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**What are Current Demands  
for More Inclusive Voting Rights  
in Migration Societies?**

**in a nutshell #20, February 2021**



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## Messages for Decision-Makers

**14 EU countries have introduced local voting rights for non-EU citizens whereas in Switzerland, local voting of non-nationals is possible in eight cantons on different levels.**

**As the number of residents without voting rights is growing, activist groups are increasingly demanding more inclusive political rights.**

**Proponents see political rights also as an expression of belonging and inclusion.**

**Proponents demand that the granting of voting rights should not be tied to acquiring nationality.**

### What is meant by ...

#### ... Democratic deficit

Democracy is *the government of the people, by the people, for the people* as defined by A. Lincoln. All residents of a democratic state should ideally have the right to participate in the making of those rules that they are subjected to. If a growing number of people are excluded, this principle is ignored and thus a *democratic deficit* occurs.

#### ... (Activist) Citizens

The term *citizens* traditionally refers to those who hold the nationality of a certain country. This implies responsibilities and rights towards the respective state, including voting rights. However, in today's mobile world, more and more people live outside of the nation they are citizens of and have no voting rights at their place of residence. Activist approaches to citizenship argue that non-nationals' exclusion from political participation on local levels questions the inclusivity and legitimacy of democracy. Related concepts, such as Isin's "activist citizen" call for a more dynamic view of what it means to be a citizen, seeing engagement as a form of citizenship.

**Increasing international mobility has led to the situation that growing parts of local populations in Europe are residents without voting rights – a situation that presents a deficit in countries with a democratic system. This policy brief introduces activist groups and policy demands in Swiss and European cities that advocate an extension of local voting rights for non-national residents.**

In many countries, political rights are tied to nationality and seen as an exclusive privilege of citizens from the respective country. As more people move across national borders, this connection between political rights and nationality is increasingly problematized. Political initiatives argue that at least local voting rights should be extended to non-national residents.

### What is the Situation in Different Countries in Europe?

In Switzerland overall, the share of residents without Swiss citizenship amounts to 25%. In European cities such as Brussels, Vienna or Basel, however, this percentage exceeds 30%.

Due to **EU legislation**, voting rights exist on the communal level for citizens of other EU countries since 1992. For non-EU citizens, local voting rights exist in 14 of the 27 EU states. In federalist **Switzerland**, voting rights for non-national residents are **not uniform**. On the cantonal level, they currently exist in two out of 26 cantons (Jura and Neuchâtel). A referendum on their introduction is pending in the canton of Basel-Stadt. On the municipal level, they exist in

six cantons. A political initiative was recently rejected by the cantonal parliament of Bern while another initiative is pending in the canton of Zürich.

### Acquiring Nationality is Not Always a Solution

**Acquiring nationality** is traditionally seen as the only way to become a member of the polity, and the **discussion** of extending voting rights is often opposed by the argument that it would diminish the incentive to apply for national citizenship. However, people are increasingly internationally mobile, often on a temporary basis, and may like to engage politically in their place of residence without becoming a national citizen. Apart from the fact that not all states allow dual citizenship, acquiring nationality can be costly and lengthy – **particularly in Switzerland** where 10 to 12 years of residence are required. Abstaining from political participation for this long is contradictory to the expectation of quick integration.

### Advocating Citizenship Rights

Citizenship rights have been negotiated and fought for, and consequently have been transformed greatly over time. In



Picture: Migrant\*innensession 2019 in Basel, Verein Mitstimme, photo by František Matouš

Switzerland for instance, voting rights were expanded gradually to various groups. Women's suffrage followed after a long struggle in 1971. The Swiss living abroad were the last group to be included.

Inspired by these historical struggles and the ways in which values and entitlements related to citizenship have shifted, groups are campaigning for political participation and voting rights for non-national residents in several European countries, such as [Italy](#), [France](#), [Austria](#), [Germany](#), [Belgium](#), and Switzerland (e.g. [Basel](#) and [Geneva](#)). These initiatives are sharing their knowledge and experiences in the network "Voting Rights for All Residents".

In Basel, symbolic parliamentary sessions were held in the town hall. Participants without Swiss citizenship raised awareness for their issues by discussing and voting symbolically on demands that had been worked on for almost a year and which were then handed over to the cantonal council.

In Freiburg, Germany, people without voting rights were asked to cast their vote in an additional symbolic voting district parallel to the official elections. These votes were then submitted to a symbolic city council. Even though they are not representative, the results indicate that residents without voting rights would show a voting behavior not very different from that of people with voting rights.

These activist groups are thus adapting and expanding acts of democracy

symbolically to claim that migrants should have a political voice, because they are present:

**We don't wait, we vote. We are not saying 'please give us the voting right', it's a self-confident way of saying 'we are here and we vote'. (Proponent, Freiburger Wahlkreis 100%)**

**Our study** shows the investment in terms of time, professional and personal skills, experience, networks, and funding this kind of engagement takes. Therefore, quite a few activities are limited to those who have the corresponding resources. Moreover, it reveals the skills and energy the proponents could invest politically if they did not have to fight for having a voice in the first place.

#### Arguments Voiced by Proponents for More Inclusive Voting Rights

Addressing democratic legitimacy, proponents argue that people who live in a place and are subjected to the decisions of a state should also have a say in them. They are concerned about the future of democracy:

**It's not about the individual gain, it is not a fancy gain to have voting rights. It's that we care about democracy and we want to protect it. Participation is the only way to achieve this. (Proponent, 1bru1vote, Brussels)**

Others mention the obligation to pay taxes, in the sense of the traditional slogan from the American revolution: "No taxation without representation". Another line of arguments focuses on equality and mutual recognition within a local society:

**I want to live in a country, in which my friends, neighbors, colleagues are not sorted and judged by their passport or skin color. (Proponent, Freiburger Wahlkreis 100%)**

Subsequently, one of the proponents concludes that underrepresentation and the lacking visibility of the concerns of migrants can lead to their exclusion, discrimination, and alienation. Inclusion, participation, and a better representation of migrants are also understood as a way to prevent extremism:

**Extending and improving democracy is very important, we would like to promote a democratic society, which will keep us from extreme tendencies. (Proponent, collectif j'y suis, j'y vote, France)**

#### Policy Demands

Demands of initiatives point to the importance of introducing local voting rights after, for example, 5 years of residence. Some of the initiatives also call for voting rights on the regional level, especially when cities are composed of several municipalities, as in Basel, Vienna or Brussels.

The granting of voting rights, proponents argue, should not be viewed as the final objective linked to acquiring nationality, but rather as part of the process of being a local citizen. Another strand of demands concerns faster processes of acquiring nationality and the acceptance of dual citizenship.

We argue that these citizenship struggles mirror increasing mobility, migration, and globalization. Societies are becoming more transnational and activities and political questions concerning citizenship extend across national borders. Consequently, institutions and governments need to adapt to this dynamic of mobility and increase of non-national residents. The question as to who can participate politically *where* and *when*, will further gain importance.

One way of addressing the democratic deficit in terms of voting rights is through local initiatives and collective actions. We found that this concerns not only migrants without voting rights, but that activist groups include people with and without voting rights and with various migration backgrounds. From the perspective of an inclusive society and sustainable democracy, such struggles and their arguments deserve attention both of policy makers and citizens with political rights.



Picture: Campaign Freiburger Wahlkreis 100%, photo by Marc Doradzillo



## Further Reading

Blatter, J., Schmid, S. D., & Blättler, A. C. (2017). **Democratic Deficits in Europe: The Overlooked Exclusiveness of Nation-States and the Positive Role of the European Union**. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55(3), 449–467.

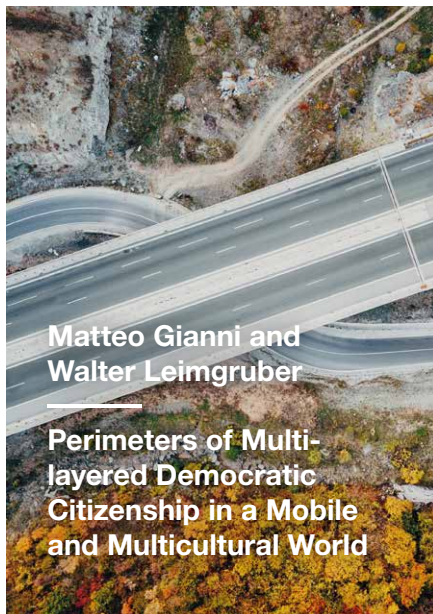
Blatter, J., D'Elia, M. S., & Buess, M. (2018). **Bürgerschaft und Demokratie in Zeiten transnationaler Migration: Hintergründe, Chancen und Risiken der Doppelbürgerschaft**. EKM.

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Isin, E. F. (2008). Theorizing acts of citizenship. In E. F. Isin & G. M. Nielsen (Eds.), *Acts of Citizenship* (pp. 15–43). Zed Books.

Leimgruber, W. (2016). Demokratische Rechte auf Nicht-Staatsbürger ausweiten. In C. Abbt & J. Rochel (Eds.), *Migrationsland Schweiz. Vorschläge für eine Politik der Öffnung* (pp. 21–37). Hier und Jetzt.

Slotwinski, M., Stutzer, A. & Bevelander, P. (2020). **From Participants to Citizens? Democratic Voting Rights and Naturalization Behaviour**. ZEW - Centre for European Economic Research Discussion Paper No. 20–055.



## Perimeters of Multilayered Democratic Citizenship in a Mobile and Multicultural World

Matteo Gianni and Walter Leimgruber

### A project of the nccr – on the move

The project studies the current transformations of citizenship in urban contexts of super-diversity. It asks which forms of (urban) citizenship exist, how they relate to multilayered citizenship regimes, and how citizenship and social cohesion can be institutionally framed in a mobile society. The project connects anthropological field research on citizenship and political philosophy of multiculturalism and mobility in multilayered governance settings.

in a nutshell #20 is based on the subproject **“Initiatives for Non-Citizen Voting Rights”** of Metka Hercog, Silva Lässer, and Katrin Sontag

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The nccr – on the move is the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies. It aims to enhance the understanding of contemporary phenomena related to migration and mobility in Switzerland and beyond. Connecting disciplines, the NCCR brings together research from the social sciences, economics and law. Managed from the University of Neuchâtel, the network comprises 17 research projects at eleven universities in Switzerland: The Universities of Basel, Fribourg, Geneva, Lausanne, Lucerne, Neuchâtel, Zurich, ETH Zurich, the Graduate Institute Geneva, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Northwestern Switzerland.

“in a nutshell” provides answers to current questions on migration and mobility – based on research findings, which have been elaborated within the nccr – on the move. The authors assume responsibility for their analyses and arguments.

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