

Citizens' Stability of Electoral Preferences in Chile since the Social Upheaval

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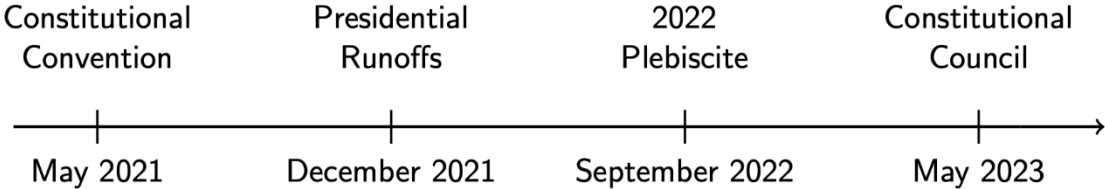
Abstract

A strong oscillation of electoral preferences took place in Chile between the election of the members of the Constitutional Convention in May 2021 and the election of the members of the Constitutional Council in May 2023. This is surprising because, until the national-scale social uprising in 2019, there was a broad consensus that Chile was a highly institutionalized party system where political preferences tend to be stable. In this research note, we study how the electoral choices made by citizens shifted between both elections, using the ecological inference approach based on a Bayesian hierarchical model developed by Rosen et al. (2001). We find that a vast majority of the new voters that resulted from the compulsory voting policy implemented between both elections opted for center-right to right-wing candidates. However, this evidence is insufficient to determine whether these new voters predominantly align with right-leaning ideologies or hold anti-systemic viewpoints.

Keywords:

- Chile
- Party system institutionalization
- Compulsory voting
- Direct democracy
- Ecological inference approach

The number of elections that have taken place in Chile in recent years is unprecedented. In a little over two years, Chileans voted in 15 elections, four of which were part of two processes aimed at drafting a new Constitution.¹



The four elections we focus on in our analysis are outlined in the above timeline. First, the May 2021 vote elected the members of the Constitutional Convention responsible for writing and presenting the draft for a new constitution. This election was agreed upon by most political parties in November 2019 to provide an institutional solution to the political crisis that followed the social uprising (a.k.a. "estallido social") that began a month earlier. This election resulted in a resounding victory of candidates from the left, with right and center-right candidates having their worst showing since the return to democracy in 1990. The second election is the presidential election runoff that took place in December 2021 between Gabriel Boric, a candidate to the left of traditional left-wing parties, and José Antonio Kast, a candidate to the right of conventional right-wing parties. Consistent with the first election, this election resulted in a victory for Gabriel Boric, who received 56% of the votes. The third election we consider is the September 2022 referendum on the constitutional proposal drafted by the previously elected convention. This election, which was also part of the November 2019 agreement by most political parties, resulted in a resounding rejection by 62% of voters. This rejection was followed by a new agreement across political parties to draft a new constitutional proposal and led to the May 2023 election of the members of the new body in charge of writing this proposal, resulting in a landslide victory for center-right and right-wing candidates.

The drastic change in the electoral results during this exceptional electoral cycle is best illustrated by comparing the outcomes of the May 2021 and May 2023 votes, a natural comparison since both elected the members of a body in charge of writing a constitutional proposal. If we split the votes in both elections into what are roughly

¹ The 15 elections and their dates are the following. October 25, 2020: Referendum on whether to undergo the process to draft a new constitution. May 15 and 16, 2021: Mayors, Municipal Council, Regional Governors, Constitutional Convention. June 13, 2021: Runoff of regional Governors. July 18, 2021: Presidential and parliamentary primaries. November 21, 2021: Presidential first round, Chamber of Deputies, Senate (one-third of members), and the Regional Boards. December 19, 2021: Presidential runoff. September 4, 2022: Constitutional referendum. May 7, 2023: Members of the Constitutional Council.

votes for center-left to left-wing candidates and votes for center-right to right-wing candidates, the difference between the results from both elections is stark: In May 2021, center-right and right-wing candidates received only 21% of votes, in contrast to 62% of the votes they received two years later, albeit from a much larger voting pool (see Figure 1). Furthermore, in the May 2023 elections, a single far-right party, the *Partido Republicano*, had the best electoral outcome of any political party in a national election in Chile since 1965, electing 23 out of 51 seats.

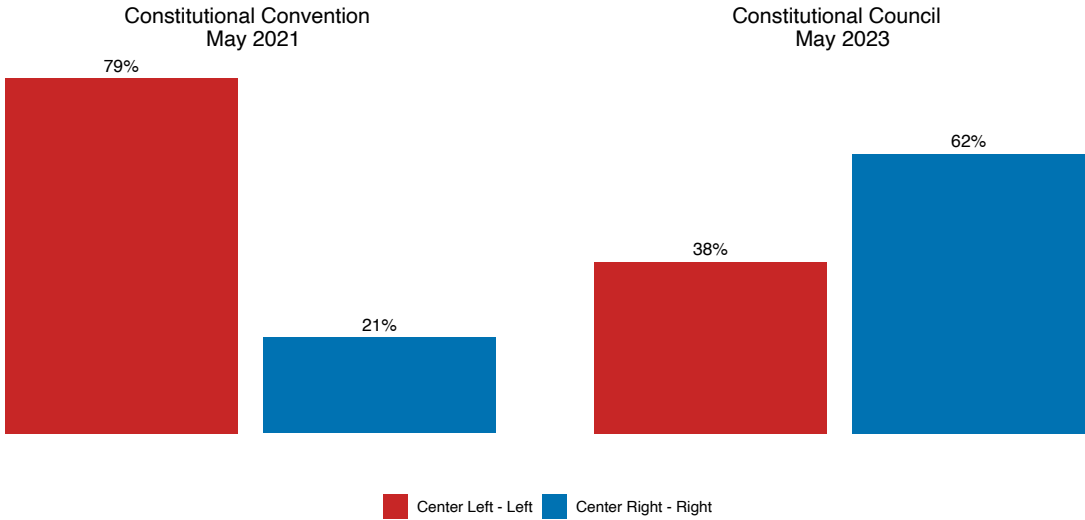


Figure 1

Source: Authors' elaboration.

What puzzles us the most is that until the national-scale social uprising in 2019, there was a broad consensus that Chile was an example of a highly institutionalized party system (Coppedge, 1998; Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Payne et al., 2003; Siavelis, 2000: , to mention just a few), which concomitantly is associated with stable inter-party competition, for many, a precondition of a healthy democracy (Kuenzi and Lambright, 2001).

The stability and regularity of party competition are considered critical aspects of a high degree of party system institutionalization (hereafter PSI). The traditional view of PSI pivoted around four crucial elements: party competition; party roots in society; the level of party legitimacy in society; and well-developed party organizations. The specialized literature considered that these four dimensions are correlated and evolve jointly (Mainwaring, 1999). However, in the early 2010s, some research (see Zucco,

2010) started to challenge this understanding of PSI, using the category of "hydroponic parties" (e.g., stable party competition without roots in society). In this regard, Luna and Altman (2011) show that the Chilean party system combined very low national-level volatility with low levels of rootedness and legitimacy in society and weak partisan organizations.

Mainwaring and Scully (1995) operationalize the rootedness of a party system in society as the stability of citizens' electoral preferences between presidential and legislative elections.² If political parties were rooted in society, citizens would more frequently vote based on party labels and tend to vote for the same label in legislative and presidential elections. In other words, minor differences in the vote in both elections suggest higher levels of party influence and significance (of course, conditioning on the concurrency of both polls). Even though Mainwaring (2018) modified his operationalization of PSI, the link between citizens and parties remains a critical aspect of PSI.

Chileans witnessed substantial partisan dealignment in recent years (Bargsted and Somma, 2016; Meléndez, 2022).³ In this context, focusing on political parties would cast doubt on the validity of the results of our study. Therefore, we decided to base our analysis on the electoral results of groups of parties. Taking political pacts as units of study, following Luna and Altman (2011), González *et al.* (2008), and Altman (2004), we relax the ideological structuring of distinctive brands.⁴

² Other proxies are also used, such as party identification Cox GW. (1997) *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., programmatic congruency González LE and Queirolo R. (2013) Izquierda y derecha: formas de definirlas, el caso latinoamericano y sus implicaciones. *América Latina Hoy* 65: 79-105., class vote Lipset SM and Rokkan S. (1967) Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: An Introduction. In: Lipset SM and Rokkan S (eds) *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*. New York: Free Press, 1-64., government formation Tavits M. (2008) Party Systems in the Making: The Emergence and Success of New Parties in New Democracies. *British Journal of Political Science* 38: 113-133.. See also Casal Bértoa Casal Bértoa F. (2017) Political Parties or Party Systems? Assessing the 'Myth' of Institutionalisation and Democracy. *West European Politics* 40: 402-429., Enyedi Enyedi Z. (2016) Populist Polarization and Party System Institutionalization. *Problems of Post-Communism* 63: 210-220., and, for the particular case of Chile, Navia & Saldaña Navia P and Saldaña JL. (2015) Mis-Coordination and Political Misalignments in Ticket-Splitting: The Case of Chile, 2005–2009. *Contemporary Politics* 21: 485-503..

³ Though not strong enough (so far) to risk the taking over of antiestablishment leaders Meléndez C and Rovira Kaltwasser C. (2019) Political Identities: The Missing Link in the Study of Populism. *Party Politics* 25: 520-533..

⁴ We decided to go electoral, even though other measures, such as a party or coalition identification –as suggested by Torcal and Mainwaring Torcal M and Mainwaring S. (2003) The Political Recrafting of Social Bases of Party Competition: Chile, 1973–95. *British Journal of Political Science* 33: 55-84.-- would be better equipped to depict political realignments. Regrettably, these measures are unavailable at the municipal or district level at which we conduct our statistical analysis.

Hypotheses and Methods

The electoral results described above raise the question of why the Chilean electorate went from choosing a left-leaning Constitutional Convention in 2021 to electing a right-leaning Constitutional Council just two years later. What explains that right-leaning parties increased the percentage of the votes they obtained threefold between both elections? Interestingly, voting was voluntary in the first election and compulsory in the second election, with turnout increasing from 56% to 86% of eligible voters between both elections.⁵ This raises the question of whether the move from voluntary to compulsory voting explains the shift in outcomes between both bodies in charge of drafting a Constitution or, alternatively, between the first and last of the four elections we focus on. Thus, one critical question that needs to be addressed to understand the contrast in the results of these elections is how the voters brought on by compulsory voting ("compulsory voters" in what follows) voted. Did the shift to the right occur because they voted overwhelmingly for parties in this sector, while voters from previous elections ("voluntary voters" in what follows) kept their party loyalties? In this case, the answer to our main question would be that moving from voluntary to compulsory voting led to a significant influx of right and center-right voters. Alternatively, it could be the case that the shift to the right was similar among "compulsory" and "voluntary" voters because these are non-ideological voters seeking alternatives that have not governed so far.

Thus, a second hypothesis we consider is that a significant number of voters, both among those that voted in the first two elections when voting was voluntary and new voters that emerged when voting became compulsory in the third and fourth elections, are anti-systemic voters who tend to vote against the candidate or option closest to the coalition that is currently in power, regardless of the traditional left-right political axis. Did the shift to the right take place because a large fraction of "compulsory" and "voluntary" voters are anti-systemic voters? In this case, the answer to our main question would be that moving from voluntary to compulsory voting led to a major influx of anti-systemic voters. Also, that part of the left-leaning vote of the first election was anti-systemic and opted for right-wing options in the last election.⁶

⁵ The percentage of registered voters that participated in the election but did not express a preference and voted null or blank increased from approximately 3 to 18% of registered voters between both elections.

⁶ For example, in the first election, two lists of independent candidates (that is, candidates with no political party affiliation) that ran anti-traditional-politics campaigns, both on the left of the political spectrum, elected 27% of the convention members. Similarly, and as already mentioned, Republicanos, a party to the far-right that also ran an anti-establishment campaign, elected 42% of council members in the second election.

To illustrate the questions we want to address and the two hypothesis we consider, we summarize the results of the elections of the Constitutional Convention of 2021 and the Constitutional Council of 2023 in Table 1. As with Figure 1, we split the votes in both elections into what are roughly votes for center-left to left-wing candidates; votes for center-right to right-wing candidates. Yet, to highlight the role of voter participation and in contrast with Figure 1, we include a third group of voters, N-B-A in what follows. This group consists of voters that did not turn out (absentees) or turned out but expressed no preference (voted null or blank).

Table 1

	Constitutional Convention (May 2021)	Constitutional Council (May 2023)
Center-Left, Left	30%	24%
Center-Right, Right	8%	40%
N-B-A	62%	36%

Source: Authors' elaboration.

As shown in Table 1, the votes for center-left to left-wing candidates decreased from 30% to 24% between both elections. If a significant fraction of those who voted for this sector in 2021 switched to voting for center-right or right-wing candidates in 2023, it would provide evidence in support of the hypothesis of anti-systemic voters. For instance, if "voluntary voters" consistently voted for a candidate in both elections, the six percentage points decrease in votes for the left between the two elections would contribute to the 40% of the votes received by center-right to right-wing candidates in the 2023 election, indicating that at least 6% of eligible voters would be anti-systemic.

Table 1 also reveals that the "N-B-A" group decreased from 62% to 36% between the two elections. If the 36% of eligible voters who did not vote in 2023 also did not vote in 2021, 26% of eligible voters would be "compulsory voters". If most voted for center-right to right-wing candidates in 2023, this could be interpreted as providing evidence supporting the hypothesis that "compulsory voters" are primarily right-leaning. However, since we have no evidence on how these voters would have voted in the first election had voting been compulsory, the possibility that a fraction of them is anti-systemic (and would have voted for left-leaning candidates in that election) cannot be dismissed.

As seen in Table 1, the votes for center-right to right-wing candidates increased from 8% to 40% between both elections. If the 8% of voters consistently voted for center-

right to right-wing candidates in both elections, the 32-percentage point increase in votes for the right would be accounted for by 6% of anti-systemic voters and 26% of a combination of "compulsory voters" and anti-systemic voters, under the simplifying assumptions of voter transitions between both elections we have made. However, other voter transitions are also plausible, providing different explanations for the 32 percentage points increase in votes received by candidates for the right.

We formally address the above questions by estimating voter transitions between these elections. Specifically, for all pairs of consecutive elections, we estimate the fraction of voters for each voting option in the earlier election that voted for each voting alternative in the following election. This implies estimating three voter transition matrices. We also estimate the voter transitions between the election for the Constitutional Convention and the election for the Constitutional Council directly. This would be trivial if we had access to individual-level voting data; however, for each election, we only have access to the total votes received by each voting option at some level of aggregation. Hence, the obstacle to obtaining these estimates lies in the well-known ecological inference problem, which involves making individual-level inferences using aggregate data. The fundamental problem of ecological inference is that many individual behaviors are consistent with the observed aggregated data (see, for instance, Shively, 1969; King, 1997; King et al., 2004; Freedman, 2001).

We use the ecological inference approach based on the Bayesian model developed by Rosen et al. (2001). Specifically, we employ a hierarchical multinomial-Dirichlet model with hyperpriors given by exponential distributions.⁷ This approach and its variants have previously been used in similar problems of voter transition estimation for the U.S. and other developing countries (e.g., Altman, 2002; Núñez, 2016; King et al., 2008; Sandoval and Ojeda, 2023; Herron and Sekhon, 2005; Santucci, 2016; Kopstein and Wittenberg, 2009; Lupu and Stokes, 2009).

The voting data is available at the polling station level. On average, a polling station consists of approximately 350 voters, for a national total of almost 43,000 stations. We aggregate the data further at the 345 municipalities due to a change in the composition of the polling stations between elections. While the changes in the number of eligible voters between elections due to deaths and new eligible voters are negligible compared

⁷ The model assumes that the number of votes for each option in each unit follows a multinomial distribution. The voting-age population is divided into groups, which may be defined demographically or by voting patterns in previous elections, in our case municipalities. The parameters of the multinomial distribution depend on the fraction of voting-age people in different groups out of the total population and on the fraction of each group that votes for each alternative. The latter fractions are assumed to follow Dirichlet distributions that are independent across groups. Without covariates, the parameters of these Dirichlet distributions are then assumed to follow exponential distributions. Inference on the posterior distribution is carried out via Markov Chain Monte Carlo methods.

to the total number of voters in each municipality, the Bayesian model requires that the total number of voters be the same in each election. To address this constraint, we account for changes in the voting pool between elections election by modifying N-B-A group in the first election.⁸

Results

Table 2 presents the first transition matrix between the Constitutional Convention and the presidential runoff. In the Constitutional Convention, we classify candidates into three groups other than the N-B-A group. In particular, we group votes into i) *La Lista del Pueblo*, which consisted of several electoral lists of independent candidates, ii) the left and center-left candidates, which consisted both of traditional left-wing coalitions, new left-wing parties, and left and center-left independents not belonging to *La Lista del Pueblo*, and iii) right and center-right electoral lists, which consisted of the conventional right-wing coalition as well as newer, non-traditional right-wing parties. We use the natural division between Boric and Kast voters in the presidential runoffs.

Table 2

Constitutional Convention (May 15-16, 2021)	Presidential Runoff (December 19, 2021)		
	Boric	Kast	N-B-A
Lista del Pueblo	0.806 (0.046)	0.065 (0.026)	0.129 (0.043)
Left, Center-Left	0.837 (0.019)	0.077 (0.014)	0.086 (0.017)
Right, Center-Right	0.025 (0.012)	0.933 (0.023)	0.042 (0.019)
N-B-A	0.089 (0.009)	0.235 (0.006)	0.675 (0.008)

Note: This table shows the estimated voter transition matrix between the Constitutional Convention and the Presidential Runoff. Each entry in bold in row *i* and column *j* corresponds to the estimated fraction of voters from group *i* in the first election that voted for group *j* in the second election. Standard errors for each estimate are in parentheses. Source: Authors' elaboration.

There are several results of note. First, approximately 13% of voters for *La Lista del Pueblo* did not vote for either Boric or Kast in the presidential runoffs, despite the

⁸ Newly eligible voters include voters that reached the legal voting age after the first election. Also immigrants that acquired the voting rights, after five years of residency in the country, between both elections. Voters that are eligible for the first but not for the second election are mainly those that died in between both elections. Both groups of voters are a negligible part of eligible voters except in the smallest municipalities in the country.

natural expectation that they may strongly prefer Boric. Second, approximately 8% of voters of Left and Center-Left candidates in the Constitutional Convention voted for Kast, which is explained by the fact that Boric campaigned under a coalition to the left of the traditional left-wing parties and by the heterogeneity in the candidates grouped under this label in the May 2021 elections. Finally, only 34% of N-B-A voters voted for either candidate in the presidential runoffs, which points to the persistence of absenteeism. Furthermore, of those who voted for Boric or Kast, approximately 70% voted for Kast. This pattern persists in the next elections, which ultimately means that the tendency of new voters to vote for right-wing candidates was already present in 2021.

Table 3 presents the voter transition matrix for the second pair of elections (i.e., presidential runoff and the constitutional referendum), where we group voters in each election into two alternatives and the N-B-A group.

Table 3

Presidential Runoff (December 19 th , 2021)	Constitutional Referendum (September 4 th , 2022)		
	Approve	Reject	N-B-A
Boric	0.934 (0.008)	0.057 (0.008)	0.010 (0.004)
Kast	0.016 (0.006)	0.950 (0.015)	0.034 (0.014)
N-B-A	0.069 (0.006)	0.607 (0.010)	0.324 (0.008)

Note: This table shows the estimated voter transition matrix between the Presidential Runoff and the Constitutional Referendum. Each entry in bold in row *i* and column *j* corresponds to the estimated fraction of voters from group *i* in the first election that voted for group *j* in the second election. Standard errors for each estimate are in parentheses. Source: Authors' elaboration.

Most Boric voters voted to approve the new constitution, while Kast voters overwhelmingly voted to reject it. Interestingly, very few Boric voters rejected the constitutional draft, which was not apparent given the ample victory for the option to reject. The real advantage of this alternative came from new voters. Almost 70% voted for one of the alternatives in the referendum rather than not voting or issuing a null or blank vote due to the compulsory voting policy adopted starting in the constitutional referendum. And approximately 95% of these voters chose to reject the constitutional draft. This is evidence of the overwhelming rejection of the constitutional draft among the newly incorporated part of the electorate, which was a common hypothesis among analysts immediately following the results of the Constitutional Plebiscite.

Table 4 presents the final transition matrix, between the 2022 referendum and the constitutional council. We divide voters into three groups besides the N-B-A group for the constitutional council elections. The first comprises left and center-left coalitions and three independent candidates who received insignificant votes for the results. The second includes the traditional right-wing parties and the populist *Partido de La Gente*. The last group consists of candidates from the *Partido Republicano*, a right-wing party to the right of the conventional right and center-right coalition.

Table 4

Constitutional Referendum (September 4th, 2022)	Constitutional Council (May 7, 2023)			
	Left, Ind.	Right, PdG	PR	N-B-A
Approve	0.701 (0.010)	0.037 (0.012)	0.023 (0.010)	0.240 (0.016)
Reject	0.038 (0.006)	0.300 (0.007)	0.421 (0.007)	0.241 (0.010)
N-B-A	0.013 (0.005)	0.021 (0.009)	0.012 (0.008)	0.954 (0.014)

Note: This table shows the estimated voter transition matrix between the Constitutional Referendum and the Constitutional Council. Each entry in bold in row *i* and column *j* corresponds to the estimated fraction of voters from group *i* in the first election that voted for group *j* in the second election. Standard errors for each estimate are in parentheses. Source: Authors' elaboration.

The first results of note are the fraction of Approve and Reject voters who voted either null, blank, or did not vote in the election for the Constitutional Council, which is approximately 24% for both groups. This is consistent with the almost 2.5 million null and blank and 5 million N-B-A votes in the elections for the constitutional council. The results for the transition matrix suggest a tendency to vote for either null or blank in both approve and reject voters in a relatively equal proportion. The reasons not to vote for some candidate in the Constitutional Council may differ between both groups of voters, but we cannot speak to these differences on these results alone. Reject voters, on the other hand, who are composed mainly of the new electorate brought on by mandatory voting policies, voted more for the *Partido Republicano* than for the group consisting of traditional right and center-right parties and the *Partido de la Gente*. The N-B-A group, mainly composed of voters who choose not to vote despite mandatory voting policies and the possibility of a fine, choose overwhelmingly not to vote again.

We also estimate voter transitions between the election for the Constitutional Convention and the Constitutional Council directly in the same way as we have for the previous pairs of elections. Results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

		Constitutional Council (May 7, 2023)			
Constitutional Convention (May 15-16, 2021)		Left, Ind.	Right, PdG	PR	N-B-A
Lista del Pueblo		0.564 (0.043)	0.142 (0.033)	0.069 (0.025)	0.225 (0.049)
Left, Center-Left		0.732 (0.024)	0.070 (0.021)	0.079 (0.019)	0.118 (0.021)
Right, Center-Right		0.035 (0.014)	0.634 (0.041)	0.249 (0.045)	0.082 (0.034)
N-B-A		0.056 (0.009)	0.152 (0.008)	0.297 (0.008)	0.494 (0.010)

Note: This table shows the estimated voter transition matrix between the Constitutional Convention and the Constitutional Council. Each entry in bold in row i and column j corresponds to the estimated fraction of voters from group i in the first election that voted for group j in the second election. Standard errors for each estimate are in parentheses. Source: Authors' elaboration.

Of the people who voted for the Lista del Pueblo, 21% voted for candidates in some right-wing party.⁹ About 57% voted for left-wing candidates, while many voted null, blank, or did not vote. Furthermore, of the voters who had not voted in the Constitutional Convention, roughly half voted for some candidate in the elections for the Constitutional Council. Among these, 90% voted for right-wing candidates, and most of these (66%) were for candidates from the *Partido Republicano*. Only 10% of valid votes among these voters were for left-wing and independent candidates. This is in line with all the previous evidence, where we have consistently found that N-B-A voters vote for right-wing candidates or alternatives supported by right-wing parties.

Preliminary conclusions

One explanation for the previous results is that the elections for the Constitutional Convention in May 2021 were preceded by the referendum to determine whether a new constitution would be written, where the option to write a new constitution won with 80% of the votes. The overwhelming result of this election might have discouraged right-wing voters from voting in the May 2021 election, which was the next election following said referendum. The mandatory voting policies would have brought them back into the voting pool. However, this alone does not explain the results of the presidential runoff and the Constitutional Council. On the other hand, the evidence

⁹ Although standard errors are notably larger in this case than for the other transitions, the fraction of these voters that voted for right-wing options is larger than zero.

presented here is not enough to distinguish whether new voters are right-wing voters or anti-systemic voters, and the presence of a robust anti-systemic vote is still possible. The most likely explanation is that, ultimately, the presence of both types of voters led to the results of all these elections. However, our estimations provide strong evidence for the tendency of N-B-A voters in each election to vote for right-wing candidates and that this tendency has been present since the first pair of elections in 2021. Further, our evidence suggests that the compulsory voting policy implemented starting in the 2022 constitutional plebiscite significantly impacted the results of both following elections, whatever the reasons explaining the tendency of new voters to vote for right and center-right candidates.

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