



Transnational Voters: Citizenship regimes, Political mobilisation, and the Emigrant Vote in Turkish Elections, 2014–2023

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Abstract

Many countries allow external citizens to vote from abroad. But while research has explored when external citizens can, and actually choose to, take up this transnational practice, little research investigates *who external citizens vote for*, centring almost exclusively how they differ from voters in the country of origin. We highlight two transnational drivers of external citizens' vote choices. First, exclusion abroad should push them to engage in rejection-based transnationalism and thus increasingly support parties offering diaspora-inclusive homeland identity narratives in their country of origin. And second, transnational mobilization, specifically by state bureaucrats abroad and diaspora organizations, should shape external citizens' votes. We test these arguments using data on all Turkish elections where external voting was possible. As theorized, we find that the ruling AKP receives more support among the diaspora in countries with more exclusionary citizenship policies and higher levels of transnational mobilization. This paper advances our understanding of transnational citizenship, external voting, transnationalism, and diaspora engagement.

Keywords External voting · Transnationalism · Citizenship · Diaspora organizations · Turkey

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Introduction

An increasing number of countries allow external citizens to participate in country-of-origin elections (Fliess et al., 2025; Wellman et al., 2023). Accordingly, scientific work studying emigrant voting in country-of-origin elections has emerged relatively recently. These studies have mainly explored emigrant enfranchisement and turnout, that is, ‘when’ emigrants are *allowed to vote* and ‘when’ *they actually do so* (see Lafleur, 2011; Escobar et al., 2015; Ahmadov & Sasse, 2016; Wellman, 2021). In contrast, research on ‘how’ *they vote* is more limited. Here, most research investigates how diasporas differ from voters at home, studying their electoral motivations (Goldberg & Lanz, 2021) and support for populist (Ash & Turcu, 2024; Gherghina & Miscoiu, 2025; Turcu & Urbatsch, 2023; Umpierrez de Reguero & Jakobson, 2023) as well as other party types (Turcu & Urbatsch, 2020a, 2020b), while others explore how emigrants’ individual attributes, such as their education and economic status, affect who they vote for (Lafleur & Sánchez-Domínguez, 2015; Mügge et al., 2021).

However, research on emigrants’ vote choice so far has paid little attention to their transnational links to their country of origin, even though studies of turnout emphasize the role of at least one such link, transnational party organizations (De Lazzari, 2019; Østergaard-Nielsen & Ciornei, 2019; Burgess and Tybuski 2020; Yener-Roderburg & Yetiş, 2024). While recent research thus seeks to understand how emigrants’ vote in country-of-origin elections, it has paid surprisingly little attention to what sets emigrant voters apart from those who remain in the country of origin: that when voting, they participate in, and are subject to, transnational politics. Put differently, most existing research sees emigrants as *voters abroad* as opposed to *transnational voters*.

Here, we focus on the role of transnational ties and experiences in how emigrants vote. We theorize and test the interconnected effects of two forms of transnationalism on external voting behavior. First, we draw on the concept of *rejection-based transnationalism* (Beauchemin & Safi, 2020) to argue that political and social exclusion in the country of residence, in particular having restricted access to dual citizenship, drives external citizens to vote for parties that propagate diaspora-inclusive homeland identity narratives which underline their self-worth, dignity, and national pride, reinforcing their sense of belonging to the country of origin. And second, we highlight the role of transnational political mobilization by meso-level actors, such as country-of-origin bureaucrats and state/government-linked diaspora organizations, in pushing external voters to cast their vote in favor of the ruling party. We expect both of these transnational factors to independently, but especially together, shape the choices of transnational voters.¹

To test these expectations, we study the voting behavior of Turkish emigrants around the world across all elections where they could vote from abroad (seven electoral rounds over the period from 2014 to 2023). We employ a country-election

¹ While we focus on these factors, we of course do not claim that they are the sole predictors of diaspora vote choice. Rather, they add to the set of predictors previously identified in existing research.

round-level dataset including all countries from where emigrants could cast votes, which combines official information on votes, eligible voters, and voting stations with self-collected data on the presence of transnational mobilization actors. These data enable us to not simply contrast emigrants with voters at home, but to compare the different transnational experiences and vote choices of voters residing in different countries. As expected, we find that vote shares for the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) are higher in countries where Turkish emigrants are exposed to restrictive citizenship policies, interaction with Diyanet officials, and longer enduring branches of DITIB (the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs). We also find evidence for our two sets of arguments interacting, highlighting the importance and interdependence of rejection-based transnationalism and transnational mobilization for external voting behavior.

Turkey is an important case to study external voting for several reasons. With more than 6.5 million citizens living abroad (Açıklan, 2024), its diaspora is large in absolute terms and relative to the number of citizens in Turkey. This, combined with the increasing implementation of voting infrastructure abroad, means that external voters may have sizeable influence on the country's often closely contested national elections. Accordingly, the Turkish state is also a core example of governments actively engaging diasporas they want to make political use of (Yanasmayan & Kaşlı, 2019), as emigrants tend to cast their vote for the ruling AKP party. External voting in Turkey thus contrasts with cases where emigrants appear to favor opposition or even anti-system parties, such as Romania. But as our results show, the Turkish diaspora is more heterogenous in its vote choices than this overall trend suggests.

This paper contributes to our understanding of external voting, transnationalism and transnational citizenship, and states' diaspora engagement. For external voting, it emphasizes how meso-level transnationalism shapes emigrants' vote choice in country-of-origin elections, instead of focusing on individual- or macro-level factors. Accordingly, the paper shows how different forms of transnationalism, rejection-based individual practices, on the one hand, and institutionalized forms on the other, can shape external voting independently, and in their interaction. That rejection-based transnationalism occurs here highlights, in turn, that citizenship operates as more than a legal institution, instead also providing individuals with emotional affirmation and a sense of belonging (Siviş, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2004). As such, we point to dual citizenship restrictions as a crucial part of how migrants experience transnational citizenship and their belonging both "here" and "there," emphasizing country-of-origin and country-of-residence citizenship policies' importance for understanding transnational citizenship practices, such as external voting. Finally, our paper highlights that diaspora engagement may not only take very various forms across space and time (Tsourapas, 2021; Yanasmayan & Kaşlı, 2019) but even differ across a single country-of-origin government's engagement with its diasporas in different host states.

Background: The Turkish Diaspora

At least 6.5 million Turkish citizens reside outside of Turkey (Açıkalin, 2024). This diaspora is sociodemographically heterogeneous, predominantly comprising individuals of Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, and Alevi backgrounds. Most of its members descend from the first generation of guest workers who migrated in the 1960s and 1970s. Additionally, some individuals are asylum-seekers who fled during the military coup in the 1980s and the Kurdish conflict in the 1990s. Since then, high-skilled migration, student mobility, and family reunification also contribute to the increasing number of Turkish citizens living abroad.

In parallel with shifting migration dynamics, the Turkish state's approach to diaspora politics has changed over time (Bilgili & Siegel 2011). In the early years of Turkish labor migration, the diaspora was mainly valued for its economic contributions through remittances and return migration. However, this perception evolved over time as Turkey has updated its strategic approach to the diaspora (Bilgili & Siegel 2011; Yanasmayan & Kaşlı, 2019), increasingly emphasizing its identity rather than solely its economic contributions. Turkey's recent diaspora strategy can be summarized around three pillars: leveraging soft power, utilizing the diaspora as a lobbying force, and combating Islamophobia (Açıkalin, 2024; Arkilic, 2022). This shift has been facilitated by enhancing institutional capacity and working with diaspora NGOs (Akcapar & Aksel, 2017). To illustrate, the *Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities* (YTB 2026) was established in 2010 to strengthen diaspora ties with their homeland and enhance their economic, social, and legal standing in their countries of residence. And the number of Turkish consulates and embassies grew from 163 in 2002 to 252 at present, with the range of services also increasing (Açıkalin, 2024; Akcapar & Aksel, 2017).

External voting emerged as a further key political tool to strengthen the Turkish state's ties with the diaspora. The 2012 *Electoral Law* granted non-resident Turkish citizens the right to vote in national parliamentary and presidential elections from abroad (Yener-Roderburg, 2024). While these citizens had previously been permitted to vote at the customs, turnout was negligibly low due to the impracticality of the process. The new law deepened engagement with the diaspora and empowered non-resident citizens to actively participate in shaping the country's politics.

Accordingly, all Turkish citizens over the age of 18, who are registered with a Turkish Consulate in their country of residence, are eligible to vote abroad. After external voting was introduced, the 2014 presidential election exhibited low turnout among nonresident citizens, with only 18.9 percent participating. However, by the 2023 presidential elections, turnout had risen significantly to 56.3, following practical improvements in voter registration.² For instance, the initial requirement to make an appointment at a designated polling station was lifted in 2015, facilitating greater access to voting. Additionally, nonresident voters now

² Elections: presidential elections in 2014, two parliamentary elections in 2015, presidential and parliamentary elections in 2018, and two rounds of presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023. A constitutional referendum occurred in 2017.

can vote at any designated polling station abroad—before, they could do so only in their country of residence—or Turkish border crossings where polling is available. Since the introduction of external voting, the number of countries with voting stations has also increased from 54 in the 2014 election to 73 in the 2023 elections, while the total number of polling stations rose from 103 to 156 (YTB, 2023; Yener-Roderburg, 2024).

The AKP has won all national elections since nonresident Turkish citizens were allowed to vote from abroad, while the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has consistently finished second. As such, the Turkish party system is regularly characterized as predominant, though this ignores that outside the AKP's and CHP's relative positions, party representation has undergone significant change across recent elections. Following the 2023 elections, no less than seven parties are represented in the current parliament. Accordingly, the AKP has recently relied on coalitions to obtain parliamentary majorities, while the wider party system appears in flux, coalescing around individual political leaders, and into strategic alliances rather than stable parties (Ecevit, 2023).

Within this party landscape, increasing external voter turnout matters particularly as no parliamentary seats are specifically allocated to voters abroad (Yener-Roderburg & Yetiş, 2024). Instead, their influence is felt indirectly, as their votes are allocated to the national electoral districts. To illustrate, external voters influenced the shift of three parliamentary seats in June 2015, and of one seat each in November 2015 and 2018 (Yener-Roderburg, 2024). Figure 1 shows where Turkish external citizens could cast their vote in the 2023 elections, highlighting that voting stations were most numerous in countries with large Turkish diasporas, e.g., Germany, but also accessible in nontraditional destinations for Turkish immigrants, such as Brazil and Tanzania.

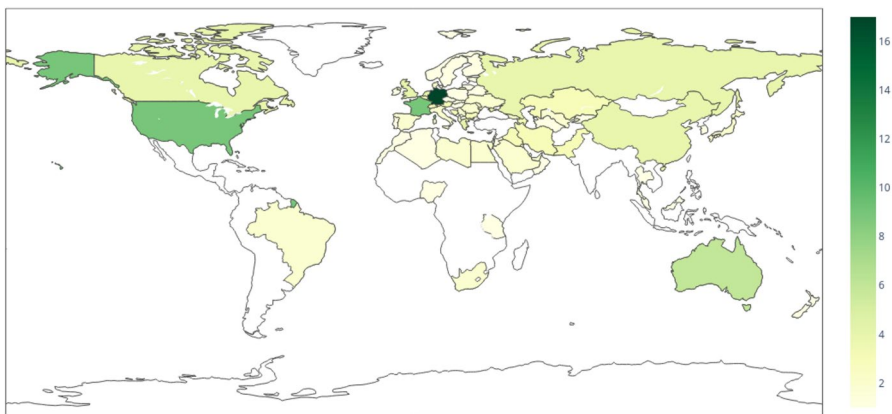


Fig. 1 Voting stations abroad for the Turkish elections in May 2023. Data source: SKGM, 2023a

Locating Transnational Citizenship in External Voting

We next review recent research on external voting, beginning with a discussion of its fundamental precondition: *citizenship*. Over the last three decades, scholars have increasingly emphasized the conceptual transformation of citizenship, often described as a push to “deterritorialize citizenship.” This perspective posits that citizenship should be studied beyond the confines of national borders (Bauböck, 2007; Collyer, 2014; Soysal, 1994), mirroring newly emerging complexities and dimensions of transnationalism (Vink et al., 2019; Yener-Roderburg & Toivanen, 2024). Put differently, citizenship not only extends beyond the legal and institutional frameworks that nation states rely on, but also functions as a *dynamic and evolving social realm in which individuals can actively participate and practice their citizenship* (Isin & Turner, 2002). Accordingly, Bauböck defines transnational citizenship as “a triangular relation between individuals and two or more independent states in which these individuals are simultaneously assigned membership status and membership-based rights or obligations” (2007: 2395). Thus, transnational citizenship can be understood as a partial overlap of political communities from distinct states while their territorial boundaries remain entirely separate (Bauböck, 2007). However, “membership status and membership-based rights” do not necessarily correspond to full legal citizenship in both entities, but instead entail the social and political practice of membership in two or more states.

Recognizing the shifting, multilayered, and complex nature of citizenship, Ehrkamp and Leitner (2003) draw attention to the role of both local and transnational factors, alongside national ones, in shaping contemporary practices of citizenship. They adopt a relational perspective to address the challenges of citizenship. This perspective investigates and theorizes “the complex interplay and productive tensions between state and civil society in the construction of citizenship” (2003: 132), moving beyond reductive dichotomies such as state-centered versus social practices of citizenship (2003: 132). Citizenship thus operates on interconnected local, national, transnational, and supranational levels, hinting at the role of, e.g., grassroots organizations and bureaucrats in practising and constructing citizenship.

Building on this conception of transnational citizenship, further studies investigate how migrants practice their memberships across different contexts and levels. Along these lines, evidence from Swiss emigrants indicates that individuals with dual citizenship were equally likely to be active in Swiss politics as those who remained in Switzerland with single citizenship, supporting the practice-based notion of transnational citizenship (Schlenker et al., 2017). And Yener-Roderburg and Toivanen (2024), exploring the political practices of Kurdish immigrants’ descendants, reveal how national contexts in the countries of origin and residence, as well as the transnational, diasporic, and supranational setting, shape migrant descendants’ political activism, identity formation, and perceptions of citizenship. Moving to a narrower conception of political participation, several studies investigate how these transnational citizens engage with voting in their country of residence (Özek, 2025; Spierings & Jacobs, 2025, for reviews of this literature, see Ferris et al., 2020; Umpierrez de Reguero et al., 2023).

But most importantly for our purposes, a more recent literature focuses on migrants' political participation and voting in their country of origin. We roughly divide this literature into three strands based on the outcomes studied. A first strand investigates *when* and *why* emigrants are allowed to vote in their countries of origin (e.g. Collyer, 2014; Fliess et al., 2025; Hartmann, 2015; Lafleur, 2011; Wellman, 2021; Wellman et al., 2023). Second, several studies investigate *why* and *when*, if allowed to vote from abroad, emigrants take up this right (e.g. Lafleur & Chelius, 2011; Escobar et al., 2015; Şahin-Mencütek, 2015; Ahmadov & Sasse, 2016; Burgess and Tybuski 2020; Szulecki et al., 2021; Szulecki et al., 2023a; Superti, 2023; Gherghina & Basarabă, 2024; Umpierrez de Reguero & Finn, 2024). And finally, a smaller, albeit growing group of papers investigates the political preferences of diasporas and *how* they vote: Here, several studies document how emigrants vote differently from those who stayed at home (Ash & Turcu, 2024; Goldberg & Lanz, 2021; Szulecki et al., 2023a, 2023b; Turcu & Urbatsch, 2020a, 2020b, 2023), while others investigate how they are affected by political competition in their country of residence (Mügge et al., 2021; Ognibene & Paulis, 2023) or their individual ideological and sociodemographic attributes (Lafleur & Sánchez-Domínguez, 2015; Goldberg & Lanz, 2021; Aydemir & Vermeulen, 2023). Sevi et al. (2020) and Gherghina and Giugă (2025) begin exploring the influence of host country contextual factors such as political rights, economy, and distance to the country of origin. The present study contributes to this last, presently smallest strand of the literature by, first, zooming in on a country-of-residence factor that studies of turnout have begun to explore (e.g., Superti, 2023), but whose implications for vote choice have, so far, been ignored: citizenship.

But additionally, this study tackles two further gaps that span across all three discussed strands of the literature. First, it joins a small number of comparative studies that hold constant the country of origin and observe a diaspora group across different country-of-residence contexts (Ahmadov & Sasse, 2016; Gherghina & Giugă, 2025; Sevi et al., 2020)—this research design allows a strong focus on *the country-of-residence context*. But it is also crucial for our second more general contribution, the wider conceptualization of transnational mobilization: here, existing comparative work has largely focused on political parties' transnational campaigning (De Lazzari, 2019; Burgess and Tybuski 2020), while case studies have begun to look beyond parties and investigate political entrepreneurs within both state institutions and grassroots organizations (Arkilic, 2022; Burgess, 2018; Maritato, 2021). We study the influence of such *nonparty transnational mobilization* comparatively, holding constant both the state institutions and type of grassroots organizations it occurs in.

This study, therefore, tackles several gaps within existing research on external voting. First, it studies external vote choices, clarifying how citizenship policies of the country of residence shape diasporic political participation in the country of origin. Second, we expand existing conceptualizations of transnational political mobilization and study comparatively how state institutions and diaspora organizations shape voting behavior. As such, this study also moves beyond the literature's dominant focus on individual-level predictors of external vote choice and instead explores the role of *meso-level factors* within and between the countries of residence and

origin. And third, we ground our analysis of external voting in how legal constraints on transnational citizenship and diaspora engagement policies influence political and social practices of transnational citizenship.

The Argument: Transnational Dimensions of External Voting

With this background, we develop two interrelated arguments that relate external voting to (1) citizenship policies of the country of residence and (2) transnational mobilization. We argue that these, independently but especially in their interaction, affect diaspora voting behavior in Turkish elections.

Restrictive Citizenship Policies, Rejected Transnationalism, and External Voting

First, we argue that restrictive citizenship policies in the country of residence drive external voters toward political parties that promote an identity in which they feel recognized and valued as members of their community, as opposed to the marginalized identity they experience in the country of residence. In other words, we propose that feeling excluded in their country of residence makes external voters attach greater importance to, and align their votes with, appeals to an identity linked to their country of origin.

Conceptually, transnationalism has gained increasing scholarly attention over the past 30 years as an analytical framework for understanding international migrants' connections, cross-border activities, and practices that extend beyond state borders—including citizenship. Importantly, transnationalism can take various forms and manifest in various ways (Tedeschi et al., 2020). For our purposes, *rejection-based transnationalism* (Beauchemin & Safi, 2020), is crucial: here, transnational practices emerge due to segregation in the country of residence, which is often driven by racism and discrimination. In response, migrants reinforce their ties to and engagement with their country of origin, as their sense of belonging aligns more closely with it rather than the country of residence. In its symbolic form, rejection-based transnationalism appears as migrants maintaining a strong sense of identity with their country of origin as a reaction to experiences of discrimination³ (Beauchemin & Safi, 2020). Rejection-based transnationalism can prompt even return migration and, as we argue, is likely to affect diasporic voting behavior.

This is the case because identity, including national identity, is not fixed; rather, it remains contested and subject to ongoing negotiation and redefinition in virtually all countries. Given the fluid and socially constructed nature of national identity (e.g., Siviş, 2023), both ordinary citizens and political actors often disagree on its

³ Under economic rejection-based transnationalism, migrants invest in the country of origin to gain prestige and counterbalance the frustrations they face in their country of residence (Beauchemin & Safi, 2020).

definition and core components, as members of the same community can attribute different meanings to national identities based on everyday experiences, shifting societal values or political discourses. Consequently, different political parties regularly offer varying interpretations of national identity as part of their electoral platforms, either implicitly or explicitly. We argue that owing to feelings of exclusion in the country of residence and the resulting rejection-based transnationalism, external voters become more inclined to embrace diaspora-inclusive homeland identity narratives and to vote accordingly.

Viewed in this manner, external voting can thus emerge as a symbolic manifestation of rejection-based transnationalism. In the Turkish case, the ruling AKP propagates a vision of Turkishness that emphasizes links to (Sunni) Muslim Turkish identity (Aydemir & Vermeulen 2023). This competes with, for instance, forms of Turkish identity that emphasize secularist-nationalist discourses or ethnic minority identities (Arkilic, 2022), and has been categorized as transnational “homeland populism” (Jakobson et al., 2023), situating the AKP’s diaspora discourse alongside other prominent cases such as Hungary’s Fidesz. While the AKP’s political narrative does not resonate with all segments of the Turkish diaspora—as evidenced by the presence of more secular and less conservative communities—it nonetheless serves as an important political frame for voters who feel excluded in their countries of residence.

Although rejection-based transnationalism can occur in response to a wide range of discriminatory experiences, we specifically focus on the access to citizenship in the country of residence. This is because access to dual citizenship plays a crucial role in migrants’ integration process in the country of residence, serving as a key marker of belonging and a gateway to political participation, including the right to vote. In some countries, citizenship policy may even differ across nationalities, imposing restrictions not on all, but only specific immigrant groups. To them, this then signals not only that their opportunity to be included as a part of the majority group through citizenship is restricted, but also implies marginalization even in comparison to other immigrants, further undermining their sense of self-worth, dignity, and belonging. For instance, in Germany, until the recent introduced new citizenship law, dual citizenship was possible for immigrants from other European Union countries, Switzerland, and, e.g., children born to German parents in the US. But among other migrant groups, including Germany’s largest migrant group, Turkish people, even second- and third-generation individuals were legally required to renounce their other citizenship to acquire and retain a German passport (Worbs, 2024). Accordingly, restrictions on the access to citizenship of this kind are likely to trigger rejection-based transnationalism, particularly in relation to citizenship and political participation.

Within the Turkish diaspora, then, we argue that external voters are more receptive to the AKP’s diaspora-inclusive homeland identity narratives which embrace them, offer affirmation, and reinforce their sense of belonging to the country of origin, when they live in countries with restrictive citizenship policies that signal their exclusion and, in turn, diminish their sense of belonging there. This argument is related to Arkilic’s suggestion that “diaspora populations that report stigmatization at a higher rate are more likely to be wooed by a paternalistic populist-nationalist

discourse” and hence to vote for political parties engaging in such discourse (2021: 587). Here, rejection-based transnationalism thus takes the form of embracing a particular identity vision linked to the country of origin and voting accordingly. Therefore, we expect that *a Restrictive CoR Citizenship Policy increases diaspora support for the AKP* (Hypothesis 1).

Transnational Mobilization and Voting at Home: Meso-Level Linkages

While we thus expect host country policies to affect how migrants vote in their country of origin, our argument also implies that political actors mobilize them to do so. This idea aligns with several studies of party mobilization abroad (see De Lazzari, 2019; Burgess & Tybuski 2020; van Haute & Kernalegenn, 2021). Favero (2025), for instance, investigates how political parties in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland invest in reaching nonresident citizens, highlighting the significance of party size and institutionalization in fostering transnational mobilization. Recent work on party mobilization also points to its links with polarized external voting in more authoritarian contexts. For instance, Waterbury (2025a) documents diaspora mobilization efforts by Hungarian opposition parties, even including flights to Hungary to cast votes there, while for the then-ruling Fidesz party, affiliated political parties in Romania and Serbia carried out such activities.

In the Turkish case, Yener-Rodenburg (2024; Yener-Roderburg & Yetiş, 2024) explores the external activities of political parties, while Arkilic documents that “mass rallies organized abroad constitute an essential component of the Turkish state’s diaspora empowerment policy” (2022: 595). Beyond the impact of such relatively rare, top-down mobilization drives involving visits by Turkish politicians, we move the focus to voter mobilization by meso-level political actors—Turkish diaspora organizations and bureaucrats abroad. These actors fulfil crucial tasks within top-down mobilization, such as organizing travel to mass rallies and providing infrastructure, e.g., meals, around them, supporting in particular the events and interests of the ruling AKP (Arkilic, 2022; Yener-Roderburg, 2024).

But additional to their role in campaign rallies, Turkish bureaucrats and organizations working within the diaspora also engage in more bottom-up political mobilization. For instance, both diaspora organizations, such as DITIB, and the Turkish state’s Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) are actively involved in running mosques within the diaspora. The mobilization of religious organizations by political parties for external voting is not unique to the Turkish case. For example, Gherghina and Mişcoiu (2022) demonstrate how traditionalist priests campaigned for the Alliance for the Union of Romanian (AUR) by mobilizing their networks in the Romanian diaspora. And applying similar techniques, though focused on emphasizing cultural rather than exclusively religious ties, the Hungarian government establishes cultural centres abroad where the diaspora could “nurture their Hungarian heritage, identity, and culture” in line with the government’s vision (Adorján, 2022; Papp et al., 2025).

Returning to the Turkish case, Carol and Hofheinz (2022) show that sermons in DITIB-run mosques in Germany regularly relate to emigrant’s persistent connection

to the (Turkish) homeland but also specifically discuss intergroup relations and integration in the country of residence. These texts emphasize both emigrants continued connection to Turkey and the importance of remembering Turkish ancestors, martyrs, and history. Notably, sermons are written either centrally by Diyanet-employed imams in Germany and distributed around the mosques, or even sourced from the Turkish Diyanet itself (Carol & Hofheinz, 2022). Sermons, therefore, offer one vehicle of transnational political socialization and mobilization of emigrants, imbuing them with the Diyanet's and, by extension, Turkish state's vision of the homeland.

But beyond sermons, mosques are important spaces of transnational political mobilization as they offer counselling, support groups, and religious texts, all of which can include political messaging on migrants' links to their countries of residence and origin. Along these lines, religious texts published by the Diyanet specify obedience and loyalty to their state's government along the religious duties, thus emphasizing a direct linkage between religious and national identity mirroring the Turkish government's vision (Maritato, 2021). By sending imams and muezzins from Turkey into the diaspora, the Diyanet transmits political values and messaging which mobilize emigrants in favor of the current government's policies (see Aydemir & Vermeulen 2023). Accordingly, both Maritato (2021) and Arkilic (2022) also emphasize that Diyanet, as well as Turkey's broader diaspora outreach, collide with minority identities within the diaspora—excluding Kurdish and Alevi populations, but also secular communities, highlighting the importance of these cleavages for Turkish emigrants' political behavior (see Yener-Roderburg & Yetiş, 2024). The Diyanet's presence in the diaspora is therefore clearly political and tied up with the current AKP government, serving to mobilize transnationally in line with the government's vision of Turkish identity.

However, this political role is not only limited to the Diyanet, or similar Turkish state institutions, but also extends to diaspora organizations such as DITIB. As discussed above, DITIB runs mosques and organizes religious education in public schools, supported by Diyanet who provide the imams. But it also engages in advocacy and offers language courses, social and youth programs, and advice and support services. In contrast to Diyanet, DITIB is not only exclusively linked to the Turkish government, but also works with and has been supported by the German government, indicating that it operates in “a transnational space between the Diyanet/Turkey on the one hand and Germany on the other” (Carol & Hofheinz, 2022: 651).⁴ But like Diyanet, DITIB serves clear political goals and actively mobilizes for them. Yener-Roderburg (2024) identifies the organization as a core part of the AKP's transnational political mobilization, as DITIB provides information on the eligibility to vote in Turkish elections, organizes bus transfers to polling stations for (conservative) voters, provides spaces for polling stations, and its imams, as Diyanet-affiliated state officials, hold official positions in administering elections abroad (see Arkilic, 2022). DITIB is thus instrumental not only in shaping Turkish emigrants' connections and political views towards their country of origin via its

⁴ Similarly, Hungarian diaspora media and organizations are organizationally linked to the Fidesz government (Waterbury, 2025b).

mosques (Carol & Hofheinz, 2022), but also in facilitating their physical turnout to vote.

As such, we argue that activities of both meso-level political actors discussed here, the Diyanet and its state bureaucrats as well as the DITIB diaspora organization, are political and mobilize emigrants to vote in favor of the AKP government. We hence expect that *diaspora support for the AKP in a country of residence increases with the presence of Diyanet officials and with the age of DITIB there* (Hypothesis 2), assuming that how long a diaspora organization has been active proxies for its institutionalization and capacities.

Transnational Mobilization of the Rejected Transnational Voter

Finally, we argue that our two streams of argument intersect: pro-AKP diaspora mobilization efforts should be particularly successful if the diaspora already feels excluded in their country of residence. Along these lines, Carol and Hofheinz (2022) note that DITIB plays a pivotal role in reinforcing Turkish immigrants' sense of belonging to their 'homeland'—Turkey—as they live in a country which may be their second home, but where many of them also experience exclusion. Similarly, Maritato (2021) highlights that in constructing emigrants' belonging to a conservative vision of Turkish society, many Diyanet texts and officials emphasize that this society's values are opposed to and threatened by those of their countries of residence. And Arkilic (2022) reports how Turkish diaspora organizations, including DITIB, actively combat discrimination, provide information on political rights, and advocate for dual citizenship. As such, external citizens' exclusion in their countries of origin should not only, as we argue above, invoke rejection-based transnationalism and push them towards voting for the AKP, but is also actively taken up as a political issue by transnational actors seeking to mobilize diaspora voters, serving as fertile ground for AKP-linked outreach efforts. For this reason, we expect that *diaspora support for the AKP in a country of residence especially increases with the presence of Diyanet officials and with the age of DITIB there when a Restrictive CoR Citizenship Policy is in place* (Hypothesis 3).

Research Design

To test our hypotheses in the context of Turkish external voting, we use data covering all seven rounds of elections and each country where official polling stations were set up since voting from abroad was first introduced. Our unit of observation is the country-election round. As the Turkish state has expanded its external voting infrastructure over time, we observe voting in 53 countries for the 2014 elections but 72 in 2023.

We obtain voting data covering the period 2014–2018 from Sevi et al. (2020) and expand this dataset via official releases by the General Directorate of the Electoral Roll (Seçmen Kütüğü Genel Müdürlüğü; SKGM, 2023a, 2023b). We use these data to construct the three dependent variables we test our expectations on. Our core

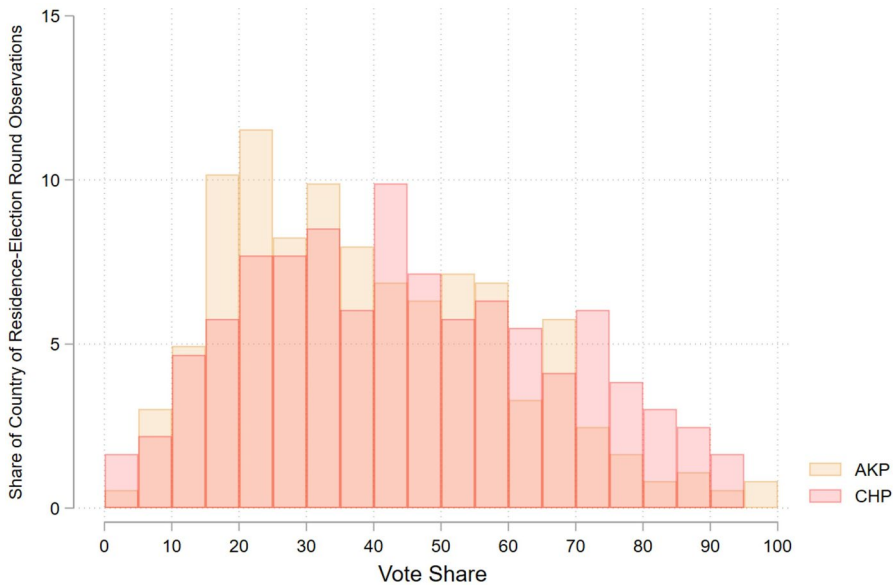


Fig. 2 AKP and CHP vote shares across external voting country-election rounds, 2014–2023

dependent variable is the AKP's share of the total vote in each electoral round.⁵ We employ the main opposition party CHP's vote share and the share of "yes" votes in the 2017 constitutional referendum as supplementary dependent variables. Figure 2 depicts the distribution of AKP and CHP vote shares across country-election rounds, indicating that both vary substantially across contexts.

Our dependent variables are continuous but bounded between zero and one, as vote shares cannot be negative or more than 100%. Empirically, they range between 3.42 and 96.58% in our sample. Our modeling approach must mirror these attributes, and we hence choose beta regression (Ferrari & Cribari-Neto, 2004), which is perfectly suited for variables bounded by 0 and 1 but never reaching either of these extreme values.⁶

To test our first expectation, we capture a country's citizenship policy, specifically towards Turkish immigrants, via a variable from the Dyadic Dual Citizenship Data (Vink et al., 2025) which codes whether to achieve residence-based naturalization in the host state, migrants must renounce their Turkish citizenship. In line with our argument, this variable focuses on how citizenship can be acquired and, in contrast to other existing measures, is sensitive to variation across different combinations of

⁵ We combine presidential and parliamentary elections and prioritize presidential over parliamentary vote share for the 2018 and 2023 elections, where both elections occurred at the same time, as Turkey had a presidential system by then.

⁶ We employ a complementary log–log link, which outperforms other link functions in model fit for our data.

a specific country of origin with a range of residence countries. It takes the value 1 if a renunciation condition for Turkish citizens exists, and 0 otherwise. And to test our expectations regarding transnational mobilization, we rely on two different variables which capture the two different modes of mobilization theorized above. Given the lack of available data, we collected own data to capture institutional and grassroots mobilization: For institutional mobilization, we focus on the presence of Diyanet officials in a country, collecting this data from its official website.⁷ This is also a dummy variable and takes the value 1 if a country is recorded as having Diyanet officials deployed within a Turkish consulate or embassy there. And for grassroots mobilization, we collected data on the presence of DITIB organizations, specifically recording whether and since when such an organization exists in each country, and use the duration of its existence as a rough measure of its influence among the Turkish immigrant community. Again, this is coded based on DITIB branches' online presence.⁸

While testing the influence of these three variables on Turkish transnational voting behavior, we account for several other factors that may affect voting decisions, transnational mobilization, and host country citizenship policies. First, beyond the two modes of mobilization we are interested in, voters may be swayed by transnational campaign visits (Burgess & Tyburski, 2020), and we thus seek to account for such visits by Turkish politicians. As we lack comprehensive data on this, we use data on Turkish leader visits (Balci & Pulat, 2024), such as Erdogan in his roles as Prime Minister and President, or Binali Yildirim as final Prime Minister, to at least capture visits by government politicians; the resulting leader visits variable takes the value 1 for country-election rounds where a visit occurred in the six months before the election. We unfortunately are unable to account for campaign visits by opposition leaders. Next, we control for Diyanet-linked Mosque building projects to ensure that we do not accidentally capture the broader presence of Diyanet in a country as opposed to its mobilization efforts specifically targeted at emigrants; Diyanet mosque projects have been common in countries where the Turkish government seeks to gain political influence, thus indicating a very different kind of purpose. Data on mosque projects is again self-collected.

As research on external voting highlights the role of party organizations abroad, we control for the presence of the AKP-affiliated Union of European Turkish Democrats (UID, 2025; see Yener-Roderburg, 2024), using self-collected data to capture whether it is absent, present with a national branch, or even has subnational branches. Following Sevi et al. (2020), we next control for a country's distance from Turkey, its democracy score, as well as variables capturing civil liberties and civil society activity there. These variables may shape external voters' connections to and views towards Turkish politics (Gherghina & Giugäl, 2025; Ognibene

⁷ We discuss the data collection process and provide source URLs in the supplementary materials.

⁸ While member, employee, or subnational branch numbers would be preferable to measure organizational influence, we could not find reliable, cross-national data on these variables. Branch age is thus used to proxy for influence: the longer a branch has existed, the greater its opportunity to have consolidated its institutional power.

& Paulis, 2023), but also influence transnational mobilization by making it logistically harder or legally more constrained. We take countries' distances from Turkey from the Cshapes 2.0 Data (Schvitz et al., 2022) and rely on V-Dem for measures of electoral democracy, civic liberties, and civil society organizations' participatory environment (Coppedge et al., 2024; Pemstein et al., 2024). Mirroring the finding that ease of voting influences emigrant voting behavior (Szulecki et al., 2021), we use data collected from official documents to control for the number of polling stations (SKGM, 2022, 2023a, 2023b). Since the transnational mobilization of voters is likely to especially target countries where more of them reside, but smaller diaspora communities have also been found to participate more in home country elections (Ciornei & Østergaard-Nielsen, 2020), we control for the number of registered Turkish voters. We thus collect information from several sources on vote number (SKGM, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; TUIK, 2024) and turnout (Euronews, 2023; Sevi et al., 2020), combining them to estimate the size of the emigrant electorate. And we use data from Pew (Hackett et al., 2025) to control for Muslim population share in the country of residence, as this may affect Diyanet presence, grassroots mobilization, and diaspora voting. Beyond this, we are unfortunately unable to control for other socio-demographic features of the diaspora across countries of residence due to a lack of data, meaning that these remain as unaddressed sources of remaining omitted variable bias.

Finally, to account for election type, shifts in turnout, and important political events such as the 2016 Coup attempt or the 2023 earthquakes, which may modify external voters' ties to their country of origin and thus voting behavior (Lubbers et al., 2024), all models include election round dummies.⁹

Results

The results of two models testing our expectations on the AKP vote share among external voters in different host states are presented in Table 1. Model 1 includes the covariates of substantive interest and election round dummies, and model 2 adds control variables.¹⁰

While beta regression does not allow us to directly interpret coefficients, we can observe their direction and statistical significance. Accordingly, the results presented in Table 1 offer support for the idea that the AKP receives more support among external voters living in countries with more restrictive citizenship policies. And similarly, both the presence of Diyanet officials and the more enduring existence of Turkish grassroots organizing is positively associated with AKP vote share. These

⁹ We omit host country-fixed effects as we have few observations over time and our variables of theoretical interest are bound to show limited temporal variation.

¹⁰ While this model includes coefficient estimates for all independent variables, we restrict interpretation to those of substantive interest. Control variable estimates likely suffer from posttreatment and omitted variables bias (Hünernund & Louw, 2025).

Table 1 Models of AKP vote share in external voting

	(1)	(2)
<i>DV:</i>	AKP vote share	AKP vote share
Restrictive citizenship policy	0.192*** (0.0579)	0.262*** (0.0520)
Diyanet officials	0.468*** (0.0734)	0.335*** (0.0784)
DITIB time	0.0133*** (0.00219)	0.0182*** (0.00341)
Leader visit		0.0313 (0.0663)
Diyanet mosque project		−0.212*** (0.0780)
UID: national		0.151* (0.0920)
UID: subnational		0.654*** (0.144)
Distance from Turkey		0.00281 (0.0114)
Electoral democracy		0.00648 (0.288)
Civil society environment		0.136*** (0.0362)
Civil liberties		−0.270 (0.277)
Voting stations		−0.0634*** (0.0160)
Registered voters		0.0380** (0.0191)
Muslim population %		0.0116*** (0.00107)
Constant	−1.051*** (0.0823)	−1.775*** (0.265)
Scale factor	2.056*** (0.0799)	2.566*** (0.0898)
<i>N</i>	344	343

Models include election round dummies; robust standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, and *** $p < 0.01$

coefficient estimates are statistically significant at the 99%-level and match the expectations developed above.

These results provide important insights on how restricted access to citizenship and transnational mobilization affect diaspora voting behavior. But they cannot clarify the substantive size of these associations. For this, we turn to Fig. 3 which

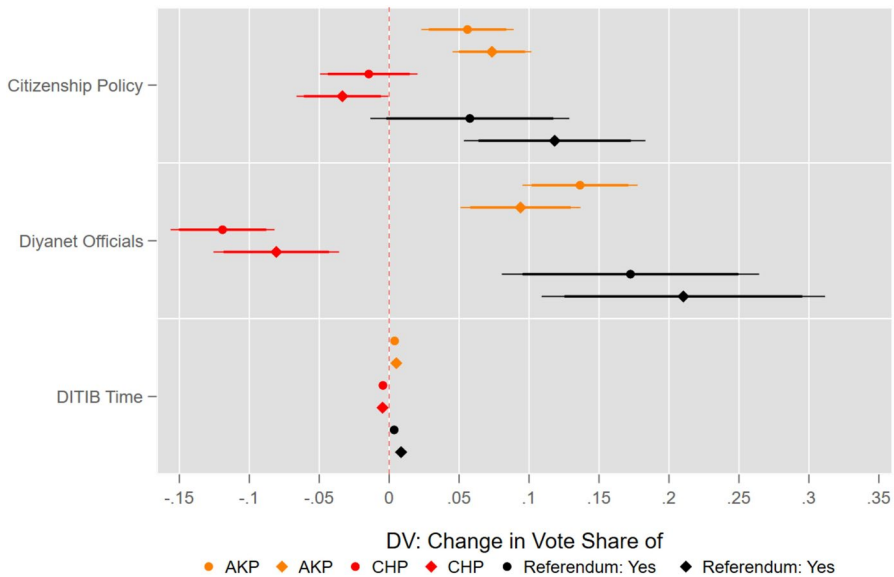


Fig. 3 Predicted changes in vote shares. Graph shows the change in the predicted vote share of the AKP (orange), CHP (red), and “yes” in the constitutional referendum (black) associated with the four independent variables of interest. Circles give point estimates for models without controls, diamonds for models with controls. 90 and 95% Confidence Intervals

presents the predicted changes in vote share associated with a one unit increase in a respective independent variable—in other words, it shows the predicted change in vote share as a country’s citizenship policy switches from unrestrictive to restrictive, Diyanet officials are present instead of absent, and a diaspora organization has been in existence for one additional year. We present substantive effects for our main dependent variable, AKP vote share, as obtained from model 2, and the two supplementary dependent variables, CHP vote share and referendum results. Full results for these dependent variables are reported in the supplementary material.

In Fig. 3, restrictive citizenship policy is predicted to increase the AKP vote share by approximately 5.6–7.4%, while its association with CHP and referendum vote share, albeit not consistently statistically significant, matches the expected pattern. The presence of Diyanet officials is associated with even stronger effects, increasing AKP and decreasing CHP vote share by close to 10%, suggesting a substantively large relationship. For the constitutional referendum, estimated effects are even larger though exhibit large uncertainty estimates. Effect estimates for DITIB time are statistically significant and in line with expectations across all models, but difficult to interpret in Fig. 3. We further visualize the relationship between DITIB time and predicted AKP vote shares in Fig. 4. In its left panel, AKP vote shares are predicted to be ~10% higher in countries who have hosted a DITIB organization for twenty years compared to those who have no such organization.

To further illustrate these results, we can explore voting in the first round of the 2023 elections in Australia. Here, the AKP received 42.6% of the vote, while our

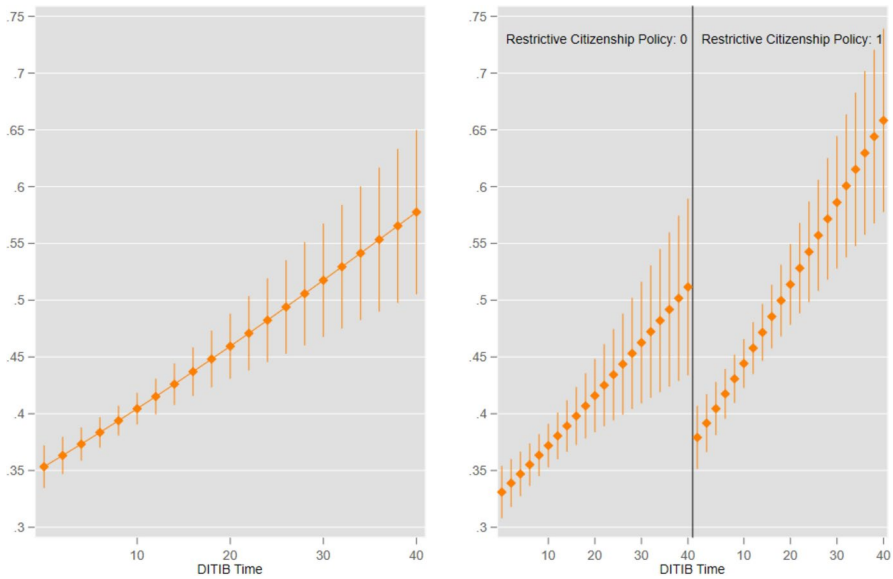


Fig. 4 Predicted vote shares. Graph shows the predicted vote share of the AKP associated with the different observed DITIB Time values. Left panel shows unconditional predictions. Right panel distinguishes predictions for unrestrictive (left) and restrictive citizenship policies (right). 95% Confidence Intervals. Models include all control variables

complete main model predicted a vote share of 44.2% given all observed covariate values. How would voting have changed if, counterfactually, our independent variables of theoretical interest had been different? Leaving everything else unchanged, but moving from Australia's unrestrictive citizenship policy to a restrictive one, our model predicts AKP vote share to have increased by 7.0% in the counterfactual scenario. Counterfactually moving to Diyanet having no presence is predicted to have resulted in a 7.7% reduction in AKP vote share. And while we record DITIB to have existed in Australia for 11 years at the time of the election, the model predicts that ten more years of organizational existence would have been associated with a 4.8% increase in AKP voting. These counterfactuals further illustrate the substantive significance of our results.

Finally, we expect that our two mechanisms interact, as transnational mobilization should increase AKP votes especially when emigrants have restricted access to citizenship. To test this expectation, we extend model 2 by interacting citizenship policy with both the Diyanet officials and DITIB time indicators. Regression tables for this analysis are reported in the supplementary materials. In the right panel of Fig. 4, we present the interaction results for DITIB time, separately plotting it against predicted AKP vote share depending on the restrictiveness of the country-of-residence citizenship policy. The steeper slope on the right side of the right panel of Fig. 4 indicates that DITIB duration is especially associated with a higher share of votes for the AKP when citizenship policy is restrictive. Additionally, the presence of Diyanet officials is also more substantively associated with AKP voting in this

case. The predicted change in vote shares due to the presence of Diyanet officials amounts to +18.6%, whereas in contexts without restrictive citizenship policies, it is estimated at +4.1%.

Our empirical results suggest that both restrictive citizenship policies and transnational mobilization drive Turkish voters abroad to support the AKP. In countries where Turkish immigrants are restricted from obtaining host country citizenship without renouncing their Turkish passport, the AKP is predicted to win 5.6–7.4% more of the expatriate vote than where it is possible to hold dual citizenship. This effect may not immediately seem substantively relevant, but considering how close recent elections in Turkey have been, it can be a relevant difference-maker. Additionally, we have found even larger effect estimates consistent with the idea that transnational mobilization efforts, by migrant grassroots organizations and Turkish government officials, push external voters to vote for the AKP. This highlights the observable effects practices such as organizing transport to poll boxes, religious education, and providing counseling have on Turkish external voters.

In the supplementary materials, we document several robustness checks further investigating these findings. We run all models using the supplementary dependent variables, CHP and referendum vote share. We use a disaggregated version of the citizenship policy dummy, distinguish Diyanet officials by the office they are deployed in, capture DITIB presence instead of duration, allow DITIB time to affect vote choice non-linearly, and explore interdependence between Diyanet and DITIB. Given our dependent variables' skewed nature, we also employ Poisson instead of beta regression. Substantive results remain unchanged.

Conclusion

This paper investigates how voters' meso-level ties to their countries of residence and origin affect external voting in the Turkish diaspora. We investigate how restricted access to citizenship and transnational mobilization by country-of-origin bureaucrats and diaspora organizations shape voting. Using newly compiled data covering all seven rounds of Turkish diaspora voting, we find that restricted dual citizenship, the presence of Diyanet officials, and longstanding DITIB branches are associated with sizeable increases in the AKP's vote share. Our results also indicate that the two theorized mechanisms interact, and that they extend to voting decisions towards the opposition and in the 2017 constitutional referendum.

This research contributes to the literatures on external voting, transnationalism and transnational citizenship, as well as states' diaspora engagement. While our empirics are restricted to Turkish transnational voters, these findings should largely generalize to other diaspora groups, though nuances exist for each of the predictors of external voting behavior studied here. Whether restrictive citizenship policies in the country of residence matter may, for instance, depend on citizenship rules in emigrants' country of origin. And while meso-level transnational political mobilization efforts should affect external voting across cases, variation will exist in their intensity and what form they take. However, non-party-based, religious mobilization has also been documented within the Romanian diaspora

(Gherghina & Mişcoiu, 2022), and given the importance of religious cleavages in many countries' politics, we believe that such mobilization efforts are also at play in other cases of external voting.

Beyond being restricted to one case, our empirical findings are of course subject to other limitations. Data limitations restricted our ability to fully account for all possible sources of endogeneity, including, prominently, the demographic and ideological makeup of country of residence-specific diaspora communities. And given that we use aggregated voting data, our results may be subject to ecological fallacies. As such, these results also present a clear opportunity for future studies to continue with and improve upon the research presented here, for instance via the collection and application of new cross-country data on the Turkish diaspora, using individual-level data on voting intentions for at least the most prominent diaspora cases, and furthering the causal identification of the dynamics discussed here via qualitative methods.

Future studies should thus further unpack heterogeneity within and across diaspora engagement and continue investigating meso-level dynamics of voting behavior, focusing particularly on the transnational practices and actors that distinguish external voting from voting in the country of origin. Finally, as this paper studies a particular diaspora case, future research should investigate the dynamics we uncover here within other diaspora groups and, ideally, even in a comparative manner.

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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