right to vote**

Most British citizens overseas have no knowledge of their right to vote or of how the registration process works. This is clear from talking to many British citizens overseas. It is underlined by the fact that, at the last election, only 191,000 of an estimated 3.4 million British citizens living overseas registered to vote. **Recommendation one follows:**

#### **Recommendation one:**

##### **A one-off major publicity drive to inform citizens overseas of their voting rights**

A publicity campaign should be organized overseas by the Electoral Commission through British-related social media and other suitable methods, starting now and continuing to the next General Election, with targets set for new registrations.

### *Issue three:*

#### **Ease of registering as an overseas voter**

Many countries oblige or incentivize citizens to register with an embassy or consulate when they move to a foreign country. Registering with an embassy or consulate often automatically triggers a voting registration. Other countries maintain national registers tied to ID cards. Submitting an overseas address to that register will in some cases automatically generate a new voting registration. The UK does not have either

underlying requirements or systems in place to do this, but there are some links that could be made to achieve easy registrations. **Recommendation two follows:**

**Recommendation two:**

**Create the opportunity for voter registration at time of passport application.**

An application for a new passport could easily include an option to register as an overseas voter. All the necessary data required for an electoral registration, such as ID and overseas residential address, is required to be given in a passport application. In addition, the system could be set up to ensure that the voter could opt to give additional registration information required for voter registration at the same time. The additional registration information would be the citizen's last UK voting address or, in the absence of a last UK voting address, their last UK residential address. This would create a new or renewed registration, which under current regulations would last three years.

**Issue four:**

**Appropriate constituency to be entitled to vote in**

The creation of overseas constituencies (as used by some European countries including France and Italy) is the BOVF's long-term recommendation and is referred to later. However, it would require a major piece of legislation, and it is difficult to call for this change while there are so few registered overseas voters. Therefore, overseas voters probably need to live with voting in an existing domestic constituency for the time being. Shopping around for where to vote should not be allowed, otherwise overseas voters would choose only a marginal seat to register in where their vote was more likely to be significant. This would be unfair on domestic voters who have no choice. The UK position of using the last voting address or, in the absence of one, the last UK residential address is the practice adopted in almost all countries with geographic constituencies. There is no good reason to change it.

**Issue five:**

**Giving citizens overseas access to a reliable method of voting**

This issue covers the need to ensure a much greater likelihood of an overseas vote arriving in time to be counted. The problem is mainly one of timing delays due to global postal systems. It can be tackled in the following ways:

- A. Allow embassies and consulates to send out ballot papers.
- B. Allow voters to download ballot papers electronically.



- C. Allow voters to deliver their completed ballot papers to local embassies and consulates.
- D. Require embassies and consulates to conduct the balloting process.
- E. Implement electronic voting.

Options D and E are desirable in the long term but difficult to achieve in the short term because they require major changes in the operation of the UK government. Options A, B, and C are likely to be much more achievable. **Recommendations three and four follow:**

**Recommendation three:**

**Give voters the opportunity to download ballot papers from the internet.**

The UK government should allow individual voters to download their UK ballot papers. This completely removes any delay in the overseas voter receiving the ballot paper and saves considerable work for each local authority. It is possible that the work could be done centrally by the Electoral Commission, with each local authority just confirming the names of candidates who are standing for election

**Recommendation four:**

**Use embassies and consulates as collection points for ballot papers.**

Embassies and consulates would act as collection points for ballot papers received via the local postal system or delivered by hand. These could all be in pre-addressed, sealed envelopes. The task that is required is for the embassies and consulates to use the diplomatic mail service to send the envelopes to a central point in the United Kingdom for onward distribution by the Electoral Commission, presumably with some tracking attached to ensure delivery is complete.

**Issue six:**

**Reliably allowing citizens to vote with privacy.**

The proxy system (used only by the UK) does not enable citizens to vote with privacy. The problems are that

1. the overseas voter needs to know someone in the country whom he/she believes can be relied upon
2. the overseas voter has no idea whether or how their proxy voted; and
3. the secrecy of the vote is destroyed in the process.

**Recommendation five follows:**

### **Recommendation five:**

#### **At the appropriate time, abolish proxy voting.**

When citizens overseas have been given means to vote with certainty and privacy, proxy voting could be abolished. This would also remove administrative work and costs from local authorities.

### **Issue seven:**

#### **Assuring citizens overseas that their votes are counted**

Recommendations three and four will ultimately improve the situation, but certainty could only be assured through electronic voting and/or voting at embassies and consulates. Electronic voting should be a long-term goal. Two countries in our survey currently use electronic voting successfully. See the long-term recommendations in this section.

### **Issue eight:**

#### **Criteria for differentiating a domestic registered voter from an overseas voter**

As with many rules around residence, there appears to be no accurate definition in law. Voters are in some cases, where they may live in the UK for a few days in a year in a property available to them, able to decide their residence status for themselves. The residence rule crops up many times in electoral law and has never been properly defined. **Recommendation six follows.**

### **Recommendation six:**

#### **Clearly define residence criteria for electoral purposes in the regulations.**

It is not clear in our opinion how residence should be defined, but perhaps the easiest way to manage and enforce it would be set criteria based on time spent in the UK during a calendar year or over two to three calendar years or to follow the well-defined tax residency rules.

### **Issue nine:**

#### **Means for elected representatives and candidates to contact overseas voters**

With overseas voters, it is not possible to initiate contact by knocking on the door and delivering a communication. **Recommendation seven follows.**

### **Recommendation seven:**

#### **Make overseas voters more contactable.**

It may not be possible to allow MPs, political parties, and candidates to use the email address given to the electoral authorities at the time of registration due to the lack of ability to control what happens to email thereafter. But at least a portion of the GBP 11,000 per year allowed for MPs to mail constituents should be specifically earmarked for communication with overseas constituents. In today's world, when MPs primarily receive E mails and return E mails from constituents, it should be possible to save money from this budget for domestic mail and give MPs a specific overseas postage allowance perhaps based on the number of overseas voters they have in their constituency. Some thought has also to be given to what means candidates at election time will have available to contact their registered overseas voters.

### **Issue ten:**

#### ***Lack of knowledge and focus on British Citizens living overseas***

Almost all countries have a greater focus on the needs of their overseas diaspora as well as extracting the benefits from them. Most countries register their overseas citizens at their embassies and consulates. Rightly or wrongly the UK does not do this. The French go even further by requiring their overseas citizens in each consulate territory to elect advisers to the embassy or consular staff. Indeed, these elected advisers go on, through an electoral college, to elect dedicated senators in the French Parliament

### **Recommendation eight:**

#### **Create the position of a minister for overseas citizens**

This would be an effective way to ensure that the UK not only has a focus on looking after its overseas citizens but also to gain more benefit from them for the UK. It would be likely that this would a junior minister in the foreign office, but the minister could be attached to another department such as trade.

**Two long-term recommendations follow:**

**Long-term recommendation one:**

**Create overseas constituencies based on geography of where voters currently live.**

France, Italy, and Romania have overseas (diaspora) constituencies. Their ability to engage with citizens overseas and obtain a greater interest in voting than other countries is clear.

**Long-term recommendation two:**

**Make embassies and consulates voting centres and and/or introduce electronic voting.**

As mentioned previously, these are the only two ways voters overseas can be sure that their vote arrives on time and is counted.

## **Comparative study of voting practices in 20 countries – methodology**

In coming up with our recommendations, we examined how a number of major countries that are relevant to the UK enable their overseas voters. The full result of the study is available in a separate spreadsheet.

### **Choice of Countries**

We chose a good cross section of countries including those that the UK historically tends to see as being most relevant. An explanation of our choices follows:

***Large Western European Countries.*** We chose countries usually deemed the most relevant in comparisons with the UK. They include Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands. We included one Scandinavian country, Norway, because such countries often have a different and valuable way of looking at governmental issues.

***Selection of Eastern European Countries.*** As relatively new democracies, these countries have been able to look at their democracy in fresher terms and be more radical in their approach. Included are Poland and the Czech Republic due to their economic significance; Romania due to its reasonable size and the fact that it has overseas constituencies; and Estonia because of its experimentation with electronic voting..

***Four Former UK Dominions.*** We included Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa owing to their proximity to the United Kingdom in terms of history, culture, and legal and parliamentary systems.

***Latin American Countries.*** We included Brazil and Argentina as two of the largest countries in the region.

***Asian Countries.*** We chose Japan and Thailand as they are larger democracies; and Singapore because it is often offered as an alternative governmental model.

We excluded the United States partly because what is permitted varies from state to state and partly because their voting systems seem to be in a state of flux.

### **Most countries in this comparative study have single-member constituencies.**

Most countries studied require systems in place to enable voters to vote in single-member constituencies. This requirement is common to the UK.

It is obviously easier to arrange overseas voting if voters are selecting candidates for multi-member constituencies because it reduces the number of destinations for completed ballots. Out of our 20 sampled countries, only six have multi-member constituencies.

Additionally, our sample includes three countries with overseas constituencies. If a country uses overseas constituencies, the voting arrangements are inevitably easier.

### **Countries with multi-member constituencies**

Only six countries in the survey base their electoral systems solely on multi-member constituencies under a proportional-representation (PR) method. These are Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the Czech Republic and Estonia.

### **Countries with separate constituencies for overseas voters**

These countries have advantages for registration (which can be done at embassies and consulates) and for the collection and counting of votes (as overseas votes do not have to be merged with domestic votes). However, there are only three examples in our study of countries with dedicated representation for overseas voters, these being France, Italy, and Romania. Specifically, France still has single-member constituencies for all its overseas voters. Interestingly, Italy recently introduced single-member constituencies as part of the mix, with multi-member seats selected by PR. However, in Italy voters overseas are denied the opportunity to participate in single-member seats and can only vote in the PR section, i.e., the multi-member section, where four regional seats are dedicated to voters overseas. Romania has one multi-member seat for its voters overseas.

## Comparative study of voting practices in 20 countries – findings

Perhaps only four countries (Romania, Italy, France and Estonia) can be judged to get their rules and processes to an acceptable level (see the league table towards the end of the report). Our assessment involves ease and effectiveness of voter registration right through to giving all (or most) citizens overseas sufficient ease and certainty in voting. However, Romania, Italy, and France could still be said to fail at the last hurdle because, whether based on the number of registered voters or even on actual votes cast, voters overseas are substantially underrepresented in the respective parliaments.

In the case of Romania, votes cast by the overseas voters in the overseas constituencies are now 10.2% of the total but result in an allocation of only 1.3% of the seats in parliament. In the case of Italy, overseas voters in total represent 10.3% of registered voters 4.2 % of actual voters but only allocated 2% of all seats. The overseas French voters are not so badly underrepresented being 3.4 % of registered voters 2.4% of actual voters and are 1.9% of the parliament.

### A. There is a trend among many countries to improve the rules around processes.

Many countries (perhaps most) in our study have recognised that there are problems in achieving their electoral objectives and in the past few years have been improving the options and systems around voting from abroad. Examples are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Recent improvements by countries in overseas voting arrangements**

Country	Recent Improvement
Argentina	In 2025 introduced a postal vote option.
Canada	In 2019 allowed all overseas Canadians to vote irrespective of length away.
France	Introduced electronic voting in 2024.
Japan	Introduced postal voting as a supplement in 2024.
Netherlands	Introduced download of ballot paper option for 2025 election.
Singapore	Postal voting, in addition to embassy and consulate voting, introduced in 2023.
United Kingdom	In 2024 extended the vote to all adult British citizens who had once lived in the UK and made registration easier.

## **B. The vast majority of countries use their embassies and consulates in the voting process one way or another.**

Sixteen of the 20 countries in our survey use embassies and consulates as voting stations and/or as places from which to send out ballot papers and/or as places at which to receive them. Probably the most valuable use for embassies and consulates is as distribution points and collection points. Thailand is the only country that uses embassies and consulates as both distribution and receiving points, sending out ballot papers by local mail and receiving them by hand or post. This system is intended to ensure that, wherever Thailand has an embassy or consulate, 100% of the ballots can be distributed and collected in time to be counted. Some countries including Italy distribute ballot papers from their embassies and consulates but do not collect them there. This arrangement helps get ballot papers out to voters in a timely fashion, but we suspect that many papers do not make it back in time in light of a low ratio of completed votes to registered votes.

Table 2 shows what countries use embassies and consulates for.



**Table 2. The five potential uses for embassies and consulates shown by country**

Country	Place of registration	Sending out ballot papers for postal voters	Used as a voting station	To collect ballot papers	Act as a counting centre	To send ballot papers or collect them
Argentina	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Australia	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Brazil	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Canada	No	No	No	No	No	No
Czech Republic	No	No	No	No	No	No
Estonia	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
France	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Germany	No	No	No	No	No	No
Italy	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Japan	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Netherlands	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
New Zealand	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Norway	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Poland	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Romania	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Singapore	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
South Africa	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Spain	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Thailand	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
United Kingdom	No	No	No	No	No	No
<b>Total in each category</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>16</b>

### C. Most countries use postal voting as one, or the only, voting option.

Most countries (16 out of 20) use postal voting.

Only three countries offer *only* postal balloting where ballot papers are mailed from the country and sent back. In these cases, the success rate is shown to be very low. In the case of postal balloting in the case of the UK, we know that the success rate (as per Electoral Commission) statistics is little more than 50%.

In most cases, postal balloting is used as a supplement to another system.

Most countries that use postal voting also allow voting at an embassy or consulate the latter of which is a good choice for citizens who live within reach of one but not for citizens in more remote locations, who are forced to take their chances on postal votes.

Two of the four countries that do not offer postal voting are in fact using electronic voting, these being France and Estonia making postal voting unnecessary. Electronic voting is clearly the gold standard if countries can be convinced that it is a secure process.

Apart from the two countries that are offering electronic voting, the two other countries that do not offer postal voting, these being Brazil and South Africa are, in both cases, allow voting in person at embassies and consulates.

Table 3 shows ways in which postal votes are exercised in sample countries.

**Table 3: Different ways of exercising the postal vote shown by country**

Country	Postal vote only and excluding any use of E and C	Postal vote only but including use of E and C	Postal voting as a supplement to voting at E & C	Use of E and C to aid postal voting effectiveness	No postal voting
Argentina			Yes	Yes	
Australia			Yes		
Brazil					Only E and C
Canada	Yes				
Czech Republic	Yes				
Estonia					E Voting
France					E Voting
Germany	Yes				
Italy		Yes		Yes	
Japan			Yes	Yes	
Netherlands		Yes		Yes	
New Zealand			Yes	Yes	
Norway			Yes	Yes	
Poland			Yes	Yes	
Romania			Yes	Yes	
Singapore			Yes		
South Africa					Only E and C
Spain		Yes		Yes	
Thailand		Yes		Yes	
United Kingdom	Have proxy				
Total	3	4	8	10	4

E and C = Embassies and consulates

## D. Use of the internet in the voting process

The internet can be used for the issue of ballot papers, for voting, or for transmitting count details between counting centres.

**Table 4: Use of internet in the voting process shown by country**

Country	Internet voting as main option	Downloading ballot paper from internet	Use E and C as counting centres and transmit result electronically
Argentina			Yes
Australia			
Brazil			
Canada			
Czech Republic			
Estonia	Yes		
France	Yes		Yes
Germany			
Italy			
Japan			
Netherlands		Yes	
New Zealand		Yes	
Norway			
Poland			
Romania			
Singapore			
South Africa			
Spain		Yes	
Thailand			
United Kingdom			
Total	2	3	2

E & C = Embassies and consulates

## E. Different voter registration processes

Most countries allow centralised online registration. Some make it necessary to register at an embassy or consulate only. Some offer both options. A few allow a manual process. Germany is somewhat rudimentary as the only application it allows is by post to the relevant local election district.

**Table 5: Different Voter Registration Methods shown by Country**

Country	Online to a national register	National register manual option by post	Register at embassies and consulates
Argentina	Yes		
Australia	Yes		
Brazil			
Canada	Yes	Yes	In some territories only
Czech Republic	Yes	Yes	
Estonia	Yes		
France			Yes
Germany		Yes	
Italy	Yes		
Japan	Yes		Yes
Netherlands	Yes		
New Zealand	Yes		Yes
Norway	local register		
Poland	Yes		Yes
Romania	Yes		
Singapore	Yes		
South Africa	Yes		Yes
Spain	Yes		
Thailand	Yes		Yes
United Kingdom	Local register	Yes	
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>

## F. The rights of citizens to vote in each country

Most sampled countries permit all their citizens to vote. Some restrict voting to those who have once lived in the country. New Zealand and Singapore require a recent visit. Australia puts a time limit (six years) on how long one can be away before losing the right to vote in federal elections This restriction can be disallowed for certain reasons.

**Table 6: Different rights to vote given to citizens shown by country**

Country	Just citizens or including PRs	Any further restrictions or qualifications on voting rights
Argentina	Citizens	
Australia	Compulsory for citizens	But generally, only if not away for more than 6 years
Brazil	Compulsory for citizens	
Canada	Citizens	But must have lived in country at some point in life.
Czech Republic	Citizens	
Estonia	Citizens	Must be in the population register.
France	Citizens	
Germany	Citizens	Must have lived in country for 3 months in last 25 years.
Italy	Citizens	
Japan	Citizens	Must have lived in country at some point in life.
Netherlands	Citizens	
New Zealand	Citizen and PR	Must have once lived for 12 months and returned in last 3 years (if citizen) or in last 12 months (if PR).
Norway	Citizens	Must have lived in country at some point in life.
Poland	Citizens	
Romania	Citizens	
Singapore	Compulsory for citizens	Must have resided in the country for at least 30 days in the last 3 years.
South Africa	Citizens	
Spain	Citizens	
Thailand	Compulsory for citizens	
United Kingdom	Citizens	Must have lived in country at some point in life.

PR: Permanent resident

## **G. The district in which a voter can register**

Apart from the three surveyed countries with overseas constituencies, countries generally tie one's voting constituency to a previous residence. Some countries such as Netherlands and Denmark only have one national list of candidates and therefore no specific allocation to an individual district. In the case of the Czech Republic, votes from overseas registered voters are aggregated and allocated to only one of the national multi member districts in each election, the chosen district being rotated at each election. In the case of Poland, the overseas votes are also aggregated and then added to the central Warsaw multi member constituency.

## **H. Why UK proxy voting is flawed**

The UK is the only studied country to offer proxy voting for voters overseas. Conceivable reasons for the non-existence of proxy voting in other countries are as follows:

1. The vote is not secret.
2. The voter cannot be sure that the proxy will vote according to the voter's choice (or even vote at all).
3. Many people living overseas do not feel that they have anyone they know well enough to trust with their vote.
4. It is more open to abuse than other voting systems.

In the UK, the process is complicated. Even local authority staff handling it seem sometimes not sufficiently familiar with the rules.

## **I. Countries that do not allow citizens resident overseas to vote**

We found only two countries that generally do not allow citizens overseas to vote, these being Ireland and Denmark. Ireland allows only diplomats and members of the armed forces to vote from overseas. Denmark allows more categories of citizens to vote from overseas, including those working for Danish companies abroad and students studying abroad.

## **Ranking of countries by effectiveness of voting arrangements**

Ranking of countries for effectiveness of their overseas voting arrangements is not easy. The best measure would be to look at the percentage of citizens that successfully vote over the total number of citizens entitled to vote.

However, most countries do not provide or even know what the number of those entitled to vote is, and even those that do are only able to provide a rough estimate. However, there is a reasonable yardstick contained by measure C, which is described below. It is clearly the most relevant one and the one we use to ultimately rank the countries

### **Measure C: Votes recorded as percentage of number of citizens living overseas**

We do not have any reliable data on the number of overseas citizens who are eligible to vote

We do however have access to a UN report which records the migrant stock of a country, this essentially being an estimate of all citizens of a country that currently live overseas.

We believe it is reasonable to use this number as a proxy for citizens living overseas who are entitled to vote, knowing that some countries will have slightly higher or lower proportions of overseas citizens who have not yet reached voting age.

It is also true that the statistics may not record all of its overseas voters as a migrant of a country, particularly where dual citizenship is involved, and where migration took place a very long time ago. In 2 of the 20 countries surveyed, these being Italy and Spain, we note that the number of registered voters exceeds the migrant stock, this probably being explained by the factor of very long-ago emigration from those countries particularly to South America and their allowance of dual citizenship.

We believe that overseas votes cast as a percentage of migrant stock should be the main criteria to judge all countries.

Clearly small percentage differences between countries on the above criteria could be explained by factors that had nothing to do with the efficiency of the process and therefore we have put countries in the below table into bands, and they should perhaps be judged by the band they fall into.



The following two measures, A and B, have some relevance.

**Measure A: Number of overseas registered voters as proportion of country total**

This is a relatively hard number and measures the significance of overseas registered voters in relation to the voting population as a whole.

The proportion of the number of overseas voters could be down to two reasons.

Firstly, it is the result of the success the country has in finding and registering its overseas voters.

Secondly, the number will be affected by the proportion of its citizens living overseas

Some countries restrict who can register to vote to those who have once lived in the country or who have recently made a return visit so for them the proportions should be lower

**Measure B: Actual votes recorded as percentage of registered overseas voters**

This is the turnout percentage.

We usually know how many citizens have been registered to vote (although one country Romania does not require preregistration to vote and ends up with more citizens casting their votes than those who were registered.

We also generally have an accurate number for those who actually voted.

It is useful to look at the success of those who successfully voted as a proportion of those who registered to vote. It reflects the success of the voting process as well as interest citizens have in voting once they have registered. However, the more difficult it is to register to vote, then likely the keener the voter has to be to complete the registration process and the more likely the voter is to vote Therefore, countries which make voter registration easy or automatic will tend to have a lower percentage of its registered overseas voters to vote.

**Table 7: The criteria explained for assessing countries for electoral effectiveness**

Category	What it is	What it Means
A	Proportion of registered overseas voters out of total number of registered voters for a country	<b>This is a measurement of the importance of registered overseas voters to the country as a whole.</b> It reflects the size of expatriate population relative to the country, the determination of the country to register its overseas citizens as voters, and negatively any restrictions being place on some of its overseas citizens being able to vote
B	Proportion of votes recorded by overseas registered voters out of total registered voters.	<b>This is the measure of voting turnout.</b> This mainly reflects the efficiency of the voting process and also the willingness of registered voters to actually vote in any particular election. In practice, in many countries where postal voting is used, a significant proportion of the ballots fail to arrive in time to be counted.
C	Proportion of actual votes recorded out of estimate of total number of citizens living overseas	<b>The KEY MEASURE - the success rate of overseas citizens being able to vote successfully.</b> No country is able to provide an accurate number for all those overseas citizens entitled to register to vote. However, using the same UN derived number of the total number of overseas citizens in respect of all countries, this number at least acts as a consistent denominator. All countries should have a not too dissimilar proportion of its overseas citizens that are too young to vote.

Abbreviations used in Table 8 are as follows:

**PV** =Postal voting **EV** =Electronic voting **E&C** = Embassies and consulates **ORV** = Overseas registered voters **OV** = Overseas voters who actually voted. **OCs** = Overseas constituencies. **H K** and **L** = Likely higher, medium, or lower proportion of eligible overseas voters out of total eligible voting population.

**Table 8: BOVF ranking of countries by effectiveness of overseas voting arrangements**

<b>R a n k</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>A ORV as % of total country voters</b>	<b>B Turnout of ORV i.e., those votes arriving in time</b>	<b>C OV as % of total immigrant stock</b>	<b>Key Feature of the Country's System</b>
	<b>The Top 5</b>				
<b>1</b>	<b>Norway</b>	2.3	80.0	<b>62.9</b>	Comprehensive Voter registration
<b>2</b>	<b>Italy</b>	10.3	26.4	<b>42.5</b>	OCs and E & C use involved
<b>3</b>	<b>Estonia</b>	5.0	67.7	<b>26.2</b>	With EV it is difficult to define an OV
<b>4</b>	<b>France</b>	3.4	33.0	<b>21.9</b>	E&C and EV as options
<b>5</b>	<b>Romania</b>	7.2	69.5	<b>21.2</b>	800 polling stations worldwide
	<b>Second Tier</b>				
<b>6</b>	<b>Australia</b>	0.8	57.6	<b>17.4</b>	Restriction on qualification to vote
<b>7</b>	<b>Spain</b>	6.2	10.0	<b>14.4</b>	PVs go back to E and C
<b>8</b>	<b>Poland</b>	2.1	94.4	<b>12.6</b>	Relatively low % living overseas
<b>9</b>	<b>Thailand</b>	0.3	83.6	<b>10.8</b>	E&C and 400 extra polling station
<b>10</b>	<b>Brazil</b>	0.4	30.1	<b>9.6</b>	Voting at E & C only
<b>11</b>	<b>N. Zealand</b>	2.4	68.5	<b>9.0</b>	Restriction on qualification to vote
	<b>Third Tier</b>				
<b>12</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>	0.7	36.4	<b>5.7</b>	Recent reforms will improve number
<b>13</b>	<b>Czech Rep.</b>	0.3	80.1	<b>3.9</b>	
<b>14</b>	<b>S. Africa</b>	0.2	70.9	<b>3.9</b>	Voting at E & C only
<b>15</b>	<b>Singapore</b>	0.7	51.8	<b>3.5</b>	Restriction on qualification to vote
	<b>The Rest</b>				
<b>16</b>	<b>Japan</b>	0.1	28.9	<b>2.7</b>	
<b>17</b>	<b>Germany</b>	0.2	79.0	<b>2.6</b>	PV option only
<b>18</b>	<b>Canada</b>	0.1	79.5	<b>2.3</b>	PV option only
<b>19</b>	<b>UK</b>	0.4	42.0	<b>1.7</b>	Unknown % of proxy voters who vote
<b>20</b>	<b>Argentina</b>	1.2	3.7	<b>1.4</b>	New reforms should help in future

# The Global State of Democracy 2025 Report

This report was produced by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, which is based in Stockholm, Sweden. The main purpose of the report was to rank all the countries in the world for democracy in 2024. The report also shows comparisons with findings for the previous year.

A major section of this report summarizes issues around the current state of voting for overseas citizens of each country of the world. It is therefore a valuable supplement to the BOVF report, which analyzes in detail the 20 major, relevant countries that we selected.

## Excerpts from the Global State of Democracy report

The sections below are copied from the Global State of Democracy Report. Any commentary or information added by BOVF is shown in italics.

Note: In the narrative below, the following abbreviations are used.

**GSOD** = Global State of Democracy (report)

**OCV** = Out of country voting

**CSO** = Civil society organization

## Global migration

*The relevance of the section below is to demonstrate that the proportion of the population of the world now people living outside their own national borders is now very significant.*

The scale of migration continues to grow, with the latest data showing that 304 million people are international migrants — three times the estimate in 1970. Today, this figure represents 3.7 per cent of the world's population (UNDESA 2025).

Contrary to many commonly held assumptions, the data show that most migration happens within, not between, regions. This pattern is particularly evident in the strong inward and outward flows (originating from the base), within each region.

Although migration has significant implications for democracy, some of the most well-known democracy assessment frameworks (such as those by Freedom House, International IDEA and V-Dem) do not have specific indicators that systematically measure how institutions include or exclude immigrants and emigrants (as distinct from

resident citizens). As a result, migration-related problems are not reflected in quantitative measures of democracy such as the GSOD Indices.

**Table 9: GSOD global ranking of democracies**

*We show the GSOD rankings given in their report against our BOVF assessment of the quality of mechanisms allowing overseas citizens to vote*

2024 Rank	Country	2023 Rank	Change in Rank	Assessment of effectiveness of overseas voting
	Denmark	1	-	<i>Very restricted vote</i>
	Switzerland	2	-	<i>Not in BOVF study</i>
	Germany	3	-	<i>Low assessment</i>
	Luxembourg	4	-	<i>Not in BOVF study</i>
	Belgium	5	-	<i>Not in BOVF study</i>
	Norway	14	+8	<i>High assessment</i>
	Finland	8	+1	<i>Not in BOVF study</i>
	Ireland	9	+1	<i>No Vote for overseas citizens</i>
	Japan	6	+3	<i>Low assessment</i>
	Sweden	11	+1	<i>Not in BOVF study</i>

### **Breakdown in the way countries provide voting opportunity**

*We have compiled this table from data in the GSOD report, which is the result of their survey of 216 countries and territories.*

**Table 10: Overseas voter methods of voting in 216 countries and territories**

<b>Methods of out of country voting (OCV)</b>	<b>GOSD global survey</b>	<b>BOVF study of 20 countries</b>
Multiple methods	47	12
In-person only: This normally means at a country's E and C but sometimes at polling stations set up for the purpose or both.	74	4
Postal balloting only	21	4
Electronic voting only	3	
Proxy voting only	7	
Indirectly only	7	
Voting limited or as yet method undecided	5	
No (or almost no) overseas voting	52	2
Total	216	22

### **Countries with designated overseas constituencies**

At least 21 countries have created special constituencies to represent overseas voters. In these cases, there are seats in the legislature that are assigned to represent emigrants either as a global class or differentiated by region of residence (such as in Cabo Verde and Italy). Such special representation may allow for the different interests of non-resident citizens to be effectively represented in the legislature, sometimes in a highly differentiated way. It may also be preferable. While the average percentage of votes from abroad remains low, OCV can, in a few countries, have a significant influence on electoral outcomes.

### **How overseas voting enhances democratic resilience**

Political participation contributes to democratic resilience. A range of factors (such as the size of the diaspora population, the cost of designing and maintaining out-of-country voting (OCV) systems, diaspora communities' economic contributions to origin countries, etc.) will result in different decisions across contexts, but evidence indicates

that OCV helps promote a continued sense of belonging, which can contribute to long-term democratic resilience.

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

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

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

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

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

## **Recommendations for electoral management bodies**

- 1. Recognize OCV as a core electoral function, not a technical add-on.** Designing and delivering OCV is not merely a logistical task; it is central to ensuring that democratic processes remain inclusive in an era of transnational mobility. EMBs should integrate OCV into standard electoral planning cycles, with dedicated budget lines, personnel and long-term capacity development.
- 2. Simplify registration procedures to lower participation barriers.** Evidence shows that requiring in-person or overly burdensome registration procedures significantly reduces participation. EMBs should streamline diaspora voter registration — for example, via online platforms, embassies and consulates, or automatic enrolment where feasible — while ensuring security and accessibility.
- 3. Diversify voting methods to improve access.** Offering multiple voting options (postal, in-person and, where appropriate, electronic) has been associated with higher participation. EMBs should assess which combinations are most suitable based on diaspora size, geographic dispersion, administrative capacity and the integrity risks of each method. Kosovo's recent reforms provide an example of how more and simpler options can motivate turnout.
- 4. Strengthen integrity through transparency and communication.** Clear information on registration, deadlines, voting options and eligibility is essential for building trust in OCV. EMBs should develop targeted communication strategies — using diaspora media, civil society partnerships and multilingual materials — to ensure that voters abroad are informed about and confident in the process.

## **Recommendations for civil society actors**

- 1. Advocate for equitable access to OCV.** Civil society organizations (CSOs) can play a key role in ensuring that the expansion of OCV is inclusive — not limited to certain groups or geographies. Advocacy effort should focus on removing discriminatory barriers in laws or procedures and promoting enfranchisement for all eligible non-resident citizens.
- 2. Monitor OCV implementation and support electoral integrity.** Diaspora focused CSOs and independent observers should be engaged in monitoring the implementation of OCV, from registration to vote counting. Their oversight helps enhance trust and transparency, especially where governments, or EMBs, lack credibility or where diaspora votes may significantly affect outcomes.
- 3. Build awareness and civic education among diaspora communities.** Low turnout among registered diaspora voters points to a need for more active engagement. CSOs



should develop non-partisan voter education initiatives — using diaspora media, digital outreach and community events — to raise awareness of registration processes, voting options and election timelines.

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

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

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

**END**