Obstacles to Political Rights of EU Citizens

Survey Report

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**Summary of the Main Findings**

Most respondents are UK nationals (40%) followed by Irish, Italian, German and French. The highest number live in Belgium, France, the United Kingdom and Ireland. However, all 28 EU nationalities are represented and 15 countries of the EU are covered by the sample. Most of the participating citizens are economically active long-term residents with 40% having lived more than 10 years in their host country.

The main findings of the survey are as follows:

- Mobile EU citizens experience difficulties in registering to vote, do not vote because voting represents an administrative burden and/or experience problems with local authorities based on their origin.
- Mobile EU citizens vote less outside their country of origin and the majority is politically and civicly inactive.
- The opportunity to improve the situation of one’s community is essential to stimulating political participation, according to the respondents. However, political engagement is not perceived as decisive for the improvement of one’s status in the host country.
- Discrimination and other difficulties experienced in the host countries also encourage political and civic engagement.
- Many respondents consider that the right to participate in national referenda as well as legislative, parliamentary and presidential elections, under the same conditions as nationals of the host country, would greatly stimulate their involvement in political and civic life.
- Expat-friendly events are considered by a large majority of citizens as crucial to increasing political and civic activity of mobile EU citizens. However, most citizens do not think that the local authorities are doing enough to promote active citizenship of expats.

Main obstacles to increased political and civic participation:

- The fact that mobile EU citizens cannot vote in national elections and referenda;
- Language barriers;
- Not understanding the political system of the country;
- Temporary residence attitude of mobile EU citizens.

Suggestions for local authorities to increase participation:

- Organisation of targeted events for mobile EU citizens;
- Better dissemination of information on the political system, processes and electoral procedures;
- Language classes and opportunities to learn more about the culture of the country organised by the local authorities and the establishment of dedicated units within local authorities to engage non-nationals;
- Creation of committees of representatives from the expat community inside the municipalities.
BACKGROUND AND AIM OF THIS SURVEY

This activity has been carried out in the framework of the project One-Stop-Shops for Political Participation of Mobile EU Citizens funded by Directorate-General Justice and Consumers’ Justice Programme of the European Union and led by Migration Policy Group (MPG). The project focused on informing and encouraging EU mobile citizens to take up rights and opportunities to participate in their host EU country’s civic and political life. It promoted the exchange and dissemination of innovative community based methods based on the best available research and practices. In addition, it aimed to raise policy-makers’ awareness of the reasons, procedural and practical obstacles, and interests for mobile EU citizens to use these rights and opportunities.

The aim of this survey was to gather the key concerns of mobile EU citizens related to the exercise of their EU political rights with a focus on the right to vote in local and European elections and civic participation in their host country. The findings shed light on the drivers and obstacles to political participation of EU mobile citizens and should provide feedback to decision-makers, offering leads to the organisers of future elections on how to increase the turnout of EU citizens living in EU countries other than their own.

STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY

This report is based on the findings of a survey designed and launched by ECAS on 29 March 2017 and closed on the 8 December 2017. The survey was promoted by ECAS and the project partners through their social media and through the own-organised one-stop-shop events in Belgium, Ireland and UK. Hardcopies were also distributed at two ECAS events:

- Conference “Free Movement of Persons in the EU: A Loved and Feared Reality” on 19 May 2017, and the
- Roundtable “Brexit and Citizens’ Rights: Where Do We Go From Here?” on 10 July 2017

The survey was divided into two parts. The first part included questions to profile the respondents and describe the sample (i.e. nationality – country of origin, country of residence – host country, age, gender, occupation and duration of residence in the host country). The second part includes a set of multiple choice or ranking-type questions, as well as open questions. Respondents were asked about their perception of political and civic engagement in the host country and their country of origin in order to examine reasons for disengagement. The importance placed on active political engagement as a factor of change and improvement of status was also studied. The role of local authorities in facilitating active political and civic engagement was also examined and suggestions for improvements were solicited from the respondents.

1 Objectif, Belgium, the Immigrant Council of Ireland, the Migrants’ Rights Network, UK, and the Irish Immigrant Support Centre.
The survey received a total of 141 unique responses. While the sample size is relatively small, it is quite diverse and provides a wealth of information about the perceptions of mobile EU citizens regarding the exercise of political and civic rights across the EU.

**Basic Data**

**Gender**

![Gender Pie Chart]

Almost 65% of respondents are women, which might indicate that mobile EU citizens’ interest in political rights and civic activism are somewhat more pronounced within the female population.

**Age**

![Age Pie Chart]

Different age groups are almost equally represented within the sample expect for the youngest group: those aged up to 25 years (5.7%). This category would also include students, including those who are taking part in exchange programmes and who are not necessarily looking to establish permanent
residence in the host country. However, this does not preclude that they would be less politically active in their host countries.

**Status or occupation**

It is significant that 44% of the respondents are in employment and 21% are self-employed. This means that a majority (65%) are not a burden on the social security system of their host country and are tax contributors. It also indicates a high level of integration within the host country. 20% are pensioners while 15% represent the economically inactive: such as students (3.6%), job-seekers (4.3%) and homemakers (3.6%).

**Country of Origin**
More than half of the respondents are UK nationals. It can be argued that the reason for the higher response rate of UK nationals in the survey could be the political context during the duration of the survey: the Brexit negotiations and the uncertainties related to the future rights and status of UK nationals in EU countries. Nationalities that follow statistically are the Irish, Italian, German and French, but also another 23 nationalities (each representing 2% or less). This means that the entire sample represents together all the nationalities of the EU.

**Host country**

![Host country chart]

Then main countries of residence in descending order are Belgium, France, the UK and Ireland. Other countries represent 28% of the sample and another 11 different countries of the EU. This means that the respondents live in 15 different countries of the EU that are not their country of origin. Keeping this in mind, it can be argued that the aggregated responses provide a respectable appraisal of the situation in the EU related to the exercise of political rights of mobile EU citizens.

**Duration of residence**

![Duration of residence chart]
Most the respondents are long term residents with more than 40% having lived more than 10 years in their host country. Short term residence of up to 3 years represents a quarter of all the answers (25.2%). Most of the respondents are well established in their communities and most are probably benefiting from recognised long-term residence conditions. This means that they can legally access the full set of EU rights, be they political or social. Combined with the data on the status of the respondents, which showed a predominance of the economically active, this trait is further reinforced.

MAIN CONCERNS OF EU MOBILE CITIZENS RELATED TO EU POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIC ACTIVISM AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The second part of the survey focuses on the exercise of political rights and civic activism in the host countries. Through a combination of multiple choice questions with predefined answers and open questions, the respondents were given the opportunity to evaluate the political environment in which they live and also propose solutions.

Analysis of the multiple-choice questions

1. Do you think that in your host country you have more opportunities to participate in the political life than in your country of origin?

The results to all three questions are rather neutral given that the majority answered, “neither agree nor disagree”. In all three proposals, there is also a similar proportion of agreement and disagreement. The only exception concerns the questions related to opportunities in the host country to participate in political and civic life in comparison to the country of origin. Here the majority of respondents disagreed with the statement, which shows that the political environment in the host country is not perceived as more stimulating to political engagement in comparison to the country of origin. The somewhat “neutral” results can also be explained by the countries of origin of the respondents, which are for the most part established parliamentary democracies where civic and political rights of citizens are upheld to the highest standards.
2. How politically and civically active are you in your host country of origin and how active were you in your country of origin?

The results indicate overall a clear decrease in traditional political activities (voting and membership in political parties) in the host country in comparison to the country of origin. However, there is a slight increase in host countries in “civic activity” and “participating in demonstrations” categories. Mobile EU citizens vote less outside their country of origin and the majority is politically and civically inactive.

3. Have you heard of an EU mobile citizen who is?

All three suggestions have been recognised by the respondents in almost equal proportions, which confirms the starting hypothesis: Mobile EU citizens experience difficulties in registering to vote, are not voting because it represents an administrative burden for them and/or experience problems with local authorities based on their origin.
4. **What do you think encourages citizens to become politically or civically active?**

![Graph showing percentages of responses]

All three proposed statements were confirmed by the citizens with the majority of citizens (36%) agreeing that the **opportunity to improve the situation of one’s community** is essential in stimulating political participation. Discrimination and other difficulties experienced in the host countries also **encourage political and civic engagement**, according to the respondents, with 25% agreeing with the statement. Lastly, having a national spouse or children is also considered conducive to increased political participation in the host country (15%). Among the “Other” replies, the most prominent factors that citizens think encourage political and civic activity are the “threat to the EU from Brexit” (3.7%) and “owning a business in the host country” (2.2%).

5. **Mobile EU citizens are not politically and civically active because they are still active in their Member State of origin?**

![Bar chart showing distribution of responses]

The results do not allow any conclusions to be formulated given that there is an equal number of respondents agreeing and disagreeing with a very pronounced number neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Perceptions seem to vary considerably across the sample.
6. Mobile EU citizens do not think that they need to become politically active to defend their interest in the new Member State?

A slight majority of the respondents, if the neutral responses are not considered, agree with the statement that political activity in the host country is not synonymous with a better defence of mobile citizens’ interests. This seems to indicate that political engagement is not seen by mobile EU citizens as a direct way to ensure a better status in the host country. One can also argue that the high number of neutral answers to the question would also indicate that political engagement is not seen as decisive for the improvement of one’s status.

7. Mobile EU Citizens are less likely to be active if they come from a neighbouring or close country because they still maintain close links to their country of origin?

The closeness of the country of origin to the host country is not seen as a determining factor for political disengagement, according to the respondents, as the greatest number do not have a fixed opinion on the question. A slight majority, if the neutral responses are ignored, do, however, agree with the statement.
8. The possibility to stand as a candidate in elections under the same conditions as a national of the country increases their interest in political and/or in civic participation

Although, once again, the neutral respondents dominate in absolute numbers, there is a clear majority that agrees that the possibility to stand as a candidate in elections under the same conditions as nationals of the host country increases interest in political participation. As we will see in the section dedicated to open questions, “same conditions” are interpreted by many respondents to include the participation in national referendums as well as legislative, parliamentary and presidential elections, which currently exclude nationals of other EU countries in all EU Member States.

9. What do you think of the role of local authorities?

Most respondents think that local authorities are expat-friendly, with a high number of neutral responses once again. Expat-friendly events are considered by a large majority of citizens as crucial in
increasing the political and civic activity of mobile EU citizens in the host country. However, the majority of citizens do not think that local authorities are doing enough to promote active citizenship of expats.

Analysis of the Open Questions

The answers to the open questions were categorised in groups representative of the concerns or suggestions given. They are presented in descending order according to the number of contributions per category.

Open Question 1: What do you think are the main obstacles to those EU citizens who want to be politically and civically active?

- No right to vote

40 citizens consider that the main obstacle to active political and civic participation is that mobile EU citizens can only vote in local or European elections. Should they be given the right to participate in national elections at all levels as well as in referenda, political participation would increase.

- Language barriers

25 citizens consider that language barriers are the greatest impediment to their exercise of political rights in their host countries. This includes the lack of availability of information in the host country’s local offices on the election process as well as the lack of knowledge of the local languages by the mobile citizens themselves

- Not understanding the political system of the country

10 respondents found that there was not enough information on the political system of their host country. This was especially pronounced among the citizens resident in Belgium, who found the country’s system especially complicated.

- Expats’ attitude as temporary residents

8 citizens found that one of the main obstacles to greater political and civic participation was the attitude of the mobile citizens themselves. They considered that many of them do not want to stay in the host country and acquire permanent residence and that this had as an effect a disinterest in political processes or civic engagement.

- Other

Among the other obstacles mentioned (23 contributions), it is worth mentioning discrimination, structural barriers, lack of a specific educational background, lack of belief that being politically/civically active leads to any results, lack of personal contacts or difficulties to network, insufficient recognition by local authorities, cultural differences and generalised bureaucracy.
Open Question 2: Do you have any suggestions on how local authorities could increase the political and civic engagement of mobile EU citizens?

- Organisation of events for mobile EU citizens

21 respondents considered that the organisation of targeted events by public authorities could increase the political engagement of mobile EU citizens. Practical suggestions included the organisation of active forums, international coffee mornings or happy hours, celebrations of diversity, newsletters and events publicised in English, invitations to “ordinary” local council meetings, events via meetup.com, civic participation events on subjects of interest to EU citizens, debates on political/civic issues and invitations to visit local authorities.

- Better dissemination of information

9 citizens considered that more and better information flows needed to be established between the local authorities and mobile EU citizens. Practical suggestions included clear information about what expats can and cannot do regarding political engagement, sharing of opportunities for civic engagement, promotion of the good work done by mobile EU citizens in local communities, circulation of more information upon registration, information packs or a visit to inform them, communication campaigns to raise strategic awareness of rights and events, dedicated information websites and mandatory information sessions upon registration.

- Giving mobile citizens the same political rights as nationals of the country

8 citizens considered that there would be an increase in the participation of mobile EU citizens in the political life of the host country if they were allowed to participate in national elections and referenda.

- Language

8 citizens thought that the lack of language skills was the main obstacles to greater participation in the political and civic life in the host country. This applies to the expats themselves, but also to local authorities. Language classes and opportunities to learn more about the culture of the country organised by the local authorities was seen as a way to remedy the problem. Also, the establishment of dedicated units within local authorities whose job would be to engage non-nationals was also offered as a solution.

- Representative bodies

3 contributors suggested the Creation of an internal Committee of representatives from the expat community inside the municipalities. This body would act on a case by case basis and would appoint a responsible local councillor who would be responsible for mobile EU citizens.

- Other

Other interesting suggestions included reducing mistakes with paper files, streamlining registration processes, not treating mobile EU citizens as second class citizens, helping them to gain citizenship of the host country, ending double standards and ending discrimination.