



## Expanding Voting Rights for People with Intellectual Disabilities in European Parliamentary Elections: Best Practices and Considerations for the EU in 2024

### 1. Introduction:

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of inclusivity and representation in democratic processes. For the European Union (EU), ensuring that all citizens can exercise their right to vote is a fundamental aspect of a fair and democratic society. However, individuals with intellectual disabilities often face significant barriers that limit their political participation. In preparation for the 2024 European Parliamentary Elections, it is crucial for the EU to prioritize the expansion of voting rights for people with intellectual disabilities. This paper aims to explore best practices and considerations for expanding voting rights for individuals with intellectual disabilities in the EU, particularly in the upcoming 2024 elections.

### 2. Autonomy and Empowerment:

Promoting autonomy and empowerment is essential in ensuring that individuals with intellectual disabilities can actively engage in the electoral process. Through initiatives like the "The Future is Ours" project, self-advocates have had the opportunity to voice their concerns and advocate for their rights. These projects should be expanded and funded to support more self-advocates in becoming active members of the democratic process. By providing accessible information about the electoral process and candidates, and encouraging self-advocates to voice their preferences and opinions, we can empower them to make informed choices.



Moreover, a key aspect of autonomy is the ability to make independent decisions and have those decisions respected. In the case of individuals with intellectual disabilities, support systems should focus on fostering decision-making skills and ensuring that their choices are valued. This requires ongoing efforts to dismantle ableist attitudes and to involve individuals with intellectual disabilities in discussions about their lives, including political engagement.

Easy language and accessible information are crucial components of promoting autonomy and empowerment for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Ensuring that all EU information materials, including those related to elections, are available in easy-to-understand formats can greatly enhance their ability to participate in the electoral process. This includes providing voter guides, candidate profiles, and election-related information in plain language, accompanied by visual aids where necessary. By adopting these practices, the EU can empower individuals with intellectual disabilities to make informed decisions about their participation in the democratic process.

Countries like Germany and Belgium have made significant progress in promoting autonomy for individuals with intellectual disabilities. These nations have embraced supportive decision-making models, empowering individuals to make their own choices with appropriate assistance from support persons, safeguarding their right to vote without compromising autonomy.

Germany's "Bundesteilhabegesetz" (Federal Participation Act) aims to strengthen the rights and participation of people with disabilities, including their voting rights. This act seeks to enable people with disabilities to participate fully in society, emphasizing self-determination and autonomy.

Belgium has worked to include individuals with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, in politics. Efforts have been made to encourage political parties to field candidates with disabilities, promoting equal representation.



These states have developed easy-to-read voter guides, pictorial party platforms, and candidate profiles tailored to individuals with cognitive challenges. By collaborating with self-advocacy groups and disability organizations, they have ensured the content's relevance and relatability.

The EU can encourage all member states, including those with representation in recent events, to adopt standardized accessible voting materials and disseminate best practices in creating inclusive voter information. This will enable individuals with intellectual disabilities to make informed choices during elections.

### 3. Visibility and Representation:

Visibility serves as a powerful catalyst for advancing the voting rights of individuals with intellectual disabilities, and its significance cannot be overstated. Effective representation within decision-making bodies, such as the Disability Intergroup in the European Parliament, holds a pivotal role in ensuring that the voices of this community are not only acknowledged but also actively incorporated into the shaping of policies and strategies. Encouraging more MEPs, like François-Xavier Bellamy and Chiara Gemma, to proactively engage with self-advocates and gain insights into their unique perspectives is vital for fostering genuine understanding and meaningful representation. Additionally, events such as the Autonomy, Visibility, Health, and Equality Event play a crucial role in bridging the gap between self-advocates and policymakers, thereby augmenting their visibility and representation within democratic processes.

To enhance the effectiveness of representation within the Disability Intergroup and other decision-making forums, a highly impactful recommendation emerges: the establishment of a paid position or internship specifically held by an individual with a mental disability. This role would provide direct feedback, insights, and advice to the group, thereby offering an authentic perspective grounded in



personal experience. This initiative aims to bridge the gap between policymakers and individuals with intellectual disabilities, promoting more informed and empathetic decision-making processes. The individual in this role could provide firsthand accounts of the challenges faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities, offer insights into their aspirations, and contribute to shaping policies that directly affect their lives. This interactive dynamic would not only facilitate the crafting of more inclusive policies but also empower individuals with intellectual disabilities to actively participate in their own representation.

Furthermore, the significance of visibility extends beyond formal settings and necessitates integration into mainstream media and public spaces. Media campaigns featuring self-advocates sharing their stories and experiences have the potential to dismantle prevailing stereotypes and foster a deeper public understanding and empathy. The inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities as speakers, consultants, and representatives in political parties and campaigns would ensure their perspectives are seamlessly woven into policy deliberations and decision-making processes. This comprehensive approach aligns with the overarching goal of democratizing representation and embedding inclusivity at every level of the political spectrum.

The involvement of individuals with intellectual disabilities in mainstream media holds significant potential for shaping civil society. The conversation between self-advocates and their allies highlights the crucial role of incorporating people with intellectual disabilities into mainstream media. Their compelling stories illuminate that genuine representation transcends the dismantling of stereotypes; it nurtures comprehension, empathy, and societal inclusiveness among audiences with limited exposure to such perspectives. By showcasing the varied talents, aspirations, and accomplishments of individuals with intellectual disabilities, mainstream media possesses the ability to reshape societal viewpoints, challenge preconceptions, and foster a society that is more embracing and just. The journey of self-advocates like



those discussed and the supportive roles of allies underscore that representation serves not only to empower marginalized individuals but also to enrich the collective narrative, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of human potential.

Past initiatives, such as "The Future is Ours," have effectively showcased the experiences and insights of self-advocates with intellectual disabilities. By amplifying their voices, the EU can markedly enhance visibility and representation, granting these individuals the agency to advocate for their rights, including the right to vote. This positive trend is also evident in countries like Malta, Romania, and Hungary, all of which have taken significant strides in fostering increased visibility of individuals with intellectual disabilities in diverse sectors, particularly in politics. Initiatives in Malta to promote inclusion and representation of individuals with disabilities in politics have led to tangible positive changes in policy and practices.

As the EU continues its commitment to promoting inclusivity, it is paramount to support initiatives that equip self-advocates with the skills and confidence to engage with media and policymakers. The provision of training, support, and funding for these initiatives would bolster the visibility and influence of individuals with intellectual disabilities within the political sphere. By empowering them to effectively communicate their viewpoints and aspirations, the EU can construct a political arena that genuinely reflects the diverse perspectives and needs of all its citizens.

In summary, elevating the visibility and representation of individuals with intellectual disabilities within the democratic landscape is an essential step toward fostering an inclusive society. Through initiatives like the establishment of a paid position or internship within the Disability Intergroup and by promoting active participation in media and political events, the EU can significantly enhance the democratic experience of individuals with intellectual disabilities. By doing so, the EU reinforces its commitment to



representation, equality, and justice, ensuring that the voices of all citizens, regardless of ability, are heard and valued.

#### 4. Health and Wellbeing:

To create an enabling environment for people with intellectual disabilities to exercise their voting rights, addressing health and wellbeing concerns is crucial. Discrimination in healthcare (as discussed during the “The Future is Ours” Health-Panel) must be eradicated. Proper training for medical staff to ensure individuals with intellectual disabilities are treated with dignity and respect during medical appointments is essential.

It is imperative to recognize the unique healthcare needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities and provide appropriate support and resources. Initiatives like the ICOD project are critical in advancing research and healthcare support for people with Down Syndrome and other intellectual disabilities. By prioritizing health and wellbeing, we can ensure that individuals with intellectual disabilities are healthy, engaged citizens who can actively participate in the electoral process.

Health events and discussions within the EU have shed light on the pressing health challenges faced by individuals with Down Syndrome and intellectual disabilities. Disparities in healthcare access and discrimination have been highlighted, emphasizing the need for better research, informed medical staff, and improved doctor-patient communication.

Countries like Spain and France, represented by participants in recent events, have made efforts to address healthcare disparities for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Spain's "PNSD 2018-2020" strategic plan aims to improve the quality of life of people with intellectual disabilities, focusing on areas like health promotion, access to healthcare, and mental health support.



France has implemented policies to improve access to healthcare for people with disabilities, emphasizing the importance of preventative care and early interventions. By supporting research in this area, coordinating efforts to address health disparities, and promoting healthcare that is inclusive and respectful of the unique needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities, the EU can contribute to improving health outcomes for this population.

Easy language and accessible information are vital in the context of healthcare as well. Ensuring that health-related information is presented in clear, simple language with visual aids can empower individuals with intellectual disabilities to make informed decisions about their health. By providing accessible materials, the EU can bridge the information gap and promote better healthcare outcomes for this community.

#### 5. Equality and Equal Treatment:

Promoting equality and equal treatment is a core tenet of expanding voting rights for people with intellectual disabilities. Efforts like the "Equality Event" provide a platform to discuss the challenges faced by individuals with Down Syndrome in the workplace. Encouraging initiatives that support employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities can have a transformative impact on their inclusion in society.

However, equal treatment goes beyond employment and extends to education, housing, and social services. Addressing systemic barriers and ensuring that individuals with intellectual disabilities have access to quality education, inclusive living arrangements, and adequate social support systems are crucial components of promoting equal treatment. Furthermore, combatting stigmatization and promoting positive attitudes towards intellectual disabilities will foster an inclusive society where the rights of all citizens are respected.



Throughout the EU, initiatives have been developed to address discrimination and promote equal treatment for individuals with intellectual disabilities. In the workplace, countries like Belgium and Spain have encouraged political parties to be more inclusive in their candidate selection processes, fostering a diverse and representative political landscape.

Belgium's efforts to encourage political parties to field candidates with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, are essential steps toward equal representation and political participation. Spain's emphasis on disability inclusion in politics aligns with the EU's goals of creating a more diverse and representative political landscape.

Easy language and accessible information play a pivotal role in ensuring equal treatment for individuals with intellectual disabilities. This includes providing information about their rights, services, and opportunities in formats that are easily understandable and accessible. By doing so, the EU can empower individuals with intellectual disabilities to advocate for their rights and actively engage in societal and political processes.

The EU can set guidelines and incentives for political parties across member states, including those represented by participants in recent events, to include individuals with intellectual disabilities as candidates. By doing so, the EU can promote greater political participation and representation, ensuring that individuals with intellectual disabilities have a meaningful role in shaping the policies that affect them.

## 6. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the imperative of inclusivity and representation in democratic processes stands resolute. The European Union's commitment to upholding the right to vote for all citizens, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, is an embodiment of its dedication to fostering a fair and democratic society. As





the 2024 European Parliamentary Elections approach, the significance of expanding voting rights for individuals with intellectual disabilities takes center stage. This paper has delved into multifaceted dimensions crucial to achieving this objective.

Autonomy and empowerment are the cornerstone, where the amplification of self-advocate voices through initiatives like "The Future is Ours" can mold active participation. Encouraging self-determination, accessible information, and inclusive decision-making processes can empower individuals with intellectual disabilities to partake in the democratic discourse.

The vitality of visibility and representation cannot be overstated. Through engagements within the Disability Intergroup and collaborations with self-advocacy groups, the EU can ensure that diverse perspectives contribute to the shaping of policies. Establishing a dedicated position held by an individual with a mental disability within the Intergroup could infuse authenticity and insight into discussions, paving the way for more inclusive policies.

In the realm of mainstream media, the narratives of individuals with intellectual disabilities and their allies underline the transformational potential of representation. By sharing stories that transcend stereotypes, mainstream media can usher in empathy and understanding among audiences with limited exposure to such experiences. The EU's support for training and initiatives that facilitate communication between self-advocates and media can magnify the visibility of this community.

Addressing health and well-being remains pivotal. Eradicating healthcare discrimination and offering specialized support are vital components in ensuring a healthy and engaged electorate. The EU can take cues from countries like Spain and France, bolstering research, promoting informed medical care, and enhancing health outcomes for individuals with intellectual disabilities.



Equality and equal treatment, deeply embedded in the pursuit of expanding voting rights, demand a holistic approach. Empowering individuals with intellectual disabilities through employment opportunities, inclusive education, and an end to stigmatization builds a more equitable society. The EU's encouragement of diverse political candidacy, as observed in countries like Belgium and Spain, reflects its commitment to equality in political representation.

In essence, by embracing autonomy, amplifying visibility, prioritizing health and well-being, advancing equality, and ensuring easy language accessibility, the European Union can pave the way for expanded voting rights for individuals with intellectual disabilities. This endeavor epitomizes the essence of democracy – recognizing and valuing every voice within society. As the EU propels these principles into practice, it reiterates its dedication to inclusivity, representation, and a democratic ethos where the rights of all citizens find true expression.

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