



What works to 'get out the vote'?

**Combining 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'
approaches to ensure migrant voter
mobilisation**

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1. Summary

Voting rights embody the principles of inclusion and participation that are so essential to migrant integration and to a democratic society. The exclusion of migrant voters, in particular TCNs, from electoral processes results in their marginalisation, limits their ability to effect policy change – and by extension the circumstances of their own lives – and hold decision-makers accountable, and reduces feelings of belonging. In order to establish how the electoral participation of TCNs and EU mobile citizens can be better promoted, the New Europeans Initiative conducted interviews with participants of its 2023/24 VoteEuropa training, migrant-led organisations, and migrant representatives. Against the backdrop of the findings of the Participation Policy Index, this report presents the observations and recommendations of those interviewed on getting out the vote.

The report recommends that effectively getting out the vote requires a combination of 'top down' methods – wherein state policies are reviewed and amended, via an intersectional approach, to extend voting rights across all levels to TCNs and EU mobile citizens – and 'bottom up' inclusive community mobilisation methods. In particular, automatic voter registration processes could be introduced, outreach initiatives could be multiplied and targeted to specific voter groups, and multi-level public awareness campaigns, designed in conjunction with TCNs and EU mobile citizens, could be launched.





2. Introduction and background

The right to vote allows citizens to shape political power and to affect the laws and policies of their municipality, region or country of residence (Groenendijk, 2014). To grant migrants voting rights is to treat them as equal members of the community, ensuring they have the opportunity to take part in essential decision-making processes. Across the EU, whether with reference to elections at local, regional, or national level, there are discrepancies in voting rights between EU citizens, EU mobile citizens and third-country nationals (TCNs).

While EU mobile citizens generally have broader voting rights at the municipal level, TCNs face more restrictive policies which often stipulate long-term or permanent residence status as a requirement for voting. Only 14 EU countries – including Belgium, Denmark, and Sweden - grant voting rights at the municipal level, while the rest – including Austria, Germany, and France - do not. In those countries that do grant voting rights at municipal level, there has for many years been a concerning low turnout among TCNs.

Furthermore, although EU mobile citizens make up 15% of the EU's electorate, they vote considerably less often than other citizens. According to European Commission (EC) data, only 10% of EU mobile citizens registered to vote in their host Member State for the 2019 EU elections: 1.3 million non-resident nationals registered on the electoral roll of their host country, while 5.5 million registered in their home country and a large proportion did not register on either list (Yilmaz, 2023). Despite the high rate of mobility in the EU, many citizens are still uninformed about their electoral rights and encounter administrative difficulties when they want to participate in elections (Ostling, 2019). The resulting electoral participation gap contributes to underrepresentation in social and political spheres throughout the EU.

In order to establish how the electoral participation of migrants (both TCNs and EU mobile citizens) can be better promoted, the New Europeans Initiative conducted interviews with participants of its 2023/24 VoteEuropa training (delivered in conjunction with NGO Voicify), migrant-led organisations, and migrant representatives. Against the backdrop of the findings of the 'encouragement to vote' dimension of the initiative's Participation Policy Index (a new comparative policy index which assesses policies fostering the political participation and integration of New Europeans in EU Member States), this report will present the observations and recommendations of those interviewed on getting out the vote, including by highlighting some good practices. The report follows the publication



of the New Europeans Initiative's [2023 policy brief](#) on enhancing the electoral participation of mobile voters in the 2024 European Parliament elections and its 2024 '[Get out the vote](#)' toolkit.

Overall, the findings of this research highlight the need for more inclusive approaches to the promotion of electoral rights and democratic participation. Automatic voter registration, targeted outreach and broader public awareness campaigns, for example, would all serve to better integrate TCNs and EU mobile citizens into the democratic process. The report concludes with concrete recommendations that include expanding voting rights across the EU as a first step, as well as the implementation of accessible voting and registration procedures, increasing awareness-raising and dedicating more funding to campaigns specifically promoting the electoral participation of TCNs and EU mobile citizens.



3. Interview insights: barriers to getting out the vote

When it comes to voting at the local level, only 14 countries in the EU grant TCNs as well as EU mobile citizens the right to vote in municipal elections. The number of EU countries granting voting rights to these groups at national level is smaller still. Many of those interviewed identified similar barriers to getting out the vote, thereby highlighting systemic failures on a trans-European level as well as at the national level.

Limited outreach on the part of relevant local or national authorities was one particularly common issue, as well as – correspondingly – a lack of knowledge of voting rights and systems, on the part of TCNs especially. Both these barriers go some way towards explaining low voter turnout among TCNs where voting rights are already granted.

3.1 Lack of knowledge among (potential) migrant voters

Limited voting knowledge among migrants eligible to vote was found to relate most often to whether they do indeed have the right to vote, how to register to do so and how to do so when the time comes, and where to find reliable information on the individuals or parties they could vote for.

In some EU countries, voters are registered automatically. This is the case in Belgium for everyone apart from TCNs and EU mobile citizens. These two groups are eligible to vote at the local level (subject to certain residence requirements), but must to register themselves in the electoral register individually if they wish to vote. According to campaigners based in Belgium, many of those who know they have the right to vote do not realise that they first need to register themselves. Additionally there are many who do not know they are eligible to vote in the first place. The issue is not widely promoted and guidance is not readily available: one has to know where to look or who to ask.



3.2 Limited outreach and campaigning

One way to tackle limited knowledge of electoral rights and processes among migrants is through outreach and campaigning. However, in countries where both TCNs and EU mobile citizens are able to vote at all levels, and in some cases are even automatically registered to do so, a common complaint among interviewees was that there is a lack of proactive outreach to eligible voters prior to elections: either there are no voter encouragement campaigns targeted at these migrant groups, or those that exist are ineffective and/or inconsistent. Moreover, efforts tend to be confined to promoting participation in local or regional elections rather than in those at the national level.

3.3 Lack of intersectional approach

A compounding issue when it comes to limited outreach and campaigning is a clear lack of specific measures or campaigns for promotion of voting among (underrepresented) migrant groups who face specific obstacles due to their intersecting identities or who have additional requirements or vulnerabilities. Relevant factors can include gender, sex, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, disability and age, among others.

3.4 Procedural and bureaucratic obstacles

Procedural barriers, such as manual registration processes and tight deadlines, can further hinder access. Oftentimes, even if a campaign successfully leads to increased intention to vote among TCNs and EU mobile citizens, these individuals are unable to register before the deadline or indeed find that they have missed it altogether. According to feedback given during focus groups organised as part of the VoteEuropa campaign, for example, mobile voters lack awareness of both how to register to vote and how to find the relevant registration dates (Sherif & Huddleston, 2019). The VoteEuropa campaign sought to increase electoral registration and voter-turnout among mobile EU citizens, naturalised migrants and refugees, young people of diverse backgrounds and citizens in the 2019 elections for the European Parliament.

Feedback given during the interviews highlighted that even if they are aware that they can vote and of the relevant deadlines, many people struggle to access manual registration processes. It can be very difficult to attend registration appointments in the middle of the working day, for example (where these are necessary), or in some cases to secure an appointment in the first place. Furthermore, these manual processes can be complex and confusing, and often there is little support available to those who are new to them. The voting sections of national government



websites may not be available in a relevant language, while official communications (e.g. letters sent to a person's home in advance of an election day) may not provide the necessary clear, comprehensive instructions or may even be delivered to the wrong address.

3.4 Limited funding

Without exception, every person interviewed who had worked on the implementation of a campaign to get out the vote said that they had been unsuccessful in securing external funding for the campaign, either because their funding application was rejected (likely due to limited capacity in applying for it and/or knowledge of what works on such an application) or because - to their knowledge at the time - there was no funding available to apply for.

3.5 Limited capacity of migrant-led initiatives

Several interviewees who worked for or with migrant-led organisations said that even where the will might exist, the capacity of these organisations to execute a campaign promoting the electoral participation of migrants can be limited for a number of reasons. Funding aside, these could include a lack of structural knowledge, of experience, of relevant connections, or of time.



4. What really works to get out the vote?

With all these obstacles in mind, what *does* work to get out the vote and increase the electoral participation of TCNs and EU mobile citizens? Taking into account the feedback of those interviewed and the findings of the New European Initiative's Participation Policy Index, the solution is two-fold: **encouragement on a structural level** is needed, through policies that promote and support voter engagement, in combination with **'bottom-up' community mobilisation efforts**.

4.1 Encouragement to vote

Setting the scene: Participation Policy Index results

Participation Policy Index research – which includes extensive review of academic and policy literature on migrant civic and political participation – covers eight dimensions, one of which is '*encouragement to vote*'. This dimension evaluates efforts made by EU countries to encourage the political participation of TCNs and EU mobile citizens, taking into account voter registration procedures and promotion of turnout at local-, regional-, national- and EU-level elections for different migrant groups.

On voter registration procedures, the research asks:

- Is voter registration automatic (i.e. upon residence registration) or only available upon individual application?
- Is every eligible voter contacted ahead of each election for registration purposes (i.e. by post or email)?
- What is the deadline for voter registration (i.e. how many days before the election)?
- Are eligible voters able to register by email? And by third parties (i.e. by proxy or NGOs)?

Further questions focus on promotion of election turn out, at different levels and with reference to groups of special concern.



- Has the state undertaken (or recommended sub-national authorities to undertake) large-scale public campaigns aimed at promoting the rights of migrants or citizens of migrant background in the areas of voting in EU elections, national elections, regional elections, or local elections?
- Has the state called for (or recommended sub-national authorities to undertake) specific measures for promotion of voting among migrant women, migrant LGBTIQ+ communities, migrant persons with disabilities, or other minority groups?

Each EU country was given a score per indicator on a scale from 0 to 100.
The following chart shows the overall country scores for this dimension:

Encouragement to vote

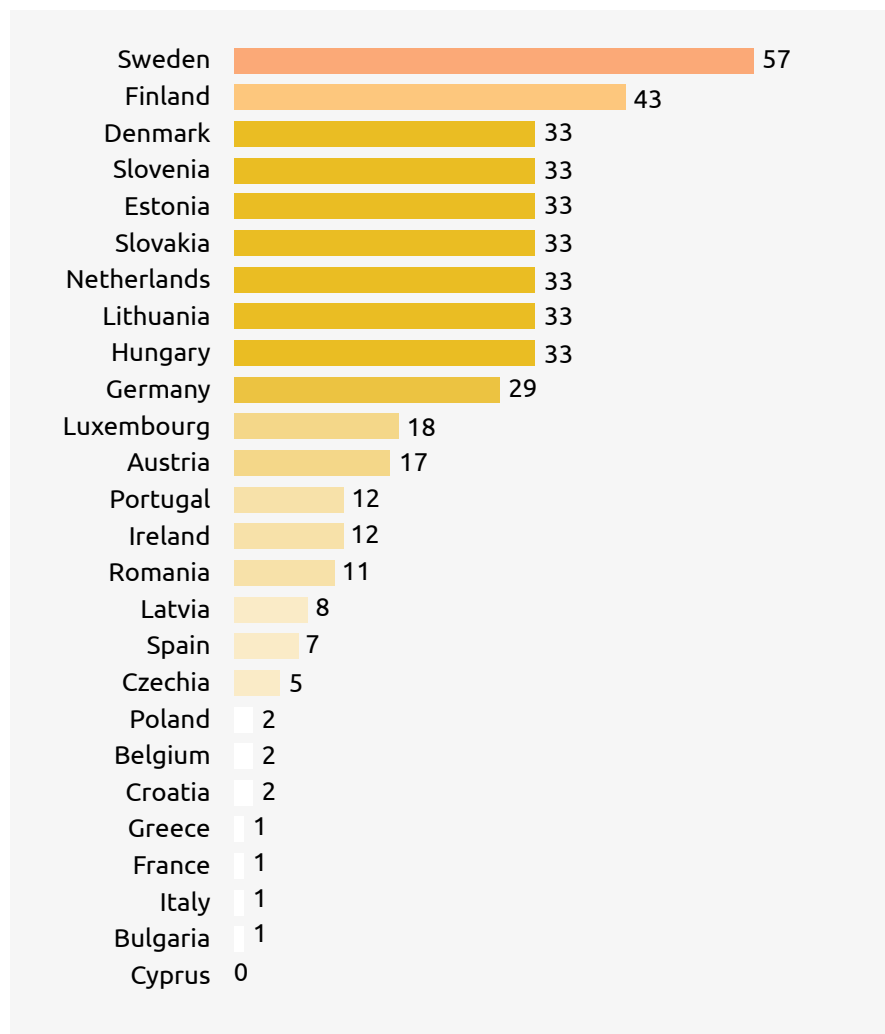


Figure 1: Ranking of EU country scores on the 'Encouragement to vote' dimension of the New Europeans Political Participation Policy Index.



Sweden sees the highest score in this dimension, scoring 57 points out of a possible 100. This is largely due to its simplified automatic voter registration for all non-citizens (one of the most inclusive in the EU), and its large-scale public campaigns that promote voting in both local and regional elections. EU citizens can vote in both local and regional elections without residency restrictions, while TCNs can do so after at least three years of continuous residence. Neither group, however, can vote in national elections. Sweden also allows TCNs to stand as candidates in regional elections.

Finland comes second, with a score of 43. While it does allow non-citizens to vote in regional elections, voter encouragement campaigns in Finland are limited to local elections. The third highest score, 33, is held by seven countries: Denmark, Slovenia, Estonia, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Hungary. Although among the highest scoring in this dimension, these countries fall far short of the highest score possible (100). In Cyprus, the country with the lowest score in this dimension (0), EU mobile citizens have the right to vote in both local and regional elections only after six months of residence and TCNs are excluded from voting in elections at any level.

Case study: Sweden

Sweden extended municipal and provincial voting rights to resident non-citizens in 1976, and its Election Authority (Valmyndigheten) has historically targeted migrant voters by running voter information and registration campaigns in minority languages (Adan & Antara, 2018). In 2014, for example, the authority issued fact sheets in 31 different languages, including Arabic and Somali, on how to vote in elections to municipal and county councils (Mundzic 2015).

Additionally, political parties in Sweden have in the past made efforts to increase internal diversity in order to solve the underrepresentation of immigrants in political life. The Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokraterna, SAP), for instance, introduced a quota for candidates with non-Nordic immigrant backgrounds, including refugees, and in the 2014 elections one in every four candidates on the SAP list in the electoral district of Stockholm had an immigrant background. Commitment to increasing internal diversity in this way can serve to promote migrant voter engagement, and feelings of inclusion and belonging more generally, as voters see themselves represented.



The average score for this dimension (17 points) is the second-lowest of the entire Participation Policy Index, demonstrating extremely limited promotion of the electoral participation of TCNs and EU mobile citizens across the EU.

The other seven dimensions of the index focus on national strategies for increasing political participation, political and civil rights through citizenship, the right to vote in elections for foreign citizens, the promotion of representation in political life, representation of migrant-led civil society, enabling collective civic engagement and civic education for a diversifying society. The below heat map shows the individual scores of each Member State across all eight dimensions.

MS	1. National strategy	2. Full political rights	3. Right to vote	4. Encouragement to vote	5. Representation in political life	6. Representation Migrant CSOs	7. Enable collective engagement	8. Civic Education
AT	0	25	17	17	42	0	64	17
BE	6	66	17	2	42	68	100	84
BG	0	22	25	1	13	0	75	34
HR	1	28	25	2	75	15	71	67
CY	0	45	33	0	50	19	75	67
CZ	13	38	17	5	17	25	100	59
DK	13	30	67	33	83	28	68	59
EE	42	44	38	33	25	54	73	100
FI	18	64	67	43	100	49	75	59
FR	1	55	17	1	33	27	87	34
DE	44	71	17	29	50	47	87	84
GR	3	36	33	1	67	31	68	59
HU	0	29	25	33	25	0	58	34
IE	66	61	50	12	100	35	100	84
IT	1	43	17	1	50	2	75	50
LV	0	37	25	8	75	42	75	42
LT	0	34	38	33	25	21	83	84
LU	24	70	50	18	100	75	99	100
NL	6	52	33	33	58	10	57	34
PL	0	48	17	2	17	10	100	50
PT	40	71	17	12	50	94	88	100
RO	0	47	13	11	25	2	57	34
SK	3	31	50	33	50	8	70	84
SI	1	24	38	33	13	24	65	34
ES	25	41	25	7	58	26	99	59
SE	29	78	67	57	83	44	75	67

Table 1: Heatmap of scores per country in eight dimensions of the New Europeans Political Participation Policy Index



In general, the findings of the '*encouragement to vote*' dimension demonstrate minimal commitment on the part of EU countries to fostering electoral participation among TCNs and EU mobile citizens. As mentioned, efforts to promote participation are found to be largely confined to local or, at the most, regional elections, and are often hampered by procedural barriers such as manual registration processes and tight deadlines. Public voting promotion campaigns are found to be inconsistent and generally fail to address the specific needs of underrepresented groups.

Taking action: improving voter encouragement

Against the backdrop of the results of the Participation Policy Index, it is clear that change is needed on a structural level. For voting on the part of TCNs and EU mobile citizens to be meaningful, legal frameworks should not obstruct it, and relevant authorities, parties, and organisations must actively inform these groups about their rights (Seidle 2015). A recent study by Slotwinski et al. (2023) finds that extending voting rights strengthens inclusion and feelings of integration, particularly among migrants from less-developed countries, who may be more motivated to pursue citizenship as a result. Research conducted in Sweden in 2023 confirms this: a comprehensive study of Swedish administrative data and voter turnout of non-citizens led to the conclusion that turnout could increase by 10-20 % if non-citizens' voting rights were extended to the national level (Aggeborn et al., 2023).

More inclusive policy approaches that promote and support voter engagement, such as automatic (sufficiently promoted) voter registration systems, broader public awareness campaigns and targeted outreach would all serve to better integrate these migrants into the democratic process:

- **Automatic voter registration systems:** Automatic voter registration systems ensure that everyone who is eligible to vote is registered to do so. This mitigates the risk that those who are voting for the first time will miss registration deadlines, are unable to find and provide the correct paper registration documents, and so on. Due to its implementation of such a system for all TCNs and EU mobile citizens, Sweden is one EU country that was highlighted by several interviewees as being exemplary in its approach. On election days, eligible voters in Sweden simply need to show their ID at a polling station in order to vote.
- **Large scale, multilevel public campaigns:** In addition to automatic registration systems, large-scale public campaigns aimed at promoting awareness of the voting rights of TCNs and EU mobile citizens work to ensure that those who can vote, do. Where these groups do not have the right to vote in local and/or regional elections, campaigns of this scale can also be a useful tool in advocating for policy change. Sweden again is a good example here: it undertakes public campaigns on a very



large scale, which are aimed at promoting the voting rights of TCNs and EU mobile citizens in both local and regional elections. In Finland, prior to the 2021 municipal elections, the Ministry of Justice, the Advisory Board for Ethnic Relations (ETNO) and *Moniheli ry* – an umbrella organisation of migrant associations – launched an information campaign to promote migrant voter registration which included dissemination of information in English, Russian, Estonian, Arabic and Somali.



Good practice: VoteBrussels campaign

The VoteBrussels campaign (full title: 'Encouraging Foreign Residents for Greater Electoral Participation') combines awareness-raising, advocacy, and practical tools to engage and empower foreign residents, ensuring their voices are heard in local governance. It actively addresses barriers to participation and fosters a more inclusive democratic process, and in 2018 led to a doubling of the number of international voters in Brussels' local elections.

As part of the campaign, the #1Bru1Vote petition focused on local advocacy, mobilisation, and raising awareness to gather support and pressure regional authorities to amend voting laws, creating a more inclusive democratic process. In 2018 the petition secured a resolution from the Brussels Regional Parliament, advocating for long-term regional voting rights for international residents, greater outreach, and more automatic voter registration.

In preparation for the 2024 local elections, the Brussels Region again supported the VoteBrussels campaign, offering information sessions, training for international voters at all 19 Brussels city halls, and setting up 'voting box' stands across the city. Trade unions from European institutions, coordinated by U4U Union for Unity, also participated.





- **Intersectional approaches:** Campaigns taking an intersectional approach – with consideration for existing identities within broader 'migrant' categories, such as those related to gender, sex, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, disability and age – would ensure that the varied priorities of different groups are taken into account, and that individuals within these groups feel seen and heard. Many of those interviewed described feelings of marginalisation on the part of some groups, as if politics were 'not for them', so an intersectional approach could go some way towards mitigating feelings of exclusion.

For as long as these marginalised groups do not have the right to vote they are excluded from holding decision-makers accountable, which can result in discriminatory outcomes based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and other factors (Yilmaz & Wolffhardt, 2024). In addition, research shows that political systems are stronger when participation is broad and inclusive, as in this way accountability and responsiveness from elected officials is ensured (Ruth et al., 2017; Hayduk & Coll, 2018).

4.2 Community mobilisation

Focus groups

Closely linked with taking an intersectional approach is the good practice of working with target communities themselves to better design campaigns and initiatives focused on getting out the vote. The use of focus groups, for example, ensures that campaign messaging is relevant and appropriate, and seeking advice from community representatives can help with tailoring campaigns to specific target groups.

Community outreach

In addition, community-based outreach is an excellent way to distribute information. It can be used to provide newcomers or first-time voters with knowledge on who they might vote for, how to cast a vote, and - where needed - why to do so (for example, by explaining how voting on EU policies can affect an individual's daily life). Understanding the most effective distribution channels for each community also ensures that information is disseminated as far and as wide as possible. Some communities may use email correspondence and local newsletters for their news and coordination, for example; others may communicate more via social media platforms. Taking the time to verify the most effective and accessible method of communication or promotion for each community could lead to much higher voter turnout among these communities.



Community partners and representatives

Campaigners can work with community partners - representatives, councillors, religious leaders, local institutions and so on - to find out what works best, to secure access to the relevant channels and to tailor messaging appropriately. Trusted community representatives are also integral to promoting the electoral involvement of migrant communities: the 'right messenger' can make all the difference.



Good Practices: All Europa campaign

Following its 2019 VoteEuropa campaign, MPG ran the All Europa campaign to reach EU citizens with a migrant and refugee background through videos made by migrant and refugee messengers. The videos look at how the European Parliament and European Commission work and explain the EU's role in policymaking in fields such as anti-discrimination, climate and environmental protection, gender-based violence and anti-racism.



Inclusive language

Use of inclusive language in campaigning works to unite voters by emphasising a feeling of togetherness. Ensuring that messaging uses such words as 'we', 'us' and 'together', for example, and focuses on shared goals, helps to reduce perceptions of migrants as 'other'. Doing so can ensure that everyone, regardless of the specific voter group to which they belong, feels included.



5. Conclusion and recommendations

Voting rights embody the principles of inclusion and participation that are so essential to migrant integration and to a democratic society. The exclusion of migrant voters, in particular TCNs, from electoral processes results in their marginalisation, limits their ability to effect policy change – and by extension the circumstances of their own lives – and hold decision-makers accountable, and reduces feelings of belonging.

Effectively getting out the vote and ensuring broader representation would strengthen democratic systems and, more widely, the social and political inclusion of migrants. This can be achieved with a combination of 'top down' methods – wherein state policies are reviewed and amended, via an intersectional approach, to extend voting rights across all levels to TCNs and EU mobile citizens – and 'bottom up' inclusive community mobilisation methods. In particular, automatic voter registration processes could be introduced, outreach initiatives could be multiplied and targeted to specific voter groups, and multi-level public awareness campaigns, designed in conjunction with TCNs and EU mobile citizens, could be launched.

Research evidence presented in this report informs the following specific recommendations for relevant stakeholders in getting out the vote for TCNs and EU mobile citizens:

Expanded voting rights, accessible voting and registration procedures:

- EU countries that have not already done so should extend the right to vote, at all levels of governance, to both TCNs and EU mobile citizens.
- Member States that have not already done so should introduce automatic registration systems, in particular for TCNs.
- The European Parliament should work with national electoral commissions to implement standardised voting and registration procedures for TCN and EU mobile citizens.



- Member States should simplify voter registration procedures and improve their accessibility for TCNs and EU mobile citizens, by making useful information available in relevant languages and providing in-person support for access wherever necessary.
- Member States should be encouraged to exchange information on good practices in the design and implementation of accessible voting systems and automatic registration procedures.

Awareness-raising

- National authorities should organise, in conjunction with migrant group representatives themselves, multilevel awareness-raising campaigns targeted at TCNs and EU mobile citizens to ensure these groups are aware of how and when to vote.
- Guidelines should be provided for actors at all levels, in particular local and regional, on how to set up and make the most of 'get out the vote' campaigns.

Increased funding

- Increased national and EU funding should be made available to promote 'get out the vote' campaigns and - where the implementing or coordinating actor is not the state - the capacity of the initiatives and organisations behind them.
- EU authorities should increase engagement with initiatives working to 'get out the vote' that are led by EU mobile citizens and TCNs, in order to build an understanding of their community-based work and how both national and EU funding can be used to better promote it. This can include involving these actors in grant-making processes and strategies.





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