

The role of cities in enhancing voting rights in European Parliament elections and beyond

To explore the potential of cities, the [Human Rights Cities Network \(HRNC\)](#) and the [Global Parliament of Mayors \(GPM\)](#) organised a Human Rights City webinar on Enhancing Human Rights in Cities with the Right to Vote: the 2024 European Parliament Elections. The event took place on the 6th of May 2024, in the framework of the Barcelona programme as the [1st European Capital of Democracy \(ECoD\)](#) and gathered representatives of local authorities, civil society, and academia. The webinar raised awareness on how municipalities can guarantee the right to vote to their citizens and showed cases of local good practices on how to enhance a democratic participation in the 2024 EP elections.

Executive summary

Local authorities play an important role in bringing the European Union (EU) into every day's life of its citizens, as suggested by this [Spring Eurobarometer survey's results](#). Municipalities facilitate access to human rights, in particular in the context of the electoral cycle and the upcoming [European Parliament elections](#). Given the current backsliding of democratic standards in parts of the EU and the importance of voting to safeguard democracy, it is essential to uphold electoral rights of all citizens in the upcoming European Parliament (EP) elections.

This policy paper analyses the challenges cities are facing when ensuring voting rights and highlights the potential to enhance democratic participation in the wake of the 2024 EP elections and beyond. Among them are practical challenges related to the organisation of elections, such as for example organising accessible and barrier-free polling stations, ensuring quality information adapted to the needs of different social groups or staffing of the polling stations with trained poll workers. Alongside a discussion of good practices on local level, the paper also provides short- and long-term recommendations to local actors involved in electoral processes; in particular establish a local Human Rights Council to monitor the human rights situation in the city including electoral processes or create partnerships with civil society and academic institutions to conduct civic education activities.

Background and context

Between 6 and 9 June 2024, the 10th European elections will take place in the 27 EU Member States, and around 366 million EU citizens will be called to the polling stations¹. The elections to the European Parliament represent a crucial moment in EU democracy: they give citizens a say in the EU's political direction.

The right to vote is recognised as a fundamental right by international, EU and national legal instruments². The EU law extend electoral rights to EU citizens³. Every citizen of an EU country residing in another member state can vote and stand as a candidate at municipal European Parliament elections, in the member state where they reside.

Recent developments, in several EU Member States (EU MS), threaten the practice of representative democracy based on free and fair elections. Among them are a lack of trust in the political system, restrictions of media freedom, concerns about the integrity of the vote,⁴ as well as a decreasing electoral participation. This trend, recently observed in Hungary, Poland, the Netherlands and Italy erodes the EU's fundamental principles of democratic participation, accountability and legitimacy, at national and at the EU level. The importance of the 2024 EP Elections is reflected in the massive voter information campaign launched by the EP, in partnership with hundreds of civil society organisations (CSOs) across the EU, to increase citizen participation. The HRCN is proud to take part in this European movement as one of the EP's communication partners *Promoting Voter Turnout for the European Elections 2024*. The more people vote, the stronger democracy becomes.



¹ Topical digest European Elections, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/TD_European_elections.pdf

² Art. 21 [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), and Art. 25 [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#).

³ [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) (Art. 22) and the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#) (Art. 39 and Art. 40).

⁴ OSCE ODIHR, Republic of Bulgaria. Early Parliamentary Elections 2 April 2023. Election Observation Mission Final Report, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/7/549292_0.pdf, accessed 9 May 2024

The European Committee of the Regions has also embarked on a mission to raise awareness and equip local authorities with official resources to promote the elections.⁵ Local authorities play an important role in the different stages of the electoral process, despite the lower importance given by experts and international organisations specialised in elections when it comes to electoral observation. Municipalities' responsibilities can range from voter registration, organising and administering the right to vote, ensuring accessibility of polling, to providing voter education and information, as well as recruiting and training polling staff. However, the role local authorities play in electoral processes in the EU varies from country to country and depends on the national legal framework and electoral system.

According to the latest Eurobarometer, there is an increasing interest in the elections and in the likelihood to vote.⁶ However, a closer look into the disaggregated country data shows substantial differences between EU MS, with the citizens of the Czech Republic and Bulgaria being amongst the least interested in the upcoming elections. The survey also shows that citizens' priorities ahead of the elections differ widely. Action against climate change is the most important priority for Swedish voters, while for the citizens of the Baltic countries European defence and security policy constitute the most important topic in the electoral campaign.⁷ These examples indicate that a high turnout at the June elections is not foreseeable in all member states and the topics that mobilise voters vary significantly.

Electoral officials serve as the guardians of democratic processes, ensuring that elections are conducted in a transparent, fair, and accurate manner, in compliance with the law. Their role is fundamental to the functioning of democratic systems and is as crucial as the role of the information environment in shaping the democratic landscape. Local political representatives are best able to explain how the EU impacts people's day-to-day life.⁸ Municipalities are the first point of contact when citizens have an inquiry or an issue. This direct contact makes local authority the closest public entity to people. This position allows municipalities to better understand the needs and concerns of their constituencies, often leading to a higher level of trust in comparison to national and EU institutions. Local governments also provide a level of autonomy and decision-making power at the grassroots level, ensuring more representative and accountable governance. They use strategies such as consultative and collaborative engagement to include citizens in decision-making processes,⁹ thus empowering people and promoting local democracy. Cities' administrations are key actors in raising the involvement of the public in the democratic life, too often translated by a low level of participation in elections.

⁵ European Committee of the Regions, European Elections 2024, <https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/Pages/elections.aspx?origin=spotlight> accessed 9 May 2024

⁶ European Parliament Eurobarometer, Use Your Vote. Countdown to the 2024 European Elections, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3272>, accessed 8 May 2024

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ [European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 'Flash Eurobarometer FL539 : Public opinion in the EU regions', version v1.00, 2024](#), accessed 8 May 2024

⁹ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, Assisting the Effective Implementation of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty: [Tool for a consultative approach \(2020\)](#), accessed 13 May 2024

The urgent need to strengthen the “democracy of proximity”¹⁰, to reconnect Europe with its citizens and more widely with the diversity of its population, can be turned into a strategy to build democratic legitimacy in the EU. The main strength of local governments is their ability on the one hand to directly reach citizens in both urban and rural spaces, and on the other to facilitate direct access to national governments. The municipalities’ unique position to initiate collaboration at both levels, local and national, is a major asset to extend the right to vote to everyone, ensuring inclusivity and diversity.



Findings from consultation with cities

Prior to the Human Rights Cities webinar, a broad consultation with cities was launched through an online questionnaire. Nine municipalities from seven countries (PT, SP, IT, AT, NL, GE, PL) responded. The main queries focused on how municipalities reach out to voters, how they combat disinformation, how they ensure inclusivity and equality, and what challenges and needs they face in the organisation of elections. The results show that the main information tool municipalities are using is their official website. In terms of inclusivity and equality, the biggest groups reached by municipalities targeted information are young people and citizens with migrant or refugee backgrounds. Looking more closely at the challenges and the good practices gathered through both the questionnaire and the webinar, the following trends were identified.

¹⁰ Constanta Matusecu, The Role of Local and Regional Authorities in Applying the EU. Legislation Regarding the Election Rights of European Citizens, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 81 (2013) 280 – 285, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S187704281301495X>, accessed 7 May 2024

Challenges

The challenges cities are facing in upholding the right to vote can be categorised in three groups: systemic, legal and practical.

- The **systemic challenges** affect the whole of the EU and are connected to the overall lack of trust in the political system, the democratic deficit, and the underrepresentation of big segments of the population (young people, women, people with migrant or refugee backgrounds, persons with disabilities). Coupled with a poly-crisis including the Russian war on Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas war in the Middle East, and the adverse effects of the economic crisis in the EU, the social agenda is deprioritised at national and supranational levels and becomes the responsibility of cities. Local authorities are at the frontline responsible for the broader socio-economic issues affecting people's lives such as enhancing both social inclusion and greater equality as well as building diversity and enhance a in urban context

To do so, cities can centre a human rights-based approach within their local public policies by more effectively responding to the needs of inhabitants and city users. In this overall process, cities are enhancing their stature as policy actors and use their position to give a voice to citizens' concerns on a broader national and global level. By doing so, cities demonstrate their capacities to turn the universality and equality of rights into practices. In the context of the forthcoming EP elections in particular, municipalities can influence electoral processes by expanding the right to vote to different groups and to a wider number of their population. For example, ensure accessibility of polling stations by consulting with CSOs specialised in social inclusion, diversity and equality to set up basic guidelines in respect of human rights standards, or provide social services to ensure equity of accessibility, such as free transport for persons with disabilities and elderly on election day.

- The **legal challenges** are those pertaining to the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in European elections. EU law gives the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in EP to every citizen, even when they are living abroad. Citizens can participate in European elections either in their country of citizenship (country of origin) or in the EU country they live (country of residence).¹¹ Therefore, EU nationals who live in a Member State other than their own are entitled to participate in European and municipal elections, respectively, in their country of residence¹². This concerns an estimated 11 million EU citizens of voting age, called mobile EU citizens. However, voter turnout among mobile citizens remains low compared to nationals. Similarly, only a fraction of candidates standing for European elections is made up of non-nationals (slightly over 1 % in the 2019 elections)¹³.

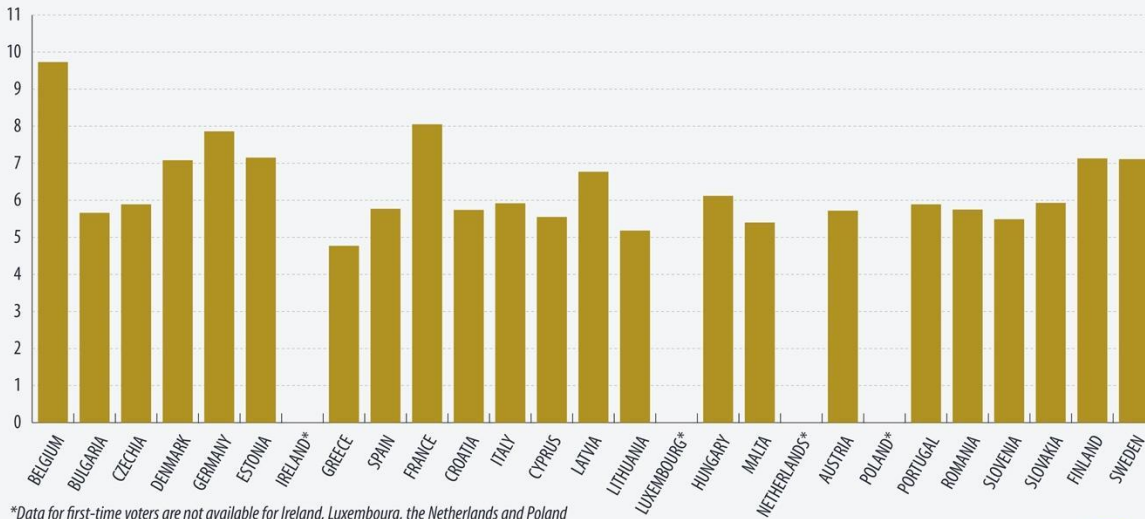
¹¹ Election-Watch.EU, Participation of mobiles infographics, <https://www.wahlbeobachtung.org/en/participation-of-mobile-eu-citizens-infographics-in-24-european-languages-released/>

¹² Council Directives 93/109/EC and 94/80/EC

¹³ Voting and candidacy rights of mobile EU citizens in European elections under Council Directive 93/109/EC [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/694237/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)694237_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/694237/EPRS_BRI(2021)694237_EN.pdf)

Population eligible to vote for the first time in the 2024 elections for the European Parliament

(% of total population eligible to vote)



*Data for first-time voters are not available for Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Poland
All data are estimated

eurostat

When it comes to first-time voters (persons who have reached voting age since the last European elections in 2019), the highest numbers are expected in Germany (5.1 million persons), France (4 million) and Italy (2.8 million). The lowest numbers are expected in Malta (20 000 persons), Cyprus (37 000) and Estonia (70 000). The highest shares of first-time voters are expected in Belgium, France and Germany with 9.7%, 8.0% and 7.9% of all eligible voters, respectively.¹⁴

Therefore, limitations vary from country to country, depending on their national electoral system and legal framework. There are, for example, differences in the minimum voting age, voter registration procedures, the approach towards inclusive participation (young people, women, people with disabilities, and other historically disenfranchised groups), or in the regulations concerning the use of non-official languages in campaigning.

One important legal obstacle is the lack of voting rights for non-citizens. Approximately 11 million EU citizens of voting age reside in another member state. A significant number of these residents are not eligible to take part in EP elections. As for example, in Czechia, Ireland, Malta and Slovakia, voting from abroad in European elections is not allowed. This situation hinders the rights of the residents of these countries living abroad to participate in democracy, a vital principle of the EU. On the other hand, some EU countries allow residents who do not hold citizenship of an EU country to vote in local elections. Nordic countries as well as Denmark and Belgium,¹⁵ have a long tradition of electoral enfranchisement of non-citizens and third country nationals at the local level, which could be a practice at EU level.

¹⁴ European elections 2024: people eligible to vote, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240404-2>

¹⁵ Fabbrini, Federico, 'The Right to Vote for Non-Citizens', *Fundamental Rights in Europe*, Oxford Studies in European Law (Oxford, 2014; online edn, Oxford Academic, 16 Apr. 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198702047.003.0004>, accessed 9 May 2024

Systemic and legal challenges are the most difficult to address by local authorities alone. To do so, they should seek broader advocacy coalitions to put pressure on national and EU institutions. Cities remain a rich source of good practices, including to enhance the right to vote of their population. Focusing on the quality of local public services builds the trust of people in institutions and, in return, trust builds democracy. Empowering cities through inclusive and participatory approaches is therefore part of delivering democracy. Together, mayors, cities' administration and civil society are playing an essential role in the electoral process. They empower people with their rights making the EU's fundamental values a reality on the ground.

When it comes to **practical challenges** related to the organisation of elections, cities share the following concerns:

- Organising accessible and barrier-free polling stations
- Ensuring quality information adapted to the needs of different social groups (for example, in languages different from the official language of the country)
- Staffing of the polling stations with trained poll workers
- Reaching out to all voters, especially the ones that are traditionally excluded from decision-making processes

There is a clear need for more cooperation with national governments and CSOs to solve the above-mentioned practical challenges. Every exchange of experience among cities and networks, but also coalition building at different levels - from the local to the global - provides an opportunity to strengthen democracy and civic participation between CSOs, municipalities, academics, international human rights organisations and EU institutions.



Good practices

Consultations underlined local good practices that can enhance participation, not only on election day but in democratic process in general. The most inspiring human rights practices raised by the speakers are the following:

- **Proactive outreach**, especially to disadvantaged and disenfranchised communities. This is a crucial role municipalities can play at local level. For example, the municipality of Padua, Italy, sends letters to young people turning 18 and to new citizens to inform them about their voting rights. The municipality of Graz, Austria, sends a personal letter to every eligible voter.
- Provide **free transport on election day**. In Katowice, Poland, the municipality provides free transport for people with disabilities. In the city of Nijmegen, Netherlands, elderly people and people with mobility difficulties can book a free “voting taxi”.
- **Bring the EU closer to the citizens** and include their contributions in the EU decision-making process. The municipality of Braga, Portugal, organised an EU Local Dialogue with the support of the Committee of the Regions.
- Initiate **local participatory democracy** through participatory budgets to build trust, is another practice from the municipality of Braga, Portugal.
- Establish a **Council of Diversity, Participation and Dialogue**, like the municipality of Sindelfingen, Germany, to allow people with migration history and those who have been excluded from the decision-making process to have a say in policy-making.
- Create a **youth council** with a dedicated budget to empower young people to participate in decision-making by the municipality of Sindelfingen, Germany.



Recommendations

In conclusion, local authorities play a crucial role in promoting democracy and electoral rights, not only during the electoral period but throughout the electoral cycle. Eligible voters and residents cannot be expected to vote if throughout the rest of the time they are not involved in the political reality of their city, or if they do not feel part of the EU decision making process.

When local authorities face challenges in ensuring the right to vote, coalition building and collaboration amongst civil society, academia, national and EU authorities are essential to address these challenges. By doing so, the local authorities can bring the EU at the heart of their city and in return, city representatives can bring the voice of a diverse population across the EU to reflect their concerns in the European decision-making process. Information-sharing and capacity building are integral to a successful coalition and collaboration. One strategy to achieve this is to create online and face-to-face workshops to build solidarity and co-create solutions.¹⁶ Within this, mutual feedback is imperative to ensure that the different entities can learn from each other, and local governments can implement better informed initiatives to promote engagement in decision making processes at local, national and EU level.

Another strategy is to form citizen assemblies, similarly to what Gdansk (Poland)¹⁷ and Aachen (Germany)¹⁸ have done and bring together ordinary citizens to discuss issues with experts, local governments and civil society organisations, and democratically co-create solutions.

The next step is to gather existing local practices across the EU that can be adapted and applied in other places, to enhance democratic participation before and after the upcoming EU 2024 elections.



¹⁶ European Commission, Quadruple Helix Collaborations in Practice Stakeholder Interaction, Responsibility and Governance (2021), p,21, <https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/documents/downloadPublic?documentIds=080166e5e4d98f00&apId=PPGMS>

¹⁷ European Capital of Democracy, ECoD Application: Gdansk (2023), pp. 14-20 https://capitalofdemocracy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/23ECoD_Application_Gdansk.pdf, accessed 13 May 2024

¹⁸ Permanent citizens' assembly in Aachen (2022), <https://www.buergerrat.de/en/news/permanent-citizens-assembly-in-aachen/>, accessed 13 May 2024

Ten considerations for local leaders and governments to safeguard democratic practices and mitigate potential harms during and after election periods

1. Enhance a city's understanding of how information is manipulated to disrupt elections.
2. Monitor for misleading information throughout the election.
3. Strengthen a city's resilience to information manipulation.
4. Help maintain information integrity by debunking misleading content and providing reliable, up-to-date information throughout the election period.
5. Create a plan of action for preventing and responding to election violence.
6. Provide targeted support to groups who may be targeted by or are otherwise at risk of election violence.
7. Commit to administer a credible, transparent and inclusive election in your city to help build trust in the election process.
8. Proactively promote peace and civility throughout the election period.
9. Cultivate an inclusive dialogue to help minimise polarisation.
10. Promote civic engagement to build social capital and enhance social cohesion¹⁹.

Enhance access to voting rights and democratic participation on the local level

Short-term measures actionable prior to the EP elections:

- Ensure **accessibility of polling stations** by consulting with CSOs specialized in social inclusion, diversity and equality to set up basic guidelines in respect of human rights standards.
- Provide **social services** to ensure equity of accessibility, such as free transport for persons with disabilities and elderly on election day.
- Provide **specific and quality information responding to the needs** of different groups of voters. Use the resources by the [European Committee of the Regions](#), the European Parliament at <https://together.eu/> and [Election-Watch.EU infographic](#).
- Take **measures against disinformation** following the guidelines of the Committee of the Regions outlined in [Developing a handbook on good practice in countering disinformation on local and regional level](#), such as for example awareness-raising and capacity building

¹⁹ Strong Cities Network, *Preventing and Responding to Election Disruption and Violence: Ten Considerations for Cities*, <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/resource/preventing-and-responding-to-election-disruption-and-violence-ten-considerations-for-cities/>

exercises, developing media literacy, strengthening public communication, or the promotion of local media investment.

Long-term measures to be implemented throughout the electoral cycle:

- Establish **human rights monitoring focal points within municipalities**. Join the HRCN and the GPM pilot initiative to develop and implement with other cities a Standardised Monitoring System (SMS) in cooperation with municipalities and civil societies.
- Form a **local Human Rights Council** to monitor the human rights situation in the city, as well as election campaigns (York, UK).
- Institute permanent structures enabling young people to participate in decision-making such as **youth councils**, youth parliaments or similar forums that are composed of elected representatives and have an allocated budget in accordance to the guidelines of the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life²⁰ (Vienna, Austria).
- Initiate **participatory democracy measures** such as participatory budgets and citizens assemblies to engage citizens and build trust (Barcelona, Spain).
- Establish **partnerships** with civil society and academic institutions for the development and delivery of civic education activities (Graz, Austria).
- Introduce measures to **involve local residents who do not hold citizenship** of an EU country in decision-making processes (Berlin, Germany).
- Create an **enabling environment for civil society**, without imposing limitations and restrictions on the freedom of assembly and association, which can be furthered in collaboration with national and EU institutions (Utrecht, Netherlands).
- Set up **permanent citizen's assemblies** to discuss local and national issues to promote participatory democracy (Aachen, Germany).

²⁰ Council of Europe, Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, 2015, <https://rm.coe.int/168071b4d6> accessed 9 May 2024