University of Kent

Kent Academic Repository

Morgan-Jones, Edward, Sudulich, Laura, Popp, Raluca and Grbavac, Valentino (2025) *Is there a representation gap? Citizen preferences for political representation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.* Discussion paper. Forum of Federations

Downloaded from

https://kar.kent.ac.uk/115095/ The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

https://www.forumfed.org/document/is-there-a-representation-gap-citizen-preferences-for-political-repres

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in ***Title of Journal*** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies).

December 2025

InclusivePeace: Citizen Inclusion in Power-Sharing Settlements

IS THERE A REPRESENTATION GAP? CITIZEN PREFERENCES FOR POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Laura Sudulich (University of Essex), Edward Morgan-Jones (University of Kent),
Raluca Popp (University of Kent) & Valentino Grbavac (Brandon University)

THE ISSUE

Through a public opinion survey, we find that citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina have strong preferences for candidates that are their co-ethnics and practice "clean politics" devoid of corruption.

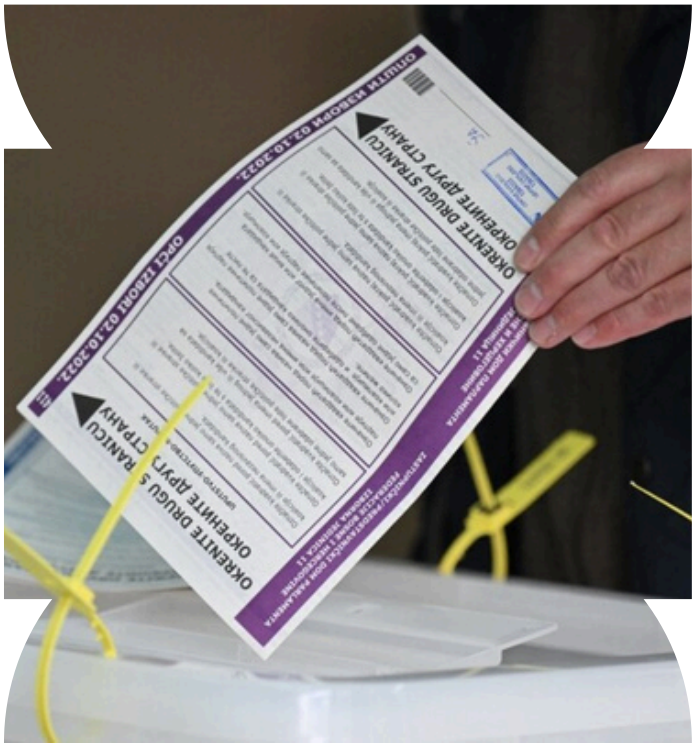
Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has a corporate consociational political system in which three named constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs) receive a share of political power. This was designed as part of the Dayton Peace Agreement to ensure that each major ethnic group would have their interests represented in the political system, reducing incentives for resumption of violent conflict.

However, ethnic identity is only one basis for representation in a political system. By prioritizing the representation of certain group identities, other group identities may remain un- or under-represented and citizens' policy views may be deprioritized relative to group membership. This can lead to, for example, underrepresentation of women (in BiH, only about a quarter of lawmakers are women). Some scholars and analysts worry about a representation gap and a divergence between elite habits of providing representation and ordinary citizens' preferences for representation. This concern has led to calls for institutional reforms to change the basis on which representation works in BiH.

To identify and analyze potential representation gaps, we contracted IPSOS to conduct a face-to-face survey, including a candidate conjoint experiment. The survey ensured a nationally representative sample of respondents through a multistage stratified random sampling procedure. We had 2,506 respondents with data collection running from February to April 2025. The conjoint experiment allowed us to identify citizens' preferences about candidates' attributes and representation priorities. These attributes included candidates' ethnicity, gender, age, and profession. In addition, we explored how important policy priorities espoused by candidates, such as the fight against crime or unemployment, are to citizens.

We also explored the relative importance of material and non-material benefits that candidates might offer to voters, such as access to jobs or a political network. Our key question was: what is most important to citizens when they choose between different political candidates?

Researching representations gaps is valuable information to both domestic parties in how to best position themselves and their candidates, as well to external actors, who often mediate between local actors and provide aid and training to political parties.



Voter casting ballot in 2022 BiH General Election

About Inclusive Peace: Citizen Inclusion in Power-Sharing Settlements
The Inclusive Peace project is an international collaborative research initiative which investigates the adoptability and adaptability of power-sharing settlements, including what influences a citizen's decision to endorse settlements and their capacity to shape those agreements over time. The project is funded by an Open Research Area 7 grant.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Citizens care the most about ethnic identity of candidates and prefer co-ethnics

Ethnicity is by far the most important attribute across all three constituent peoples. All three constituent peoples prefer candidates who are from the same ethnic group as them, but to a varying degree. Croats, who are the least numerous constituent people, have the strongest affinity for their co-ethnics, followed closely by Serbs' affinity for their co-ethnics. Bosniaks also prefer their co-ethnics as candidates, but this preference is not as strong as in the case of Croats and Serbs.

While Croats and Serbs disfavor candidates belonging to other two constituent peoples almost equally, Bosniaks disfavor Serb candidates more than they disfavor Croat candidates. Citizens are largely ambivalent about the Others (national minorities) candidates, with only Bosniaks slightly favoring Others candidates.

2. Both male and female citizens prefer female to male political candidates

Both male and female citizens prefer female candidates over male candidates. Croats are ambivalent about candidate's gender, while Bosniaks and, to an even greater extent, Serbs prefer female to male candidates.

3. Candidates' age and professional background are not important to citizens

Citizens seem to slightly prefer younger (35) over older (55) candidates, but overall citizens are ambivalent about age. Croats and Serbs are completely ambivalent about age, while Bosniaks have a mild preference for younger candidates and slightly disfavor older candidates. Similarly, citizens are ambivalent about candidates' professional background. Bosniaks prefer lawyers and slightly disfavor professional politicians, while Croats and Serbs have no preferences.

4. Candidates' policy priorities were less important to citizens than the material and influence benefits that candidate could provide

When it comes to candidates' programmatic commitments, citizens do not favor candidates that focus on environmental issues and slightly favor candidates that focus on crime and the cost-of-living issues. This applies to all three constituent peoples. However, candidates' programmatic commitments, much like their age and professional background, do not seem to matter to citizens.



Vijećnica, Sarajevo

Non-programmatic commitments, such as political influence, are much more important to citizens than programmatic commitments. In fact, the importance of non-programmatic commitments is second to only ethnicity.

5. Citizens dislike candidates that would try to influence their vote with offers of jobs or cash, and prefer candidates who had access to political influence and were not corrupt

Citizens strongly disfavor candidates that would offer them cash for their vote and disfavor candidates that would provide a job in return for votes. When it comes to other non-programmatic benefits, citizens favor candidates with strong political networks and influence. The single most favored attribute for non-programmatic benefits is clean politicians who do not offer bribes to their voters. This is both a significant and surprising finding given that BiH is the second most corrupt country in Europe and that electoral bribery and clientelism are widespread.

The same dislike of bribes and favoritism of "clean politicians" can be observed across all three constituent peoples. All three constituent peoples would like to see candidates that would engage in clean politics and would stay away from corruption and clientelism. This is a highly optimistic finding given BiH's history of corruption.

Overall, some findings confirm our expectations: ethnicity being the most important attribute, especially for relative minorities (Croats and Serbs), and non-programmatic benefits having a stronger influence than programmatic benefits. Yet, some findings are surprising: both men and women preferring male to female candidates and citizens preferring clean politicians despite (or perhaps because of) wide-spread corruption.

POLICY LESSONS

Lessons for political parties in BiH are:

1. Focus on anti-corruption. Citizens do not care all that much about programmatic positions of political candidates, but they do care quite a bit about electing "clean politicians." This is a clear sign to political parties in BiH that they can gain large proportion of votes at the polls by promoting credible anti-corruption and anti-clientelism electoral platforms. In other words, there is space for smaller reformist parties to win big and an incentive for larger and more established parties to reform internally and embrace the rule of law and clean politics. Citizens of all three constituent peoples care more about clean politics than any other programmatic or non-programmatic benefit.

2. Protect group rights. For all three constituent peoples, but especially Croats and Serbs who are less numerous than Bosniaks, the most important attribute is candidate having the same ethnicity as them. This is seen in practice through very high rates of affinity voting in BiH. There is an appetite for anti-corruption reformist parties, but within the bounds of three constituent peoples rather than through multi-ethnic parties which would represent all citizens simply as citizens.

3. Nominate female candidates. Citizens in BiH prefer female to male candidates. This is likely connected to their desire for cleaner politics as women are a minority in politics. Promoting female candidates can assist the more established parties in reforming from within and showing their voters a commitment for cleaner politics. This would also help remedy a severe gender imbalance in BiH's politics.

Lessons for external actors in BiH mirror lessons for political parties, but the focus is on mediation and aid rather than on selection of candidates and political platforms:

1. Promotion of anti-corruption and the rule of law should be the most important priority for external actors. Promotion of the rule of law should capture the most aid and training that is facilitated by international NGOs and agencies, as well as most diplomatic capital when it comes to negotiations with local parties. Instead of trying to reform the power-sharing system itself, the focus should be on fostering environment that would be conducive to the rule of law and aimed at weeding out corruption in BiH.

2. Citizens prefer co-ethnic candidates, giving credence to the current consociational system in BiH. For citizens in BiH the most important attribute of political candidates is their ethnicity, which means that the current consociational system is what people, directly or indirectly, desire. Instead of trying to promote policies that would reform the consociational system itself the focus of external actors should be on promotion of anti-corruption measurements and the rule of law. The historic promotion of (often only nominally) multi-ethnic parties, in retrospect, seems like wasted effort of external actors given citizens' preferences for their co-ethnics and limited success of these nominally multi-ethnic parties to gain voters within Croat and Serb communities. However, preference for consociationalism, which depresses programmatic competition, should not be seen as necessarily bad, as it is clear that citizens reject clientelism and patronage and are open for the emergence of political identities that are not primarily connected to ethnicity, such as gender.

3. Female candidates should be promoted and supported. Citizens prefer female candidates, but the female politicians still make only about a quarter of representatives in the House of Representatives of BiH, and a similar proportion in other legislative bodies. Voters might believe that female candidates are non-viable. This could be partially remedied with more campaigns aimed at promotion of female candidates and incentives for women to run.



City Assembly, Banja Luka

AUTHORS

LAURA SUDULICH IS A READER IN PUBLIC POLICY AT THE DEPARTMENT OF GOVERNMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX (UNITED KINGDOM). SHE USES SURVEY RESEARCH TO STUDY PUBLIC OPINION, ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR

EDWARD MORGAN-JONES IS PROFESSOR OF COMPARATIVE POLITICS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KENT (UNITED KINGDOM) AND AN EXPERT ON DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

RALUCA POPP IS A SENIOR LECTURER IN QUANTITATIVE POLITICS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KENT (UNITED KINGDOM). SHE RESEARCHES ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR, POLITICAL REPRESENTATION, AND CONFLICT ANALYSIS

VALENTINO GRBAVAC IS A POSTDOCTORAL FELLOW IN THE POLITICAL SCIENCE DEPARMTENT AT BRANDON UNIVERSITY (CANADA) WORKING ON THE INCLUSIVEPEACE PROJECT

INCLUSIVE PEACE

Forum of Federations
The Global Network on Federalism and Devolved Governance