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Faculty of Political Science and Sociology
Bachelor's Thesis

Title: The Challenges of European Citizenship: The Political Participation of Mobile Citizens in the EU

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Abstract (EN): Since 1992, nationals of EU Member states have held electoral rights in local and European election in any Member state they are residing in. However, the uptake of electoral participation of mobile citizens has been below the general average. What are the factors behind the political (dis)engagement of mobile EU citizens? Understanding the reasons behind this gap in the uptake of political rights is important in order to prevent underrepresentation in the European institutions of a significant part of the European population. The analysis of the data from the 2019 Electoral Study reveals that the length of time spent in the host country and their attitude about European institutions largely inform whether mobile EU citizens vote in European Parliament elections or not.

Abstract (ESP): Desde 1992, los nacionales de estados miembros de la UE tienen derechos políticos en elecciones locales y europeas en cualquier estado miembro en el que residan. Aun así, el ejercicio de participación electoral de ciudadanos desplazados en otros estados miembros es menor que la media general. ¿Cuáles son los factores que influyen en esta desvinculación política? Entender las razones que causan esta brecha en el ejercicio de los derechos políticos es importante para evitar la infrarrepresentación en las instituciones europeas de una parte significativa de la población europea. El análisis de los datos del European Electoral Study de 2019 revela que la duración de la estancia en el país de residencia y la opinión sobre las instituciones europeas informan en gran medida la participación electoral de ciudadanos comunitarios móviles en las elecciones al Parlamento Europeo.

Abstract (CAT): Des de 1992, els nacionals dels països de la Unió Europea tenen drets polítics en eleccions locals i europees en qualsevol estat membre on resideixin. Tot i així, l'exercici de participació electoral dels ciutadans desplaçats a altres estats membres és més Baix de la mitjana general. Quins són els factors darrere aquesta desvinculació política? Entendre les raons que causen aquesta diferència en l'exercici de drets polítics és essencial per evitar la infrarrepresentació a les institucions europees d'una part important de la població. L'anàlisi de dades de l'European Electoral Study de 2019 revela que la duració de l'estada en el país de residència i l'actitud envers les institucions europees determinen en gran mesura la participació electoral dels ciutadans comunitaris mòbils en les eleccions al Parlament Europeu.

List of abbreviations

EES: European Electoral Study

EP: European Parliament

EU: European Union

EUMC: European Union Mobile Citizen

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INTRODUCTION

The adoption of the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 introduced the concept of “European Union citizenship”, allowing for free movement of EU citizens within its borders, and granting them the same electoral rights as nationals of the Member states where they reside. Three decades later, free cross-border movement has become a central pillar for the EU integration process, with an estimated 14.3 million people over 18 years of age residing in another Member state in 2019 (Hutcheson and Ostling, 2021). This is not an insignificant number, as it represents a larger share of the European population than that of most countries in the EU (20 out of 27 current Member states).

However, the political participation of this part of the electorate remains decidedly low in comparison with the general population. As Eurosceptic sentiment seems to be rising in the last decades, as well as cries about the democratic deficiency of the European institutions, the apparent disconnect in behaviour from the citizens who have put into practice one part of EU citizenship rights, and are believed to hold more positive attitudes towards the European Union than average (Kyriazi, 2021), but do not present a corresponding political behaviour to those is crucial to understand. Not only the political integration of the European Union seems to be failing, but the threat of underrepresentation of arguably the most “Europeanised” part of the population must be rectified. What are the causes behind the political (dis)engagement of mobile EU citizens?

The literature examining EU mobile citizens’ political participation is few and is often focused on the administrative hurdles individuals face when attempting to register to vote in their host countries. Indeed, while Directive 94/80/CE gave EU citizens the right of passive and active suffrage in any EU country they reside, it also allowed Member States to create some additional measures to regulate voting and candidacy rights. While the national regulations have been blamed for low migrant electoral participation, one cannot ignore that the problem persists even in those countries with easy or automatic registration. Thus, an analysis of the issue must go beyond the administrative field and examine voters’ attitudes and behaviours.

This thesis will analyse the electoral participation of EU mobile citizens in the most recent European Parliament elections, held in the spring of 2019. Using the data collected by the 2019 European Electoral Study, a regression model will be designed to examine the factors affecting the political participation of European non-citizen residents living in other Member States. Observing whether or not the individuals voted in the election, a series of independent variables will be extracted from the EES survey to test which ones might be behind this issue.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Many explanations have been offered for the participation of EU mobile citizens (EUMCs) in European Parliament elections. The topic of general participation in European elections has itself been broadly examined, as the consistently less-than-average turnout rates in comparison with national elections have often led to discussions about the legitimacy of the European Parliament and, as an extension, the European Union (Kyriazi, 2020). The most prevalent theory to explain such low participation rates is the “second-order elections” theory (Reif and Schmidt, 1980), by which EP elections seem less important to voters because they perceive the European parliament to hold less power than their national parliaments. Such broad theory fails to explain, however, the differences in turnout between Member states in EP elections. Or how the ever-increasing European integration, which pulls more political and legislative power towards the EU, has not caused European elections to overcome the second-rate perception they have, as 40 years later, more and more issues and policy areas are undertaken in Brussels (Mattila, 2003). Most importantly, this theory does not take into account the particular position of EU mobile citizens, who may place a higher value on the European Union, as they are benefitting from the rights that European citizenship grants more directly than other citizens (Recchi, 2015).

When it comes to the participation of mobile citizens, and in particular non-citizen residents, studies examine different potential factors, both at the system and individual level. Furthermore, while specific EU variables are examined (such as attitude towards Europeanisation, or the country’s relation to the EU) scholars consider the impact of factors that generally affect national elections as well (Mattila, 2003; Recchi, 2015), drawing on literature from more well-studied elections.

A well-established link between electoral participation of non-citizen residents at the system level is the severity of the administrative regulations that Member states impose on mobile citizens in order to be able to join the electorate in their country of residence. Indeed, while Directive 94/80/CE gave EU citizens the right of passive and active suffrage in any EU country they reside, it also allowed Member States to create some additional measures to regulate voting and candidacy rights. Several studies have addressed the differences in registration procedures, comparing registration and turnout rates of non-citizen residents in countries with automatic registration versus countries where active registration by mobile citizens is needed in order to be able to vote. Analysis suggests that registration (and when data is available, turnout) rates in countries with automatic registration is significantly higher than those with more difficult procedures (Hutcheson and Russo, 2021).

A key element needs to be taken into consideration when examining mobile voting. While the Maastricht Treaty allows non-citizen residents to participate in European elections in their country of residence, they still have the option of voting in their home country. This option might be at times easier than doing so in the host country, as 22 out of the 27 Member states allow the possibility of remote voting from abroad, for example in the form of personal voting at diplomatic missions, postal voting or, in a few cases, proxy voting (Hutcheson and Ostling, 2021). Thus, any analysis on the issue of low participation of mobile citizens must take into account that they might do so at their home country.

In relation to this issue, another factor explored in the literature considers the level of integration of mobile EU citizens in their host country to be linked with their political participation. In particular, some scholars consider the length of time spent in the country of residence to be a factor in the likelihood of mobile citizens to vote in that country (Chaudhary, 2017; Hutcheson and Ostling, 2021), for example having had more opportunity to familiarize themselves with the infamous registration procedures, or gaining a better knowledge of the local language and thus being able to access information on the subject. Therefore, it can be estimated that *the likelihood of mobile EU citizens voting in EP elections in their country of residence is positively correlated to the length of time they have spent in the host country (H₁)*.

Another possible variable that must be taken into account when examining electoral behaviour is the attitude and opinions of individuals towards the institution they are voting in. As previously stated, the European Union institutions are often accused of being “too technocratic” and perceived by its citizens as a distant and ineffective government body (Kyriazi, 2021). This perception, along with the aforementioned “second-order elections” theory has been the explanation for the low political involvement of European citizens with EU institutions in the recent years. This argument might not be proven so easily in the case of mobile citizens, as their transnational experience and practical implementation of EU citizenship rights can lead to less Eurosceptic individuals (Kuhn, 2015; Ciornei and Recchi, 2017). However, the heterogeneity of EU mobile citizens and the lack of data on the issue allow to, similarly as with the general population, hypothesise that *mobile citizens are more likely to vote in European Parliament elections when they have more positive attitudes/views about the European institutions (H₂)*.

On the individual level, there are several arguments that attempt to explain the differences in political participation of EUMCs. The literature has often referenced socio-demographic factors such as age, level of education, or income as determinant factors when it comes to electoral participation. When comparing the background of mobile voters, other possible variables might offer further explanation, such as the political context of the country of origin (Ciornei and Østergaard-Nielsen, 2020). The democratic quality and the levels of electoral participation in the

home country could be a determinant factor in individual political participation. Data at the national level in European countries show significant differences in turnout across several types of elections (Briatte, Kelbel and Navarro, 2020). Scholars offer a variety of explanations, such as democratic history in the country, corruption index, compulsory voting, or electoral and party systems, among others. Examining the issue with a European lens, it has also been observed that new membership status and the European integration process might also be a factor in explaining differences in EP elections turnout. New Member states seem to hold distinctly high turnouts for the first elections (Mattila, 2003), but after these initial figures, participation decreases rapidly, below the average turnout of “old” Member States (Briatte, Kelbel and Navarro, 2020). Following national trends, the literature suggests nationality of origin as a possible factor for electoral participation, hypothesizing that *mobile citizens from new Member states are less likely to vote in European parliament elections* (H₃)¹.

METHODOLOGY

To be able to properly examine the participation of EU mobile citizens in European Parliament elections, information of turnout rates is not enough. To ascertain which factors influence individuals to vote, information on the composition of the electorate is also needed.

As few countries actually record additional information on turnout, not distinguishing citizens from non-citizen residents, many scholars look at registration rates for mobile voters instead. As many Member states require active registration, that can often be a good indicator of willingness to vote in an upcoming election. Registration rates provide adequate aggregate data but cannot give information on other individual factors.

In order to analyse the established hypothesis, a statistical regression will be used to estimate the significance of various possible variables to explain the political participation of mobile citizens. The data used in the empirical analysis has been taken from the 2019 European Parliament Electoral Study, which surveyed a sample of the population of the 28 EU Member States (pre-Brexit), enquiring about their electoral participation in the European Parliament elections in the spring of 2019, and also seeking information about their general political behaviour and socio-demographic background. The study surveyed 26538 individuals and codified 136 different variables out of their responses and data provided.

¹ The point of distinction between “new” and “old” Member states is commonly determined by the 2004 enlargement of the European Union.

One of the 53 questions asked about the country of birth of the respondents, and it was used as the method to identify EUMCs (question D4a: *In which country were you born? Possible answers were the country where the survey was asked, or "OTHER"*). After isolating those responses, there were 803 observations left. While that question is an efficient option to seek out non-citizen residents, some responses proved doubtful or inconclusive, as some respondents listed countries that no longer exist as their place of birth (such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia) To avoid any possible inclusion of national citizens in the analysis all these responses were omitted from the selection.

From their dataset the dependent variable was determined as whether the respondents had voted in the most recent European Parliament elections (Q6: *The European Parliament elections were held on the [insert correct date for each country]. (...). Did you vote in the recent European Parliament elections?*). From this question a dichotomic dependent variable was coded.

In order to test the different hypothesis, several independent variables were also identified. To determine which respondents were nationals from "new" or "old" Member states, a new variable has been created, separating countries who joined the EU after the 2004 enlargement as "new", and coding the rest as "old" Member states.

The individual length of stay in the country has been measured from question D4b on the survey, asking *"IF OTHER When did you first come to [Country]?"* The resulting data was then re-categorized as years spent in the country, from the date stated in the response to 2019. The remaining variable was named *years_in_country*.

Additionally, Q18.2 (*For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion: You trust the European Parliament*) was used to measure respondents' attitudes towards the European Union, and the European Parliament in particular, seeking to create a variable determining trust in European institutions. For these questions, respondents were asked to define their level of trust from 1 ("Yes, totally") to 5 ("No, not at all"). The resulting variable is shown in the regression analysis as *trust_EP*.

Control variables

Other variables selected for the analysis were gender and level of education. The information on the gender variable is taken from question D3 on the survey (*Are you ... (1) male (2) female (3) Other?*). As there were only 2 mobile citizen respondents who identified as neither male nor female, that subcategory was omitted from the analysis. The variable was coded as *gender*.

The level of education was determined following a pre-established sub variable by the Questionnaire. Question D2 asked *How old were you when you stopped full-time education?* Afterwards a secondary variable was created, separating respondents in to three categories (under 15, 16 to 19 and over 19). On the original survey, it was possible to indicate the fact that the respondent was still studying. Since the survey was addressed to people over 18, one could assume to include those on the third category (those studying after a high school degree). However, the option has been omitted, as the vagueness of the question could categorize respondents in two different categories. The variable has been named *level_education*, and divided into three categories: low (only 15 years of education), medium (16 to 19 years, similar to obtaining a high school diploma) and high (more than 19 years, equivalent to at least a university degree).

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

A preliminary analysis of the data, shown in Table 1 allows the determination of turnout rate of the sample population. Almost 71% of respondents claim to have voted in the 2019 European Parliament election, a significantly higher percentage than that announced by the own European Parliament (2019), which set the turnout at 50.66%, the highest since 1994. With that difference in sample population in mind, it is not unsurprising to find the turnout of EU mobile citizens (Table 2, with 59.2% of respondents having voted) also higher than the calculated rate.

Table 1: Turnout of total respondents

Levels	Frequencies	% of Total	% Cumulative
Voted	18789	70.8 %	70.8 %
Not voted	7341	27.7 %	98.5 %
Don't know	404	1.5 %	100.0 %
NA	4	0.0 %	100.0 %

Extracted from jamovi calculations.

Table 2: Turnout of EU mobile citizens

Levels	Frequencies	% of Total	% Cumulative
Voted	475	59.2 %	59.2 %
Not voted	312	38.9 %	98.0 %
Don't know	16	2.0 %	100.0 %

Extracted from jamovi calculations.

The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 3. The table includes five regression analyses, using the binary logistic regression method, often preferred to the OLS alternative (Pituch and Stevens, 2016), as it does not assume a linear relationship between dependant and independent variables. Despite the low adjusted R^2 value, the regression model can still be significant, as this indicator is not as exact as in linear regressions. A better assessment are the individual indicators for each variable.

Model Fit Measures

Model	Deviance	AIC	BIC	R^2_{McF}	Overall Model Test		
					χ^2	gl	P
1	818	832	863	0.0939	84.7	6	< .001

Table 3: Model Coefficients

Predictor	Estimate	SE	Z	p	Odds ratio	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
Constant	0.1448	0.52467	0.276	0.783	1.156	0.413	3.232
trust_EP	-0.2936	0.07594	-3.867	< .001	0.746	0.642	0.865
years_in_country	0.0364	0.00503	7.225	< .001	1.037	1.027	1.047
EU_membership:							
Old – New	0.1838	0.18104	1.015	0.310	1.202	0.843	1.714
level_education:							
medium – low	-0.0478	0.43172	-0.111	0.912	0.953	0.409	2.222
high – low	0.2830	0.42462	0.667	0.505	1.327	0.577	3.050
gender:							
female – male	-0.2768	0.17003	-1.628	0.104	0.758	0.543	1.058

Note. The estimates represent log odds of "voted_EPE = yes" vs. "voted_EPE = no"

Extracted from jamovi calculations

Table 3 confirms the results from studies on the broader European population, unsurprisingly corroborating the hypothesis that electoral participation is linked to attitude towards the European Union (trust_EP) and its institutions. The regression model indicates an increased probability of voting if trust in the EP is higher (for every unit increase in this variable, the odds of voting change by a factor of 0.746). As the variable is coded to show increasing levels of distrust (level 1 indicating high trust in the European Parliament, and level 5 considerable

distrust), the coefficient for this regression is negative. The results again show a very low p value, confirming the significance of the result.

In a similar manner, the length of time spent in the country of residence also proves significant to the probability of voting in European elections, with every unit increment in the variable (every year spent in the host country), the odds of voting increase by a factor of 1.037. The variable is also statistically significant, as $p < 0.001$.

On the other hand, the regression model does not confirm the relation between electoral participation and country of origin's EU membership, despite what the data might suggest at a first glance (shown in Table 4). While there is a higher probability of voting if one's country of birth is an "old" EU Member State that relation is not found to be significant ($p > 0.05$).

Table 4: Turnout based on birth country's EU membership

voted_EPE	EU_membership	
	New	Old
yes	135	334
no	126	196

Extracted from jamovi calculations.

This apparently contradicting data might be explained by the effect of the other previously discussed factors (time spent in country of residence and attitude towards the European Union). The interrelation between these variables may have caused a spurious correlation, as individuals from "old" Member States might trust more in the EU than citizens from newer Member States (Table 5).

Table 5: Trust in European Parliament

trust_ep	EU_membership	
	New	Old
(1) Yes, totally	12	34
(2) Yes, somewhat	74	167
(3) Neither trust not distrust	79	162
(4) No not really	41	87
(5) No, not at all	38	63
NA	17	17

Extracted from jamovi calculations.

As for the other variables tested, the level of education is found to vary its effect in comparison with the reference category (low education), decreasing the odds of voting for the respondents with a “medium” education and increasing it by a factor of 1.327 for those with a high level of education (at least college graduates). However, these results cannot be considered significant, due to their elevated *p* values. Furthermore, the difference in sample size (only 30 responses in the lowest group, accounting for only 15 years of education) might have also affected the results.

Finally, gender is also not found to have had an effect on political participation. In comparison to men, women’s odds for political participation decrease by a factor of 0.758, but the results are not significant.

CONCLUSIONS

For a large part, turnout among European Union mobile citizens is affected by individual’s attitude towards the European Union and its institutions, not dissimilarly as to the political behaviour of the general European population. A significant effect is observed by the time spent in the country of residence, hinting at a pattern of some level of political integration of the mobile citizen in the host country, or perhaps to become more familiar with the bureaucratic voter registration procedures.

While the distinction between newer and older EU countries has not been proven to affect electoral participation, the variable comparison with attitudes towards EU institutions suggests a higher level of trust in the European institutions being found in the older Member states, which could hint at broader systemic issues than this thesis can scope (Lucka, 2019), and would open a brand-new line of research into the topic.

Furthermore, while the objective of the analysis is determining political participation, it must be acknowledged that electoral participation is just one way of political engagement, and individuals might often participate politically in other ways, especially if there appear to be challenges to voting. While electoral participation is a strong measure for political interest and engagement, one must consider that mobile citizens might still participate in European (and local) politics through another medium.

The findings of this analysis only highlight the need to further examine the topic, and to bring this issue to the forefront of the political debate. As numerous scholars have demanded,

more information is needed on the political and electoral participation of mobile citizens, as more data will undoubtedly shed some light into the issues on lower registration (Hutcherson and Ostling, 2021). Turnout rates for non-citizen residents need to be more accurately compiled, not only in their host country, but in the country of origin as well. Apart from the few countries which automatically forbid it, often voters can find themselves registered in both countries by a clerical mistake (Hutcherson and Ostling, 2021), and determining if, and where they voted becomes impossible. Information on turnout might also be beneficial to ascertain more accurate voting rates. The data used for this thesis (the 2019 EES survey) suggests a much higher turnout both for mobile citizens and the general population, indicating a slight bias even in a larger sample.

Perhaps, an adequate solution would require a central European registry, as to avoid duplicate registrations, and to facilitate data gathering. But most importantly, to encourage the political mobilization of a significant part of the population (around 14.3 million, by the last estimates), who often find themselves unable or unaware of their opportunities to do so. This situation is not only detrimental to this underrepresented collective, but ultimately, it affects the overall quality of European democracy.

The idea of an EU elections reform is already being discussed. In the debate of the European Parliament last May 3rd, the European Parliament voted in favour of, among other measures, creating a pan-European constituency for European parliamentary elections, further erasing the national limitations, and embracing the transnational aspect of the European identity.

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