

Why don't immigrants vote more?

*There are relatively few cases where non-citizen immigrants can vote in municipal elections, but where they can participation tends to be low. **Didier Ruedin** assesses the case of Geneva, where he finds that, even accounting for social origin, engagement, civic integration and socialisation, there is a gap in participation that needs further explanation.*



Citizens voting in the Swiss canton of Appenzell Innerrhoden. Picture [HD](#), via a [\(CC BY-NC-SA 2.0\)](#) licence

A local politician I talked to in Geneva was visibly perplexed: 'We have given them the right to vote, and yet they don't use it – why don't they vote?' The canton of Geneva is one of the few cantons in Switzerland where foreign citizens have the right to vote. This right was introduced in 2005: foreign citizens who have lived in the country for at least 8 years are eligible to vote in the municipal elections. However, few of the foreigners with the right to vote actually turn out. Using a new representative survey, I find that social origin and socialisation are only part of the story.

Foreign citizens from some countries are particularly unlikely to vote, notably immigrants from Spain and Portugal. With automatic registration, in Switzerland we have an accurate picture of turnout by nationality (Table 1). While 42% of Swiss resident in the canton of Geneva voted in the municipal election of 2015, noticeably fewer foreigner citizens did so. For the politicians this was disappointing because they invested in a large campaign to get immigrants to vote, and the chancellor wrote a personalised letter to every foreign citizen eligible to vote to encourage turnout. Yet the turnout in 2015 was quite comparable to previous years. The table shows the largest immigrant groups in the canton, lumping together other nationalities.

Table 1. Turnout by nationality group

Nationality	Turnout
Swiss	42%
Other Western countries	39%
France	38%
Italy	34%
Other continents	27%
Spain	22%

Nationality	Turnout
Portugal	17%

Notes: measured turnout from official statistics (OCSTAT), overall turnout 38%.

To put this into context, in most countries foreign citizens cannot vote at either the local or national level. While several countries may be toying with the idea of granting foreign citizens the right to vote at the local level, most evidence comes from EU citizens voting in other countries of the European Union, from the UK where foreign citizens tend to have historical ties to the country, or from Nordic countries. The situation in Switzerland may be more similar to other places considering the purported benefits of granting the right to vote: the hope is that letting foreign citizens participate in local politics will aid their integration into mainstream society. While the city of Geneva – where around half of the residents are foreign citizens – is generally open to immigrants and has many programmes to assist integration, at the national level the mood is less open to immigrants and may be hostile.

While official statistics provide an accurate picture of who votes, they cannot explain the difference in turnout. To examine the reasons why foreigners are less likely to vote in the municipal elections, my colleague [Rosita Fibbi](#) and I fielded a representative survey in the canton of Geneva. We drew on the [Swiss electoral study](#) to allow comparisons with the national election wherever possible, and (as a novelty for research on electoral turnout) added questions relevant for foreign citizens. The [data](#) are freely available to other researchers.

The literature provides four explanations why immigrants may be less likely to vote than members of the majority population: social origin, engagement, civic integration and socialisation. Researchers use many different terms to describe these mechanisms, and the survey finds support for all four mechanisms.

When I refer to social origin in the context of voting, I mean socio-economic characteristics that generally correlate with turnout. The intuition is that these characteristics – frequently referred to as resources – make individuals more likely to vote. Older individuals, those with more education and richer people tend to vote more often in the canton of Geneva. At the same time, foreign citizens in the canton of Geneva on average come with fewer of these facilitating 'resources'. For instance, the average Swiss person eligible to vote has 14 years of formal education, compared to 10 years for those from Spain and Portugal. In this sense, we can say that social origin explains part of the reason why foreign citizens are less likely to vote.

Political knowledge and participation in non-political contexts describe engagement. The intuition is again that these characteristics are more common in individuals who are likely to vote, and that these characteristics are less common among foreign citizens. Empirically, both factors are associated with turnout, and we find that foreigners are substantively less likely to participate in organisations and have on average less political knowledge.

With regard to civic integration, we look at variables related to immigration that classic descriptions of voter turnout do not include. Two factors may be particularly relevant: whether respondents plan to eventually return to their country of origin, and whether they have regular contact with members of the majority population. Foreign citizens vary substantively in their plans to return eventually to the country of origin. Spanish and Portuguese immigrants are particularly prone to stating that they plan to return to their country of origin in the future. Similarly, contact with the majority population is less pronounced for some nationalities, including Italians who do not share these plans to return to the country of origin as much as the Spanish and Portuguese. By contrast, we find no evidence that foreign citizens in the canton of Geneva would feel less attached to their place of residence. Likewise, they trust local politicians as much as Swiss nationals do. Taken together these factors, particularly differences in contact with the majority, are associated with differences in turnout.

Under the heading socialisation, I include psychological factors: whether the respondents' parents voted when he or she was 14 years old, and whether the respondent comes from a country classified as free by [Freedom House](#). In both instances, the intuition is that these variables reflect respondents' habit and norms of participation. Having a parent who voted when the respondent was 14 years old, and coming from a free democracy are both associated with voting in local elections. In these two aspects, immigrants are clearly disadvantaged, with many coming from households where the parents did not vote, and many from unfree countries.

Looking at the predicted probabilities for voting for Swiss and foreign citizens, the largest impact – hence the ‘best’ explanation for differences in turnout – is related to social origin and socialisation. However, the coefficient for foreign nationality remain substantively important in all models. This is the case irrespective of the explanations considered, including models that consider all of them at the same time. These associations with nationality, once we have taken into consideration the main explanations for differences in turnout, point to a remaining gap in understanding why immigrants (do not) vote in local elections. Yet, with social origin and socialisation – and to a lesser degree engagement and civic integration – classic reasons for voting in elections also apply to the local election examined. Foreign citizens tend to vote less often because they have fewer of these ‘resources’ that facilitate participation, but at least in the case of the canton of Geneva there seems to more to being a foreign citizen than these resources.

This article gives the views of the author, not the position of Democratic Audit. It draws on the author's article 'Participation in Local Elections: "Why Don't Immigrants Vote More?"' Parliamentary Affairs 71 (2): 243–262. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsx024>.

About the author



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