Breaking the glass ceiling: equal participation of persons with disabilities in political life

Inclusion Europe represents 20 million people with intellectual disabilities and their families in Europe. We want a Europe where people with intellectual disabilities enjoy equal rights and fully participate in all aspects of life, including politics.

Legal restrictions on running in elections or holding public office

Inclusion Europe's report Inclusion Indicators 2025 (covering data from 33 European countries) finds that in 14 countries, people with intellectual disabilities are restricted from standing for election. In 13 countries people with intellectual disabilities can be denied the right to vote. In many of these cases, this is because their legal capacity can be removed. In 29 countries, legal capacity can be partially or fully removed.

For example, under Article 6 of Portugal's Electoral Law (Law No. 14/79), individuals declared legally incapable by a court cannot stand for election. Although Law 49/2018 abolished full legal incapacity, courts may still impose partial restrictions on a person's legal capacity. Those under such measures can be barred from candidacy depending on the scope of the restriction. In practice, many people with intellectual disabilities subject to these measures are effectively disqualified from running for office.

Existing stigma, ableist attitudes and other barriers

Stigma and ableist attitudes continue to block the political participation of people with intellectual disabilities. Low expectations and stereotypes about their abilities discourage parties and others from supporting their involvement in politics, creating a cycle of exclusion. Information about politics, voting and elections is rarely accessible. Election materials and debates are rarely available in easy-to-read formats. Political parties and civil society organisations often lack inclusive practices, and people with intellectual disabilities who do participate may face tokenism or discrimination.

A lack of funding for self-advocacy further limits opportunities for political engagement. Self-advocacy means people with intellectual disabilities speaking up for themselves, making their own decisions, and influencing the systems that affect their lives. In 11 countries, Inclusion Europe's members receive no government funding for advocacy, and

in 26 countries no person with an intellectual disability sits on the national cross-disability council.

Successful measures and supports

In Europe, only a few people with intellectual disabilities hold elected positions. In Spain, Mar Galcerán serves in Valencia's regional assembly. In France, Éléonore Laloux is a municipal councillor in Arras. In Belgium, Nicolas Vanwinsen is a municipal councillor in Heist-op-den-Berg. In Ireland, Fintan Bray holds an elected executive position within the Fianna Fáil party, which is not a public office but remains significant.

The successful elections of these candidates were made possible by accommodations such as mentorship, support persons in meetings, and accessible communication. For example, Éléonore Laloux in France works with a mentor councillor and receives documents in plain language, while Nicolas Vanwinsen in Belgium is supported by an assistant during council sessions. Mar Galcerán in Spain benefited from her party's active support and accessible campaign arrangements.

Inclusion Europe's demands

- The right to vote and stand for election for all people with intellectual disabilities, regardless of their legal capacity status.
- Accessible elections in practice. For example, easy-to-read information, supported decision-making, and polling procedures designed for people with intellectual disabilities.
- Access to support for people with intellectual disabilities to campaign and stand for election. For example, support persons and easy-to-read information.
- Recognition and sustainable support for self-advocacy groups as essential political actors.
- Civil participation processes to be inclusive and accessible. This includes consultations, deliberative forums and civil dialogue.
- Protections against exclusion, political pressure, financial cuts and disinformation.