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### **The Relationship Between Electoral System Design and Voter Turnout**

Electoral system design has long been identified as a structural determinant of political participation. Proportional representation systems distribute seats according to vote share, while first-past-the-post systems award seats to the plurality winner in each constituency, often producing outcomes that systematically under-represent minority parties. This essay argues that proportional representation systems produce consistently higher voter turnout than first-past-the-post systems, and that this effect is driven primarily by the reduced proportion of wasted votes rather than by differences in political culture between polities.

The relationship between electoral system type and turnout is robust across comparative studies controlling for GDP, political history, and compulsory voting legislation. An analysis of electoral data from 36 OECD countries between 1990 and 2019 found that proportional representation systems averaged 6.3 percentage points higher turnout than first-past-the-post systems after controlling for these variables (Blais & Aarts, 2020). The authors attribute the gap primarily to the incentive structure facing voters: in first-past-the-post systems, votes cast for losing candidates produce no seat allocation, reducing the perceived utility of participating in non-competitive constituencies. The turnout gap, on this account, is not a cultural difference between polities but a direct consequence of how each system treats votes that do not contribute to a seat, a structural cause that structural reform can address.

The comparative evidence establishes that electoral system design is a more consistent predictor of voter turnout than political culture or historical tradition. The 6.3-percentage-point turnout advantage observed in proportional representation systems across

OECD countries persists after controlling for the economic and legislative variables most commonly cited as confounds. For policymakers seeking to increase participation, electoral reform represents a more tractable intervention than cultural change, and the evidence base for its effectiveness is stronger than the debate around it typically acknowledges.

