

PROPOSAL FOR A EUROPEAN SYMBOLIC VOTE ON 26 APRIL 2024 IN BRUSSELS



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BACKGROUND AND AIMS

This proposal meets the emphasis placed by the European Parliament on **reaching young and first-time voters in the campaign for the European elections on 9 June 2024**.

The focus on votes at 16 being introduced for these elections in Belgium has novelty value. It is also a way to demonstrate that it is not only important for young people to participate in the European elections, but for other first-time voters to do so, especially among the communities of EU citizens. There are grounds for optimism since the experience of Austria for example shows that 16-year-olds are more likely to vote than 18-year-olds because they are in a more stable school environment.

This is an **electoral reform which can help encourage initiatives for civic education in and out of school** – the theme of a new European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) called "[I'm going European](#)" which will be launched by the ECIT Foundation. Experience with lowering the voting age has been positive in Malta and also in Greece, where it is 17. This has encouraged legislators in Belgium and Germany to introduce votes at 16 for the European elections. The European Parliament has repeatedly advocated for lowering the voting age throughout the EU for the European elections.

For a conference which ECIT organised on 19 September, [a background document on votes at 16](#) was prepared. A group of young Austrians came specially to Brussels for this event to explain to Belgian and resident EU citizen 16-year-olds about their experience with voting. The event report can be found [here](#). Encouraging direct communication among first-time voters across borders is a highly effective way to encourage reforms. It is already starting. This project will involve setting up a team of young and first-time voters using the brand "Voters Without Borders" (VWB) established by a previous European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) demanding full political rights for mobile EU citizens run by ECIT.

1. Can discussion of this reform encourage more voters to make use of the right they already have?

In the 2019 European elections, the increase in turnout to just over 50% reversed a decline and was largely due to young people becoming mobilised around Europe as an issue for the future and turning up to vote, contrary to the trend towards abstention by their generation in other elections. Discussion of reforms to extend the franchise should encourage existing voters to use their political rights and not take them for granted.

In particular, attention should be paid in this project not only to national but also non-national votes at 16 and young European citizens. Maybe reforms for the young generation which underly the importance of voting could encourage them to persuade others to vote, including their parents? Whilst figures are not available for all Member States it can be estimated that in the last European elections roughly 10% of some 13.7 million mobile EU citizens voted in their country of residence and 20% in their country of origin. Votes at 16 could help break a trend towards the older generation of mobile EU citizens passing on habits of self-disenfranchisement to their children.

2. Can this reform encourage discussion of others?

Votes at 16 stands out as a reform which could spread against a background where other reforms advocated by the European Parliament for the European elections appear blocked. These concern ways to encourage better turnout of mobile EU citizens by removing obstacles to voting and providing more information in their own language. The European Parliament has advocated for two votes in the European elections, the first as now for MEPs from one's own country, the second for a European constituency based on a choice of transnational lists. There are links between these reforms. The European symbolic vote, which is the centrepiece of this project, will focus on first time voters but will also gather opinions about other reforms.

THE PROPOSAL

Against this background, the proposal is that people should be invited to vote on the spot on 26 April and online until 9 May for three propositions to strengthen European democracy and extend the franchise towards the goal of universal suffrage:

- Should all European citizens (and not just those from 5 of 27 EU Member States) be entitled to vote from the age of 16?
- Should 13.7 million mobile EU citizens be entitled to vote and stand not only in European and local elections, but also in regional and national elections?
- Should these voting rights be extended to 23.7 million non-EU passport holder residents?

In addition, the symbolic vote should be an opportunity to experiment and find out how the European Parliament's proposal for a vote for transnational lists is perceived by the public and might work in practice. This could take the form of asking those interested who have voted for or against the 3 electoral reforms to then go through the process of a symbolic ballot, first voting for a national list and secondly for a European list. This feature would be designed in close cooperation with European Parliament services and support from MEPs.

The proposal is coherent and consistent, since all activities lead up to or follow on from the organisation of a European symbolic vote on 26 April in front of the European Parliament. It is cost-efficient, building on ECIT's work which is carried out on a voluntary basis and with paid internships. Costs are low since the delivery of the project will be by first-time voters themselves forming "Voters Without Borders". It is also a participatory, interactive, and creative method to engage with the public. Alongside the voting booths for the symbolic vote there could also be a dedicated "together.eu" and European Parliament stand, as well as a stand for local and Brussels authorities. The new ECIT ECI – "I'm going European" – will also be promoted on 26 April.

Off-site internet access is also to be set up since the European symbolic vote will be as much online as on the spot.

This project could be linked to many other activities to encourage turnout in the European elections. This is because of the nature and methodology of a European

symbolic vote which on the one hand is a copy of the real election and on the other an opportunity to introduce other elements to make voting more attractive. A strictly non-partisan approach to this project, keeping it independent from political parties, is essential, otherwise its credibility could be undermined.

EXPERIENCE OF ECIT AND VOTERS WITHOUT BORDERS

This proposal builds on previous activities and experience which provides a strong guarantee that its deliverables described in more detail below will be executed. The ECIT Foundation sees its role as being primarily — that of a think-tank on European Citizenship, which for specific actions should set up a task-force of young people.

As a think-tank, the foundation has been pioneering the idea of [a Statute on European Citizenship](#), which has been supported by the Conference on the Future of Europe and repeatedly by the European Parliament. This has been a major topic for [the Cross-Party Group of MEPs on European Citizenship](#) which ECIT has set up. This group includes MEPs which have promoted the idea of a statute as well as the rapporteurs for European electoral reform who should be closely associated with this project. MEPs who have participated in previous meetings of this Cross-Party Group are aware of ECIT's interest in organising a symbolic European vote and can be relied upon to provide advice and support.

For a European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) "Voters Without Borders" (VWB), ECIT set up a task-force of young Erasmus students. This has given the foundation experience of how to support a young team and give them a leading role. The ECI demanded an end to disenfranchisement of European citizens who have practiced their rights to freedom of movement and an extension of the rights of mobile EU citizens to vote in local and European elections to regional and national elections. Although the ECI attracted under 10,000 signatures, its demands were taken up in the AFCO report on ["Parliamentarism, European Citizenship and Democracy"](#). VWB also built a network of 50 partner organisations and mapped 700 social media groups of mobile EU citizens. Above all, "Voters Without Borders" established itself as a "brand" and is sufficiently well known to still be attracting candidates and volunteers. VWB should be restarted in the run-up to the European elections.

The ECI experience led to cooperation with voting rights organisations grouped together in VRAR (Voting rights for all residents) which focusses attention on the political rights of third-country nationals. A symbolic vote was held in the Place de la République over one day by VWB together with the French associations in VRAR in the run-up to the French presidential elections in spring 2022. Before going to Paris, the VWB team was trained by the VRAR coordinator and made use of their practical guide.

For the team members, this was regarded as a highlight of their experience. They spoke to over 500 visitors and "voters". Having acquired the technique of a symbolic vote, it makes sense to be making use of this instrument again. The main target should be first-time voters, since the new experience of going to vote can be intimidating for some. The primary target group should be 16-year-olds, but other age groups should not be excluded. 9 out of 10 mobile EU citizens resident in Belgium have not voted where they live so far in the European elections, but rather back in their country of origin. The symbolic election

should be set up to resemble what will happen on 9 June when the real vote takes place and include volunteers on the spot who can explain the process.

WHY 26 APRIL?

For this project, the date chosen for the European symbolic vote is Friday 26 April 2024, which is ideal for several reasons. It is the day after the last session of the current European Parliament and sufficiently ahead of the political campaign and the date of 9 June not to be mistaken for any connection with the real election. The vote would take place either on the Place de Luxembourg or on the Esplanade of the European Parliament.

26 April is a date which has strong resonance among voting rights organisations throughout Europe as “International voting rights day”. This year, it will mark the 110th anniversary of the first symbolic vote by the women of France in 1914. The communication effort for a European symbolic vote in Brussels can only benefit from similar events probably occurring on the same day in Paris and Berlin and perhaps in other cities.

Whilst ECIT is confident that the on-the-spot European symbolic vote on 26 April will be a success, the online voting system which would follow on presents more of a challenge. This is why we propose measures in the next section to reduce the risk that the online system does not attract enough “votes”.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

A. THE TEAM

To carry out this project, different organisational roles are proposed:

1. The ECIT Foundation.

As the host for the project and legally responsible for its execution, the foundation will have an overall supervisory role.

- **Tony Venables**, the Founder of ECIT will cover the overall strategy both in terms of internal planning and outreach towards the Belgian authorities.
- **Nathalie Calmejane** will be responsible for the budget, payments and looking after the collective and individual needs of the VWB team.
- **Selma Remond, Caterina Camilleri and Alicia Cleary-Venables** will be responsible for executive tasks to set up the symbolic vote on the spot and online.

2. The Voters Without Borders team.

The recruitment of the team should be done after the event on 24 January beginning with a coordinator for the daily running of the team and planning ahead. Based on past experiences, this is likely to be an Erasmus intern with a background in European studies and some relevant practical experience. In the run-up to the European elections, there should not be a shortage of good candidates for this role as team leader.

- An Erasmus intern should be in charge of **communication** especially on social media but also towards the traditional media. This is a position for which it is more difficult to find good candidates. A background in journalism or marketing studies plus some knowledge of European affairs is necessary.
- Other members of the team should have **complementary roles for research, communication, and advocacy**.

Normally applicants should have Erasmus funding to which ECIT should add a contribution as host organisation.

B. ACTIVITIES AND TIMETABLE

This schedule could change in conformity with the roll-out of the European Parliament communication campaign, but if 26 April is kept as the date for the main activity, changes are unlikely to be radical.

January	<p>Putting the team in place:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building shared knowledge • joining Together EU • defining respective roles and responsibilities <p>The team should study and develop material resulting from the MobileCIT conference of 19 September about voting at 16, mobile EU citizens and the European elections.</p>
24 January	<p>Kick-off meeting at 1pm before the start of the ECIT event on European Citizenship at STAM Europa, 104 Rue d'Arlon Brussels and online.</p> <p>This planning meeting should bring together the ECIT and VWB volunteers, and several key interlocuters.</p> <p>Agenda:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training by VRAR on how to organise a symbolic vote. • Presentations about Together EU and the organisation of the European elections in Belgium. • Open and detailed consultation on how to organise the 26 April event so that support from local, Brussels city and national authorities can be more easily secured. • First discussion about how the on-the-spot symbolic vote can continue online. • End with a discussion of who can do what to promote the symbolic vote or lend its support in other ways.
March to April	<p>Finalising arrangements for the symbolic vote and promotion on the basis of this indicative to-do list:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • announcement to the press and on social media with the results of the kick-off meeting. • communication plan (see below). • logistical issues for 26 April (posters, flyers, ballot papers, translations, voting booths and recruitment of additional volunteers; Together EU stand). • testing the proposal for transnational lists. • promoting the ECI "I'm going European". • possible further features — possible catering, games, quizzes, questionnaires within the limits of in-kind or budgetary contributions • press briefing just before 26 April
26 April	<p>Full day for all team members plus extra help from partners and additional volunteers:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue with the online voting system.
May	<p>9 May:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • full report on the results of the European symbolic vote both on the spot and online.
June	<p>Update the report in the light of the results from the European elections on 6-9 June and send to elected MEPs.</p>

C. FEEDBACK AND REPORTING

Throughout this project, collecting feedback and reporting will be a constant task. One of the merits of symbolic voting is that it is a technique which encourages people to talk about voting, elections and democracy – subjects too easily taken for granted or which many are reluctant to discuss in public. It should be relatively easy to promote a European symbolic vote on a symbolic day and to give people a rendez-vous point in front of the European Parliament.

One option to be considered at the kick-off meeting would be to have static or mobile polling stations in other parts of the city to reach a more diverse public, but this will depend on additional funding and/or voluntary support. The visual and sound recordings gathered should be brought together for the contents of the final report which should be both a record of the activity and a more forward-looking set of recommendations for the future organisation of European elections. As already indicated, the election could be accompanied by a request to fill in a short questionnaire which could add material to the report. After the elections on 9 June, the report should be updated with data from the elections on 9 June on turnout of 16-year-olds and mobile EU citizens.

D. COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

This is a high-profile project which will certainly bring in more young volunteers. To the extent that the symbolic vote will test out proposals by the European Parliament for European electoral reform, one can be relatively optimistic that support for drawing attention to the symbolic European vote can come both from individual MEPs, the European Parliament communication services – especially for youth outreach – and from the liaison office in Belgium.

For the event on votes at 16 on 19 September, ECIT found that there was readiness on this particular theme for local and Brussels authorities to help with promotion, provided they are given sufficient lead time. For example, the Visit Brussels newsletter reaches key stakeholders in the public and private sectors. European affairs departments in the Communes can reach mobile EU citizens and organise discussions in advisory councils, whilst education departments can help with reaching schools and youth organisations. VWB already has contacts with Erasmus departments in Brussels universities and a list of relevant social media groups.

The key objective here is that partners should buy into the project and share the communication tasks. For VWB, this project is as much about its own role in communicating as persuading others to do so. Communication through these multiple channels can reach

a very large audience in Brussels, whilst the online vote will be accessible from anywhere for European citizens.

CONCLUSION

In this outline, we have stressed that organising a symbolic vote is above all a collaborative venture. Many activities can be planned around the day of 26 April. No other conclusion is necessary at this stage. The conference on Wednesday 24 January will therefore be an opportunity for anyone to come forward with ideas starting with a brainstorming and training session at 1 pm. We are particularly interested in recommendations from first-time voters.

To register, please follow [this link](#).