



The Citizens of the Capital of Europe

Evaluation of Voter Registration in Brussels and the VoteBrussels campaign

By Thomas Huddleston

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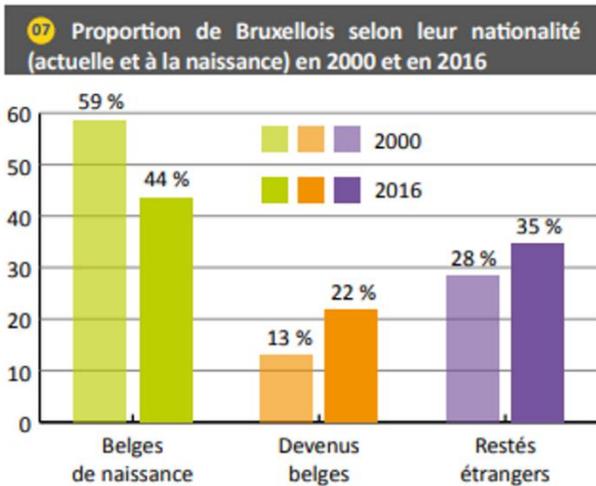
***VoteBrussels** by Migration Policy Group was the largest voter registration campaign in Brussels--non-partisan and co-funded by the Brussels Region and the European Commission's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme as part of the FAIREU project led by the European Citizen Action Service.*

Summary: In a period of just 5 months, the number of non-Belgian voters doubled across Brussels, thanks largely to a few dozen volunteers, letters and online applications. VoteBrussels estimates that one third of new voters came from their campaign with non-partisan partners, another third from the work of the Brussels Region and another third from the most active communal administrations and EU citizen candidates. As a result of the VoteBrussels recommendations during and after the campaign, most Brussels communes improved their voter registration information and procedures, while the call for automatic voter registration and information for all newcomers has been endorsed by the Brussels Parliament in its [5 April Resolution A-827/1](#) and by most French- and Dutch-speaking parties running in the 26 May regional elections. This reform is essential for the future of its communes and the region, as Brussels—Capital of the European Union and most cosmopolitan city in the democratic world—suffers from one of the greatest democratic deficit in the European Union.

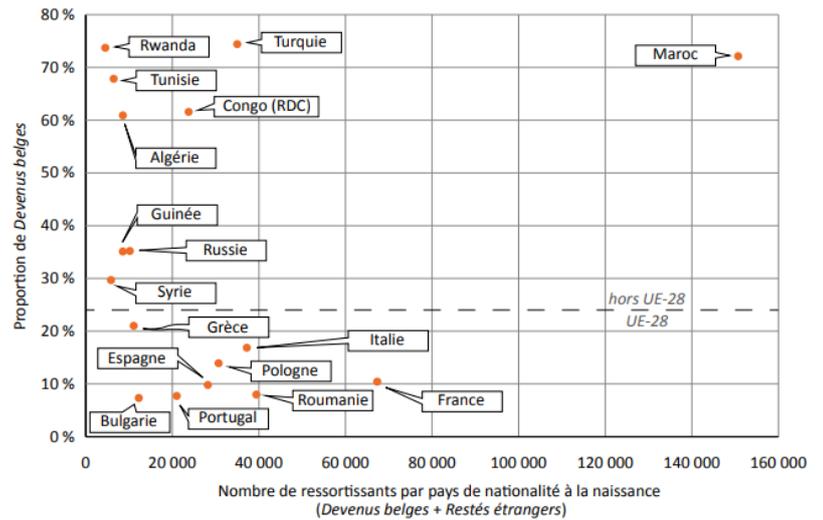
Acknowledgements: MPG would like to thank its 100+ VoteBrussels volunteers and its main partners: the European Citizen Action Service, Objectif, Louise Nikolic, the Brussels Commissioner for Europe, the Brussels Region, the communal authorities of Brussels City, Etterbeek, Ixelles and Saint-Gilles, the European Commission and all other European institutions and offices that hosted VoteBrussels events.

KEY FINDINGS: VOTER REGISTRATION

Figure 1: Brussels population by nationality and mode of nationality acquisition



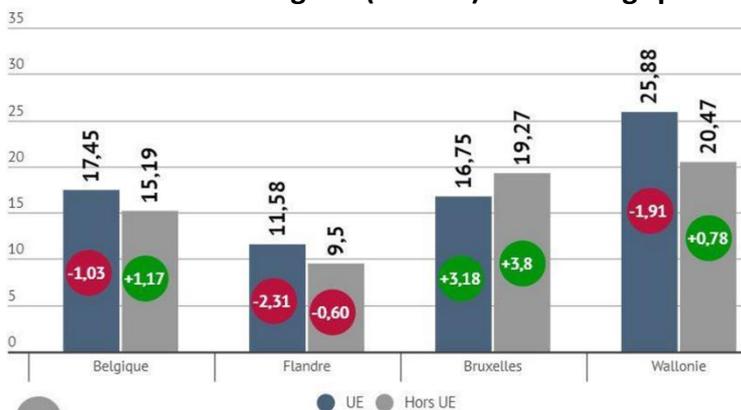
Source : IBSA, SPF Economie – Statistics Belgium



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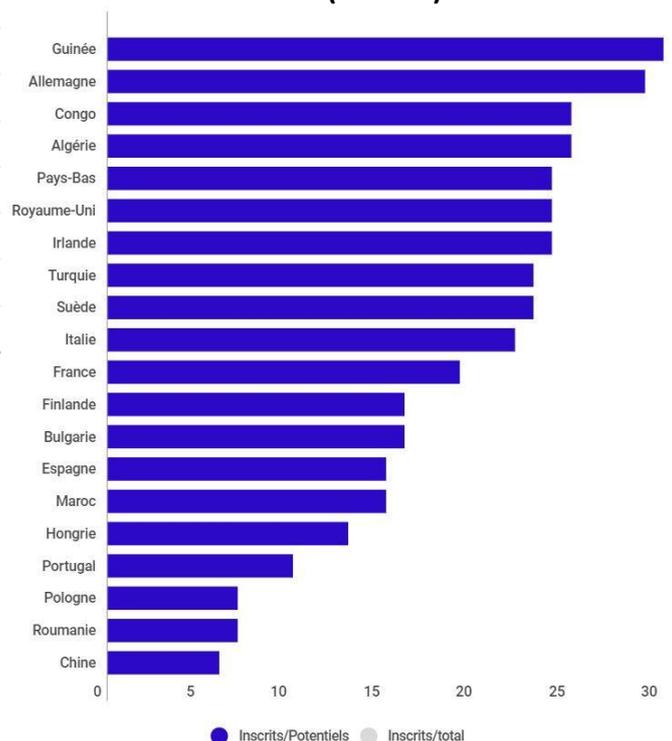
The Brussels Capital-Region—Capital of the European Union—is the most cosmopolitan city in the world after Dubai. Its 285,000 eligible non-Belgian voters could amount to nearly one-third of its electorate (see Charts 1 and 2). Their potential share in the electorate rises to nearly half of all voters in 3 of its 19 communes (Etterbeek, Ixelles, Saint-Gilles) and in 13 of its 145 neighbourhoods. However, 92% were not yet registered to vote as of March 2018. Among these non-registered voters, nearly 90% were European Union citizens (e.g. French, Romanian, Italian, Polish, Spanish). Belgium suffers from one of the lowest voter registration rates for EU citizens in the EU (see European Commission COM(2018) 44 final).

Figure 2 & 3: Voter registration rates for 2018 communal elections among non-Belgian voters across Belgium (Chart 2) and among specific nationalities in Brussels (Chart 3)



Différence avec l'année 2012, en points de pourcentage

LE SOIR



Over the course of 5 months—March to July 2018—the number of registered non-Belgian voters doubled to reach 49,406. That means the registration rate rose to 17%, an increase of 24% compared to the 2012 communal elections. Brussels registered 81% of all new voters in Belgium—much more than Flanders and Wallonia combined. The registration rate in Brussels increased by 3 percentage points compared to 2012, while the overall registration rates decreased in Wallonia and Flanders.

Table 1: Voter registration rates in 19 Brussels communes at last elections (October 2012), start of 2018 campaign (March 2018) and deadline for 2018 registrations (31 July 2018)

	Potential non-Belgian voters	Rate - 10.12	Rate - 03.18	Rate - 07.18	Change over 5 months	Early website	Good website	Email applications	Local letter	City event	City NGO partner
Anderlecht	25489	11%	7%	14%	199%						
Auderghem	6307	17%	12%	19%	160%			✓			
Berchem-Sainte-Agathe	3416	14%	9%	16%	177%						
Bruxelles	44481	12%	7%	16%	246%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Etterbeek	16296	12%	7%	18%	257%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Evere	6679	11%	7%	12%	180%	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Forest	13875	15%	10%	17%	175%			✓			
Ganshoren	3746	17%	9%	16%	177%			✓			
Ixelles	31012	12%	7%	18%	257%		✓	✓		✓	✓
Jette	8301	15%	8%	13%	167%		✓				
Koekelberg	4416	14%	8%	13%	169%						
Molenbeek-Saint-Jean	17210	13%	7%	14%	193%			✓		✓	✓
Saint-Gilles	18101	19%	11%	22%	191%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Saint-Josse-ten-Noode	7567	17%	8%	24%	295%	✓		✓	✓		✓
Schaerbeek	31911	14%	9%	20%	235%		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Uccle	19094	16%	11%	18%	161%		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Watermael-Boitsfort	3599	25%	18%	26%	145%	✓	✓	✓			
Woluwe-Saint-Lambert	13982	13%	9%	16%	179%	✓	✓	✓			
Woluwe-Saint-Pierre	10113	19%	13%	22%	167%	✓	✓	✓	✓		
19 Brussels communes	285595	14%	8%	17%	205%	8	11	15	7	8	6

The explanation for these higher registration rates across Brussels communes does not lie with the communal authorities themselves. In fact, the voter registration campaign ahead of the October 2018 communal elections started at a disadvantage because of the major delays by the communal authorities. As shown in Table 1, 14% of non-Belgians were registered in 2012, but only 8% remained June 2018. The form and information had not changed. Yet both were absent from the services and websites of most Brussels communes. At a conference with *Brulocalis* and *Pouvoirs Locaux* in February, civil servants from most communes said that their mayor and aldermen had not yet decided if and how to inform their non-Belgian residents. The communes received recommendations from associations in February and from the region in May, but most implemented them only by June—two months before the deadline. Although non-Belgians could have registered at any time during the past six years, most communes did not start to inform or register them until June—two months before the deadline. Even if enough resources had been dedicated to the most effective methods for voter

registration, thousands of applications per day would have had to be processed by the population services, which are chronically overworked and understaffed.

Given this major delay, why was 2018 so much more successful than 2012? The 19 communes did not do so much more than they did in 2012 (see Nikolic 2018). An overview of communal and regional actions in 2018 is provided in Table 2. 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. A minority of communes undertook more effective actions with local events, NGO partners and active EU citizen candidates. Few worked with local associations or neighbourhood 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 (NVA), who sent a secret circular—3 months before the deadline—which created confusion about applications received by associations or candidates.

So, what was the big difference between 2012 and 2018? For the 1st 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
- 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
- 4) The visibility of these actions also encouraged more EU citizens than ever (300) to run as candidates with partisan campaigns like #IVoteWhereILive and nearly all Brussels parties

Table 2: 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	100251 voters
Regional actions	
Letter from Brussels region	285595
Brussels regional websites as reported to VoteBrussels	7150
Voters reached at events (VoteBrussels 2876 & Objectif 2500)	5376
Voters regularly reached by VoteBrussels social media	110000
EU citizen candidates	300 candidates

The extensive international research on “Get Out the Vote” provides benchmarks for the number of immigrants likely to register as a result of these different actions (see Green and Gerber 2015 summarised in Huddleston 2017). The methods that work for immigrants are generally the same as for non-immigrants. Nonpartisan contact must be repeated and urgent, highly personable, simple, powerful and targeted. Even in the best cases, actions like letters, emails, leaflets or phone calls are generally not found to be effective on their own. These actions have small negligible effects: one new voter for every 200 leaflets sent, for every 275 letters sent and for every 900 automated calls made. The most effective action is interpersonal contact, which tends to convince one new voter for every 10-15 contacts made. Enthusiastic staff or volunteers should match the specific target groups and then provide semi-scripted interpersonal conversations with targeted information, inspiring messages and social pressure. These effective interpersonal actions include face-to-face conversations (door-to-door, presentations at events) or highly intimate direct mediums of communications like calls, text messages, emails or social media messages from trusted contacts/organisations.

VoteBrussels applied these international benchmarks to these actions in order to estimate the effects of the communal, regional and non-governmental actions. Of the 25,185 new voters that registered between March-July 2018, VoteBrussels estimates that one third of new voters came from their interpersonal campaigns, another third from the letter and websites of the Brussels Region and another third from the most active communal administrations and EU citizen candidates.

While coordination and timing could have been improved among these actors, the campaign results could not expect much better based on the limited available resources for voter registration in Brussels. International benchmarks suggest that the most effective methods cost on average around 30 euros per new voter and convince 1 in 10 or 15 people—that means 1 new voter for every 10-15 non-voters reached by the action. Given that only around 200,000 euros were spent overall (with hardly anything spent by communes or political parties), the few actors investing in voter registration this year seem to be effective.

WHAT WAS VOTEBRUSSELS?

VoteBrussels by Migration Policy Group was the largest voter registration campaign in Brussels, in partnership with Brussels City, Etterbeek, Ixelles, Saint-Gilles, the Brussels Commissioner for Europe, the Brussels Region and Objectif. The main target group for VoteBrussels was the 222,000 EU citizens who compose three-quarters of all eligible non-Belgian voters. The campaign's target group, information and messaging were designed based on an online survey ([The Bulletin and VoteBrussels, "Brussels Moves!"](#)), desk research, focus groups and bilateral meetings with authorities and NGOs.

Step 1: Gather data to decide on your target groups, information and messaging

Get data (research, surveys & focus groups)

WHY DID YOU NOT VOTE IN THE LOCAL ELECTIONS IN 2006?



Source: 9000 EU citizens, 2012 Brussels-Europe Liaison Office, [Survey about the Life of the International Community in Brussels](#)

Similar results from VoteBrussels/Bulletin "Brussels Moves" Survey in 2018

This research confirmed 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. VoteBrussels' main messages were that local councilors are more powerful in Belgium than elsewhere 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 1-page voter form by 31 July, vote by proxy on election day if they need and de-register after if they want, all without any risks or fines. This information was put in a FAQ leaflet and a training presentation in English and French ([watch here](#)) as well as six online quizzes in English, French and Dutch ([www.vote.brussels](#)). This wording was directly used to improve the websites and materials of the Brussels Commissioner for Europe, the Brussels Region, Etterbeek, Ixelles and other communes. The VoteBrussels volunteers' main materials were the Commissioner's trilingual leaflet, the application form and our list of communal email/mail addresses.

Step 2: Improve and use the best existing official materials

14 ★ 10 ★ 2018
Use best official materials

I VOTE! 14 ★ 10 ★ 2018

- Download the voter form from www.commissioner.brussels or pick up the form at your local commune.
- Complete and sign the form. Send it with a photocopy of your Belgian ID by ordinary mail to your commune or drop it off there before 31 July 2018.
- Your registration will be confirmed by post.
- For more info visit www.commissioner.brussels or contact us on +32 (0)2 430 86 00.

"More than 210,000 EU citizens live in Brussels' 19 communes, representing a quarter of the electorate. In your commune, a few hundred votes could change the outcome... So make your voice heard!"

The communes have broad competences and can defend your interests with regional and national authorities. Communes make decisions that directly affect your daily life: the development of your neighbourhood and its public and green spaces, cleanliness, parking, housing, education, and much more. EU citizens are entitled to vote in local elections. Do you want a say in your municipality's future? Don't forget to send in your voter form in time.

Who can vote?
All residents who have the nationality of an European Union member state and who:

- are registered in the population or foreigners register on 1 August 2018 or hold a special identity card;
- are at least 18 years old on 14 October 2018;
- complete the voter form for the elections before 31 July 2018.

 Non-EU citizens also have the right to vote if they have lived in Belgium for 5 years or more (www.elections.fgov.be).

FAQ

What do I have to do to become a voter?
Voting is a basic right and the procedure is extremely fast and simple. You fill in a one-page form and send it to the commune. By ordinary mail it is processed with a photocopy of your Belgian identity card.

Once I am registered, is voting compulsory?
No, because non-Belgian citizens can deregister as voters before 31 July 2018. After the elections, you can also deregister if you do not wish to vote in future elections.

Can I still vote in my own country?
Yes, taking part in local elections in Belgium has in principle no effect on your right to vote in elections in your own country.

What happens if I am abroad, sick or absent for another reason on 14 October 2018?
No problem, there is a simple solution: you can give a proxy vote to another eligible, who votes in your place.

I voted in the previous local elections. Do I have to register again?
No, your registration is still valid, even if you have moved to another municipality in the meantime.

What if I voted in Belgium in the European elections?
You also have to register for local elections. These are two different procedures.

Can I stand as a candidate in local elections?
Yes, EU citizens can become local councillors or aldermen.

14 ★ 10 ★ 2018

Think European

VOTE LOCAL

by [VoteBrussels](#) and [Commissioner for Europe](#)

www.commissioner.brussels

Responsible editor: Brussels Commissioner for Europe and International Organisations - Avenue d'Auderghem 63 Oudergem, 1160 Brussels

With these materials, volunteers could directly assist registering voters and collect their completed forms. Volunteer trainings were offered face-to-face, online and at the EU Affairs Consultative Committees of Etterbeek and Ixelles. Most volunteers were working full-time in or around the EU institutions, active in expat activities and skilled in public speaking and campaigning. Their potential was largely untapped by Belgian authorities and organisations, as most had lived in Brussels for less than 6 years (i.e. arrived after the last communal elections) and limited comfort in Dutch or French and limited time during the day. The campaign also opened its trainings and non-partisan collaboration to EU citizen candidates from all political parties, since these candidates had strong dedication and networks, but lacked any information, materials or training from their party.

Step 3: Train and coordinate ‘citizen mobilisers’



The volunteer ‘mobilisers’ were 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. VoteBrussels directly informed an estimated 3,000 mobile EU citizens through 350 hours of conversation at 80 events. Of these citizens, 1,000 were reached through group presentations and nearly 2,000 more reached through one-on-one conversation and dissemination at public events. The most well-attended events took place in Brussels’ EU Quarter, where many EU citizens work and organise events during lunch, after-work/evenings or weekends. These events included work meetings, professional, social and nationality-based events, language courses, markets and festivals. Lunchtime presentations were organised in every EU institution and major NGO, as most of their employees are non-Belgian citizens and able to spare 30-60 minutes away from their work, travel and family duties. On 2 July alone, 60+ volunteers received 330 applications and reached many more at a lunchtime day of action with European Commission DG HR and the Brussels Commissioner for Europe.

Step 4: Reach voters at existing events and organisations



Step 5: Focus on media and social media used by your target group

Ryan Heath @PoliticoRyan

Be targeted with (social) media

City of #Brussels makes it easier to mobilize expat voters

1/3 of ppl living in Brussels are non-Belgian, but less than 14 percent vote in local elections. #1Bru1Vote campaign also pushing for extending voting rights to all residents in regional elections.

Bullein The platform for Belgium's international community

BRUZZ 'Voter registration needs to become quasi-automatic'

be. brussels express

2018 Communal Elections in Etterbeek

Brussels mobilizes expat voters

LE SOIR

Rosetti Rivu

JVMAGAZINE.BE JV Magazine - Elections communales en Belgique

DEREDACTIE.BE Kommunalwahlen Brüssel: Expats kaum interessiert?

5,495 people reached

2,063 people reached

Alongside these face-to-face interactions, the VoteBrussels team secured significant attention through media and social media content. VoteBrussels became the main contact point for press covering voter registration, thanks to our press releases on 10 May and 21 August. The under-appreciated ‘expat media’ was 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. In the end, 15 media references were identified from all the major Belgian and expat television and print media.

Volunteers regularly posted on expat social media groups and 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. The most successful content were the six VoteBrussels online quizzes (www.vote.brussels), which were taken nearly 4000 times, shared extensively by participants as fun visuals with their facebook friends and then seen by hundreds of thousands of unique users in Brussels. VoteBrussels’ viral social media content regularly reached 50,000 Brussels users every week. Social media became the main focus of the campaign in July—the last month before the registration deadline, the first month of the election campaign, but also the first month of school holidays. In this context, social media was the easiest way to reach and remind EU citizens, who could still mail or email their form, even from abroad.

Step 6: Make voting fun and motivational

Make voting fun & motivational

QUIZ #1 My vote, my history
30 history lessons to the FIGHT for YOUR right to VOTE

QUIZ #2 4 Big Myths
That stop non-Belgians from voting

QUIZ #3 My local power
Every Vote Matters. The Power of Your Voice

QUIZ #4 Brussels Personality Test
COMING SOON

QUIZ #4 Stop complaining, start campaigning
COMING SOON

QUIZ #5 My election poster
COMING SOON

KEY FINDINGS: VOTER PARTICIPATION

Figure 4: 25 EU citizen city councilors elected out of 300 candidates



Non-Belgian voters played a role in making the 2018 Brussels communal elections into a ‘change election’ and a victory for representative democracy. The 49,406 registered non-Belgian voters constituted 8% of the total electorate—enough to elect 54 city councilors and 11 aldermen across the 19 communes. As a result of this increase in the electorate, each city council would need on average 36 more votes to get elected, which means that the communal elections were made more competitive and inclusive. Overall voter participation was comparatively high at 83.5% of all registered voters.

The 2018 communal elections represented such a significant change in Brussels politics because its electorate is changing. In a hyper-mobile city like Brussels, non-Belgians are just one part of a new, mobile electorate demanding change. Non-Belgian registered voters voted a lot like other first-time voters (youth and naturalised citizens) and like other ‘new Brussels residents’ (Belgians and non-Belgians who moved to their commune since the last communal elections in 2012).

Non-partisan analysis of overall voting patterns concluded that this electorate wanted a change of priorities, a change of coalitions & a change of generation – a change of 1/5 of city councilors, a change of 14 of the 19 communal governing coalitions and a decrease in votes for sitting mayors. With this turnover to a new generation of politicians, women now make up half of all elected city councilors. 5 of the 19 mayors in Brussels have immigrant backgrounds: Belgium's 1st mayor of African descent, as well as mayors of French, Greek, Moroccan, Turkish descent. More EU citizen candidate were also elected than ever before. Over 300 EU citizens (7% of all candidates) ran & 25 (8% of them) were elected, mostly on the Green (11) and liberal (10) lists.

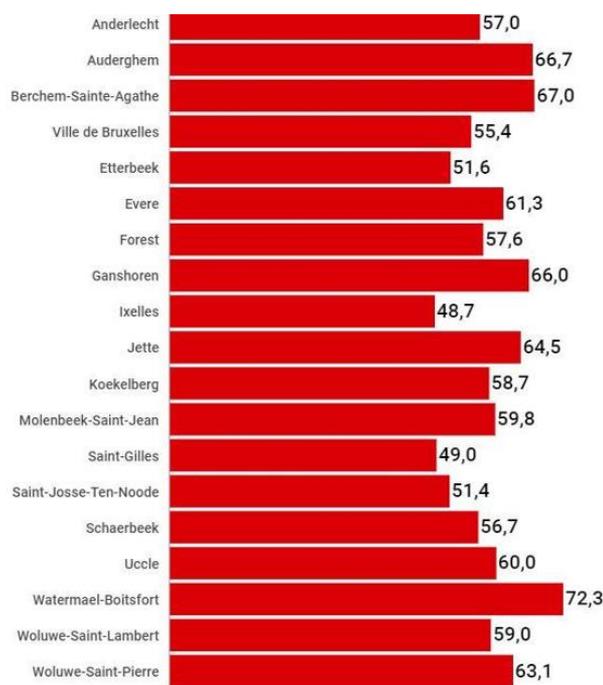
RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT FUTURE FOR BRUSSELS DEMOCRACY?

Notwithstanding the substantial gains of these 2018 voter registration campaigns, 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.

Perhaps the most Belgian solution would be to abolish the obstacle of voter registration. The right to vote for European citizens was introduced in EU law in 1994. Other European countries have automatic voter registration and thus higher registration and voting rates than Belgium. At the time, Belgian authorities thought the introduction of voter registration was the best fit with Belgium’s policy of obligatory voting.

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 the few available surveys, 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.

Figure 5: Actual vs. Potential Voters in 2018 communal Brussels elections



Brussels democracy has changed a lot since 1893; the combination of voter registration and obligatory voting has become the obstacle to truly universal suffrage in Brussels. Analysis of the overall voter participation rate by Emilie van Haute (ULB) demonstrates the impact of low voter registration and substantial voter abstention. Figure 5 shows the number of actual voters (voting on election day) compared to the size of the potential overall electorate (registered and non-registered voters). On the one hand, the lack of information and engagement for non-Belgians means that nearly 25% of the Brussels electorate (237,760 potential voters) were not registered to vote. On the other, the fact that obligatory is not enforced means that 16.5% of registered Brussels voters (100,789 voters) did not vote on election day. As a result, in a country with ‘obligatory voting,’ nearly half of all potential voters did not vote for the local government in Brussels that are supposed to represent, inform and engage them.

Source : Cevipol

Brussels cannot wait for federal reform because of the democratic deficit that is unique and urgent for the Region and its communes. If things do not change, non-Belgians will continue to be poorly informed and engaged. Likewise, the Brussels Region and communes will have few channels to reach them, particularly Europeans, who often work and travel a lot and use few Brussels services.

Luckily, Brussels does not need to wait for the federal government. Since the 6th Reform of the State, the Belgian Regions are now responsible for the organisation of the communal elections as well as the integration of non-Belgian citizens. Furthermore, the Brussels Region is responsible for the hosting of the European institutions on its territory, for which the Brussels Commissioner for Europe has a mandate to directly assist European citizens. At European level, since 2018, the European Commission is also more actively promoting voter registration among EU citizens across the EU.

The challenge is how to inform nearly 300,000 non-Belgian voters, without burdening the population services and depending on local political interests? The solution is simple: voter registration would become quasi-automatic. The authorities should continue what they began with the European institutions and their non-partisan volunteers. The letter of the Region, made more simple and personal, should be sent automatically to all Europeans who officially move from abroad or from one commune to another. The letter can be resent systematically after 5 years to all Europeans as well as to non-European citizens, and then again on 1st June 2024, two months before the deadline. The processing would also become quasi-automatic: the pre-completed form could be signed and sent, with a photocopy of the identity card, by email, by Iris-box or commune's e-guichet. This process will significantly facilitate the procedure on both population services and applicants themselves. In addition, based on the positive experience of VoteBrussels, potential voters should also be invited to '*ateliers démocratiques*' run collaboratively by the region, commune and volunteers from a diversity of non-partisan associations. Participants could learn everything about the Brussels communes and regions: local and regional services, opportunities to participate, the right and obligation to vote, Belgian citizenship and local associations looking for volunteers.

This procedure will be easier for both population services and residents. In order to better coordinate this process with the communes, the Brussels Region should take the lead as the entity responsible for the local elections, the European institutions and the integration of newcomers. A regulation and a budget should be adopted and the Office of the Brussels Commissioner for Europe should be reinforced. This process could already be piloted for Europeans for the European elections in 2019.

Currently, newcomers have few information channels to learn about truly local issues and politics, apart from a few specialised Brussels media. Likewise, the Brussels Region and communes have invested little in outreach to European and non-European citizens, who often work and travel a lot and use few services of the communes or associations. Yet due to the presence of the European institutions, Brussels is home to some of Europe's top experts on the great challenges facing the Region and its communes: urban planning, mobility, environment, energy, inequalities, entrepreneurship, integration, security and so on. Surveys suggest that non-Belgians agree with their Belgian neighbours on most election and reform issues. More and more are running as candidates, but many more want to give back to their neighbourhood where they feel most at home in Belgium and in Europe.

As an international and mobile city, Brussels needs to reinvest in its democracy with ongoing voter registration. If Brussels continues to inform and engage non-Belgians over the next six years, then, by the next elections, the majority will be voters and active participants in our local democracy. Greater participation would mean more competitive elections, more participatory policies and better information for the benefit of all.

IMPLEMENTATION OF VOTEBRUSSELS RECOMMENDATIONS



> (panel assis de gauche à droite) Hassiba BENBOUALI (asbl Objectif), Louise NIKOLIC (Docteur en Sciences Politiques), Thomas HUDDLESTON (Migpolgroup), Héliène HERMAN (responsable élections BPL), orateur Bruno MARTENS (Unia).

At a conference with *Brulocalis* and *Pouvoirs Locaux* in February, Objectif invited VoteBrussels to present joint recommendations for the 19 communes, which were published in the monthly [Brulocalis magazine](#) and supported in May by a follow-up communication from the Brussels Region. These recommendations drew from the extensive grassroots experience of Objectif, the latest academic research (Nikolic 2018), a 2012 survey by the Brussels Commissioner for Europe and additional desk research and focus groups by VoteBrussels. Based on this evidence, five major recommendations were put forward to the 19 Brussels communes. These recommendations were then implemented by a majority of communes by June 2018, thanks to the continued engagement by VoteBrussels, the Region and the Brussels Commissioner for Europe.

Table 3: Five recommendations for 2018 voter registration (February 2018)

- 1) Accept applications without a photocopy of the ID (all communes adopted)
- 2) Accept applications by email (15 out of 19 communes)
- 3) Create local web-pages (nearly all)
- 4) Organise trainings of citizen 'mobilisers' (nearly half, 8 out of 19 communes)
- 5) Send simple letter(s) along with the application (nearly half, 7 out of 19 communes)

Following the registration deadline, this evaluation of the 2018 voter registration actions was undertaken by VoteBrussels in collaboration with its partners. Initial recommendations were published in French in [Le Soir newspaper](#) on 21 August and in Dutch and English in the [BRUZZ regional magazine](#) on 29 August. In addition to the data analysis mentioned above, bilateral meetings were organised with the aforementioned VoteBrussels partners. The final recommendations were drafted and agreed by the campaign's volunteers and around a dozen EU citizen candidates from diverse parties, who came together in a 'Citizens Convention' on 19 November.

Table 4: Final recommendations from Citizens Convention 19 November 2018

Recommendations for Brussels communal authorities

- Adopt an ongoing information policy and voter registration procedure:
 - o Provide every newcomer upon arrival with a multilingual webpage, information point and welcome pack (including information on voting and communal services, participation policies, and associations)
 - o Accept registration for local and European elections by email, e-guichet and by simple drop-off at city hall
 - o Invite all non-Belgians to an annual Welcoming Event about the communes' services and participation policies, organised in partnership with local and non-Belgian associations.

Recommendations for Brussels regional authorities

- Adopt an ongoing information policy, with an adequate budget, for the democratic participation of non-Belgian citizens
 - o Inform Belgian and non-Belgian residents of each other and increase the opportunities for them to meet each other, volunteer together and participate in politics and citizens' consultations
 - o Facilitate ongoing voter registration with a regional website and online registration platform and a brochure and letter in all European languages for every newcomer upon registration and by post at least three months before the registration deadline

Recommendations for Brussels as the Capital of Europe

- Adopt a policy of "European Citizenship" by expanding the services and reach of the Brussels Commissioner for Europe both within and outside the European institutions and to both Belgians and non-Belgians

Since the October election, several communal governments have proposed to improve their outreach to potential non-Belgian voters. The aldermen responsible for elections in Etterbeek and Ixelles have already contacted VoteBrussels to discuss improvements in their procedures. While the communes have yet to discuss (quasi)automatic voter registration, they did continue to implement many of the VoteBrussels procedural recommendations for the European Parliament elections: email applications accepted by 16, local web-pages available in all and half-a-dozen local letters sent.

As recommended by VoteBrussels, the solution has become regionalised. VoteBrussels has been the one actor with recommendations on (quasi)automatic ongoing voter registration. [On 14 January 2019](#), the Brussels Regional Parliament invited VoteBrussels to present its evaluation and recommendations to its General Affairs Committee. Based on these recommendations, the Brussels Parliament developed a multi-party [Resolution A-827/1](#), which was adopted on 5 April 2019 by a majority composed of Francophone and Dutch-speaking green, socialist, centre and social liberal parties.

Brussels Regional Parliament Resolution A-827/1 on voting rights:

Demands that the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region:

- Pursues and intensifies concrete actions aiming to increase the participation of non-Belgian residents in the political life of the commune and, in time, the Region

Demands that the Federal authorities:

- Evaluate to what extent the application form constitutes an obstacle to the participation of foreign voters – European or third country – in communal elections
- Lead a reflection on the current voter registration mechanism for the registration of foreign voters and the obstacles that it creates and evaluate the possibility to make voting rights automatic, with the option of de-registration

As a result, ongoing voter registration has become a priority in the 2019 Brussels regional elections. This question was included in the Francophone 'Voter Aid Application' designed by the consortium of Belgian television (RTBF/VRT), newspapers (Libre/Standandaard) and universities (UCL & Antwerp). Five of seven Francophone parties are now on the record as in favour of automatic voter registration, at least for EU citizens. The only major party against voter registration—the liberals—states that non-Belgian voters are not interested in voting and therefore against automatic voter registration.

Proposition 25/35
Choisir une proposition ▾

Les résidents étrangers doivent être automatiquement inscrits comme électeurs pour les élections communales

Moi

D'ACCORD

DÉFI

PAS D'ACCORD

Pas d'avis >



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Pourquoi DÉFI n'est-il pas d'accord

Le sujet est plus complexe selon qu'il s'agit de ressortissants de l'Union européenne ou hors UE.