



VOTING RIGHTS: How to raise awareness and foster participation of EU mobile citizens in municipal and European elections?

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Do EU mobile citizens benefit from specific voting rights?

“Citizens of the Union residing in a Member State of which they are not nationals may exercise the right to vote and to stand as a candidate there in municipal elections.”[1]

“Citizens of the Union residing in a Member State of which they are not nationals may exercise the right to vote and to stand as a candidate there in elections to the European Parliament.”[2]

All EU citizens in voting age benefit from the right to vote and stand as candidates both in the **municipal and European elections** of their country of residence. Yet, although precise data on turnout is missing, studies have shown that there is a clear lack of interest in the political landscape of the host country. [3]

To understand this absence of involvement and try to see what solutions can be implemented to foster political rights of EU mobile citizens, ECAS has organised a series of focus groups in Member States holding municipal elections.



What is a focus group?

The focus group methodology [4] is a research approach that involves bringing together a small group of individuals to engage in a structured discussion on a specific topic of interest. It is a qualitative method used for social research that aims at gathering in-depth insights, perspectives, and experiences from participants through interactive group discussions. Focus groups involve a moderator who facilitates the discussion that occurs among participants as well as between the participants and the moderator.

To understand **why EU mobile citizens tend to feel disengaged from the political landscape** of the Member State they reside in, ECAS has organised focus groups gathering Civil Society Organisations, policy makers, academics and EU mobile citizens who shared their thoughts and solutions to tackle this lack of participation.

Format, places and dates

At this stage, four focus groups have been organised:

- Focus group in the Netherlands, March 7th 2022 (online)
- Focus group in the Czech Republic, September 16th 2022 (online)
- Focus group on Spain, March 30th 2023 (online)
- Focus group in Luxembourg, May 10th 2023 (online)

In 2024, ECAS will organise a focus group in Belgium, prior to the municipal elections taking place in June 2024.

What did we learn from the focus groups?

Throughout our exchange with the focus group participants in the four above-mentioned countries, we have developed a clearer understanding of the obstacles to political participation of EU mobile citizens in municipal and European elections, and gathered a series of recommendations to foster their political participation. Those recommendations can be divided in four different categories: language, awareness, administrative barriers and absence of data.

Language

- Civil servants should be able to provide information in other languages than the local language;
- Not all political parties seem to have their programme translated into English, and, also, not all municipalities seem to send an information letter regarding voting rights in English. It was recommended to address this language issue by also translating debates and political programmes at least into English, or in the most widely spoken language of the local EU mobile community;
- More funding should be given to NGOs to support translation of election information and promote the voting rights of EU mobile citizens.

Awareness

- Awareness campaigns (preferably in English) targeting EU mobile citizens specifically should be put in place;
- Civil Society Organisations, media and public authorities should do their utmost to raise awareness on the role of the European Union and EU citizenship rights;
- Political parties should raise awareness among EU mobile citizens that they can stand as candidates;
- Involving EU mobile citizens should be done throughout the year, not only before election days;
- Civic education for democratic citizenship should be further developed in schools.

Administrative barriers

- Registration processes should be easier and more harmonised throughout the EU;
- Voting processes should be upgraded and more digitalised;
- Allowing EU mobile citizens to participate in other elections (including national elections) would increase their interest in the political landscape of their host country;
- It would be useful to extend voting rights to all residents in all Member States (including the ones currently applying restrictions), both permanent and temporary;
- A systematic or automatic registration to the electoral roll for municipal elections should be introduced when newcomers register for residence at the municipality.

Lack of data

- Municipalities should conduct surveys on the participation of EU mobile citizens in the elections;
- Measurable data on the participation of EU mobile citizens in municipal elections is missing, as well as data on participation of EU mobile citizens in European Parliament elections in their host country.

A few examples of good practice

During our focus groups, examples of local initiatives have emerged as good practices that could be applied in all Member States.

For instance, in the Netherlands, ProDemos (House for democracy and the rule of law) is an organisation which helps citizens to exert political influence at municipal, provincial, national and European levels. They provide information in English on their website to explain in detail who can vote, to which elections, and how. Additionally, they organise events to promote voting rights. [5]

In Luxembourg, the website of the government of the Grand Duchy also provides clear information in English on who can vote, referring to relevant websites where information on voting procedures can be found. [6]



References

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- [3] Hutcheson, D., & Russo, L. (2021, April). The electoral participation of mobile European Union citizens in European Parliament and municipal elections. https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/71159/RSCAS_GLOBALCIT_PP_2021_2.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
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- [6] Voting rights for non-Dutch nationals. (n.d.). ProDemos. <https://en.prodemos.nl/the-dutch-political-system/voting-rights-for-non-dutch-nationals/>



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