

Promoting your EU electoral rights

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Ruta, who is Lithuanian and lives in Malta, wants to vote for Maltese candidates in European elections. She is refused this right because she does not possess a Maltese identity card, as required by domestic legislation.

Charlotte, who is a Danish citizen living in the Czech Republic, wants to join a Czech party sharing her political views. Domestic law does not currently allow her to do so, as is the case in Poland and Lithuania.

Richard, who is a British citizen and moved to Spain 20 years ago, wants to vote in national elections in the United Kingdom. He is refused this right because he has not been living in the United Kingdom for the past 20 years. He does not have the right to vote in Spanish national elections either because he is not a Spanish citizen.

Ruta, Charlotte and Richard are among the increasing number of EU citizens residing in a Member State other than their own and who want to exercise their voting rights. Registrations to vote in the Member State of residence increased from 5.9% in 1994 to 11.6% in 2009, out of the total population of EU citizens living outside their home Member State. The number of candidates who stood in elections in their Member State of residence reached 81 in the 2009 European elections, compared to 57 in previous European elections.

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Promoting EU citizens' use of their voting rights is more important than ever following the decline in the general turnout in European Parliament elections from 61.9% (in 1976) to 43% in 2009.

Voting rights

EU citizens who live in a Member State other than their own have the right to vote and stand as candidates in European Parliament elections and municipal elections organised in that Member State. This must be done under the same conditions as for the country's own nationals, even if EU citizens do not have the host country's nationality.

Despite these rules, citizens still face major obstacles in exercising their voting rights:

Some Member States require nationals of other Member States to fulfil additional conditions that are not allowed by EU law to vote in European Parliament and municipal elections (such as holding a national identity card issued by the Member State of residence).

Other Member States do not adequately inform EU citizens from different Member States about their electoral rights.

Furthermore, a number of Member States restrict the right to become members of political parties. They also restrict the right to found a party to their own nationals.

What is the Commission proposing?

The European Commission is taking specific action to resolve all obstacles that stop citizens from exercising their voting rights.

The Commission requests Member States to ensure that:

- EU citizens are properly informed about their electoral rights;
- additional administrative requirements for registering to vote are removed;
- EU citizens are allowed to become members of or found political parties in the Member State of residence.

The Commission is also looking at removing unnecessary bureaucratic burdens so that EU citizens who live in a Member State other than their own can effectively use their right to vote and stand as candidates in European elections in that Member State.

The Commission is also analysing how to improve information exchange between Member States to prevent possible cases of “double voting” or “double candidacy” in the Member State of origin and of residence at the same time.

The Commission is particularly vigilant in ensuring that the principles of free and secret elections are respected.

Ensuring that the principles of free and secret elections are respected

When organising European Parliament elections, all Member States must respect a number of common principles, including that elections shall be free, secret and by direct universal suffrage.

The Commission is particularly vigilant in ensuring that these principles are respected. For example, early publication of the results of European Parliament elections in one Member State, several days before the close of the poll in other Member States, prevents citizens from casting their vote free of influence by these electoral results.

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The Commission can launch infringement proceedings against Member States when there are violations of the principle of free and secret elections.

Attention to the right to free movement

The Commission is also paying particular attention to obstacles that undermine citizens' right to free movement:

Although EU law grants EU citizens the right to participate in municipal and European elections in the Member State where they reside, it provides no such right with regard to national elections.

- According to the legislation of several Member States, their nationals lose their right to vote in national elections if they have lived in another Member State for a certain period of time.
- Given that EU citizens of those Member States are not able to participate in any national elections, (neither in the Member State of origin nor in the Member State of residence), they are deprived of one of their most important political rights just because they exercise their right to free movement.

The exercise of the freedom of movement should not result in losing an important democratic right. The Commission will launch a discussion to identify political options to prevent EU citizens from losing their political rights when they exercise their right to free movement.