



Policy Brief

New Europeans' Political Participation in the EU: Policies Matter

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About the New Europeans Initiative

In a vibrant democracy everyone can take part in political and social life. People with diverse origins and cultural backgrounds are an inseparable part of European society. But these New Europeans face many barriers that hinder their ability to have a say in decisions that affect them daily. The New Europeans Initiative is a programme of the Migration Policy Group aimed at making European democracy fit for an increasingly diverse and internationally mobile society. We research policies, identify best practices, and promote evidence-based solutions.

www.neweuropeans.eu



About the Migration Policy Group: Evidence-Based Change for Inclusive Societies.

The Migration Policy Group is an independent Brussels-based think-and-do tank. We conduct evidence-based projects, research and campaigns in the areas of integration, migration and anti-discrimination.

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Introduction

Political participation is a fundamental pillar of democratic governance and a key dimension of migrants' political integration. Across the EU, migrants' opportunities to participate politically vary widely, shaped by citizenship regimes, voting rights, civic freedoms, support for civil society, and broader institutional practices. While existing research highlights the importance of political opportunity structures, comparative evidence linking policy frameworks to concrete participation outcomes remains limited.

The New Europeans Initiative's report "From Policy to Practice: How Political Participation Frameworks Shape New Europeans' Political Engagement" addresses this gap by analysing the association between national political participation policies and migrants' political participation outcomes across 22 EU Member States. It uses the New Europeans Political Participation Policy Index (PPPI) developed by the Migration Policy Group as the main measure of national policy frameworks and combines it with outcome data from Eurostat and the European Social Survey (ESS).

This Policy Brief provides a concise synthesis of the main findings of the report, with a particular focus on the relationship between national policy frameworks and political participation outcomes. It is intended for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders who may not engage with the full analytical report. The document concludes with the full set of detailed policy recommendations derived from the empirical findings and the identified evidence gaps.

Data and methodological considerations

Migrants are defined as individuals born outside their country of residence, regardless of citizenship status. Political participation is understood broadly, encompassing electoral and non-electoral participation as well as attitudes towards politics, including trust, political efficacy, political agency, and sense of belonging.

The analysis draws on a mixed-data approach combining administrative and survey data. Naturalisation rates are obtained from Eurostat, while electoral participation, non-electoral participation, and attitudinal outcomes are derived from the ESS (Round 11, 2023–2024). All outcomes are constructed at the country level by aggregating individual-level responses.

A key finding of the research is the persistence of wide data gaps in administrative data on migrant political participation. Comparable, disaggregated administrative data on voting turnout, institutional representation, and non-electoral participation are available only for a limited number of countries and election types. Definitions of “migrant” vary widely across national registries, and data collection is often constrained by legal, ethical, and historical concerns around the use of sensitive personal data. As a result, survey data remain indispensable for comparative analysis, despite known limitations related to sample size and underrepresentation of migrant groups.

The report therefore adopts a descriptive analytical approach, relying on scatterplots and correlation coefficients to explore associations between policies and outcomes, without making causal claims.

Key Findings

1. Naturalisation

The analysis shows a strong positive association between inclusive political participation policies and naturalisation rates. This relationship is particularly pronounced for the dimension of Full Political and Civil Rights Through Citizenship. Countries with more accessible, predictable, and less restrictive citizenship regimes tend to display significantly higher naturalisation rates, especially among non-EU citizens. This suggests that favourable citizenship policies remain a powerful incentive for migrants to acquire citizenship and access full political rights.

2. Political trust, efficacy, and agency

Countries with more inclusive political participation frameworks tend to exhibit higher levels of institutional trust and political efficacy among migrants. Migrants living in such contexts are more likely to believe that political institutions are trustworthy and that the political system allows them to exert influence. While overall levels of perceived political efficacy remain relatively low across Europe, the positive association with policy frameworks highlights the role of institutions in shaping perceptions of political relevance and agency.

2. Sense of belonging

The relationship between political participation policies and migrants' sense of belonging is positive but weak and statistically insignificant. Migrants across most countries report relatively high levels of emotional attachment to their country of residence, regardless of policy context. This suggests that sense of belonging is shaped by a wider range of factors beyond political participation policies alone, including migration histories, demographic composition, political discourse, and socio-economic integration.

4. Electoral participation

The association between political participation policies and migrant voter turnout is mixed. While the extension of voting rights and favourable citizenship regimes do not consistently correlate with higher turnout, policies that actively encourage voting – such as outreach campaigns, simplified registration, and targeted mobilisation – show a

stronger positive association with migrant electoral participation. This finding underscores that formal rights must be complemented by active engagement measures to translate into actual participation.

5. Non-electoral participation

More inclusive policy frameworks are positively associated with certain forms of non-electoral participation, particularly signing petitions and participation in political parties or pressure groups. Support for migrant-led civil society, civic education, and collective engagement appears especially relevant in this regard. Protest participation shows weaker and less consistent associations with policy frameworks, indicating that it is influenced by broader contextual factors such as political culture, trust in institutions, and the availability of alternative participation channels.

Overall, the findings suggest that political participation policies matter for migrants' political engagement and attitudes, but their effects are neither automatic nor uniform. Inclusive legal frameworks are most effective when combined with active encouragement, civic education, institutional support for civil society, and an open civic space. At the same time, persistent data gaps limit the ability to fully assess policy impact and monitor participation gaps over time.



Policy recommendations

1. Develop comprehensive national strategies on migrant political participation

Member States should adopt or strengthen national strategies specifically dedicated to migrant civic and political participation, rather than treating participation as a secondary component of integration policy. These strategies should:

- Clearly define objectives across electoral and non-electoral participation,
- Allocate dedicated and multi-annual budgets,
- Identify responsible institutions at national and local levels,
- Include monitoring and evaluation frameworks linked to measurable outcomes.

The analysis suggests that countries with more coherent and visible policy frameworks tend to exhibit higher levels of trust, political efficacy, and engagement among migrants. National strategies can also improve policy coordination across ministries responsible for citizenship, education, equality, and civil society.

2. Lower structural and administrative barriers to citizenship acquisition

Given the strong association between inclusive citizenship regimes and higher naturalisation rates – particularly for non-EU citizens – Member States should:

- Reduce excessive language, income, and residence requirements that disproportionately exclude certain migrant groups,
- Lower application fees and processing costs,
- Shorten waiting periods and improve transparency and predictability of procedures,
- Ensure access to legal and administrative support throughout the naturalisation process.

Inclusive citizenship regimes not only enable formal political participation but also signal recognition and belonging, which can foster broader political engagement even prior to naturalisation.

3. Expand voting rights and align them with meaningful participation opportunities

Where national constitutions allow, Member States should consider extending voting rights for foreign residents, particularly at the local and regional levels, and ensure that such rights are accompanied by effective participation mechanisms. This includes:

- Automatic or simplified voter registration for eligible non-citizens,
- Clear and multilingual information on voting rights and procedures,
- Equal access to polling infrastructure and electoral information.

The findings indicate that voting rights alone are insufficient; without active encouragement and institutional support, expanded suffrage does not consistently translate into higher turnout.

4. Prioritise encouragement to vote as a core participation policy tool

Encouragement to vote emerges as one of the strongest policy correlates of migrant voter turnout. Member States should therefore:

- Institutionalise targeted voter outreach campaigns for migrants at all electoral levels,
- Engage local authorities, migrant organisations, and community leaders in mobilisation efforts,
- Design inclusive campaigns addressing groups facing intersecting barriers, such as migrant women, young migrants, and persons with disabilities,
- Ensure that electoral information is accessible, culturally sensitive, and available in multiple languages.

Such initiatives not only increase turnout but also strengthen political efficacy and institutional trust by reinforcing the message that migrants' participation matters.

5. Strengthen civic education for a diversifying society

Civic education should be understood as a lifelong process and not limited to formal schooling. Governments should:

- Integrate inclusive civic education into school curricula, reflecting the diversity of contemporary societies,
- Support adult civic education programmes for newly arrived migrants and long-term residents,

- Combine information on rights and institutions with practical knowledge on how to participate politically,
- Partner with civil society actors to deliver community-based civic learning initiatives.

Civic education plays a critical role in bridging the gap between formal rights and effective participation by enhancing political knowledge, agency, and confidence.

6. Support migrant-led civil society as a pillar of political participation

Migrant-led organisations are key intermediaries between institutions and migrant communities and serve as vital spaces of political empowerment. To strengthen their role, policymakers should:

- Provide stable, multi-year funding rather than short-term and highly competitive grants,
- Ensure funding frameworks do not discourage advocacy, critical engagement, or political expression,
- Facilitate migrant organisations' access to policymaking through consultative bodies and participatory mechanisms,
- Promote capacity-building in leadership, policy advocacy, and organisational sustainability.

The analysis shows that supportive civil society environments are closely linked to higher levels of non-electoral participation and political engagement.

7. Protect and expand civic space and collective participation rights

An open and protected civic space is essential for both electoral and non-electoral political participation. Member States should:

- Safeguard freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly in law and practice,
- Remove administrative or legal barriers that disproportionately restrict migrant participation in protests, unions, and advocacy groups,
- Ensure that public authorities engage constructively with protest and civic mobilisation rather than discouraging participation.

Policies that protect civic freedoms contribute to higher levels of political agency and enable migrants to engage politically beyond formal electoral channels.

8. Promote representation of migrants in political and institutional life

To address persistent representation gaps, Member States should:

- Encourage political parties to adopt inclusive recruitment and candidate selection practices,
- Support mentoring, leadership, and training programmes for candidates with migrant backgrounds,
- Remove legal or administrative barriers to standing for election where possible,
- Promote diversity within public administrations and advisory bodies.

Representation can enhance trust, legitimacy, and political engagement among migrant communities and reduce participation gaps over time.

9. Embed migrant political participation in broader democratic governance agendas

Finally, migrant political participation should not be treated as a niche integration issue but as a core democratic governance concern. Policymakers should:

- Mainstream participation objectives into democracy, rule of law, and equality strategies,
- Recognise migrant participation as a driver of democratic legitimacy and resilience,
- Frame political inclusion as an investment in social cohesion and democratic sustainability.

By strengthening migrants' political participation, Member States can enhance the quality, representativeness, and legitimacy of democratic decision-making across Europe.

10. Address administrative data gaps on migrant political participation

The report highlights severe limitations in administrative data on migrant political participation. To improve evidence-based policymaking, governments should:

- Collect and publish disaggregated data on political participation by migrant background, where legally and ethically feasible,
- Harmonise definitions of “migrant” and related categories across administrative systems,

- Expand administrative data collection beyond eligibility and registration to include participation outcomes, such as turnout and representation,
- Develop safeguards to ensure data protection and prevent misuse of sensitive information.

Improved administrative data are essential for monitoring participation gaps, evaluating policy impact, and ensuring accountability

11. Integrate administrative and survey data through coordinated data strategies

Given current constraints, policymakers should adopt mixed-data approaches by:

- Systematically combining administrative records with high-quality survey data such as the European Social Survey,
- Supporting oversampling of migrant populations in large-scale surveys,
- Encouraging longitudinal data collection to track participation trajectories over time.

At EU level, stronger coordination on data standards and funding for cross-national data infrastructure would significantly enhance comparative analysis.

