

Political participation of EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands

Obstacles and Recommendations

ECAS Brussels, April 2022

Welcome

Political participation of EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands

Obstacles and Recommendations

7 March 2022 | 10.00 am – 12.00 pm CET

-REPORT-

April 2022

European Citizenship Accelerator (EURECA) Project

Work Package	Title
2	European Citizenship Rights
Activity	Title
2.4	Voting Rights Focus groups in the Netherlands and Czechia
Milestone	Title
MS6	Voting Rights focus groups in two Member States

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the European Citizen Accelerator (EURECA) project is to strengthen European citizenship and identity through citizen engagement, supporting the post-COVID-19 restoration of freedom of movement in the EU, and fostering EU mobile citizens' rights, including their voting rights in their host countries.

As part of the EURECA project, ECAS is organising two focus groups with NGOs, political parties, mobile EU citizens and public administrations in the Member States where local elections will take place in 2022 (the Netherlands and Czechia).

The goal of these focus groups is to get a better insight into the challenges EU mobile citizens face regarding their electoral rights, how their participation in elections can be improved, and to learn and provide good practices. In addition, the focus groups will contribute to the interaction between different stakeholders.

This report provides information acquired during the focus group in the Netherlands, which took place online (Webex) on Monday, 7 March 2022, between 10:00 and 12:00. The following participants attended the focus group:

Participants:

- Suleyman Aslami, Candidate municipal councillor D66 Amsterdam.
- Tona Belderbos, Policy officer International Affairs, BSD Internationaal, Municipality The Hague.
- Sarah Feid, The Hague International Centre/ EU mobile citizen.
- Kees Groenendijk, Professor Radboud University.
- Justine Jones, Municipal councillor GroenLinks Groningen.
- Dominika Lykowska, Board Member SIB/ EU mobile citizen.
- Tatjana Meijvogel-Volk, Project manager ProDemos.
- Maarten Vink, Professor EUI.

Moderators:

- Marrit Westerweel, Citizens' Advice Manager ECAS
- Vasiliki Katsikerou, Training and Events' Manager ECAS

This report provides information on the voting rights of EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands. Furthermore, it describes the methodology, followed by the main points of the discussion and the conclusion.

2. METHODOLOGY

An invitation for the focus group was sent to 54 stakeholders: municipalities, political parties, EU mobile citizens, academics, student associations, and civil society organisations. The invitation was accepted by ten stakeholders of which eight participated in the focus group. One invitee apologised for missing the discussion.

The focus group consisted of a plenary part and two break-out sessions.

After the introduction and a short *tour-de-table*, the first break-out session started. In these break-out sessions, the main obstacles to the political participation of EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands were discussed. The following discussion questions were posed:

- What are the main obstacles EU mobile citizens face regarding their political participation in the Netherlands?
- Enhancing the political participation of mobile EU citizens in the Netherlands is a task for local government or political parties?
- Effectiveness of information campaigns targeting EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands.

After the first break-out session, all participants returned to the plenary session where the two ECAS' moderators gave a summary of the discussion. The participants were given the opportunity to respond to and discuss the main findings.

The second break-out session covered the recommendations and good practices. The following discussion points were used:

- Improvement of the participation of EU mobile citizens in the local/ EP elections in the Netherlands.
- The interest of targeting EU mobile citizens in activities/ campaigns in the local/ EP elections in the Netherlands.
- Good practices aimed at improving political participation of mobile EU citizens in the Netherlands.

After this session, a summary was presented by the two moderators in the plenary session. The participants were again given the opportunity to respond to and discuss the main findings.

The presented discussion points were developed after undertaking a Literature review to define the context, formulate the questions for the focus group's participants and identify initial good practices to serve as inspiration for the participants. The following section of the report presents the results of the literature review.

3. VOTING RIGHTS OF MOBILE EU CITIZENS IN THE NETHERLANDS

In order to better understand the results of the focus group and to be able to place them in a broader context, a literature review was carried out on the voting rights of mobile EU citizens in the Netherlands.

3.1 Awareness of voting rights

According to Article 22 (1) of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union¹, all EU citizens have the right to vote and stand as candidates in the municipal and European Parliament elections in the country they reside, regardless if they are nationals of the host country. Currently, it seems there is no information on the awareness of mobile EU citizens on their voting rights in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, when looking at the European level, the knowledge of electoral rights is uneven, with 71% of the European citizens being aware of their rights on European Parliament's elections and only half of EU citizens being aware of their electoral rights at the municipal level.² This could also be an indication of the awareness of mobile EU citizens in the Netherlands regarding their voting rights⁵. In 2015, the 'limited awareness' of mobile EU citizens in Amsterdam regarding their right to vote was 'not considered a problem (by both migrants and the municipality)'.³ In a survey, municipalities indicated they have insufficient knowledge regarding EU migrants. In addition, two-thirds of the municipalities said to have no policies or measures aimed at this target group. From the survey, it could be concluded that municipalities are mainly focused on issues related to the housing of EU migrants within the municipality and less on letting this group become a part of the society,⁴ with voting rights falling in the latter category.

3.2 European Parliament elections

For the European Parliament elections, EU mobile citizens need to register themselves once with their municipality with a special form, the so-called Y-32 form, to declare they will not participate in these elections in another EU Member State.⁵ After this registration, the citizens will automatically receive their

¹ Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2008 O.J. C 115/47

² Flash Eurobarometer 485 Summary, 2020, Retrieved from: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/214273/Eurobarometer%20Report%20Summary%20-%20EU%20Citizenship%20&%20Democracy%20-%20July%202020.pdf>

³ Inge Razenberg. *Local welcoming policies city. Report Amsterdam*. (Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Institute, 2015). P.45.

⁴ Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving. *Enquête gemeenten & EU-migranten*. (Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut, 2015). P.7.

⁵ <https://www.kiesraad.nl/verkiezingen/europees-parlement/stemmen/niet-nederlandse-inwoners> Accessed 24/03/2022.

voting passes by regular mail. The Dutch electoral law⁶ states that municipalities need to send EU citizens a form by which they can request their registration when they settle themselves for the first time in the Netherlands. In addition, municipalities need to inform citizens about the registration in the municipal magazine (*gemeentebld*) at least six weeks before the candidacy.⁷ The Dutch municipalities are thus obligated to inform EU mobile citizens on how they can take part in this election. This was a case before the Dutch National Ombudsman in 2015. An EU mobile citizen residing in the Netherlands complained to the National Ombudsman that he was insufficiently informed about registering for the European Parliament elections of 2014 by his municipality. The National Ombudsman upheld the complaint stating the disseminated information via door-to-door papers and the website of the municipality was "insufficiently clear for EU nationals and not easy to find".⁸

In 2019, for the European Parliament elections in the Netherlands, 3.6% of the 13.5 million eligible voters had EU citizenship. Almost a quarter of them were Polish citizens, followed by German citizens (14%) and British citizens (9%).^{9,10} Of the 490.000 eligible EU citizens electorate in 2019, 12% registered to cast their vote in the Netherlands for the European Parliament.¹¹

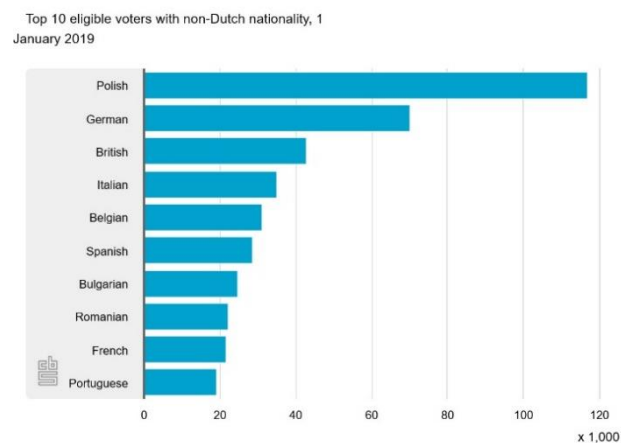


Figure 1 Top 10 voters with EU citizenship
Source: CBS

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2021/01/20/model-y-32> Accessed 24/03/2022.

⁶ Kieswet, <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0004627/2022-03-24>, Accessed 01/04/2022

⁷ Kieswet, Article Y 32.5 and Y 32.9.

⁸ De Nationale Ombudsman. *Rapport. Een onderzoek naar de gemeentelijke informatieverstrekking aan EU-onderdanen rond de Europese verkiezingen. Rapportnummer: 2015/090.* (Den Haag: Nationale Ombudsman, 2015). P.5.

⁹ <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2019/20/nearly-one-quarter-of-non-dutch-voters-are-polish> Accessed 24/03/2022.

¹⁰ Voters from the United Kingdom were still eligible to vote as the Brexit took place on 31 January 2020.

¹¹ <https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2022/02/election-watch-brussels-to-act-on-boosting-eu-residents-voting-rights/> Accessed 30/03/2022

3.3 Municipal elections

All officially registered residents in the Netherlands automatically receive their voting pass in the invitation for the municipal elections sent by regular mail. There is no need for a separate registration.¹²

The latest municipal elections in the Netherlands were held on 14, 15, and 16 March 2022. Because of COVID-19, the elections lasted three days instead of one.¹³ Almost 13,9 million people were eligible to cast their vote, including mobile EU citizens.¹⁴ The number of EU citizens residing in the Netherlands has doubled during the period 2008-2020¹⁵.

For the municipal elections of 2022, no specific information on the electorate of mobile EU citizens is available (yet).

3.3.1 Examples of good practices

As part of the literature review, examples of good practices were found in relation to involving mobile EU citizens in the Dutch municipal elections. These examples can serve as an illustration of the possibilities to increase the awareness and involvement of the electorate of mobile EU citizens.

For the latest two municipal elections (2018 and 2022), several initiatives were developed to inform EU mobile citizens about their electoral rights. A few examples can be found below.

2018 Municipal Elections:

- **Kieskompas (Wageningen)**

Kieskompas was translated in English for the municipality of Wageningen. Kieskompas is an online election tool that presents people with different statements to which they have to indicate whether they strongly agree with it, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Based on their replies, the tool will analyse their political affiliation and propose a political party that is closest to their choices. Several stakeholders asked Kieskompas (the organisation responsible for this online election tool) to translate their tool in English for the non-Dutch speakers in Wageningen in order to help them make an informed decision in the voting booth, and Kieskompas agreed.¹⁶

¹² <https://www.kiesraad.nl/verkiezingen/gemeenteraden/stemmen/niet-nederlandse-inwoners> Accessed 24/03/2022.

¹³ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/verkiezingen/nieuws/2021/12/02/vervroegd-stemmen-bij-gemeenteraadsverkiezingen-van-maart-2022> Accessed 24/03/2022.

¹⁴ <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2022/09/13-6-miljoen-kiesgerechtigden-bij-gemeenteraadsverkiezingen> Accessed 24/03/2022.

¹⁵ <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/en/dataset/03743eng/line?ts=1536419449462>

¹⁶ <https://resource.wur.nl/nl/student/show/Kieskompas-ook-in-het-Engels.htm> Accessed 25/03/2022.

- **Let's catch up to vote (Maastricht)**

The governmental agency Holland Expat Center organised an election event in English for all eligible voters in the city of Maastricht. The aim was to inform foreigners about the municipal elections and introduce them to different political parties. The event lasted two and half hours, and participants were given a short explanation about the municipal elections, after which there was an opportunity to talk to the candidates.¹⁷

- **Rock the Vote! (Amsterdam)**

The political party GroenLinks organised a pre-election party for the eligible voters of the municipality of Amsterdam. Interested citizens could attend for free and receive information about the elections, listen to short interviews with five parties (GroenLinks, D66, PvdA, VVD and SP) and to a one-minute pitch by the party leaders. The event ended with a party and a concert.¹⁸

2022 Municipal Elections:

- **Stemwijzer (Groningen)**

Stemwijzer was translated in English for the municipality of Groningen. Stemwijzer is an online election tool that presents people with different statements to which they have to indicate whether they agree, disagree or neither. Based on their replies, the tool will analyse their political affiliation and propose a political party which is closest to their choices.¹⁹

- **Groningen votes! Election debate for internationals (Groningen)**

SIB Groningen and Forum Groningen organised an election debate for, among others, mobile EU citizens living in the municipality of Groningen. Candidates of political parties delivered a pitch and answered questions from the audience.²⁰

- **Election Info Market (Eindhoven)**

The governmental agency Holland Expat Center organised an election market where people could receive information about the voting pass, voting indicator and the election programmes of present political parties.²¹

- **Elections Event 2022 (Utrecht)**

The International Welcome Centre Utrecht Region organised this information event for, among others, mobile EU citizens living in the municipality of Utrecht. It informed EU citizens about the Dutch electoral system, the role of the municipality, and the voting rights of internationals.²²

¹⁷ IMPEU. *Good Practice Guide on Political Inclusion Policies*. 2018 P. 25.

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/events/1838094776224557/> Accessed 25/03/2022.

¹⁹ <https://groningen-en.stemwijzer.nl/#/> Accessed 25/03/2022.

²⁰ <https://forum.nl/en/whats-on/groningen-votes-election-debate-for-internationals> Accessed 25/03/2022.

²¹ <https://hollandexpatcenter.com/en/events/events-for-internationals/info-market-elections/> Accessed 25/03/2022.

²² <https://welcome.utrechtregion.com/en/iwcur/events/elections-event-2022> Accessed 25/03/2022.

- **Political party programmes in English**

Based on the research results conducted by the news website Dutch News²³ in ten cities with large international populations, around half of the political parties standing in this year's local elections have been offering their programmes in English. However, only one of them, GroenLinks, has available information in English in all ten cities.

4. IDENTIFIED OBSTACLES

The following obstacles regarding the voting rights of EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands were identified during the first break-out session. The order of the obstacles, however, does not refer to their importance.

1. Language

The language barrier was mentioned by multiple participants as a lot of information is in Dutch. One participant thought the language barrier is the main problem. It was noted that some political parties do not provide any information in English. One of the participants said that having a letter in English is essential. It was also mentioned that the local participation in the local elections is low, e.g. in Groningen, only 44% of the voters casted their ballot. It was also noted that a campaign in the English language is a way to reach mobile EU citizens. One participant saw a change in political parties and a need for involvement of EU citizens throughout the year and not only during the elections. As an example, it was said that four years ago for the municipal elections only the letter from the Groningen mayor was in English and this year the information letter is also in English. In addition, it was highlighted that Stemmijzer is now also available in English in Groningen. The programme of the political party GroenLinks Groningen was also translated in English. These are small steps, it was said, and there are certain political parties that attract internationals, including mobile EU citizens, and they provide information in English. The role of the media was also noted as it plays a significant role in informing people about elections. As an example, it was stated that in Groningen, there are only two English-speaking outlets.

2. Diversity of groups

Participants pointed out that EU mobile citizens form a diverse group, making it difficult to identify them as a target group. One of the participants stated that EU mobile citizens are now on the radar as it is election time adding that in the last two elections, EU mobile citizens have become more of a topic. It was

²³ <https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2022/03/local-elections-around-half-the-parties-have-info-in-english/> Accessed 24/03/2022.

mentioned that since all council meetings are in Dutch, there is only a small window of opportunity for EU citizens' participation during election time. This was followed by the question of whether this is an issue to be solved at all since this is a Dutch election.

3. Knowledge EU mobile citizens

One of the participants said that students do not know that they have the right to vote. Also, since students do not stay in the municipality, but move away after their studies, they do not feel like voting in the local elections as they do not feel connected enough. It was also mentioned that there are many different political parties and this can be confusing for someone who is not Dutch since there are a lot of choices. Another participant also pointed to the lack of knowledge, saying that apart from an understanding of the election information, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the political parties. Concerning the online election tool where people can see which political party matches closest to their political preference, it was stated that it still requires a certain level of political knowledge. One participant highlighted that proactiveness of EU citizens is also important. Another identified issue was that although EU citizens often want to vote and are interested in acquiring the Dutch nationality, this is limited as the Netherlands does not allow dual citizenship. EU citizens are interested in civic integration and learning the language, the participant said, but not allowing dual citizenship is an obstacle to civic integration of EU mobile citizens.

4. Knowledge stakeholders

It was mentioned that it is difficult to find information about EU mobile citizens and their numbers. The lack of measurable data on the participation of EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands was also highlighted. It was noted that the debate in the Netherlands is more about non-EU immigrants and that people forget that more than half of the migrants are EU citizens. It was also mentioned that the foundation ProDemos, active in the field of democracy and the rule of law, informs non-EU citizens about their right to vote, while EU mobile citizens are not in their focus. They have a tailored activity for Polish citizens but not for other EU mobile citizens. It was noted that it is a misconception that internationals, including mobile EU citizens, are only students. It was also highlighted that enhancing the political participation of mobile EU citizens is not only a task for local governments and political parties. It was also noted that an independent body can raise awareness on the voting rights of EU mobile citizens as political parties have their own objectives and goals. There should also be a proactive attitude of mobile EU citizens themselves and of organisations linked to this group. It was noted that the government is not sufficiently interested in EU mobile citizens and neither are political parties even though this group is 4% of the electorate. Finally, it was mentioned that the use of the English language in the political campaign has increased over the last four years.

Participants also named some advantages regarding the voting rights of EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands. For the municipal elections, it was mentioned that EU mobile citizens automatically receive their voting pass if they are registered with the municipality. One of the participants said that in the Netherlands, compared to other EU Member States, the legal and administrative barriers are absent. Neither residence requirements nor language barriers were found, i.e. you are not required to speak Dutch in order to be able to vote.

The following recommendations and good practices regarding the voting rights of EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands were identified during the second break-out session. The order of the recommendations and good practices does not refer to their importance.

5. PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS AND GOOD PRACTICES

The following recommendations and good practices regarding the voting rights of EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands were proposed during the second break-out session. The order of the obstacles, however, does not refer to their importance.

Recommendations:

1. Political parties

It was stated that it is easier for mobile EU citizens to identify political parties that have an international focus, e.g. PvdA is the labour party and GroenLinks that are the greens. As an example, it was said that the German equivalent of GroenLinks (Die Grünen) came to Groningen to talk to potential voters in German. It was also said that political parties were very active in the 90s to get migrant candidates on their list. There is still an effort to get non-EU candidates on the list, but not from EU citizens, while this group is four or five percent of the electorate. It was also noted that there are many EU citizens in frontier towns with Belgium and Germany and that it is about raising awareness among political parties. One participant mentioned that mobile EU citizens need to be targeted and that the question is how political parties and municipalities can reach them as not many EU mobile citizens seem to be aware they can vote. Furthermore, it was noted that it would be good to stimulate political parties to have candidates from the group of EU mobile citizens. Another participant mentioned the involvement of a political party in getting the group of internationals, including mobile EU citizens, to vote. It was said that GroenLinks Groningen had an international working group that attracted mainly students. Diversity is still a blind spot, it was added, as for diversity one looks for non-western classes. It was mentioned that political parties could be more successful in conducting effective campaigns targeting EU mobile citizens rather than municipalities.

2. Language

Some participants noted that the main issue of language should be addressed. Language is an obstacle and it is important to translate debates, political programmes and Stemmijzer to other EU languages. It was also mentioned that for the next elections, it would be interesting to have

Stemwijzer in English for the big cities. It was asked how this was done in Groningen, and one participant wondered whether there should be funds, provided by the national level to execute this. Having information sessions in English is also a way to reach mobile EU citizens, it was noted, as local issues touch this group as well, e.g. international students had problems finding rooms in Groningen. One participant noted the level of difficulty of the terminology used by the local government, which may also be a barrier for some Dutch speakers. However, as one of the participants noted, it would not be wise to campaign for English in the council. It would be very ineffective if they could only communicate in English, especially with the local (Dutch) voters who are the primary targets in the local elections.

3. EU mobile citizens

One participant raised several questions which needed to be tackled to know how the participation of EU mobile citizens in the local/ EP elections in the Netherlands can be improved. Especially: how to identify EU citizens, how to reach this group, and which media channels do they use (traditional or social media). It was also noted that municipalities should conduct surveys on the participation of EU mobile citizens in the elections as the automatic registration does not allow the gathering of such information. It was thought political parties could be more successful in organising international focus groups to gain more information. It was also mentioned that a proactive attitude from EU mobile citizens is required. Once they follow the social media channels of municipalities, they will see election information.

Identified good practices:

1. SIB Groningen and Forum Groningen organised an election debate in Groningen for internationals. A big issue in Groningen is housing, and the first round of the debate was regarding the housing crisis. Every political party had a chance to give their opinion on the issue. Then, the second round was about the internationalisation of Groningen.
2. SIB Groningen also organised a townhall debate in English, where people could ask questions.
3. ProDemos organises little seminars (six evenings) ahead of the elections with information for citizens who want to learn more about local politics. Until now, the target group was only Dutch citizens. But it might be an interesting pilot to execute this in several cities and in English.
4. The good practice of English social media accounts of municipalities.
5. Political parties work together to target EU mobile citizens, e.g. in Amsterdam D66 and GroenLinks collaborated to reach as many EU citizens there.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Even though the focus group was not fully representative, we can draw some conclusions based on the participants' input.

There seems to be a language barrier for some EU mobile citizens, which could hinder their participation in the local and European Parliament elections in the Netherlands. Not all political parties seem to have their programme translated into English, and also, not all municipalities seem to send an information letter in English. It was recommended to address this language issue by also translating debates, political programmes and Stembijzetter into English.

It was also noted that EU mobile citizens are a diverse group, which seems to make it more difficult to reach and identify them as one target group. In addition, there appears to be a lack of data regarding the participation of EU mobile citizens in elections in the Netherlands, which makes it difficult to target this group. It was recommended that municipalities conduct surveys on the participation of EU mobile citizens in the elections.

Another obstacle to EU mobile citizens' participation seems to be that they do not always seem to know about their voting rights. In addition, there also appears to be a lack of knowledge among EU mobile citizens regarding the political parties participating in the local elections. To tackle that, municipalities and non-partisan organisations focusing on democracy and the rule of law could provide 'neutral' information to EU mobile citizens regarding their electoral rights.

Political parties and the Dutch government do not always seem interested in EU mobile citizens. It was recommended that political parties should target this group and, if possible, also include EU mobile citizens in the candidate list.

7. ANNEX 1 – AGENDA

Round-table on the political participation of EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands

Online, 7 March 2022

Time	Activity
10:00-10:10	Welcome and presentation of the agenda
10:10-10:25	Short introduction by the participants
10:25-10:45	Session on the obstacles experienced by mobile EU citizens regarding their political participation in the Netherlands
10:45-11:05	Presentations of the outcomes of the first session and discussion
11:05-11:25	Session on the possible improvements of the political participation of mobile EU citizens in the Netherlands
11:25-11:45	Presentations of the recommendations and discussion
11:45-12:00	Conclusions

Political participation of EU mobile citizens in the Netherlands

Obstacles and Recommendations

ECAS Brussels, April 2022

European Citizen Action Service

BeCentral
Cantersteen 12

B-1000 Brussels, Belgium

info@ecas.org

Twitter: [@ecas_europe](https://twitter.com/ecas_europe)

Facebook: [ecas.europe](https://facebook.com/ecas.europe)

LinkedIn: [ECAS – European Citizen Action Service](https://linkedin.com/company/ecas-european-citizen-action-service)

Welcome