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Research Article

Fostering the Political Participation of EU Non-national Citizens: The Case of Brussels

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Abstract

Political participation is considered an essential feature of democracy. The European Union (EU) aimed to foster political participation with the introduction of European citizenship, which gives the right to vote and stand as a candidate in municipal and European Parliament elections in whichever EU country the citizen resides. However, from the few figures available, registration and turnout rates among mobile EU citizens seem very low. In this article, we investigate the effectiveness of a proactive campaign in order to promote the participation of European non-national residents in municipal elections by focusing on a specific initiative: the VoteBrussels Campaign. Focusing on Brussels, and in the general on the Belgian case, offers us the opportunity to carry out a quasi-experimental design. Our findings suggest that a mobilisation campaign has a positive regionwide effect on the participation of mobile EU citizens.

Keywords

Political participation; Non-national residents; European Parliament elections

With the adoption of the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht, EU (European Union) citizenship gave every EU citizen the right to vote and stand as a candidate in municipal and European Parliament elections in whichever EU country the citizen resides. EU citizens that live (temporarily or permanently) in another EU member state are given the choice of voting either as citizens of their country of origin (subject to the home-country regulations), or as citizens of their country of residence (subject to different registration and voting procedures). Granting voting rights to foreign residents might seem like a challenge to the traditional notion of national citizenship. Indeed, even the right for national citizens to cast a vote from abroad is relatively recent, as up until the 1960s, only resident citizens had the right to vote (Hutcheson and Arrighi 2015). However, the contemporary 'age of migrations' (Castles and Miller 2003) has deeply affected the processes by which states allocate political citizenship and shape the opportunities for political participation (Isin and Turner 2002; Bird, Saalfeld and Wüst 2010). In recent decades, immigration has seen a sharp increase in nearly every country across the developed world (Castles and Miller 2009), and these trends are unlikely to reverse in the future (Putman 2007).

This increase in non-national residents has increased the importance of debates around their participation in the political and civic life of destination countries (Morales and Giugni 2011). The political participation of migrants is now considered as one measure of the quality and level of development of a democracy (Fennema and Tille 1999). Political participation is a broad umbrella under which many activities fall, for example petitioning, demonstrating, volunteering for a political campaign, joining an association and so on. The most accessible (at least for national citizens) and widespread of these activities is voting. Voting rights and voter participation among foreign residents is therefore a key indicator of the quality of democracy. This is especially true in the EU. In 2004, as a direct consequence of the Directive 2004/38/EC in the framework of the Schengen Treaty, EU citizens are free to move and reside in all EU member states. Fifteen years after Schengen, the treaty had a large impact on the geographical composition of the EU population, when looking at the rates of intra-EU mobility. The number of 'mobile EU citizens' increased from 7.1 million at the eve of Schengen (Recchi 2008) to 39 million as of 2019 (Eurostat¹). Mobile EU citizens of voting age have the right of vote in European and municipal elections, but the requirements and procedures to exercise this right vary significantly across EU member states (Hutcheson and Ostling 2019). Most notably, the majority of member states (25) requires specific active voter registration for mobile EU citizens, with significant variations in these procedures (for example automatic versus active, documentation, deadlines, information). The extent to which voter registration procedures create obstacles for mobile EU citizens is difficult to evaluate, as only a few countries collect and publish the registration rates for mobile EU citizens.² The available data suggests that only a very small portion of eligible non-nationals registers to vote. Given the importance of voting for democracy and for European citizenship, more attention is needed to the obstacles and effective measures for boosting voter registration and turnout among mobile EU citizens. Action on voter registration can occur at two levels: the policy level and the campaign level. Whilst the former is largely in the hands of the legislative level responsible for enfranchisement, the latter can be pursued by local authorities, political parties and civil society. In this article we focus on this second level by looking at one very relevant case: the VoteBrussels campaign, which took place in Brussels, the Capital of Europe, to increase voter registration among non-Belgian citizens in the municipal elections of October 2018.

Belgium is particularly interesting case to investigate for several reasons. Firstly, Belgium offers the opportunity of a quasi-experimental design, with its three regions exposed to two different party systems. Flanders and Wallonia have different party systems, while Brussels residents can choose to vote in either system (Russo, Deschouwer and Verthé 2019; Deschouwer 2012). At the same time, the registration rules are supposed to be the same across the whole country. Second, the level of aggregation is municipal, which gives us the opportunity for a granular picture comparing differences in composition and actions across Belgium's 581 municipalities. Lastly, Belgium's system of compulsory voting (both for Belgian citizens and for registered non-Belgian voters) means that voter registration statistics can be used as a basic proxy for actual turnout for non-Belgian citizens. This proxy can only apply for municipal elections, as European elections involve the possibility for mobile EU citizens to vote for lists in their country of residence

or country of citizenship, meaning that fragmented voter registration rates from different countries make comparable statistics impossible.

This article considers the Belgian case and offers a multivariate analysis testing the hypothesis that the *VoteBrussels* campaign had a significant impact on the EU citizen voter registration rate in the Brussels region. We test this hypothesis via t-test by comparing the 2018 registration rates in the Brussels region across space (comparison with the other regions) and time (comparison with the registration rate in the municipal elections of 2012). We also investigate the impact of the campaign by using a fixed-effect linear regression.

THE CASE OF BELGIUM

In Belgium, a country with roughly 11.5 million citizens, EU and non-EU citizens would amount to almost 11 per cent of the potential electorate, as shown by Table 1:

Table 1: 2018 composition of eligible voter population in Belgium

Region/ Community	Belgians		European		Non-European	
	count	percentage	count	percentage	count	percentage
Flanders	4,831,922	54.18	290,674	3.26	85,162	0.95
Brussels	585,922	6.57	222,242	2.49	63,171	0.71
Wallonia*	2,557,814	28.68	235,351	2.64	46,260	0.52
Total	7,975,658	89.43	748,267	8.39	194,593	2.18

*includes German speaking-community (61,794 voters)

Non-Belgian citizens' potential impact on the elections varies significantly between Belgium's three regions. Table 2 shows the composition of voter population focusing on the regional level.

Table 2: 2018 composition of eligible voter population by region

Region/ Community	Flanders		Brussels		Wallonia *	
	count	percentage	count	percentage	count	percentage
Belgians	4,831,922	92.78	585,922	67.24	2,557,814	90.08
European	290,674	5.58	222,242	25.51	235,351	8.29
Non-European	85,162	1.64	63,171	7.25	46,260	1.63
Total	5,207,758	100	871,335	100	2,839,425	100

*includes German speaking-community (61,794 voters)

Table 2 shows that the composition in the two major regions is very similar. Although Flanders has almost twice the number of total voters than Wallonia, the internal composition of the electorate is quite similar. In contrast, the Brussels region has a very different composition as the international gateway for Belgium and as the capital of the EU, with significantly higher percentages of European and non-European citizens. When comparing Table 1 (percentages) and Table 2 (counts), European citizens seem relatively evenly distributed across the three regions. Considering that the Brussels region is much smaller in terms of size and inhabitants, the concentration of EU and non-EU citizens is much higher.

These demographic differences have direct electoral implications. The higher concentration of EU and non-EU potential voters in the Brussels region could have substantial effects on election outcomes. Combined together, the share of EU and non-EU potential voters reaches 32.86 per cent. However, the voice of one third of the Brussels population can be significantly influenced by voter registration information and procedures. In Belgium, Belgian citizens are automatically registered to vote and voting is compulsory. For non-Belgian citizens, voting is only compulsory so long as they are registered on the electoral rolls. To register, they must provide a simple one-page form and a copy of their identity card to their municipality 90 days before an election. This 90-day registration deadline for mobile EU citizens is one of the earliest in the EU, before the electoral campaign and candidates are fully announced.

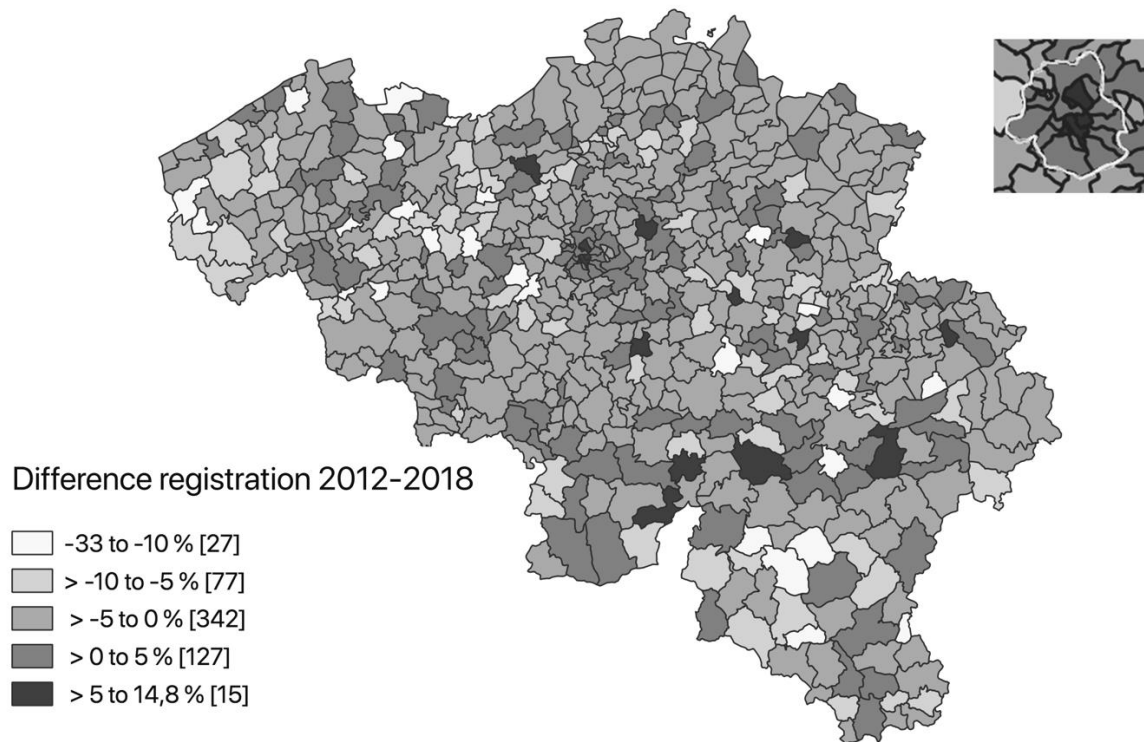
Belgium still suffers from one of the lowest registration rates for EU citizens in the EU because of its combination of obligatory voting, one of the earliest registration deadlines and local information and procedures that vary across its 589 communes. EU citizens must register before the electoral campaign actually begins and they are not properly informed about their right and obligation to vote. However, voter registration has not been part of Belgium's democratic culture for 125 years. Obligatory voting was introduced in 1893 to abolish any obstacle to universal suffrage, such as working on election day, intimidation or voter registration. Because obligatory voting leads to high voter participation rates, Belgian political parties and authorities do not realise that the rate of voter registration and turnout is largely a function of the amount of resources and time that they put in to inform and engage potential voters. Obligatory voting translates not only into less effort by Belgian authorities, but also greater confusion among potential voters. The principal reason why most do not register, according to available research (Nikolic 2017), is a lack of correct information about obligatory voting. Ironically, Belgium, like most countries with obligatory voting, does not enforce it for ordinary voters since no ordinary voter has been fined by the Federal Justice Minister since 2003. Few non-Belgians know that they can vote by proxy and de-register after without risks or fines.

How many eligible EU citizens registered to vote in the last municipal elections?

Table 3: 2018 composition of registered voter population in Belgium

Region	European citizens								
	Registered			Elegible			Percentage		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
Flanders	17,964	15,699	33,663	153,629	137,045	290,674	11.69%	11.46%	11.58%
Brussels	17,832	19,400	37,232	108,986	113,256	222,242	16.36%	17.13%	16.75%
Wallonia	30,842	28,822	59,664	120,492	114,859	235,351	41.58%	40.14%	40.85%
Total	66,638	63,921	130,559	383,107	365,160	748,267	17.39%	17.50%	17.45%

When comparing the 2012 and 2018 registration rates in Figure 1, the change (mostly a decrease) in registration rates is not uniform in direction or intensity across municipalities in Flanders and Wallonia. By contrast, the Brussels region (highlighted in Figure 1's side box) shows a relatively consistent increase in registration rates across most of its 19 municipalities.

Figure 1: Difference in 2012 and 2018 registration rate per municipality

VOTE BRUSSELS AND THE BRUSSELS REGIONAL CAMPAIGNS

The Brussels Capital-Region is the most cosmopolitan city in the world after Dubai. Its 285,000 eligible non-Belgian voters could amount to nearly one-third of its electorate (see Table 1 and 2). Most significantly, their potential share in the electorate rises to nearly half of all voters in three of its 19 communes (Etterbeek, Ixelles and Saint-Gilles) and in 13 of its 145 neighborhoods. However, 92 per cent were not yet registered to vote as of March 2018. Among these non-registered voters, nearly 90 per cent were EU citizens (for example French, Romanian, Italian, Polish, Spanish). Belgium suffers from one of the lowest voter registration rates for EU citizens in the EU (see European Commission 2018).

The 2018 municipal elections saw few improvements compared to 2012 in terms of actions taken by the 19 Brussels municipalities. An overview of communal and regional actions in 2018 is provided in Table 4. As before, most of the 19 communes published articles for the communal magazine and website, although the text was sometimes hard to understand and not very convincing. A minority also sent at least one local letter. However, all these actions are not very effective according to the extensive international research (see Green and Gerber 2017). A minority of communes undertook more effective actions with local events, NGO partners and active EU citizen candidates. Few worked with local associations or neighborhood committees. Nor was Brussels democracy aided by the Flemish Community, which restricted the voter registration activities in Brussels of its funded associations, or by Federal Interior Minister Jan Jambon (Flemish nationalist party NVA), who sent a secret circular three months before the deadline, which created confusion about applications received by associations or candidates.

Table 4: Overview of Brussels communal and regional voter registration actions in 2018

Communal actions	
Email applications accepted	15 communes
Early websites	8
Clear and comprehensive websites as evaluated by VoteBrussels	11
Partnership with local NGOs	6
Big local events	8
Local letters from mayor	7
Local letters: number of voters reached	100,251 voters
Regional actions	
Letter from Brussels region	285,595
Brussels regional websites as reported to VoteBrussels	7,150
Voters reached at events (VoteBrussels and partners)	5,376
Voters regularly reached by VoteBrussels social media	110,000
EU citizen candidates	300 candidates

So, what was the big difference between 2012 and 2018? For the first time, the region, the European Commission and the Brussels Commissioner for Europe (“Think European, Vote Local”) got involved and worked with the most effective methods for reaching new voters:

- 1) Multilingual websites (www.elections2018.brussels) and letters by the Brussels region for all eligible non-Belgian voters and all staff of the European Institutions (see European Commission 2018).
- 2) Email applications accepted in 15 of the 19 communes, thanks to guidance from the region.
- 3) Networks of volunteers like Objectif and VoteBrussels, funded by the region and European Commission, to answer questions through face-to-face discussions and social media.³
- 4) The visibility of these actions also encouraged more EU citizens than ever (300) to run as candidates with partisan campaigns by nearly all Brussels parties.⁴

Funded by the European Commission as part of the FAIREU project, the VoteBrussels⁵ initiative by the Migration Policy Group coordinated the actions and campaigns of the Brussels region, the European institutions and dozens of mobile EU citizen volunteers. Focus groups among mobile EU citizens concluded that the main reason for the low registration rate is the fact that non-Belgians do not receive all the correct information in time about their right, obligation and options to vote. Based on these findings, the campaign’s main messages were that local authorities are more powerful in Belgium than anywhere else in the EU, but are only elected with a few hundred votes, because the one-third of non-Belgians in Brussels do not know that it’s so easy to email

or mail their one-page voter form by 31 July, vote by proxy on election day if they need to and de-register after if they want, all without any risks or fines.

This wording was directly used to improve the websites and materials of the Brussels Commissioner for Europe, the Brussels region and other communes. The materials used by the VoteBrussels volunteers were the Commissioner's simple trilingual leaflet, the one-page application form in French/Dutch as well as the VoteBrussels-branded one-page leaflet in English/French (used as oral script and email template), regionally-funded English/French postcards and our list of communal email/mail addresses. With these materials, volunteers could directly assist registering voters and collect their completed forms for local submission and follow-up by the VoteBrussels coordinator.

Using these materials, volunteer trainings were offered face-to-face, online and at the EU Affairs Consultative Committees of two communes with the highest share of non-Belgian potential voters (Etterbeek and Ixelles). The nearly 100 volunteers were nearly all mobile EU citizens working in the European institutions or EU-level NGOs, including several EU citizen candidates for the municipal elections from a wide spectrum of parties. These volunteer 'mobilisers' were trained and asked to use their existing networks and contacts to secure invitations to present and distribute materials at existing events and organisations attracting large numbers of EU citizens. Most successful were events in Brussels' 'European Quarter', where EU citizens, who live all across and even outside Brussels, mostly work and attend events that take place during lunch, after-work/evenings or weekends. These events included work meetings, professional, social and nationality-based events, language courses, markets and festivals. According to the VoteBrussels evaluation report, the VoteBrussels coordinator and volunteers directly informed an estimated 3,000 EU citizens through 350 hours of conversation at 80 events. Of these citizens, 1,000 were reached through full group presentations and nearly 2,000 more reached through one-on-one conversation and dissemination at public events (see Huddleston 2018: 7-8).

Alongside these face-to-face interactions, the VoteBrussels volunteers and coordinators secured significant attention through media and social media content. VoteBrussels became the main contact point for the Belgian press. The under-appreciated 'expat media' was also highly effective as they are actually well-read by EU citizens, relatively easy-to-reach, motivated for the topic, eager for content and good at translation and messaging. More significantly, volunteers regularly posted on expat social media groups and supported the coordinator on VoteBrussels' Facebook and Twitter channels. These channels provided communal/election news in English, spontaneous video testimonials, infographics and visuals for the election calendar and specific nationalities/languages. Most successful were content related to the six VoteBrussels online quizzes (www.vote.brussels), which were taken nearly 4,000 times, shared extensively by participants among their Facebook friends and then seen by hundreds of thousands of unique users in Brussels. Regionally-funded Facebook advertisements targeted Brussels-based users born in other EU countries and therefore assured the significant campaign visibility among EU citizens in and around Brussels. As a result, the VoteBrussels Facebook and Twitter channels regularly generated viral social media content reaching 50,000 Brussels users every week.⁶

HYPOTHESES

This paper explores two hypotheses about the potential impact of the Brussels regional campaigns on voter registration rate, which can also be taken as a rough proxy for voter turnout. Specifically, we expect that:

- H1a: The registration rate of mobile EU citizens significantly increased in the Brussels Region in 2018 (in comparison with 2012).
- H1b: The registration rate of mobile EU citizens significantly increased in the Brussels Region in comparison with the other two Belgian regions in 2018.

These two hypotheses were tested by performing two t-tests: a paired one for H1_a (which assumes that the profile of registered EU voters changed little in the six years between the two elections), and an independent one for H1_b. Finally, a fixed effect linear regression was used to test the following hypothesis:

- H2: The Brussels regional campaigns had a significant and positive impact on the increase of the EU citizens' registration.

DATA AND METHODS

The topic implies the use of ecological data as the available turnout and registration rates are inherently aggregate information. Survey data on registration are neither available nor suitable, given that the low number of certain EU and non-EU nationalities (see Table 1a in the Appendix) would be problematic for a sampling design. The advantage of using ecological data lies in the ability to analyse the total population of interest rather than a limited sample. Ecological data also permits consideration of possible geographical (in this case, regional) patterns, an angle hardly ever investigated in survey analysis given the often prohibitive costs of sampling at subnational level.

We use the finest possible level at which registration data is collected, that is mobile EU citizen voter registration rates at municipal level for the 2012 and the 2018 municipal elections. The voter data employed cover all 589 Belgian municipalities and were released on demand by the authors from the Belgian Ministry of the Interior. Although this N does not match the typical individual-level dataset numerosity, it is sufficiently large enough to deliver reliable results,⁷ especially when considering that we do not include multiplicative terms in our regression model and that we are not using sample data but the whole population (with no case missing). Ideally, employing a lower level of aggregation (for example polling station) would have led to even more reliable estimates (Russo and Beauguitte 2014), but, as mentioned, in the case of Belgium municipality is the lowest available level. However, these being aggregate data, the results need to be interpreted keeping the nature of the data and their implications (see Russo 2017 for an overview).

This paper employs two strategies to assess its core question on the effectiveness of the Brussels regional campaign. First, to test hypotheses H1_a and H1_b, we assess whether there is a significant difference in the registration rate of the EU-citizens in 1) 2018 across regions, and 2) in 2012 and 2018 in the Brussels region. This strategy is pursued with a t-test and the variables involved are the registration rates expressed in percentages, as Table 5 shows. This t-test assesses whether the difference in registration rates is significant.

Table 5: 2012 and 2018 registration

Region	N	Total		
		2012	2018	Diff
Flanders	307	14	11.3	-2.75
Brussels	19	14.6	16.9	2.25
Wallonia	262	31.5	29.3	-2.20

Going further, a regression model is created to assess the potential impact of the Brussels regional campaign on voter registration rates. Due to the nature of the data and the hypothesis (H2), we opt for a fixed effect model by region with robust standard errors, in order to address possible homoscedasticity problems. Because of the organisation of the Belgian elections, with

party offer and campaign being relevant at the regional level (which is inherently linked to the hypothesis we want to test), it is pivotal to use a model in which the group means are not random, but indeed fixed at the regional level. A fixed effect model will enable us to measure the impact of the VoteBrussels campaign in the registration rates.

The dependent variable of the regression analysis is not the registration rate per se, but the *change* in registration rate, that is the difference (expressed in percentage) between 2012 and 2018.

The main independent variable is the presence of the Brussels regional campaigns, coded as a dummy of 0 in Flanders and Wallonia (no campaign) and 1 in the 19 municipalities of the Brussels region. The use of aggregate data makes it impossible to further investigate the concentration of campaign actions on more specific target groups.

The first set of control variables concerns the origin country of potential EU citizen voters. According to socialisation theory, political attitudes and behaviour show striking stability throughout people's lives. With age, people are likely to become less flexible in their political opinions and behaviour (Jaros 1973: 74). For example, Franklin's seminal 2004 study demonstrated the extent to which voting is a civic habit adopted in early adulthood. Other studies find evidence of the habit-forming effect of voting, using panel data (Plutzer 2002) and experimental data (Gerber, Green and Shachar 2003). Therefore, one could expect that mobile EU citizens coming from high versus low turnout countries would take that habit and socialisation with them to their new country of residence. For this reason, four control variables are constructed to measure the situation in EU citizens' country of origin. Firstly, we control for the change in the composition of mobile EU citizen nationalities between 2012 and 2018 (as a percentage) in order to match our dependent variable. We would expect that an increase in mobile EU citizens from high and medium-high turnout countries would have a positive effect on the change in the registration rate, while an increase of mobile EU citizens from low turnout countries would have the opposite effect. High versus low turnout countries of origin are categorised according to the turnout rate at the most recent parliamentary elections in each country of origin. Tables 6 and 7 describes this variable in detail:

Table 6: EU origin countries in each category for voter turnout in latest parliamentary election:

Category Turnout	Countries
High turnout (> 80%)	Denmark, Luxemburg, Malta, Sweden, Netherlands
Medium-high turnout (>70-80%)	Germany, Austria, Finland, Italy
Medium-low turnout (>61-70%)	Cyprus, Bulgaria, Spain, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Estonia, Czechia
Low turnout (<60%)	France, Romania, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Croatia, Slovenia

Note: Countries listed in each category in order of turnout level (highest to lowest)

Table 7: Difference in the composition of the EU citizen population eligible to vote by region.

Region	Year	High turnout	Medium-high turnout	Medium-low turnout	Low turnout	Total
Flanders	2012	100647	32357	34286	64683	231973
	2018	111180	33473	45205	100816	290674
	Diff. %	10.47	3.45	31.85	55.86	25.31
Brussels	2012	10204	35961	37766	108741	192672
	2018	10419	39790	42840	129193	222242
	Diff. %	2.11	10.65	13.44	18.81	15.35
Wallonia	2012	10112	116015	18671	84515	229313
	2018	9628	107545	19504	98674	235351
	Diff. %	-4.79	-7.30	4.46	16.75	2.63
Total	2012	120963	184333	90723	257939	653958
	2018	131227	180808	107549	328683	748267
	Diff. %	8.49	-1.91	18.55	27.43	14.42

Table 7 shows that the eligible mobile EU citizen population increased from 2012 to 2018 by 14.42 per cent (94,309 citizens). However, this increase is subject to sizeable regional differences. The region with the highest overall increase is Flanders (+25.31 per cent), followed by Brussels (+15.35 per cent) and Wallonia (only +2.63 per cent). Wallonia is also the only region that experienced a decrease in the share of the mobile EU citizen population coming from high and medium-high turnout countries.

The analysis controls for a set of composition of key demographic variables, namely gender, the overall population size (as proxy for size of a municipality), population size of non-EU citizens, and the number of **EU residents working in the European institutions**. **Gender** is taken into account with the percentage of women in the whole population. We expect that a higher share of women in the population would have a positive impact on our dependent variable, as recent literature suggests that women are voting at increasingly high, if not higher, rates as men (Desposato and Norrander 2009 and Córdova and Rangel 2017). The **size of the municipality** is captured based on the total population on a 0-1 scale for easy interpretation. Previous research has shown that less urbanised communities have higher turnout levels than urban areas (Dejaeghere and Vanhoutte 2016 Lewis 2011; Oliver 2000). Additionally, we control for the share of local residents working in the European institutions as we expect a positive coefficient given the European institutions' financial, organizational and volunteer support for the Brussels regional campaigns and the high education of this group (see Desiere, Struyve and Cuyvers 2018). We also control for the size of the non-EU citizen and expect a negative effect, given the restrictive eligibility criteria for non-EU citizens (five years of residence) and the generally lower levels of voter turnout in their origin countries.

Finally, a proxy for socio-economic status is included to measure poverty levels in the form of the share of the population with a zero-income tax declaration. Socio-economic status has been found to be one of the most stable predictors of any form of political participation, including voting (Dalton 2008; Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995). The expectation is that the lower the

socio-economic status, the lower the political and electoral participation. The data is somewhat older (2016 data from STATBEL) than the other data used in the analysis.⁸

Table 8 provides an overview of the summary statistics for the variables employed in the regression model.

Table 8: Summary statistics for the variables in the regression model⁹

	Variables	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
DV	Diff. registration 2012-2018 (%)	589	-2.35	4.25	-33.33	14.81
Main IV	Vote Brussels Camp.	589	0.03	0.18	0,00	1.00
Turnout	Diff. pop high turnout countries	589	-3.00	4.63	-24.21	8.22
	Diff. pop medium-high turnout countries	589	-3.00	4.63	-24.21	8.22
	Diff. pop medium-low turnout countries	589	-2.21	3.10	-13.80	8.49
	Diff. pop low turnout countries	589	-0.15	3.42	-15.40	15.67
Gender	Diff. Women	589	5	6	-22	32
Overall Population	Population 2018 (scale)	589	0.04	0.06	0	1
	Population non-EU	589	7639304	3066.67	0	53308
	Local residents working in European institution	589	4112881	24.62	8.24	100.00
Income	Zero income declarations (%)	589	6.83	3.72	2.51	30.31

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis begins with two t-tests to address our hypotheses H1_a and H1_b. A paired t-test is used for our H1_a as the observations are not independent of one another: *The registration rate of mobile EU citizens significantly increased in the Brussels region in 2018 (in comparison with 2012)*. Figure 2 shows the registration rates in Brussels region in 2012 and 2018.

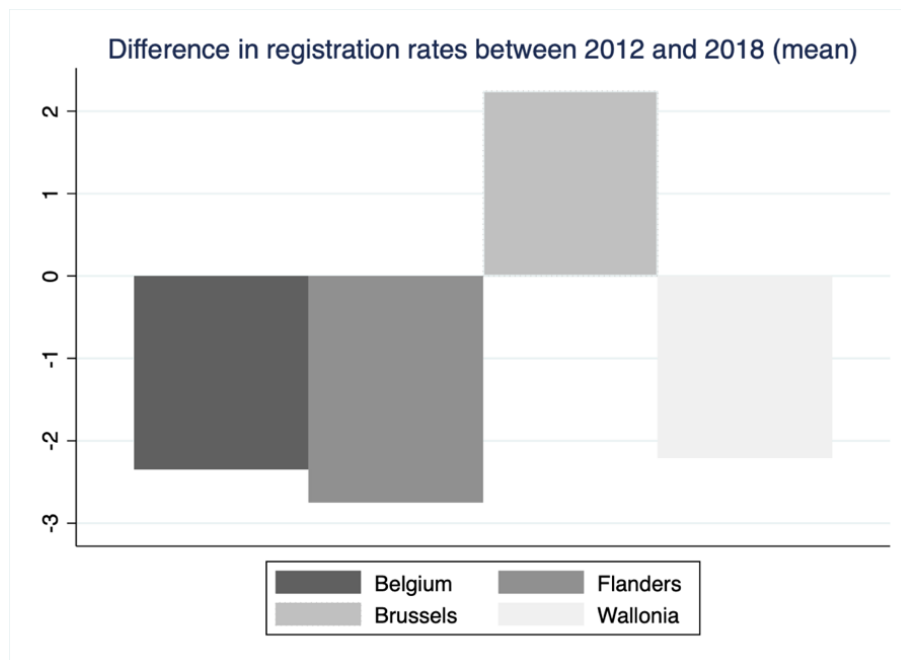
Figure 2: 2012 and 2018 mobile EU citizen registration rates (%) in Brussels (mean)



Figure 2 concludes that the mobile EU citizen voter registration rate was indeed higher in 2018 than in 2012. A paired t-test was conducted to compare the registration rates (expressed in percentages) in the 19 municipalities of the Brussels region in 2018 and 2012. A significant difference emerges between the voter registration rates in 2012 ($M=14.65$, $SD=3.83$) and 2018 ($M=16.89$, $SD=4.32$); $t(18)=-3.91$, $p<0.01$. These results show that the increase in mobile EU citizens' voter registration rates was significant in the Brussels region from 2012 to 2018.

Building on this finding, our analysis proceeds to hypothesis H1b: The registration rate of mobile EU citizens significantly increased in the Brussels region in comparison with the other two Belgian regions in 2018. Figure 3 shows the registration rates in Brussels region in 2012 and 2018.

Figure 3: Difference in registration rates (%) between 2012 and 2018 in Belgium and the three regions (mean)



As Figure 3 clearly shows, on average, voter registration rates decreased from 2012 to 2018 in Belgium, both in Flanders and in Wallonia, with the sole exception of the Brussels region. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the *change* in registration rates between 2012 and 2018 (expressed in percentages) in pairs of regions. Our analysis finds a significant difference in the registration rates between the Brussels region ($M=2.24$, $SD=2.49$) and Flanders ($M=-2.75$, $SD=4.40$); $t(325)=4.89$, $p<0.001$, as well as between the Brussels region ($M=2.24$, $SD=2.49$) and Wallonia ($M=-2.21$, $SD=3.96$); $t(279)=4.82$, $p<0.001$.

The role of the Brussels regional campaigns in boosting its registration rate is investigated with a linear regression including fixed effects (and robust standard errors) by region. Table 9 provides the results of the regression.

Table 9 indicates that the Brussels regional campaign did have a significant impact on the increased registration rates in the Brussels Region. As for all our control variables, they mostly behave as expected with regard to the direction of the effect, but not all of them are significant.

Table 9: Fixed effect linear regression with robust standard errors.

VARIABLES	Coefficients	
Brussels regional campaign (regions)	1.45	(0.66)**
Diff. pop high turnout countries	0.04	(0.02)*
Diff. pop medium-high turnout countries	0.15	(0.03)***
Diff. pop medium-low turnout countries	0.13	(0.3)
Diff. pop low turnout countries	omitted	omitted
Diff. Women	1.35	(0.04)***
Population 2018 (scale)	10.04	(4.41)**
Population non-EU	-0.001	(0.00)*
Non-Belgian working in EU institution	0.003	(0.00)
Zero income declarations (%)	0.03	(0.00)
R2		
within	0.69	
between	0.99	
overall	0.70	
Observations	589	
Number of groups	3	
*** p<0.001, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1		

For example, an increase of mobile EU citizens from high turnout countries is significant only at $p < 0.10$, but it does have a positive coefficient as expected. Coming from a medium-to-high turnout country is also highly significant. The other two variables of this group are, as expected, not significant. The effect of working in the European institutions is positive, as we expected, but largely not significant.

As expected, a higher share of women in the population has a positive effect on changes in the voter registration rate, as does the size of the municipality. Also in line with our expectations, the greater the number of non-EU citizens in the municipality, the smaller was the increase in the voter registration rate (variable significant only at $p < 0.10$). Finally, the percentage of zero-income declaration is not significant. STATBEL provides a wide variety of alternative measures for the level of wealth/poverty in a municipality (among which: prosperity index, average income per declaration and per inhabitant, asymmetry index). We tried all the variables available and none resulted in a significant coefficient.

The very high values of the R-squared are likely due to the use of aggregate level data, which tends to lead to higher R-squared values than with individual level data. Besides the specific values, it is important to notice the magnitude of the R-squared *overall*, *within* and *between* regions. In fact, we notice that the variance explained *within* each region is only slightly lower with respect to the one for the whole country (*overall*). More interestingly, the variance explained *between* regions is much higher, suggesting once again the pivotal role of our main independent variable (the Brussels regional campaigns).

CONCLUSIONS

Thirty years since the introduction of European citizenship with the Maastricht Treaty, mobile EU citizens' electoral rights and participation have not yet reached their full potential. The few statistics clearly indicate that only a very small portion of eligible voters participate in municipal and European elections (Hutcheson and Russo 2019a; 2019b). Fostering political and electoral participation of non-national is important for the quality of democracy (Fennema and Tille 1999). This article investigated whether an active campaign by and for mobile EU citizens can succeed in boosting their participation in municipal elections. The case of Belgium and the Brussels regional campaigns, most notably the *VoteBrussels* campaign, provide a rare opportunity to implement a quasi-experimental design on data disaggregated at both nationality and municipal level.

Our findings suggest that regional campaigns like *VoteBrussels* can make a significant difference, as the registration/turnout increased – both when compared to the previous municipal elections in 2012 and when compared to the two other regions (Flanders and Wallonia).

These findings bridge a gap in the literature, as to our best knowledge no previous empirical studies consider the role played by mobilisation campaigns targeting mobile EU citizens. Researchers in this field are regularly confronted with a lack of data and targeted information. The novel and encouraging findings that we present do entail certain limitations for more in-depth analysis. The use of very detailed aggregate data would offer reliable estimates from a technical point of view (Russo and Beauguitte 2014), and we included as many relevant independent variables as possible and use the lowest possible level of aggregation. Still, the granularity that our research design implies is not optimal. A dummy variable had to be used to approximate the reach of the Brussels regional campaigns as no other way existed to operationalise our main independent variable (the Brussels regional campaigns) in a more detailed way, we opted for a straightforward strategy, and we simply created a dummy variable that reflects being or being not exposed to a proactive mobilisation voting campaign at the regional level. This straightforward dummy is an approximation, as there are surely other factors that can influence the decision to vote. Furthermore, data for other potentially relevant control variables were not available, for example, as regards duration of residence, education level, political interest, and so on.

Despite these limitations, the Brussels and, more in general, the Belgian case, are extremely interesting and revealing about the potential to mobilise European citizenship. Our findings have both policy and scientific implications. At the policy level more proactive information campaigns are clearly needed to inform and inspire mobile EU citizens, as it seems necessary to embody one of the pillars of EU citizenship. From a scientific perspective, more research is needed to properly investigate this phenomenon. However, the lack of research on this topic seems to me mostly due to a severe lack of data. A systematic data collection needs to be implemented, especially when considering the growing figures of mobile EU citizens across the EU.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Data retrieved on 12 July 2019 at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/digpub/eumove/bloc-1a.html?lang=en>

² Namely: Belgium (indirectly, as registration and turnout can be considered to be the same), Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Poland, Romania, and Sweden (Hutcheson and Russo 2019b).

³ This paper focuses on the VoteBrussels rather than Objectif or Brussels Commissioner's campaigns because VoteBrussels was the new, larger-scale campaign in the 2018 local elections, working with more diverse community-based groups. The Brussels Commissioner's work was largely limited to the production of election materials, while Objectif's smaller-scale campaign (50 presentations with 20 associations) was a continuation of their earlier campaigns in 2012. For more on Objectif's campaign, see Meftah (2018)=

⁴ For example, see the #IVoteWhereILive campaign by non-Belgian supporters and candidates of the socialist and leftwing parties: <https://www.facebook.com/IvoteWhereILive/>

⁵ For the evaluation of the VoteBrussels campaign, see Huddleston (2018), Huddleston and Nikolic (2018) and Weicht (2018).

⁶ For an overview of this content, see www.facebook.com/VoteBrussels

⁷ Tabachnick, Fidell and Ullman (2007) advise that a minimum of $N > 104 + \text{number of predictors}$ (in our case 11) is the requirement to obtain a reliable estimate. Whilst Austin and Steyerberg (2014) run a series of simulations which lead to the conclusion that in the contexts of an OLS a minimum of only two observation per variable is sufficient for adequate estimation of regression coefficients.

⁸ Available at: <https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/themas/huishoudens/fiscale-inkomens#figures>

⁹ In the Appendix the same table is replicated for each of the regions (Tables 2a, 3a, and 4a)

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