

Can voters influence social policy?

One of the fundamental promises of electoral democracy is that voters influence governments' policies. However, whether voters actually have such an influence remains an open question, with recent public debate and academic research often answering 'no'. In a large-scale study of citizens' preferences, **Marc Hooghe, Ruth Dassonneville and Jennifer Oser** investigate the extent to which there is a relationship between the political position of citizens and social policy in a broad range of countries over time. They find that, while there is no direct correlation between citizens' preferences and their country's social policy, high electoral turnout and the composition of the governing cabinet do have an effect.



Street Art by Peter Fuss, Poland. Photo by [Paweł Czerwiński](#) on [Unsplash](#)

In recent years, some authors have claimed that within electoral democracy citizens basically only get a mandate to elect their political leaders, but that all in all this does not make much of a difference to the policies that will be pursued. While politicians might present a platform, there is no guarantee that they will act on that platform once they are elected. Furthermore, citizens might not always be able to vote in their own interest, or according to their own preferences. The promise of electoral democracy indeed depends on quite a number of steps: citizens have to express their preferences, they have to be able to identify the party or candidate that are closest to their own preferences, and if these candidates get elected they still have to act on their platform. Each one of the stages in this causal chain is inherently problematic, so one might indeed wonder whether electoral democracy can deliver on its initial promise.

In a recent study (published in [Political Studies](#)) we develop a large scale test for the hypothesis that citizens are able to influence government policy. We focus on 21 OECD countries for the entire period between 1980 and 2014. The advantage of selecting OECD member states is that all of these countries are fully functional democracies, so if citizens can have an effect, it should be found in these countries. Furthermore, the statistical standardisation imposed by OECD allows for more reliable data on social policy. Our main question is whether voters' ideological (left-right) preferences are associated with the social policies that governments implement – in terms of welfare spending.

A key assumption in our analyses is that being 'left' or 'right' still has an important economic meaning. That is, citizens who identify as left-wing, will have a preference for more economic equality, while those who identify as right-wing will have a stronger preference for allowing market forces to determine the income distribution within a society. This left-right distinction is clearly a simplification, as especially in recent years 'left' and 'right' might also have acquired a slightly different meaning, such as in cultural conflicts on diversity and immigration. However, if we look at surveys with a question on both left/right identification, and on a preference for redistribution, we can be confident that the old meaning still applies: even today, those who place themselves to the left of the ideological spectrum have a preference for more equality within society.

In contrast to earlier work on this topic, we start the analysis by capturing the preferences of *all* citizens – and not only voters. Based on the left-right position of all citizens of a country as captured by the Eurobarometer data, does it follow that countries with a left-wing population also invest more heavily in social policy? Our answer to this question is ‘no’. We do not find any relation at all (no matter how we specify the model) between the ideological position of citizens in general, and the percentage of the national income that is being spent on social policy. So there may well be some reason for frustration or democratic dissatisfaction there, as citizens, rightly, do not have the feeling that their positions have a direct effect on what kind of policy is actually pursued. This lack of correlation of course could have different causes: politicians might not focus on classic left-right policy dimensions in practice, or they simply might not be able to pursue their own preferences, for example, as a result of international coordination norms.

Regarding the effect of voters (in contrast to the effect of all citizens), our findings are more encouraging for those concerned about effective representation in contemporary democracies. In countries with high turnout, there is a relationship between citizens’ opinions and the policy that is being pursued, suggesting that voters do influence government policy. Our findings, therefore, confirm previous results on the importance of high turnout levels for the functioning of electoral democracy.

We complete our analysis of the ‘chain of representation’ by analysing the extent to which the ideological positions of legislatures and cabinets translates into policies. On this front, we do not see any effect of the ideological position of the parliament on social policy. For the governing cabinet, in contrast, we do find that its ideological composition has an effect. To summarise it simply: right-wing governments spend less on redistribution than left-wing cabinets. This difference is significant, even if we take into account the fact that, overall, across OECD countries, there a structural trend to spend more on social policy. This means it does remain important that citizens actually take part in elections, because this is the way they can have an effect on the composition of parliament, and eventually the governing cabinet.

Our conclusions on the vitality and the effectiveness of electoral democracy pose a challenge to citizens and voters who want their governments to represent their views. Citizens seem to be confronted with a long shot: there has to be a sufficiently high turnout level, and they have to succeed in delivering a parliamentary majority to the party they prefer. Only if all these conditions are met, can they realistically expect to have an effect on government policy. So, following our findings, a realistic vision of electoral democracy would be that it certainly is not an easy game: quite some conditions have to be met to achieve ‘government by the people’. But our results also suggest that while this might be a difficult challenge, it is not an impossible task.

*This post gives the views of its authors, not the position of Democratic Audit. It draws on their article: ‘[Public Opinion, Turnout and Social Policy: A comparative analysis of policy congruence in European liberal democracies](#)’, published in *Political Studies*, online first.*

About the authors



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