

# Estonia



## Facts & Figures

Population

**1.3m**

Political system

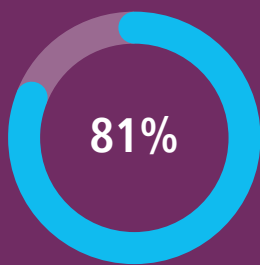
**Unitary  
parliamentary  
republic**

Varieties of Democracy  
regime type

**Liberal  
democracy**

Varieties of Democracy  
Liberal Democracy Index  
ranking (2021)

**6**



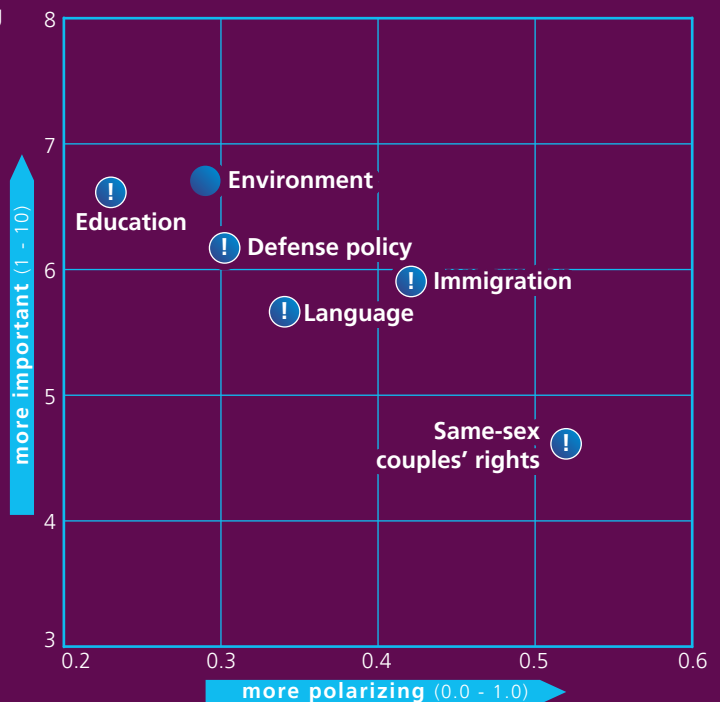
### Democratic competence of Estonian respondents

Percentage of respondents who on average rate the four democratic items as more democratic than the ten undemocratic items in our survey

## Which issues let politicians get away with undemocratic behavior?

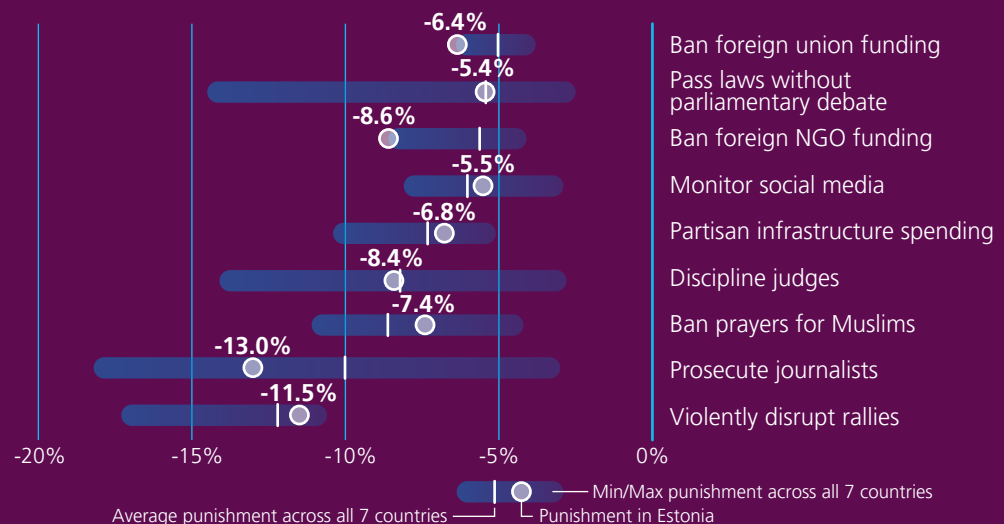
Issues displayed according to their importance to voters and degree of polarization

! Issues for which voters forgive undemocratic behavior



## How much are key elements of liberal democracy valued?

The higher the vote loss for an undemocratic policy proposed by a political candidate, the more a certain democratic element is valued.



## Estonian parties presented in the survey



English name	Estonian Reform Party	Estonian Centre Party	Conservative People's Party of Estonia	Social Democratic Party	Pro Patria
Estonian name	<i>Eesti Reformierakond (RE)</i>	<i>Eesti Keskerakond (EK)</i>	<i>Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (EKRE)</i>	<i>Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond (SDE)</i>	<i>Isamaa</i>
European affiliation	ALDE	ALDE	ID	S&D	EPP
Currently governing					

## KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AND SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY

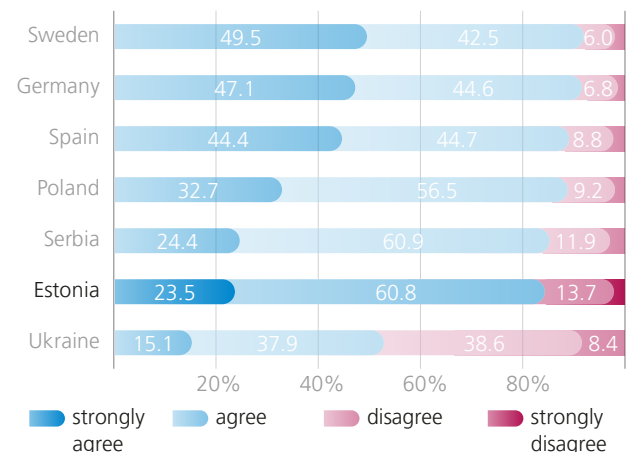
Respondents of Estonia have a good understanding of what democracy is and what it is not and they are fairly pro-democracy oriented as well. Estonians are comparatively satisfied with how democracy works in their country (ranking third just behind Sweden and Germany, albeit with some distance). However, we can also see results that show some concerning tendencies regarding their democratic assessment.

Democratic competence of Estonian citizens is at 81%.<sup>16</sup> For most Estonians, it is important to live in a country that is governed democratically, but the rating<sup>17</sup> they ascribe to this importance is still the lowest among all seven countries. 84% of Estonians either “strongly agree” or “agree” that democracy is better than any other form of government, but as with many other statements, Estonians often refrain from giving strong ratings. Hence, they still rate democracy worse than respondents from all other countries under investigation (besides Ukrainians).

The Estonian respondents also generally reject features of an authoritarian system: They are comparatively strongly opposed to “having the army rule” (the third highest average mean just behind Sweden and Germany). Yet, the statement “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections” is rejected by only 61% of all respondents. Only Ukrainians rate this statement more positively than Estonians. Similar to other countries, one of the more concerning findings is that 24.5% of Estonians regard it as rather or completely democratic<sup>18</sup> if the military removed a corrupt president. Furthermore, 58% of Estonian citizens find it “fairly good” or “very good” if “experts, not the government, made decisions for the country.”

### “How strongly do you agree that democracy is better than any other form of government?”

All figures in %



Due to rounding, totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

Moreover, Estonians are not strongly concerned with the statement “The president encourages his supporters to disrupt opposition campaign rallies.” Less than 30% of the respondents rate this as “completely undemocratic” as opposed to over 40% in Poland, Germany, Sweden, Serbia and almost 40% in Spain. When it comes to religious freedom, Estonia ranks lowest: Estonian respondents rate the statement “Muslims are not allowed to publicly celebrate religious holidays” as more democratic than other countries do.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> If we define a “democratically competent” respondent as someone who, on average, rates the four democratic items as more democratic than the ten undemocratic items present in the survey.

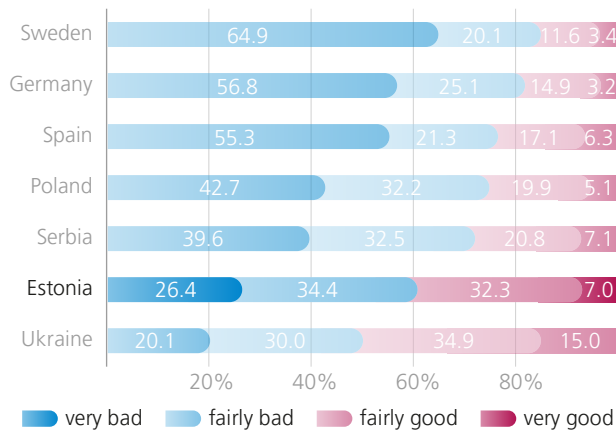
<sup>17</sup> Reaching a mean score of 8.1 on a scale from 1 to 10.

<sup>18</sup> Rating it with an 8, 9 or 10 on a scale from 1 to 10.

<sup>19</sup> Reaching a mean score of 3.8 on a scale from 1 (completely undemocratic) to 10 (completely democratic).

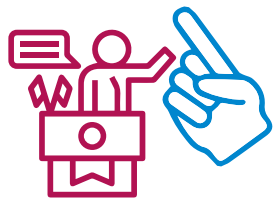
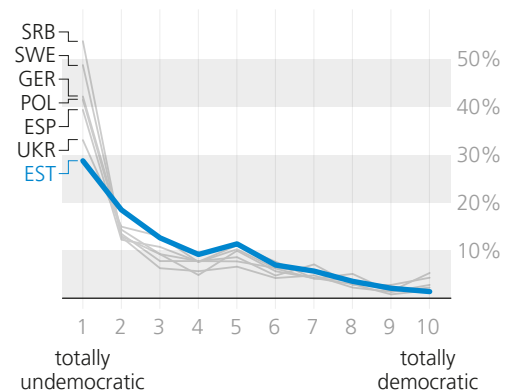
### "How good or bad do you find having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections?"

All figures in %



Due to rounding, totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.

### "How democratic do you find it when a president encourages their supporters to disrupt the opposition's campaign rallies?"



## -7.8%

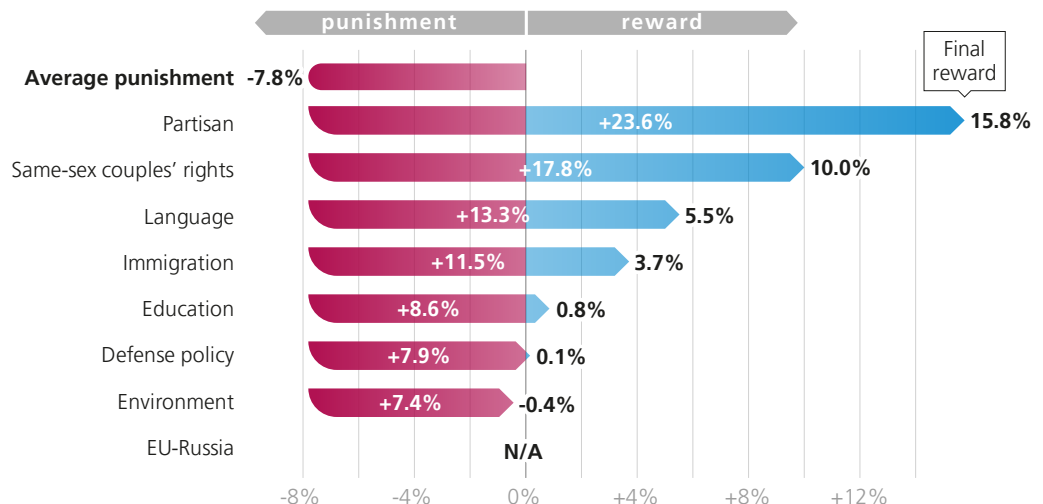
In Estonia, the average electoral punishment for a candidate who adopts an undemocratic position is a loss of -7.8% of the overall vote share.

### WHAT KIND OF UNDEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR DO ESTONIANS PUNISH?

Estonian voters showed a willingness to punish undemocratic behavior. The average punishment is a loss of -7.8% of the overall vote share for the candidate who adopts an undemocratic position. The most punished undemocratic positions are "prosecuting journalists" with a -12.9% vote share loss and "violently disrupt opponent's rallies" with a -11.4% vote share

loss. On the other hand, Estonians punish the positions "passing laws without parliamentary debate" and "monitor social media" the least: the candidates who advocate for these undemocratic positions lose only -5.4% and -5.5% of their vote share respectively.

### Existence of trade-offs/compensation for undermining democracy



## PARTY LOYALTY AND POLICY INTERESTS: WHICH ISSUES ARE

### MORE IMPORTANT THAN UPHOLDING DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS?

Estonian voters forgive undemocratic behavior of a candidate when they are coming from their favorite party. They do the same when it comes to identity-based interests and defense policy, albeit to a significantly lower degree. Moreover, advocating for favorite socio-economic policies is only partly rewarded – and not much. Indeed, a candidate from the respondent's favorite party who advocates for an undemocratic position is not punished, but instead ends up being rewarded with a +15.8% vote share increase. Favorite identity-based policies can compensate for undemocratic behavior as well. This is the case for all identity-related interests – same-sex couples' rights, language and immigration – with a +10%, +5.5% and +3.7% final vote share increase respectively. The final rewarding rate with respect to advocating for the voter's favorite policy on same-sex couples' rights is the highest among all the seven countries under investigation.

Contrary to partisan and identity-based interests, advocating for a voter's favorite defense policy does not result in a clear reward as the final vote share of the undemocratic candidate increases by only 0.1%. Nevertheless, Estonia is the only country across the entire sample in which undemocratic behavior can be fully compensated by the proposition of a voter's favorite defense policy. When it comes to socio-economic policy, the results are mixed. While an undemocratic candidate ends up being punished despite advocating for a voter's favorite policy on environmental issue (-0.4% final vote share loss), they would be rewarded when advocating for a voter's favorite policy regarding education (with a minor +0.8% vote share increase that is nevertheless the highest across the entire sample for this particular issue).

## Same-sex couples' rights

Voters in Estonia reward politicians the most for their respective preferred position on same-sex couples' rights.

### ARE SUPPORTERS OF A CERTAIN POLICY INTEREST<sup>20</sup> MORE FORGIVING OF UNDEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR THAN OTHERS?

If we divide respondents along a left-leaning/right-leaning axis, we can identify more nuanced findings about the willingness to punish undemocratic behavior. Concretely, when it comes to the issue of same-sex couples' rights, respondents from both sides of the political spectrum show less attachment to democratic principles. However, those on the right showed the greatest willingness to forgive undemocratic behavior for it, with a final +13.3% vote share increase. The same tendency could be observed with moderate right voters on the issue of immigration (with a final +6.3% vote share increase). Interestingly, while left-leaning (+1.8% final vote share increase) and moderate left (+2.5% final vote share increase) voters in the end also reward an undemocratic candidate who advocates for their favorite immigration policy, voters

on the right would neither reward, nor punish such a candidate. With respect to the language issue, those who favor the right to use the Russian language when communicating with state offices show more willingness to forgive undemocratic behavior, with a final +8.8% vote share increase. This is 4.6% more than in the case of those who prefer that only the Estonian language should be used.

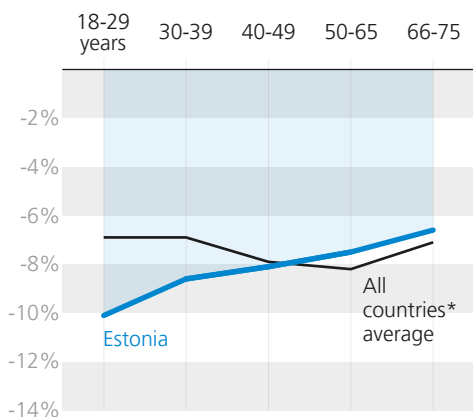
Moreover, voters who favor that Estonian defense policy is decided jointly by Estonia and the EU forgive undemocratic behavior, as in the end they reward such a candidate with a +5% vote share increase. The same can be said for those who prefer cutting personal income taxes and reducing education budget accordingly (+4.1% final vote share increase).

<sup>20</sup> Please find an overview of all tested policy positions on pg. 13.

## Defense

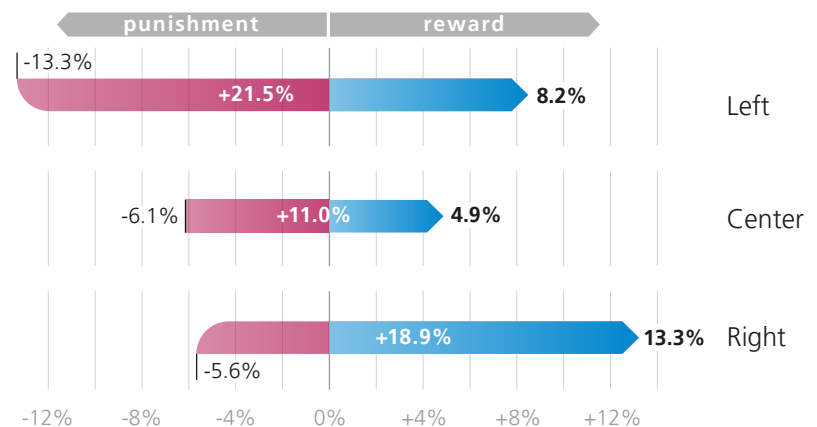
Estonia is the only country in which voters forgive undemocratic behavior when a candidate proposes their favorite defense policy.

### Average electoral punishment by respondents' age groups



\*No data was collected for age group 66-75 in Serbia and Ukraine.

### Same-sex couples' rights: shift in punishment when presented with favored policy



### WHAT ROLE DOES POLARIZATION PLAY?

When it comes to same-sex couples' rights, we can see that there is a correlation between the high polarization on this issue and the willingness to forgive undemocratic behavior for it. As a matter of fact, the issue of rights for same-sex couples is the most polarizing issue in Estonia. Moreover, we can observe the same correlation regarding the issue of immigration.

At the same time, such a correlation cannot be observed for the majority of issues for which the Estonians would forgive undemocratic behavior, as language, education and defense policy seem not to be polarizing issues in the Estonian society. Nevertheless, voters also forgive undemocratic behavior for them.

### WHO ARE THE MAIN 'DEFENDERS OF DEMOCRACY' IN ESTONIA?

The main defenders of democracy in Estonia are – similar to most other cases – young people, students and women. The age distribution is very linear, the younger voters are, the more they punish. The gender difference is somewhat more pronounced than the average across all countries. Other defenders of democracy include people who have a job (part or full time) and who take care of their family.

In turn, the willingness to punish politicians who violate democratic principles is significantly lower

among the unemployed and those with a more negative economic assessment of their family. It is also not surprising that those who are more interested in politics, who are democratically competent, who are more trustful, who are less religious and who lack an authoritarian personality also show a greater willingness to punish undemocratic behavior.

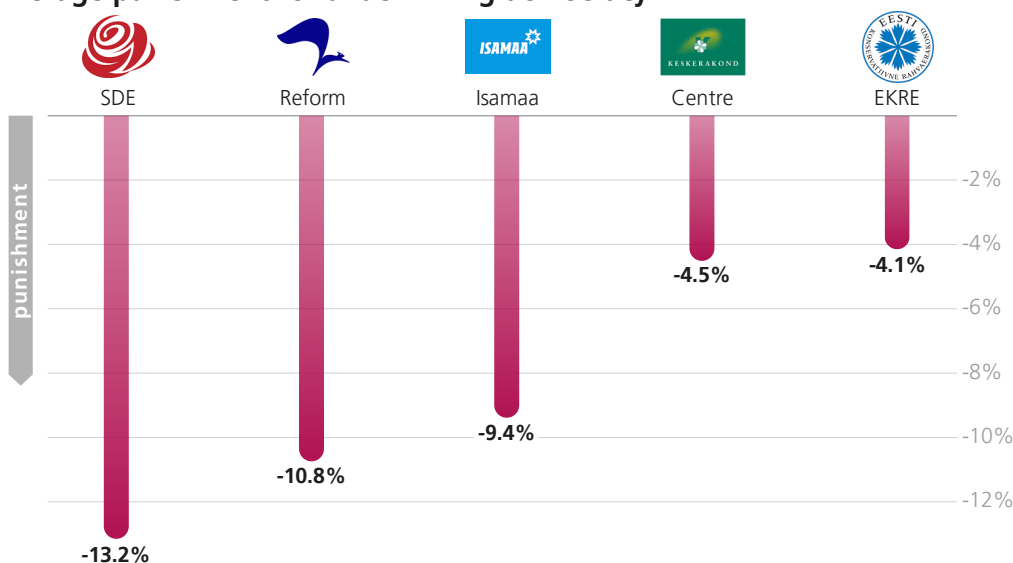
## WHICH PARTY'S VOTERS PUNISH

## UNDEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR THE MOST?

When it comes to party affiliation, voters of all Estonian parties show a general willingness to punish undemocratic politicians, however, one can observe significant variations: voters of the far-right EKRE and voters of the ruling party Centre punish the least, with a -4.1% and -4.5% vote share loss respectively. On the other hand,

voters of the SDE, Isamaa and the other ruling party Reform punish much more, as the vote share loss is -13.2%, -9.4%, and -10.8% respectively. Interestingly, the punishment rate among the respondents who would not vote for either of these five parties is the second highest, with -12%.

### Average punishment for undermining democracy



## Summary for Estonia

A majority of respondents in Estonia support democratic standards and the rule of law. However, compared with the other countries in our study, Estonians rate some undemocratic positions as significantly more democratic. In our experiment, however, we see that Estonians punish a candidate's undemocratic behavior with -7.8% loss of votes, slightly below the average of the cross-country-sample. They are most likely to defend the right of assembly and electoral fairness as well as the freedom of the press.

As in all other countries under investigation, party loyalty is the most important determinant of voting behavior. Estonians completely forgive a candidate from their favorite party their undemocratic behavior. But group loyalty and identity issues also play an important role when it comes to voting decisions in Estonia: Issues such as rights for same-sex couples, language as well as immigration are prioritized at the ballot box over rejecting undemocratic positions.

The willingness to forgive undemocratic behavior for particular interests, however, only partly correlates with the degree of polarization for these issues. Indeed, the majority of issues for which the Estonians forgive undemocratic behavior seem not to be polarizing in the Estonian society. Estonian voters however do regard all these issues as important, which could be one of the explanations for the willingness to disregard democratic principles.