

EUROPEAN

POLICYBRIEF



EUROPEAN POLITICAL CITIZENSHIP 2030: POST-DEMOCRACY WITH POPULIST ACTIVISM OR AN INTEGRATED POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CITIZENSHIP?

Policy scenarios and recommendations from bEUcitizen, a research project on the barriers to realise and exercise citizenship rights by European Union citizens

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INTRODUCTION

This is a brief in the bEUcitizen policy brief series. The bEUcitizen project - funded by the European Union - set out to identify, investigate, discuss, and ameliorate the barriers to the active use of rights (and knowledge of duties, the concomitant to rights, in so far as there are any) by European citizens. The project aimed to provide a comparative overview and classification of the various barriers to the exercise of the rights and obligations of European Union citizens in the member states. Simultaneously, the project analysed whether and how such barriers can be overcome and the future opportunities and challenges the European Union and its member states face to further develop the idea and reality of European Union citizenship.

Drawing on research conducted during the project, this policy brief discusses the problems preventing European Union citizens from becoming active political citizens. European citizenship as active political citizenship has been underdeveloped from the start and is currently under strong pressure. Over time, European Union citizens seem to have lost enthusiasm for the European political process: Voter turnout in European Parliament elections decreased from 61,99% in 1979 to 42,61% in 2014. Attempts to transform elections for the European Parliament into a meaningful decision about the policies and the personnel of European institutions have been ineffective so far in two ways: On the one hand, they did not raise more interest in European affairs; on the other hand, and even more problematically, the 'Spitzenkandidaten'-experiment was overshadowed by the power struggle between national leaders and the European Parliament.

Although similar tendencies towards decreasing voter turnout can be observed in national elections, the trend of fading popular support is particularly alarming

at the European Union level. It threatens to undermine the legitimacy and functionality of the European Union, thus jeopardizing the entire integration process. Institutions without support cannot last. The European Union provokes a rather negative political reaction among its citizens and populist activism is challenging its policies and the integration process more broadly. The Brexit decision expresses this problem in an ideal-typical form: Europe-friendly citizens do not use their right to vote while anti-European activism brings citizens to the ballot box. Concerned with this passivity as well as with the activism mobilised by anti-European populism, Europe-friendly observers and actors see a major opportunity for the European Union to strengthen the European Parliament as the core institution of a European representative democracy.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

POLITICAL CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL CLASS

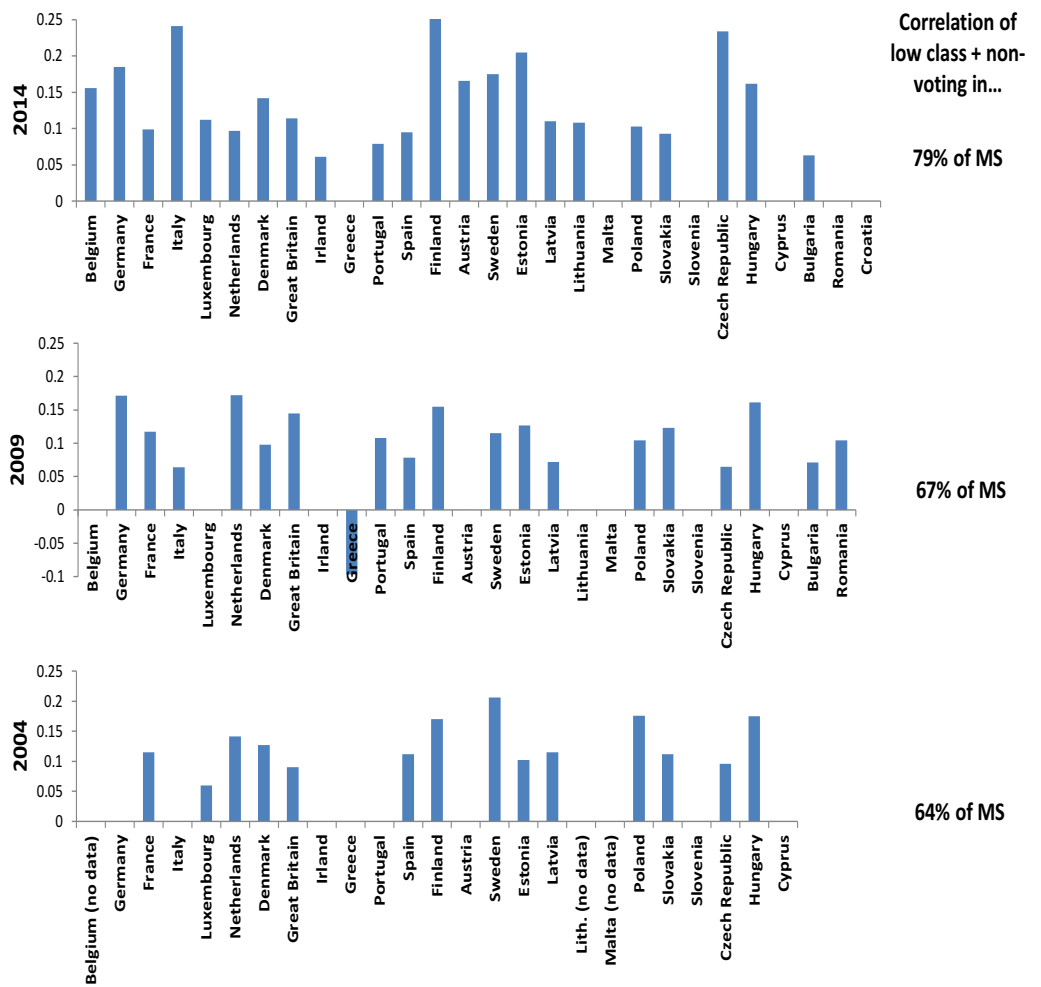
For most of its history, political citizenship – with its core, the right to vote – was something that people fought for. But since the late 20th century an opposite trend has occurred: **People choose not to exercise their right to vote. Voter turnout in the case of the European Parliament follows this trend. However, the trend does not apply to all citizens, it depends on different social groups. One could even say that it is correlated with class affiliation. One major finding of our research in the bEUcitizen project was that there is an increasing correlation between social class and participation.**¹ For example, at the federal level in Germany, eligible voters of all classes were equally likely to vote in the 1970s; in contrast, in the 2009 election, upper-class voters made almost double the number of lower-class voters.

Our bEUcitizen research also indicated that a trend similar to the one found in the national context can be observed since 2004 at the European Union level: "in 14 out of 22 member states for the 2004 European Parliament elections, in 19 out of 27 member states in the elections of 2009, and in 22 out of 28 member states for 2014. With only the exception of the 2009 election in Greece, all correlations go in the same direction: the weaker the social class, the more probable is abstention. It is also clear that this correlation increased in the period examined. The correlation between weak social class and abstention probability is present in 64% of the member states in 2004, 67%, in 2009 and 79% in 2014 (Figure 1)."² In almost all countries, abstention has increased along class affiliation, from 64% of the member states in 2004 to 79% in 2014.

¹ See bEUcitizen report *Voter turnout for the European Parliament and political equality in the EU*, D 8.6, by Seubert, S., and Gaus, D., 2016, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.56095>.

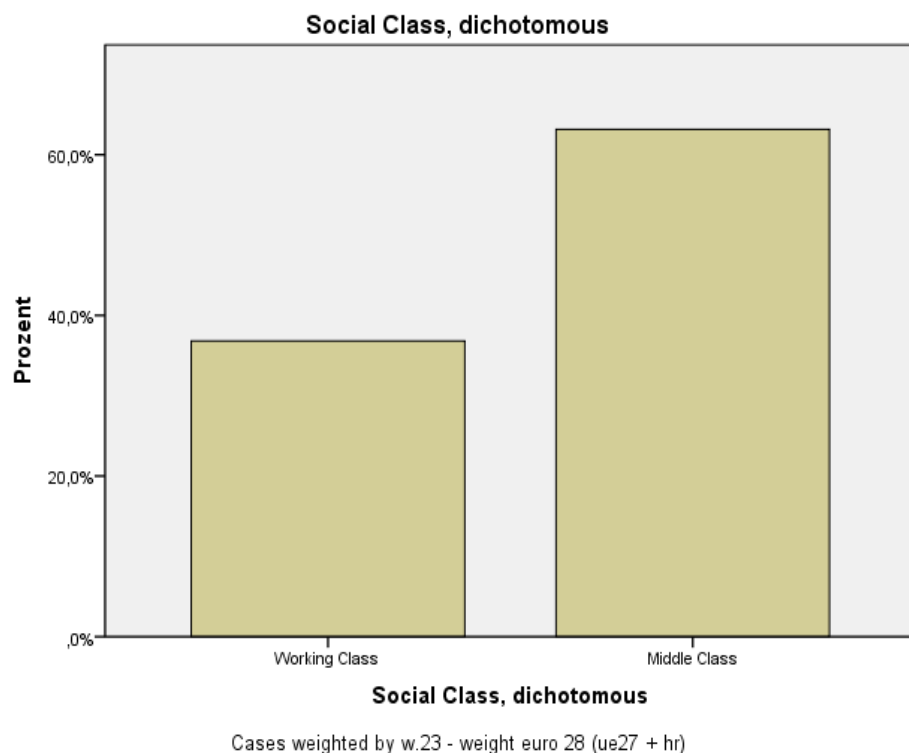
² See bEUcitizen report *Voter turnout for the European Parliament* (2016).

FIGURE 1: SOCIAL CLASS AND ABSTENTION IN THE 2004, 2009, AND 2014 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS



As Figure 2 shows for the election of 2014, in all European Union member states taken together, the middle class turnout is 26,4% higher than for the working class.

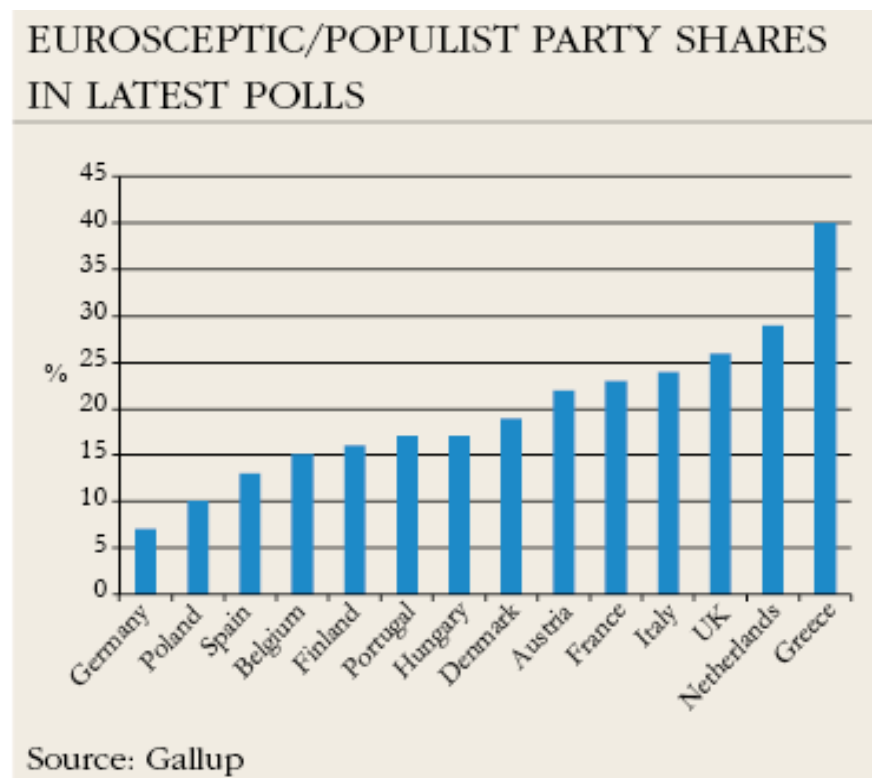
FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPATION DEPENDING SOCIAL CLASS



Scientists do no longer take this as unproblematic because the trend of passivity threatens the founding principles of political citizenship, namely that citizens can influence policies with their vote and generate political change. Currently, this seems only possible for the middle and upper classes, while voters of the working class have given up hope to foster social progress with their vote. **Especially in a post-crisis Europe of technocratic austerity measures, working class voters have become more and more frustrated. It is important to note that passive citizens are not content citizens, as political scientists tended to argue for a long time; conversely, they are disappointed voters convinced that it makes no difference whether and what they vote for, and that politics has nothing to offer them.** As Claus Offe put it: “Those who do not, or do not fully, participate in political life fail to do so because they perceive the state, governments and political parties as lacking both the necessary means and the credible intent to ‘make a difference’ on matters (such as employment, equality, education, the labour market, social security and financial market regulation) that form the core concerns of those who do not participate; they fail to participate because they have come to understand that lack perfectly well.”³ What happens at the same time increases their frustration: The elites “will concentrate their platforms, campaigns and mobilization strategies upon those segments of the citizenry who actually ‘count’ and neglect others, launching a negative and exclusionary learning cycle of mutual alienation between elites and underprivileged citizens.”⁴

If in the present social crisis European citizens do not get any good reason to hope that the European Union will really make a difference to their lives, some of them will not merely stay passive, but rather get active. However, their activism will be targeted against the European Union. This became very clear in the 2014 European Parliament election, when Eurosceptic and populist parties were a great success. Especially in Greece, where citizens felt humiliated by the “institutions”, populist activism was on the rise.

FIGURE 3: THE RISE OF EUROSCEPTIC PARTIES IN EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS 2014



³ Offe, C. ‘Participatory inequality in the austerity state: A supply side approach’. In Schäfer A. and Streeck, W. (eds.) *Politics in the age of austerity*. Polity, p. 202, 2013.

⁴ *Idem*, p. 203.

Following this trend, disappointed voters will not only vote in referenda against certain trade agreements, like in 2016 in the Netherlands. They will either vote for exiting the European Union, like in Great Britain, or they will continually vote for populist anti-European parties – both in European and national elections. Germany is a typical example of this scenario, where the relative high wealth is now aggressively defended by anti-European populists who gained more than 20% of the votes in the 2016 regional elections – compared to 7% in the European Parliament elections in 2014. Populism is directed against elites as populist leaders claim to be the real representatives of the people. Since the European Union's political representatives are not only highly specialized – and thus inevitably perceived as elitist – but also very weakly legitimised by elections, it is likely that populists will continue to gain from arguing against the European Union.

BLAMING THE EUROPEAN UNION

In the multilevel European Union governance system, the supranational level is the farthest away from the citizens and therefore can easily be blamed for everything that goes wrong. At the same time, the European Union is a player of high significance in neoliberal market policies. Thus, it is also blamed with good reason. But other reasons are more complex. A very important part of the problem is the unique architecture of European Union institutions, which expanded the European Parliament's role as co-legislator under the community method. Yet, the European Parliament is far from being the sole legislative actor within the European Union. The decisive forum of discussion and decision that shapes representative politics in modern democracies is missing in the European Union. A strong parliament is usually a good incentive for citizens to vote because they think that their vote can make a difference or at least push their interests into the political debate; alternatively, they might think that the institution for which they vote is important for decisions about pressing problems. Nevertheless, measures taken during the crisis resulted, on the one hand, in post-political technocratic austerity that left hardly any room for social policy issues while, on the other hand, they changed the European architecture into an intergovernmental executive federalist system that has further weakened the role of the European Parliament. **The forum of discussion remains the Council, which is divided along national interests. This weakened the Union itself because it strengthened the role of national arguments. In other words, to strengthen the Union it is necessary to strengthen its citizenry politically. This politicisation must break with the national line of organization and build transnational movements with a European perspective.**

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CITIZENSHIP

While in the member states only privileged citizens are active and shape policies, the underprivileged remain passive because they think that being active will not make any difference for them. But when the (still) active middle class considers European solidarity to be too expensive and expects uncompromising national policies to better able to save their privileges, populist leaders might get elected. Populism of the (semi-)privileged is thus the other side of post-democratic passivity. Conceptually speaking, the problem is that the economic, political, and social dimensions of European Union citizenship have been disintegrated from the beginning. The crisis has amplified this disintegration. However, only citizens that can use their political rights to determine the status of their social rights understand that it makes a difference to execute their political rights. The question is, therefore, how the political and the social dimension of European Union citizenship can be integrated at the European level. Speaking in terms of possible scenarios, the question is in which direction this disintegration will further develop: stronger disintegration or integration of political and social citizenship?

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Against this background, two main scenarios for the year 2030 seem possible:

SCENARIO 1: STRONGER DISINTEGRATION OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CITIZENSHIP

Only one third of the citizens vote for European Parliament elections. Two thirds of citizens think that the European Union has nothing to offer to them. This weakens the legitimacy and standing of the European Parliament in the European institutional landscape. Moreover, citizens think that Europe has destroyed the social welfare systems of their countries. Political participation is very strongly correlated with class affiliation. Only the middle and upper classes are interested in the European Union for cosmopolitan or economic reasons. The rest remains passive or engages in political activism directed against European integration. The European Union comes to stand for everything that is going wrong or should be changed. With the Council as the strongest decision-making body, populist governments in the member states would provoke gridlock of decision-making on major political problems, turning the Union into an anti-Union opting for disintegration.

SCENARIO 2: INTEGRATION OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP

Europe mobilises its citizens again. Turnout increases to 75%, with a strong participation of the lower classes and the cosmopolitan elites. Transnational social movements demand social reform. The European Commission starts a program of social welfare and growth. The European Parliament becomes a forum for discussion besides the Council and cooperates with the European Commission on a new social foundation for the European Union. Citizens start to engage in politics; populism decreases. A reform of the institutions is widely discussed and finds supporters among all social groups. The European Union starts to overcome the divide between the political and social dimension of European Union citizenship. The social dimension of European Union citizenship is accomplished through a gradual evolution that can then be legitimised by a European-wide referendum that makes the European Union a real democracy with a strong Parliament and active citizens.

The scenarios follow from the result of the increasing political inequality in European Parliament elections. They point to opposite directions. If the claim is correct, that the low voter turnout of the working class is a result of the disintegration of political and social citizenship of the European Union, then only these scenarios of either a stronger disintegration or of overcoming the gap seem possible.

Given the prospect of a disintegrating European Union citizenship, four policy options can be identified:

POLICY OPTION 1: DO NOTHING

Every political process is a long-term event that has no sudden consequences. Elections will be held, a European Commission will be elected, and national governments will negotiate. Maybe Greece will exit the Eurozone, but people will get used to it. This trend towards “post-democracy” relates to other changes in the social structure of voters, the development of media, and the losses of catch-all-parties. A European post-democracy will be as normal as an American Trump-ocracy. In the view of critical observers, Europe has already started to go down this road.

With the introduction of the Fiscal Compact, the European Union has taken another step towards an ‘authoritarian-liberal state’ and is about to surrender to the ideology of ordoliberalism. The essence of an authoritarian-liberal state consists of covering the conflict between democracy and capitalism instead of confronting it openly and dealing with it in a democratic manner. An authoritarian-liberal state is based on the assumption that a prosperous market economy can be stabilised only when markets and the right to the accumulation of private property are protected against the unpredictable interference of democratic decisions. The highest

**POLICY OPTION
2: CHANGE
ELECTORAL LAW
FOR THE
EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT**

priority for stabilising markets is, therefore, depoliticisation. The economic sphere becomes the basis for the political, public democratic discussions which are dried out by the constantly repeated reference to alleged economically-inherent necessities – also known as TINA strategy ('there is no alternative').⁵ Surely, after the next financial crisis, the social crisis will be even more dramatic and will either lead to social revolts or to a total selling-off and brain-drain of the southern European countries. But historically this is no untypical situation. It might be acceptable for North European member states. Post-democracy and authoritarianism will go hand in hand.

Given the complex situation of European Parliament elections, proposals for a **revision of the electoral process that make voting easier** are an almost self-evident option. One proposal aims at **reducing the costs of participation through online voting**. Hoping that especially younger voters can be reached with this measure, the proposal should be accompanied by a **reduction of the voting age to 16 years old**. Other reform proposals aim at overcoming differences that result from the national implementation of European Union electoral law. National differences in the procedures of voter registration represent an obstacle to the equality of citizens in the context of European Parliament elections. The **introduction of a "European Voter Card"** might help to remedy this problem as it would ease participation in European Parliament elections based on residence in an European Union country. Unequal representation could be overcome by the standardization of national electoral thresholds.⁶

Research also points towards possible positive effects of a transnational constituency by strengthening citizen representation within the European Union. First, the representation of citizens' interests along national cleavages that currently dominates in European Parliament elections would partly be broken up, and the representation of citizens' genuine transnational concerns would be promoted. Second, the status of European-wide parties would be strengthened because Members of the European Parliament would be elected not only via national parties. Third, by means of a transnational list, parties could also have the opportunity of competing for votes in member states where they have only a small representation (for instance the Green Party in Eastern Europe).⁷ Although currently European Parliament elections take place in all member states within the same time window (for the 2014 European Parliament elections it was from May 22nd to May 25th 2014), polling stations are open at different hours during that period and on different days. To **dramatize European Parliament elections as a common European moment, it would be helpful to create a pan-European electoral evening**.

Although these proposals might be appropriate for improving European election procedures, it remains unclear how they would create the impression for citizens that European elections really make a difference. As pointed out in our bEUcitizen research, "any proposal to change European Union electoral law – also an European Union-wide constituency – has to be assessed from the perspective of the European Parliament's status in the overall institutional architecture and the political process established by it."⁸ So, it is unclear what effects these changes alone can have and how they could activate European citizens to engage in politics, since they already have these rights (except 16-year old new voters). Moreover, there is no indication as to how these changes could overcome the divide between political and social citizenship. One can assume that these changes alone are likely to increase this divide because they make it easier for the already active part of the citizenry to engage, without

⁵ See bEUcitizen report *Voter turnout for the European Parliament* (2016), p. 46.

⁶ See bEUcitizen report *Voter turnout for the European Parliament* (2016), p. 55.

⁷ See bEUcitizen report *Voter turnout for the European Parliament* (2016), p. 56.

⁸ See bEUcitizen report *Voter turnout for the European Parliament* (2016), p. 57.

giving incentives to the passive part. This leads to the option of changing the institutional framework, discussed below.

**POLICY OPTION
3: MAKE
EUROPEAN
INSTITUTIONS
STRONGER**

The impression that changes in electoral law would not induce new political activism led some observers to argue that a substantial institutional reform is necessary in order to reintegrate political and social citizenship in the European Union. The reform of the European Parliament is at the core of most of these reform proposals. What needs to be altered is the dominance of the international structure of the European Union. European Union Treaties in particular have to be opened up so that conflicting issues can be discussed and democratically decided.

As our bEUcitizen research points out,⁹ transnational societal voices (that is, European parties, the media, and social movements) are crucial under this option by proposing to bestow a real power of co-decision-making upon the European Parliament in all matters of common concern. **Members of the European Parliament would be elected from transnational lists of European parties. The Council would be transformed into a second chamber to which each member state would delegate two representatives of its national parliament and two representatives of the national government. The Commission would function as a European Union government formed by parliamentary majority, entrusted with the usual tasks of an executive and answerable to the Parliament.**

It is questionable when such an institutional reform will take place since Treaty changes demand a consensus in the Council. This major reform would be a new foundation of the European Union and would, therefore, need the democratic consent of European citizens in a Europe-wide referendum. Yet, as the findings of our bEUcitizen research indicate, socially disadvantaged people will not participate if there are no social issues at stake. So it seems that a rather long-term institutional reform agenda needs some short-term back-up, since the pressure of populism will probably rise in the future.

**POLICY OPTION
4: DEVELOP A
EUROPEAN
SOCIAL POLICY**

The advantage is that **the existing – although imperfect – structure of European institutions allows for a complementary, short-term way to prove that the European Union can make a difference in social policies.** During the crisis, the Fiscal Compact has effectively abandoned the previously substantial division of labour between economic, regulatory policies as European issues on the one hand, and social, labour market, and redistributive policies as national issues on the other hand. This is the reason why so far the European Union could not take up social issues. But the Commission recently took a first step in this direction when it launched a "consultation on the European Pillar of Social Rights" in March 2016. The description of this "part of a Social Package" reveals that the Commission understands its limited role in social issues quite well. Thus it presents social issues not as citizenship issues but rather as part of economic integration: "The European Pillar of Social Rights is part of the Commission's work to strengthen the Economic and Monetary Union. It will set out a number of essential principles to support well-functioning and fair labour markets and welfare systems within the euro area. Other European Union Member States are able to join if they want."¹⁰ The idea is to "offer a way to assess and in [the] future, help foster the better performance of national employment and social policies. Throughout 2016, the Commission will engage in a debate with other European Union institutions, national authorities and Parliaments, social partners, civil society, experts from academia and citizens. The outcome of this debate should feed into the establishment of the European Pillar of Social Rights in early 2017. Once established, the Pillar

⁹ See bEUcitizen report *Voter turnout for the European Parliament* (2016), p. 60.

¹⁰ European Commission. *Towards a Pillar of Social Rights, reformed rules for posted workers and a rebalancing of the economy*, News, 8 March 2016, available at http://ec.europa.eu/news/2016/03/20160308_2_en.htm.

should become the reference framework to screen the employment and social performance of participating Member States, to drive the process of reforms at national level and, more specifically, to serve as a compass for renewed convergence within the euro area."¹¹

Clearly, the Commission is foremost interested in a "reference framework". The danger is that by this restriction it is again perceived as an actor against national standards of sovereignty. The focus on strengthening the "Market and European Union" must not leave the Social Union behind. This social dimension of the European Union is a missing part of citizenship which is here again framed in an economic context that tends to neglect the interests of the people who do not take part in the European labour market. The bEUcitizen report on "The Social Construction of Social Rights across Europe" is quite clear on that: "The idea of European Citizenship has been primarily relevant only for those citizens who wish and are able to move between member states, while its influence upon the rights of settled citizens has been largely secondary. [...] But if there is to be a European dimension to social citizenship it would have to be relevant not only to intra-Union migrants, but also to that vast majority of European Union citizens who do not move about, but 'stay at home'. [...] In so far as the European Union continues to appeal to solidarity, its appeals of late have been to solidarity between nations in the face of economic crisis, not solidarity between citizens."¹² However, since the effects of the social crisis and European austerity measures are not only felt by mobile jobseekers, it is highly important to develop a further framework of social security in the European Union for all its citizens – and that means, at the European level.

The bEUcitizen report on the "Social Rights of European Union Migrant Citizens" made the proposal to expand an European Union-wide minimum benefit for mobile jobseekers "to all European Union citizens in the form of an European Union-wide Basic Income Guarantee, which might constitute a cornerstone of future European Union citizenship."¹³ Other bEUcitizen research took up this proposal and underlined the European Citizens' Initiative that suggested a Universal Basic Income as a tool for member states to improve their respective social security systems. "Specifically, however, the objective of the Initiative in 2013 was to offer to each person in the European Union the unconditional rights as an individual, to having his/her material needs met to ensure a life of dignity as stated by the European Union treaties, and to empower participation in society supported by the introduction of the Universal Basic Income. In the short term, initiatives such as 'pilot studies' (Article 156 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union) and examination of different models of Universal Basic Income (European Parliament resolution 2010/2039(INI)) should be promoted by the European Union."¹⁴ To secure a life in dignity would prove that the European Union can make a difference to its crisis-affected citizens beyond the rights to move and seek for new job opportunities. From there, political interest would also increase and political participation would be more probable. This would clearly contribute to Scenario 2, the integration of political and social citizenship. Its backbone would be a strong European Parliament.

¹¹ *Idem.*

¹² See bEUcitizen report *The social construction of social rights across Europe*, D. 6.3, by Dean, H., and Brady, A.M., 2016, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.46834>, p. 39.

¹³ See bEUcitizen report *Social rights of EU migrant citizens: A comparative perspective*, D 6.1, by Seeleib-Kaiser, M., Bruzelius, C., and Chase, E., 2015, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20295>, p. 31.

¹⁴ See bEUcitizen report *The social construction of social rights* (2016), p. 40.

MOVING FORWARD

Of the four options, the do-nothing-option leads to an authoritarian post-democracy which is probably not desired by anyone. The second one, changing voting procedures, could possibly be implemented in a rather simple way and might have some effect on voter turnout, but it is an insufficient answer to the more fundamental problem of the disintegration of economic, political and social dimensions of European citizenship. It will only strengthen the already active part of the citizenry. Therefore, **the reform of political institutions to strengthen the European Parliament seems adequate. Yet, this far-reaching reform seems almost impossible to achieve under present conditions. It serves more as a long-term perspective that needs to be enabled and accompanied by a European social risk management. The fourth option which calls for establishing the dimension of European social citizenship as an equal right for every citizen is the indispensable condition for any strengthening of citizenship.** With this policy, European political citizenship 2030 might not turn out to be a choice between post-democratic passivity or populist activism, but a politicized transnational participation of citizens with European social rights in a vivid Europe, having the prospect to make a political and social difference for its citizens. In turn, citizens would be fostering European integration and institutions. However, if the European Union does not clearly demonstrate to its citizens that it makes a difference to them, it will be perceived as a cause for the crisis, rather than as a solution to it, thus, further provoking strong activism against itself.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

bEUcitizen is an European Union-funded research project focused on the barriers that still exist to realise and exercise citizenship rights of European Union citizens. The project aims to:

- understand the problems European citizens experience when they try to exercise the rights provided - or perform the duties required - by the legal concept of European citizenship;
- examine where, when, and why they run into hindrances and explain their nature thereof;
- identify the causes of the existence of these barriers, both direct and indirect
- explore whether these barriers can be reduced or even lifted;
- investigate which actors have already taken initiative to do so and assess how successful have they been;
- evaluate the unintended and perhaps unwanted consequences of some possible solutions to reducing these barriers.

METHODOLOGY OF THE PROJECT

The research into the rights of European Union citizens and the barriers to them exercising these is pursued within a multidisciplinary and multidimensional approach. By combining normative and empirical disciplines, bEUcitizen also integrated diverse methodological paradigms, tools and instruments. Taking into consideration that European Union citizenship is not only a legal principle but also a social practice as well as a historical process, the project raises mutual multidisciplinary understanding on the multidimensional character of citizenship, formulates linguistic and conceptual principles that enforce this mutual understanding and exchanges methodological approaches that improve mutual understanding.

The research is carried out in clusters and employs the following approaches:

- a horizontal approach, dividing citizenship rights into policy domains, i.e. economic, social, civil and political rights, recognising the

multidimensionality of rights;

- a vertical approach, starting from the premise that citizenship rights and duties affect various categories of citizens differently, recognising the multitudinous effects of rights on different categories of citizens;
- comparisons over time and space, providing a comparative and historical approach;
- a cross-sectoral and conceptual approach, running like a red thread through all work packages—from the beginning to the end.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	All Rights Reserved? Barriers towards European CITIZENship (bEUcitizen)
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FURTHER READING

bEUCitizen report *The social construction of social rights across Europe*, D. 6.3, by Dean, H., and Brady, A.M., 2016, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.46834>.

bEUCitizen report *Social rights of EU migrant citizens: A comparative perspective*, D 6.1, by Seeleib-Kaiser, M., Bruzelius, C., and Chase, E., 2015, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20295>.

bEUCitizen report *Voter turnout for the European Parliament and political equality in the EU*, D 8.6, by Seubert, S., and Gaus, D., 2016, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.56095>.