



*Do expats want to vote?  
The voice from abroad on the facilitation of the  
vote for non-resident Greeks*

This article reflects the collective thoughts of the *Greek Diaspora Team*;  
some of the individuals who have contributed to its drafting can be found at  
<http://seesoxdiaspora.org/about/>

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## Do expats want to vote? The voice from abroad on the facilitation of the vote for non-resident Greeks

By the SEESOX Greek Diaspora Project Team of the University of Oxford<sup>1</sup>

Following the emigration of almost half a million Greeks during the recent decade-long economic crisis,<sup>2</sup> the issue of the diasporic vote has come to the forefront of Greece's party-political debate. All parties agree with the principle that expatriates should be able to vote from abroad instead of the current system whereby Greeks living abroad can only vote if they return to Greece. However, there is still considerable controversy over the practicalities and the scope and inclusiveness of the law to be proposed. One of the factors that may inform this debate inside Greece may be what the diaspora itself thinks. This is the question we set out to answer through our Greek Diaspora Project at the University of Oxford.<sup>3</sup>

### Our survey

The Oxford Greek Diaspora Project in cooperation with the Athens-based think tank diaNEOsis, recently conducted a survey of the Greek diaspora in the UK which, perhaps unsurprisingly, shows that the vast majority of the respondents would like to vote from abroad in Greek national elections.<sup>4</sup> This widespread attitude is common among pre-crisis migrants (those who migrated before 2010) and crisis migrants (those who migrated after 2010). More surprisingly, a significant 24.9% of crisis migrants are not interested in voting from abroad, reflecting a broad feeling of discontent or at least indifference with the political system in their home-country, more so than pre-crisis migrants (**Table 1**).

**Table 1.** Would you like to be able to vote in Greek parliamentary elections from abroad?

	Pre-crisis migrants	Crisis migrants
Yes	77.6%	67.9%
No, I am not interested	11.2%	24.9%
No, I do not think that the Greeks living abroad should have the right to vote in Greek parliamentary elections	11.2%	7.2%

Source: SEESOX-GDUK survey (2019)

Notwithstanding this minority sentiment, our survey also shows that when offered with different options for engagement with their homeland, Greeks in the UK favor the diasporic vote as the preferred way for the Greek government to engage with the UK diaspora, followed by systematic contact with diaspora organizations and diaspora engagement in Greek policy-

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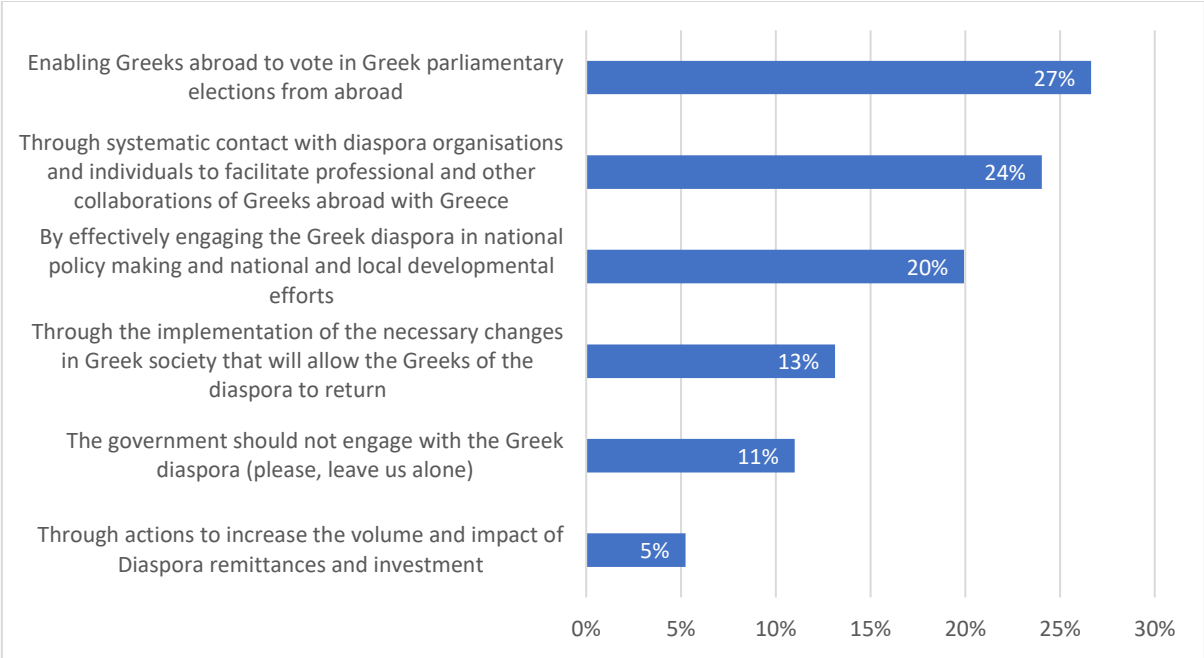
<sup>2</sup> Between 2008 and 2016, 427,000 individuals are estimated to have emigrated. Around 80% move within EU, with both Germany and the UK receiving around 25% each (OECD, 2018)

<sup>3</sup> The Greek Diaspora is a project which has been running during the last three years and is managed by SEESOX South East European Studies at Oxford.

<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted on-line with a structured questionnaire in the territory of the United Kingdom from 11/10/2018 till 06/05/2019. The survey covered all adult Greeks who had been living the UK for at least 3 months. The sample of the survey was 586 questionnaires collected via respondent driven sampling (RDS) methodology

making (Figure 1). Many scholars argue that enfranchisement is often a simpler and low-cost inclusion mechanism, while the other two presuppose either expertise or motivation, that is an ability and willingness to participate thus, excluding a large number of migrants.

Figure 1: Proposed ways for the Greek governments to engage with the UK diaspora\*



\* Multiple responses question – in the figure displayed the percent of responses

Source: SEESOX-GDUK survey (2019)

At the same time, it seems that the lack of consensus in Greece regarding the scope of the right to vote from abroad is also reflected among the members of the diaspora. Our survey has also shown that views on ‘Who should have the right to vote’ are divided between those who answer ‘those who have a closer and recent relationship with Greece’ (44.4%), and those who believe that ‘everyone should have the right to vote’ (43%). Interestingly crisis migrants agree more with the maximalist position (47.5%), while the pre-crisis migrants overwhelmingly believe that only those who have a closer and recent relationship with Greece should vote (68.6%), even where time limitations would deprive some of them of their right to vote (Table 2).

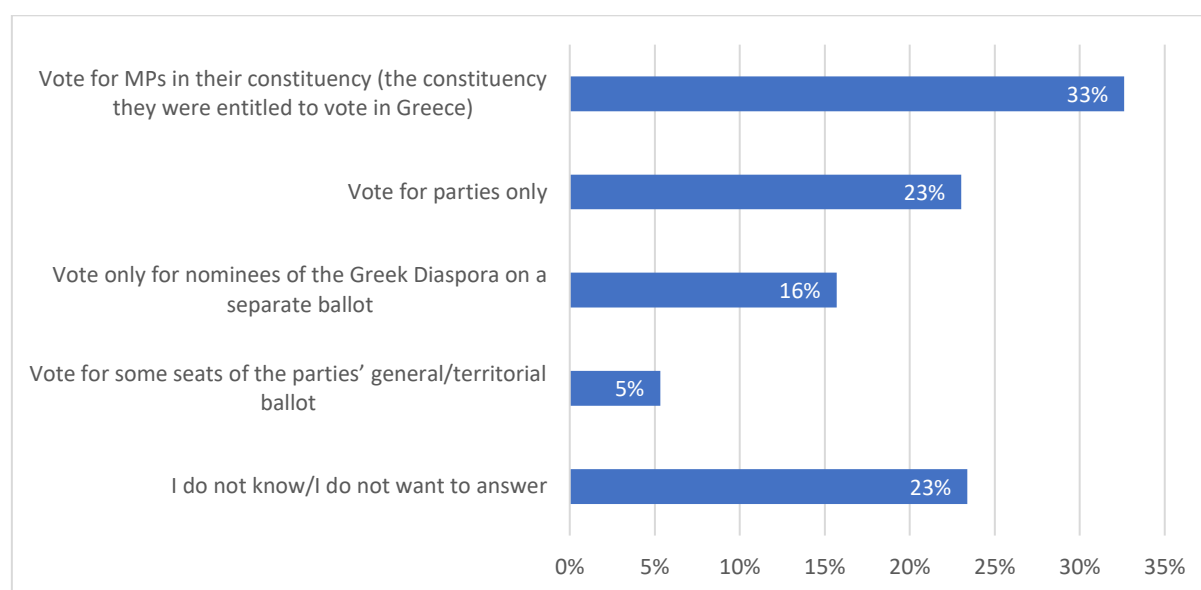
Table 2. Who should have the right to vote?

	Total	Pre-crisis migrants	Crisis migrants
Everyone should have the right to vote	43.0%	24.5%	47.5%
Only those who have a closer and recent relationship with Greece	44.4%	68.6%	38.8%
I do not think that the Greeks living abroad should have the right to vote in Greek parliamentary elections	2.9%		3.4%
I do not know/I do not want to answer	9.7%	6.9%	10.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: SEESOX- GDUK Survey (2019)

Moving on to more operational issues, regarding the question ‘In which constituency should the Greeks abroad vote?’ the largest number (33%) would like to vote for the MPs in their registered constituency, thus expressing a clear preference for their vote to carry equal weight (**Figure 2**). However, other options like ‘vote for parties only’ or electing ‘nominees of the Greek diaspora on a separate ballot’ or voting for ‘some seats of the parties’ general/ territorial ballot” gathers another 44% in total, while 23% do not express an opinion on this matter. This ambivalent attitude shows that members of the Greek diaspora in the UK do not have entrenched views about the best way to implement this principle of equality.

**Figure 2 :** In which constituency should the Greeks abroad vote?



Source GDUK- Survey (2019)

### **Our view from Oxford**

As analysts of the Greek Diaspora Project, and for some of us as members of the Greek diaspora in the UK, we do not all agree on what is to be done. Nevertheless, building on our investigation, we firmly support the facilitation of diasporic electoral rights. We consider that the Greek state should facilitate the vote of its citizens abroad, not only in order to enhance democracy for Hellenes wherever they are, but also because such facilitation would undeniably forge closer ties between Greek expatriates and their homeland. Such a gesture of inclusion would be of paramount significance, especially towards the more recent crisis-driven migrants who remain highly disillusioned with the Greek state.

The word ‘facilitation’ is central here, because the present discussion is only about members of the Greek diaspora who already have electoral rights, i.e. who are registered on the electoral rolls. That they have to physically go to Greece to vote means that members of the diaspora are obliged to make a huge effort to exercise their voting rights, including spending money on tickets (which become even more expensive in periods of peak travel around elections) requesting (unpaid) leave from employers, and countless other practical burdens. There is an interesting comparison (and indeed inequality) here with the other case of voter-travellers: the “heterodimotes” (those Greek voters registered in another municipality from the one they live

in who have to travel at the time of elections) for whom traveling is a choice; while for Greeks living abroad traveling to vote is currently a necessity.

On the issue of where to vote, postal voting which is customary in many other countries<sup>5</sup> leads to a higher turnout than when people vote in person. Indeed, consulates are not easily accessible to most Greeks abroad; in most cases the trip from a part of a country to the respective consulates can be time-consuming and financially-straining. The recent European elections for the Greeks in the UK was an indicative example of low turnout, since travelling to a UK consulate requires great effort, given that voters were obliged to travel to the consulate twice, first to register, and secondly to vote. Our comparative research with other countries (such as Serbia) has shown that the vote in consulates attracts small numbers of voters.

Eligibility to benefit from these facilitating procedures is not unqualified. On the one hand, links with one's homeland can be seen as undermined because someone has chosen to live abroad, temporarily or permanently. On the other hand, there is a constitutional imperative to safeguard the principle of equal treatment before the law. The criteria set for eligibility concern both the existence of financial links with the homeland, as well as the nature and duration of one's stay abroad. On the first criterion, there are valid concerns that any link established between voting rights and paying taxes or owning property in Greece would imply a dangerous suggestion of citizenship being connected with wealth. On the second suggested criterion, one needs to show that upon having completed 35 of years of residing abroad, one has also resided in Greece for 2 years. Questions arise as to how the state will be able to properly record time spent in Greece and abroad.

Furthermore, it is not yet clear whether non-resident Greeks will have to follow the process and fulfill those criteria or whether they will retain the option to remain registered on the general electoral roll and travel back to Greece for the elections. If the latter is to happen, the complexity of the two criteria (2-year residency and tax relations) may lead some more well-off non-resident Greeks to choose to travel back, rather than undergoing the administrative hassle to ensure their electoral rights abroad. This is however problematic as those voting from abroad will be only voting for a national list ('epikrateias'), while those travelling back to vote will be able to also vote for constituency MPs, too, thus being able to 'buy' more extensive electoral rights in the form of an airplane ticket.

In short, eligibility requirements should refrain from imposing an excessively onerous, time-consuming and costly burden of proof of the diaspora, because this would defeat the original purpose of the bill, which is *facilitation*. The cross party recognition that the vote of Greek citizens living abroad should be facilitated, and even carry equal weight with the vote of citizens living in Greece, marks an important step forward. While a degree of consensus on such a fundamental issue as electoral rights is desirable, this should not mean a half-baked reform or the creation of even more obstacles in the form of convoluted eligibility criteria.

### **Some "post-facilitation" questions**

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<sup>5</sup> These countries include France, Germany, India, UK, United States, Mexico, Italy among others

If the facilitation of the vote for non-resident Greek citizens receives the necessary majority in the Greek Parliament, this will generate further questions on the nature and orientation of the diasporic vote. Our survey results of UK Greeks point to future directions for our inquiry into the diaspora's political participation. In particular, the considerable diversity of opinion on who should have the right to vote and whether a recent relationship with Greece should be a necessary prerequisite, makes it imperative that we examine how different diaspora groups relate to Greece as a function of what group features: socioeconomic status, length of stay abroad, host country characteristics and so on. The exact nature of the vote facilitation to be granted will also be assessed in its impact on the formation of diaspora as a distinct political community of the Hellenic Republic. Will facilitation serve as a catalyst for diaspora political engagement no matter the time and residency limitations? Will this affect even the ranks of those Greek citizens or foreign nationals of Greek origin who are still denied the right to vote? Or will it create demarcation lines between those who vote and those who do not, polarizing engagement and disengagement with Greece?

Will the vote facilitation lead to diaspora mobilization not only for 'national issues' but also for issues such as economic policy or state reform which might seem 'domestic' yet might affect the way the diaspora engages with and relates to the homeland? Will the vote give collective voice to previously 'private' diaspora perspectives on such issues as state performance and quality of governance in Greece and create new forms of diaspora mobilization? Or alternatively, will the vote just re-energise traditional diaspora engagement with 'national issues' and lead to the reanimation of historic forms of diaspora associationalism centered on the Greek Orthodox Church and diaspora organisations which are defined by their subnational links with particular locales and regions of Greece.

In sum, as the facilitation of the vote of non-resident Greek citizens is a seminal moment in the evolution of the diaspora & homeland relationship in Greece, it is only the beginning of a new era of homeland-diaspora relations that will generate new issues, alliances and perspectives and an indisputable internationalization of Greece's party politics and political contestation.