

# ***The Voters Without Borders campaign for full political rights and universal suffrage***

*By Tony Venables, ECIT Founder*

The [ECIT foundation](#) on European citizenship brings together civil society activists, researchers and policy makers to make this first transnational citizenship of the modern era less scattered and more popular. We have developed guidelines for an EU citizenship of rights participation and belonging. [The EU and the Conference on the future of Europe should make sure that every EU citizen has a right to be informed of their European rights and the fundamental values of democracy and the rule of law. This is not enough unless in turn EVERY CHILD receives a sound grounding in citizen education including its European dimension.](#) In turn though, this theoretical opening to what Europe has to offer will not work without giving everyone a chance to participate in a European exchange programme. We need an Erasmus genuinely for all. Such ideas will be discussed at our next annual event on 1-2 December in Brussels where we will promote the [NECE Declaration](#) with EU policy makers.

Our foundation is the support structure for a task force of Erasmus students launching a European citizens' initiative (ECI) ***[“Voters without borders”](#)*** demanding full political rights for EU citizens. ***The OBJECTIVE is to make the existing legislation on the rights on the rights of EU citizens to vote and stand in European and municipal elections fit for purpose and extend these rights to regional, national elections and referendums.*** Anyone following the US presidential election will appreciate how vital this ECI is.

***[If we succeed, we will remove a stain on European democracy, take a step towards better integration of migrants in their host country and contribute to less nationalistic, more European politics in a European public sphere.](#)***

This is also relevant to this NECE gathering because simulating or really launching an ECI is an advanced form of European citizenship education. Provided the demand for a European law is in the competence of the European Commission, the citizen's committee has one year to collect over one million signatures meeting minimum thresholds in 7 EU member states. Only 6% have succeeded so far. This is therefore the gold standard for active European citizenship. **ECI's require an interdisciplinary approach and multi-tasking towards a specific goal within a regulatory framework giving responsibility, combined with a broad European culture and knowledge of how different countries function at the level of their political institutions and civil societies.** To meet this challenge, we have defined three work packages for the task force: **Research, Communication and Advocacy.** What have we achieved so far on each?

## ✓ RESEARCH

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The students have gathered stories about how mobile EU citizens are **disenfranchised** like the Dane who could not vote either in the recent Vienna city election or back home. They have looked at opinion polls which suggest that on average 63% are in favour of our proposal. Please read the task force 35- page report in English and German which brings the research together and makes the case for reform and bringing voting into the digital age. *Did you know that in the 2019 European elections when turnout increased generally, only some 10% of the then 17 million mobile EU citizens voted where they live and 20% back in their country of origin?* Of course, electoral systems differ across Europe as they do in the US but at least there, there is a federal voter assistance programme. Read our material and ask yourselves why if it's possible for EU citizens to vote in elections at city level in Paris, it is not possible here in Berlin? And will people really vote in second order elections where they live if they can't vote in the ones which really count-the national ones?

## ✓ COMMUNICATION

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The population of 14 million (post Brexit) mobile EU citizens is hard to reach but the task force has mapped **over 700 Facebook groups** and launched its own as a basis to collect signatures since 1 September. There is no ready- made coalition of powerful like-minded national organisations when it comes to democracy, so we need the help of everyone here. You can create your own task-force or join our coalition of over 50 partners. Communication has to be both bottom-up and top-down. There has been coverage of our initiative in The Economist which stressed that **NO TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION** is as valid as ever and the Sud Deutsche Zeitung, as well as on-line journals and regional newspapers. We are looking to recruit to the task force from journalism schools and thinking about an "all I want for Christmas is the vote" campaign. There needs to be more awareness raising of ECIs which sit uneasily with the administrative culture of the EU Commission and more mainstream media attention.

## ✓ ADVOCACY

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There is general scepticism of ECI's since the Commission is not forced to act on their results but only to produce a communication. There is also a hearing in the European Parliament. We do not share this scepticism since our ECI was accepted by a positive decision of the Commission as within its legal competence. *The Commission has now*

*included in its legislative programme for 2021 reform of the directives on the existing rights. So we will have to mount a citizen's lobby to push reforms. Anna Comacchio, the representative of the citizens' committee made a brilliant contribution to a joint hearing of European Parliament committees on EU citizenship on 29 October.* One positive side-effect of Covid- 19 is that at least with highly variable turnout figures, the issue of voting is very much on the agenda. We will be campaigning for the European Parliament to take an initiative in alliance with "voters without borders" and propose a European electoral law. But we also need your help to persuade regional and national politicians, because ultimately the decision rest with them.

I hope that this gives you an idea of where we stand with this campaign and what we have to offer if you decide, as we hope you will, to take it over whether in Berlin, Munich or Cologne from where other speakers come and in the cities across Europe where NECE participants are sitting in front of their screens and are looking for action. *Please sign the ECI now and persuade your family, friends and professional network to do the same.* If you want to do more, the task force can provide you with a full campaign package.

It was said at the opening session yesterday that we need in this unprecedented climate to think big. I think we need an ECI to focus attention on the NECE declaration and get the EU to act on European citizenship education. I also think we need to see the bigger picture and *remember that "voters without borders" is not just about the rights of attached to freedom of movement and migration in Europe, but is the last stage in the long struggle for universal suffrage.*

Thank you for your attention

Tony Venables

Founder of the ECIT foundation.