

Political participation of EU mobile citizens in Spain

Obstacles and Recommendations

ECAS Brussels, May 2023

Welcome

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-REPORT-

May 2023

European Citizenship Accelerator (EURECA) Project

Work Package	Title
2	European Citizenship Rights
Activity	Title
2.2	Voting Rights Focus groups in Luxembourg and Spain
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, support the post-COVID-19 restoration of freedom of movement in the EU, and foster EU mobile citizens' rights, including their voting rights in their host countries.

As part of the EURECA project, ECAS is organising focus groups with NGOs, political parties, EU mobile citizens and public administrations in the Member States where local elections will take place in 2023 (Spain and Luxembourg).

The goal of these focus groups is to acquire a better insight into the challenges EU mobile citizens face regarding their electoral rights, how their participation in elections can be improved, and to define solutions and recommendations. In addition, focus groups contribute to creating new synergies and fostering interaction between different stakeholders.

This report provides information acquired during the focus group in Spain, which took place online (Webex) on Thursday, 30 March 2023, between 10:00 and 12:00. The following participants attended the focus group:

- One person from the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless;
- One person working on international relationships at the University of Salamanca;
- One person responsible for the Consular section of the Portuguese Embassy in Spain.

This report describes the main points mentioned by participants during the discussion they took part in on the voting rights of EU mobile citizens in Spain. Furthermore, it describes the methodology, followed by the main recommendations and the conclusion.

2. Methodology

An invitation for the focus group was sent to 117 stakeholders: municipalities, political parties, EU mobile citizens, academics, student associations, and civil society organisations.

ECAS has performed a very thorough mapping of all NGOs, policy-makers and any relevant stakeholder located in Spain who could benefit from the outcomes of the debate. Potential participants have been contacted in advance and provided with the agenda of the focus group, as attached below in Annex.

The focus group consisted of two separate sessions: a first session about obstacles experienced by EU mobile citizens regarding their political participation in Spain, followed by a discussion on solutions to improve political participation.

After a short presentation of ECAS, Diego Gutierrez, the focus group moderator, started with the introduction and a tour-de-table.

During the first session, the main obstacles to the political participation of EU mobile citizens in Spain were discussed. The following questions were raised:

- What are the main obstacles EU mobile citizens face regarding their political participation in Spain?
- Do you think EU mobile citizens are aware of their right to vote?
- Can the language barrier represent an obstacle to EU mobile citizens' political participation?

The second session covered recommendations and good practices. The following discussion points were used:

- Improvement of the participation of EU mobile citizens in the local/ EP elections in Spain;
- Discussion around the proposals of the European Parliament¹ and the European Commission² on revising electoral rights;
- Good practices aimed at improving political participation of EU mobile citizens in Spain.

After this session, a summary was presented by the moderator 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.

¹ [MEPs begin revising rules on EU elections, calling for pan-European constituency | News | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#)

² [European Democracy: Commission sets out new rules \(europa.eu\)](#)

3. Voting rights of EU mobile citizens in Spain

According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (the official administrative body that provides statistics in Spain), almost five million foreigners (legally) reside in Spain, while the total population of the country is about 47 million.³

To provide more context to the audience, the moderator opened the focus group stating that in Madrid, 23.000 EU mobile citizens have the right to vote, and 21.000 in Barcelona. However, proper data on the participation of EU mobile citizens to local elections are missing.⁴

3.1. Registration process for EU mobile citizens

It is important to note that the complexity of the registration process for EU mobile citizens might have an impact on the turnout. Spanish nationals benefit from an automatic registration to the electoral roll, however, although the LOREG⁵ (organic law on the electoral regime) states that EU citizens must meet the same conditions as nationals in order to vote, in reality EU citizens must complete a very complex procedure in order to get registered on the electoral roll.

Indeed, EU citizens must apply to be listed as voters at the same time that they submit their application to register at the municipal administration, which must be done before a civil servant. However, in reality, a high number of EU mobile citizens do not register at the municipality. Therefore, many unregistered EU mobile citizens never get to exercise their right to vote in their host country.

Additionally, registered EU mobile citizens must complete an additional step: a form must be submitted to the Office of the Electoral Census. While some municipalities inform citizens of this requirement when they register, it can happen that local administrations do not provide such information to newcomers, which further decreases the awareness of EU mobile citizens on their voting rights.⁶

³ [Censo Electoral / Censo electoral de ciudadanos de la Unión Europea residentes en España para las elecciones municipales y al Parlamento Europeo \(ine.es\)](#)

⁴ [Censo Electoral / Censo electoral de ciudadanos de la Unión Europea residentes en España para las elecciones municipales y al Parlamento Europeo \(ine.es\)](#)

⁵ [LOREG. Ley Orgánica del Régimen Electoral General. \(juntaelectoralcentral.es\)](#)

⁶ [Microsoft Word - Spain PP Report Rodriguez online.docx \(eui.eu\)](#)

3.2. Awareness of voting rights

According to Article 22 (1) of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union, all EU citizens have the right to vote and stand as candidates in the municipal and European Parliament elections in the country they reside in, regardless if they are nationals of that country.

Participants pointed out that the lack of interest in local politics may derive from the fact that there is no right for foreigners to vote to national elections, which are the most impactful ones. There is a rule of reciprocity with some countries, but there are difficulties in Spain to exercise this right. Reference was made to the fact that some towns have many migrants from other countries (e.g., Norwegian or other nationalities in Mediterranean towns), which could have a real influence for the good of the political community if they exercised their political rights.

Another participant deplored the lack of information about voting rights, which makes EU citizens think that only Spanish nationals can take part in local elections. They also mentioned that there are different administrative practices in each country and for electoral rules. For instance: in Spain, presenting an ID card is sufficient to vote, while in France a specific document must be presented to the electoral point; Italy also issues a letter confirming the right to vote of the voter. Discrepancies between Member States can create confusion, and basic information is not known to the general public.

In a similar vein, the moderator reminded the audience of the 2020 Eurobarometer⁷ according to which 50% of EU citizens are aware of their right to vote in local elections and 70% to the European Parliament elections. In the case of Spain, the electoral office sends an informative card to voters on where the vote is taking place, however not enough information is provided and the card is not necessary on the voting day.

⁷ [EuroCom_Citizenship and Democracy_2020_v4 \(europa.eu\)](#)

4. Obstacles to political participation of EU mobile citizens to both municipal and European elections

After pointing out the reasons why awareness on electoral rights is so limited, a question on the actual obstacles to the exercise of those rights was raised to the audience.

First of all, the focus group participants agreed that the fact that the vote of EU citizens is very diluted does not motivate central authorities to raise awareness. This leads to a lack of interest by the central authorities in promoting EU mobile citizens' political participation and involvement in local politics, basically due to their lack of influence on the final results.

As a consequence, very few people vote. Moreover, the language barrier creates a major obstacle, especially in situations where EU mobile citizens have a doubt about their rights or about the registration process, as civil servants do not have the appropriate language knowledge to help in case of need.

Regarding the general lack of interest of EU mobile citizens on local political issues, one of the participants pointed out that a minimum knowledge of the country is required (e.g., political parties of different ideologies, right-left, nationalist, religious).

This is not always of interest for foreigners established in a country. They do not feel the need for a real involvement in local matters. Furthermore, some foreigners just reside in Spain for short periods during the year and then go back to their home countries, hence having no real roots in their host country.

In this respect, another attendee commented that the democratic culture of each country is an issue. In the concrete case of Spanish nationals, they are not aware of what the EU citizenship grants them.

There is a clear lack of communication about EU institutions in Spain; e.g., the EU Parliament is seen as an "elephant cemetery" and the feeling of some citizens is that nothing is done in the EU, although 80% of the applicable legislation comes from Brussels with lobbies and lack of transparency.

He claimed that EU institutions should be more present in Spain (EU issues are unknown, no information is given on the Spanish presidency during the second semester of 2023, etc.). This shows a lack of political culture, which should be the responsibility of public authorities and civil society.

Difficulties to obtain information about EU issues in Spain through Spanish media was also highlighted. There seems to be a feeling of disregard towards the EU institutions, and only those who have resided abroad or travelled a lot may have this sense of being part of something bigger.

Finally, reference was made to legal and administrative obstacles, such as the registration for residence. Once it is granted, the important issue for the authorities should be to raise the interest of the voter and launch initiatives to learn about procedures to vote, etc.

However, public authorities do not proactively raise awareness of EU mobile citizens on their voting rights. As a result, citizens do not fully understand what is at stake and what their personal interest is.

5. Solutions to increase political participation of EU mobile citizens

As a good practice example, the participant working for the Portuguese Embassy informed that the Portuguese consular authorities in Spain make a big effort to inform Portuguese citizens about their rights to vote in Portuguese elections, and facilitate voting by using different modalities, including post mail. They also provide assistance at the Consulate to make possible voting to the European Parliament elections. These type of measures should be implemented everywhere in order to increase political participation.

It was also mentioned that younger generations are better informed and vote more. Measures to facilitate voting (e.g., postal vote) for people with disability should be implemented. For instance, in case of massive voting at the Consulate for European elections, facilities should be adapted.

Participants welcomed the fact that more and more websites provide election-related information in English, however they stated that it is not sufficient. The lack of information in other languages than Spanish reinforces the lack of interest of EU mobile citizens in local politics. Therefore, more should be done to make both practical and political information available in other languages.

5.1. Examples of good practices: Estonia

Reference to the possibility to vote by electronic means in Estonia was presented as a good practice by participants. Estonia allows citizens to vote through electronic platforms.

Indeed, Estonia has developed an internet voting process that brings a strong support for e-democracy and therefore increased political participation.⁸ In a similar vein, Estonia has implemented different tools, including a platform for public consultation and an online decision-making process for local authorities.

Participants to the focus group have welcomed this initiative and suggest that similar electronic voting systems are implemented in other Member States, hence encouraging more citizens to participate and enabling a more simplified and user-friendly system that can easily include EU mobile citizens.

⁸ [e-Democracy & open data - e-Estonia](#)

5.2. Registration process for EU mobile citizens

It was mentioned that electronic voting is an open debate in Spain: citizens are not sure about technologies that ensure voting processes, the ability to track who casts the vote, fear hacking issues, etc.

Participants also observed that there has been progress with regards to the electronic vote in Portugal, the efficiency of devices that are being tested and their logistics (how to obtain them). Voters are asking for this modality. This is an interesting modality, considering that there are two million Portuguese residing abroad and who will soon be entitled to vote by digital means. They also gave the example of Brazil (with 220 million voters with access to digital vote) where this modality of voting has worked pretty well without evidence of fraud.

Therefore, there is a need to upgrade voting modalities and include technology in future electoral reforms.

6. Conclusions

To summarize the outcome of the focus group of electoral participation of EU mobile citizens in Spain, here are the main recommendations that were provided by the participants:

- Registration processes should be easier and more harmonized throughout the EU;
- Both Civil society organisations and local authorities should make an effort in raising awareness of EU mobile citizens on their electoral rights;
- We should make sure that authorities do their utmost to promote those rights;
- Civil servants should be able to provide information in other languages than Spanish;
- More effort should be put into translating information about the proposals of the various political parties to increase knowledge of EU mobile citizens on local parties and ideologies;
- Voting processes should be upgraded and more digitalized;
- Allowing EU mobile citizens to participate to other elections (including national elections) would increase their interest in the political landscape of their host country

7. Agenda

Roundtable on the political participation of EU mobile citizens in Spain

Online, 30 March 2023

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 Spain
10:45-11:05	Presentations of the outcomes of the first session and discussion
11:05-11:25	Discussion on solutions to improve political participation Focus on proposals from the European Parliament and the European Commission
11:25-11:45	Presentations of the recommendations and discussion
11:45-12:00	Conclusions

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Welcome