

EU citizens' political rights in the UK

Barriers to political participation & recommendations for better representation

AUGUST 2020

Report written by Alexandra Bulat, Young Europeans Manager, the3million
and Nishan Dzvingozyan, Managing Director, Eastern European Forum

What tangible solutions can be implemented to have the voice of EU citizens heard by political parties?

LUCAS

How can we get more reliable and holistic data on the voting patterns of EU citizens in the UK?

HUGO

How can I have an impact on UK politics if I don't have the vote?

SOFIA



Context: EU citizens' political rights in the UK after Brexit

There are two main types of system determining who can vote in a country. First, the citizenship principle entitles all citizens to vote. Second, the residency principle implies that everyone can vote on the basis of their residence, regardless of their nationality. The UK applies both these principles, but neither consistently, leading to unfair situations and confusion amongst its residents.

Not all UK citizens have full voting rights in the UK – those who lived more than 15 years abroad lose their voting rights. All Irish and Commonwealth citizens have the full franchise in the UK, while EU citizens (with the exception of those from Malta, Cyprus and Ireland) can only vote in local and municipal elections. Many other residents from non-Commonwealth countries outside the EU cannot vote in UK elections at all. However, Scotland and Wales grants voting rights to all residents at the local level, whereas England and Northern Ireland do not⁽¹⁾. Those who have the franchise can also stand as candidates in the elections they are entitled to vote in. This report uses the term 'democratic rights' to refer to both the voting and candidacy rights of EU citizens.

This issue of democratic rights has become even more complicated in the context of Brexit. These rights are not covered by the Withdrawal Agreement as they are a UK sovereign matter. **While EU citizens living in the UK were promised their rights will not**

change after Brexit, their democratic rights are currently negotiated bilaterally by the UK with each individual EU member state. At the time of writing this report, the UK has reached agreements only with Spain, Luxembourg, Portugal and Poland. The UK Government has rejected pursuing the unilateral approach of guaranteeing local democratic rights for all those who had them before Brexit. There are thus tangible concerns that some EU citizens resident in the UK risk losing their local election voting and candidacy rights after 2021⁽²⁾.



The invisible minority: EU citizens' low participation and representation in UK politics

The issue of EU citizens' democratic rights is overlooked in citizens' rights campaigning. One of the explanations of why this issue is not higher on campaigners' and politicians' agendas is the relatively low interest, even amongst EU citizens themselves, when compared to other issues, such as EU citizens' access to social security or their experiences applying to the EU Settlement Scheme. There is a vast literature, both academic and from third sector organisations and representative institutions, which highlights **two main issues: the relatively low engagement of EU citizens in UK**

local elections and the near absence of political representation for this group. Many EU citizens are part of the estimated 9 million⁽³⁾ people living in the UK whose names are not on the electoral register.

First, EU citizens living across different regions in the UK tend to be **less engaged in exercising their current rights to vote in local elections than other groups.** To illustrate, a 2016 comprehensive report on voter registration in England and Wales published by the Electoral Commission concludes that EU citizens are less likely to register than any other group⁽⁴⁾.

(1) More detail on voting rights in the UK can be found in the3million's 'Local Election Voting Rights – the facts' briefing paper: www.t3m.org.uk/LocalVotingRights

(2) EU citizens' voting rights have been guaranteed for the 2021 local elections.

See: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-06-29/66206/>

(3) UK Parliament (2020). Millions of voters may still be missing from the electoral registers, warns Lords Committee. 8 July 2020. Online at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/405/electoral-registration-and-administration-act-2013-committee/news/147227/millions-of-voters-may-still-be-missing-from-the-electoral-registers-warns-lords-committee/>

(4) Electoral Commission (2016). The December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain: Accuracy and completeness of the registers in Great Britain and the transition to Individual Electoral Registration. Online at: www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/The-December-2015-electoral-registers-in-Great-Britain-REPORT.pdf



A 2019 report on London's Voter Registration week states that the majority of EU citizens consulted who were living in London were not aware they could vote and stand in UK local elections⁽⁵⁾. the3million's own Young Europeans report published in 2020 shows how young Europeans in London generally did not register to vote, and even when they did, they mostly did not vote.

Second, research identifies the **gap in representation** amongst minority communities in the UK. Most EU citizens involved in politics are categorised as 'white others' and there is little reliable data which can give insight on the level of their representation⁽⁶⁾. An illustrative recent study in this sense is the first census of local councils which shows the significant underrepresentation of ethnic minorities – 7% of local councillors have an ethnic minority background, compared to 14% of their share in the UK population⁽⁷⁾. While there is no specific data on councillors of European background in this study due to data



limitations, if we extrapolate from voter registration figures which put EU citizens at the bottom, below Commonwealth citizens' registration, the picture could be even bleaker for EU citizens' local political representation.

These two issues on participation and representation are not new and there is no shortage of recommendations on increasing participation and improving representation of minority and migrant communities in the UK, including of EU citizens. Despite the wealth of evidence in this area, comparatively little has been systematically done so far to address these inequalities in participation and representation. One of the key recommendations is **increasing awareness through improving education on democratic rights**, particularly through schools, as young migrants often become gatekeepers for their families' political engagement⁽⁸⁾. Other solutions which have been extensively discussed in research are **setting up easier systems to check if one is registered** (like in Ireland)⁽⁹⁾, strategies to modernise the UK's democratic system, including **automatic and assisted voter registration**⁽¹⁰⁾, which could be especially important to ensure participation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Academics and civil society organisations are also especially concerned about the need for action on the barriers faced by BAME and migrant communities, and in particular younger generations, in being represented in politics. Several recent reports on young people in the COVID-19 context show how the young generation feel forgotten⁽¹¹⁾ and call for a more participatory democracy⁽¹²⁾. In this context, there have been concerns expressed about Government plans for photo voter ID, in particular how this policy could impact those who are less likely to register and vote in elections, such as young migrants. This could disproportionately affect EU citizens who are underrepresented and also do not receive a physical proof of their pre-settled or settled status⁽¹³⁾.



(5) Greater London Authority (2020). London Voter Registration Week 2019: Evaluation Report. February 2020.

Online at: <https://registertovote.london/evaluation-report/>

(6) the3million will publish a report detailing the limitations of the available data on political representation and participation of EU citizens in the UK in autumn 2020, part of a mapping project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT).

(7) For a summary of key findings, see: Sobolewska, M. and Begum, N. (2020). 'New census reveals extent of lack of ethnic minority representatives in local councils'. The Conversation.

Online at: <https://theconversation.com/new-census-reveals-extent-of-lack-of-ethnic-minority-representatives-in-local-councils-142192>

(8) Ibid., 4.

(9) Bite the Ballot, Toby James and ClearView Research (2016). Getting the 'missing millions' on to the electoral register: a vision for voter registration reform in the UK. APPG on Democratic Participation.

Online at: https://tobysjamesdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/getting-the-e28098missing-millions_on-to-the-electoral-register-report-appg-on-democratic-participation-bite-the-ballot-dr-toby-james-clearview-research-2016-1.pdf

(10) Ibid., 3.

(11) My Life My Say (2020). Launch an inquiry into how COVID-19 has impacted young people #ForgottenGeneration.

Online at: www.mylifemysay.org.uk/post/launch-an-inquiry-into-how-covid-19-has-impacted-young-people-forgottengeneration

(12) Hope not Hate (2020). Young people in the time of COVID-19.

Online at: www.hopenothate.org.uk/2020/07/30/young-people-time-covid-19/

(13) the3million is campaigning for EU citizens to have a physical proof of their pre-settled and settled status.

Read more at: <https://www.the3million.org.uk/physical-proof>



There have been many reports and evaluations on democratic engagement and participation, but comparatively little consultation with EU citizens more specifically. This brief report identifies the barriers to political participation as expressed by EU citizens during an online consultation event co-organised by the3million and the Eastern European Forum on 18 July 2020. This event included a live streamed panel discussion⁽¹⁴⁾ and a closed meeting consultation, where attendees could express their own views in small groups and then within the wider group on two main questions:

- 1 What are the barriers to political participation and representation of EU citizens in the UK?
- 2 What can we do in practice to facilitate political participation and representation of EU citizens in the UK?

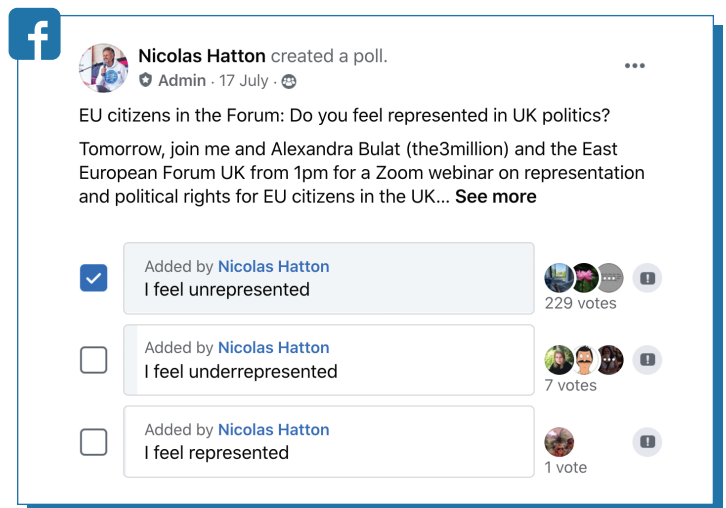
The next section summarises the barriers identified by the consultation and the last section offers five joint the3million and Eastern European Forum recommendations for increasing participation and representation of EU citizen communities in the UK.

the3million and Eastern European Forum EU citizen consultation: key barriers to political participation

“ *There is an appetite for democratic engagement, people just don't know how to do it, but they don't trust the authorities to tell them how to do it.* ”

Adina Maglan, COMMUNITY Barnet

The online consultation organised by the3million and the Eastern European Forum included EU citizens from various countries and with a diversity of backgrounds, including those working in the public sector, voluntary and community organisations, politics and those who were simply interested to express their views as local residents. They had one thing in common: **the vast majority felt unrepresented or underrepresented in UK politics when asked**; the poll of the 60-odd consultation participants mirrored previous social media polls conducted by the3million on the organisation's forums. Although those polls are not scientific and cannot be generalisable, they do offer some insight into how this issue of political participation and representation is perceived in EU citizen communities.



Example of Facebook poll on the3million's Forum for EU citizens



(14) Only the live streamed content is public (and can be viewed here: www.facebook.com/1073134609388933/videos/596688241234174). The direct quotes used in this report are from the panel speakers. The following two hours of the event (the consultation) were not recorded. This report is based on the authors' notes from these conversations, without attributing quotes to individual participants from this consultation.



The consultation identified various barriers to EU citizens' participation and representation in UK politics, which can be grouped into four main themes.

1 EU citizens have unequal and insufficient access to information about their democratic rights in the UK.

Consultation participants gave examples of how access to information is unequal. For some, information is inaccessible, while for others the information is inexistent or, at worst, factually incorrect (e.g. a participant speaking about how a local councillor informed an EU citizen that they cannot stand in local elections because they are not British). This barrier is consistent with the 3million's 2020 Young Europeans report and the Eastern European Forum's report on the challenges faced by Central and Eastern European communities in the UK.

“ There is no real expectation to be politically represented. We have to look at the barriers in a very honest way: there is a lack of awareness amongst EU nationals, particularly Central and Eastern European [...] they are not aware that they can vote, they are not aware what the relationship with the local authorities is and how to engage. ”

Adina Maglan, CommUNITY Barnet

2 EU citizens feel unrepresented or underrepresented in UK politics.

Participants spoke extensively about how EU communities are not represented politically and how it is uncommon to find a local councillor with an EU citizen background. Alongside the perceived relatively low interest in democratic participation, this creates a situation where existing representatives are not incentivised to make targeted efforts to inform EU citizens about their democratic rights. This finding mirrors the first issue identified by the Eastern European Forum's previous research. This was connected with an absence of a support network for EU citizens in the UK to develop as community leaders and gain confidence in

standing in elections. Participants gave specific examples of boroughs with a high percentage of EU citizens, such as the London Borough of Harrow where one in four residents is Romanian, and contrasted those with the low number of councillors from these nationalities (only 1 Romanian councillor identified in London). Moreover, there was detailed discussion in the consultation on EU citizens of Roma ethnicity and their lack of representation not only in the UK but across the world. There were observations on how Roma are often not mentioned by politicians as part of EU citizen conversations and often dismissed as 'hard to reach' communities by some third sector organisations, before attempting a well-resourced and genuine engagement strategy.

3 The local authority workforce does not reflect the demographics of the EU citizen local population.

Representation was not only discussed in the context of elected political positions. During the consultation, participants and panellists spoke about the shortage or lack of staff from an EU citizen background working in local government. As Adina Maglan evidenced during the consultation, where EU citizens were present, they were tasked primarily with conflict resolution situations, such as enforcement actions on their co-nationals, rather than across the spectrum of roles and departments in these authorities. The mismatch between workforce representation in local authorities and the population share means that an underresourced voluntary sector is left to fill in the gaps addressing some of the issues within these communities.

4 Limited resources for political education and community organising.

There was wide recognition that extensive grassroots work is needed to outreach to the communities who are underrepresented. However, there are limited resources in the civil society organisations working on these issues locally. At a national level, an agenda on these issues (with corresponding resources) is missing. This is partly explained by an assumption that EU citizens are temporary or circular migrants and not permanent residents and future British citizens. The EU Settlement Scheme figures⁽¹⁵⁾ and the recent naturalisation statistics⁽¹⁶⁾ show that most EU citizens are in the UK for the long term. Participants spoke about the importance of building trust with EU citizen communities, sharing good practice of successful



(15) Home Office (2020). EU Settlement Scheme statistics, July 2020.

Online at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/announcements/eu-settlement-scheme-statistics-july-2020

(16) Fernandez-Reino, M. and Sumption, M. (2020). Citizenship and naturalisation for migrants in the UK. Migration Observatory.

Online at: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/citizenship-and-naturalisation-for-migrants-in-the-uk/>



peer research projects and culturally competent communication. There was a shared view that there is appetite for engagement, but many EU citizens have limited skills and knowledge in this area and need to be supported, which is challenging within an underfunded sector. As Mihai Călin Bica from Roma Support Group exemplified in the consultation, we

cannot assume someone will immediately engage in democratic processes after receiving an email newsletter about voting – there is much more effort that we collectively need to put in and have a more proactive and united approach in the sector, including involving informal groups, such as those organised by local Roma community leaders.

“It was when I was at City Hall being interviewed by the Social Integration team, talking to them about planting Bulgarian roses in Soho, that I actually felt heard for the first time.”

Borimir Totev, Bulgarians in London



Seizing the opportunities in 2021: the3million and Eastern European Forum joint recommendations

“Not everyone is born to be a plumber, a journalist or a politician – but we are all born to make a difference – you can volunteer for a project that is close to your heart, you can write a letter to a local newspaper, [...] write a letter to an MP, engage your MP... there are a number of different ways to affect change.”

Michał Siewniak, New Europeans

2021 brings important opportunities for the UK migration sector’s work on EU citizens’ political rights. The 2021 local elections are a key event to mobilise EU citizen voters and to make the case for residents’ democratic rights. This year also represents a moment of raising awareness on EU citizens’ rights, given that the EU Settlement Scheme deadline is 30 June 2021. 2021 is also the year of the census. As raised in the meeting by Adina Maglan and confirmed by other professionals in different forums, this is a significant opportunity to improve the availability and accuracy of data on EU citizens in the UK.

the3million and the Eastern European Forum put forward five key areas of recommendations based on our previous research on this topic, conversations in the migration sector and the online consultation on 18 July 2020, responding to the barriers to participation detailed in the previous section.

1 Preserving rights

The UK Government should work to preserve EU citizens’ local election voting and candidacy rights after 2021 and level up voting rights for all UK residents in all UK regions, following the model implemented in Scotland and Wales. Having the franchise is the first step for democratic engagement.

2 Accurate and accessible information provision

Local authorities should provide accurate, accessible and timely information on EU citizens’ democratic rights. We suggest, especially in the COVID-19 context, creating an online hub with resources on democratic rights, developed in collaboration with migrant-led organisations, similar to the EU Londoners’ Hub⁽¹⁷⁾ which provides information to EU citizens on how to secure their immigration status in the UK.

(17) www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/eu-londoners-hub





More local, community-led initiatives targeted to EU citizen voters are also encouraged.

3 Community empowerment

Political parties should encourage EU citizens to stand in local elections and work locally to identify community leaders to unleash their potential in local politics.

4 Reliable evidence base

A Qualitative insight

Peer research projects led by EU citizens should be used to collect insights from communities and inform policy work on EU citizens' rights. Outreach is best conducted through trusted channels, taking into account the various vulnerabilities and the diversity of EU communities.

B Quantitative insight

It is crucial to improve quantitative data collection on EU citizens, including their democratic participation and representation in the UK. The 2021 census provides an immense opportunity to both remind EU citizens about their rights to vote in 2021 and also to collect information which then can be used to improve their democratic participation in the UK.

5 Long-term partnerships

Improving participation and representation is a long term project. To speed up the process of EU citizens' political integration, local authorities, charities, associations, community groups (including informal) and other stakeholders need to build an infrastructure of collaboration and long term strategies.

the3million and the Eastern European Forum are asking local authorities and political representatives from all UK political parties to engage with these recommendations and contribute towards implementing specific actions to increase the participation and representation of EU citizens in the UK. We cannot speak about integration without considering democratic participation, and this participation needs to result in adequate representation.

“ We hope that this initiative will be the beginning of a new page for the millions of local residents and taxpayers in the UK who are not represented on a political level. ”

Nishan Dzvingozyan, Eastern European Forum



**“ You cannot have the rights you need without having adequate representation in place. At the moment, the campaign on representation is not as visible as the campaign on rights. ”
We can change this.**

Alexandra Bulat, the3million Young Europeans

COLLABORATION



the3million is the largest organisation campaigning for the rights of EU citizens in the UK. the3million carries out a range of activities, including lobbying in the UK and the EU, legal challenges, media and outreach work. the3million has been recognised as one of the top changemakers in the

Big Issue Top 100 Changemakers 2020 for its work on campaigning for Europeans' rights in the UK. One of the3million's campaigns is focussed on preserving local democratic rights (voting and candidacy rights in local elections) for EU citizens after 2021 and expanding those rights to all UK residents.

You can follow the organisation on Twitter @the3million and read more about the democratic rights campaign here: www.the3million.org.uk/let-us-vote-campaign



The Eastern European Forum was set up in November 2018. Its mission is to build bridges between the different Eastern European communities in the UK and local authorities, partner organisations and other bodies. EEF is a very diverse platform of more than 50 organisations representing

nine different Central and East European communities, representatives of local authorities, political figures and individuals.

Facebook page: www.facebook.com/East-European-Forum-UK-787644688271655

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank all who attended the online consultation event on the 18th of July 2020, which is the basis of this report. In particular, we wish to thank the panellists for their contributions – Mihai Călin Bica (Roma Support Group), Michał Siewniak (New Europeans), Nacho Morais (West London for Europe), Adina Maglan (CommUNITY Barnet) and Borimir Totev (Bulgarians in London) – and panel chair Jakub Krupa. We thank Catherine West MP for her insights during the online consultation. We are also grateful to several contributors who offered further insight into the topic of EU citizens' political rights after the consultation event, including Dr. Elisabeth Pop (Hope not Hate), Patrick Lohlein and those who wish to remain anonymous. This report also reflects on findings from the3million's Young Europeans 'Rights and Representation' 2020 report⁽¹⁸⁾, conducted before COVID-19 and a report on the impact of COVID-19 on Central and Eastern European communities, published by the Eastern European Forum in their May 2020 newsletter. We also thank those who participated in the research conducted for these two reports.

(18) www.t3m.org.uk/YoungEuropeansReport