

People with intellectual disabilities are proud to vote: Give them the chance

Written by Jyrki Pinomaa on 18 February 2019 in Opinion
Opinion

Amid voter apathy and low election turnouts, there is one group of people who are eager and proud to vote. Not only should people with intellectual disabilities have the right to vote Europe-wide, but the voting process should be tailored to their needs, writes Jyrki Pinomaa.



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The European Parliament's campaign - #ThisTimeImVoting - for the European elections tries to counter Europe-wide voter fatigue and disengagement. Low turnouts in the European elections in 2009 and 2014 reflect this trend.

But there is one part of the population that is proud and eager to vote: People with intellectual disabilities. Historically excluded both from voting and standing for election, they are now granted this

right in more and more European countries.

A survey of Inclusion Europe amongst its members shows that currently, people under guardianship have full voting rights in 10 EU member states; in 11 countries, their right to vote may be taken away by a judge or guardian, and in 6 countries, they have no voting rights.

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Recent positive examples include Spain, which granted the right to vote to people under guardianship in December 2018, and Denmark, where the government promised to extend voting rights to people under a specific form of guardianship.

While we continue to fight for the right to vote everywhere in Europe, we should not forget that having this right does not mean to be able to truly exercise it: Politicians use complex language, election programmes are long and difficult to understand, polling officers are not prepared to assist people with disabilities, and voting slips are complicated.

In many countries, there is no possibility to take another person, for example a family member, into the voting booth to help with the process.

These things make voting inaccessible to many. A survey in the UK has shown that 70 percent of people with intellectual disabilities want to vote but more than half find it too difficult.

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How can we deal with this situation and encourage people to vote?

Answers received from associations of people with intellectual disabilities and their families all over Europe are clear: We need more information in easy-to-read language, election meetings where politicians talk in an understandable manner, and a change in social attitudes so people with intellectual disabilities are seen as citizens like anybody else.

Several exciting projects lead the way and show it can be done: In Scotland, for example, the UK Electoral Commission together with Enable Scotland developed interactive workshops and accessible hustings, where people with a learning disability meet their local politicians.

This led to a sharp rise in people with intellectual disabilities casting their ballot and to their concerns

being discussed in Parliament.

The Swedish organisation Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan trained politicians in easy language before they met people with intellectual disabilities in study circles.

These meetings led to several accessibility improvements: For example, the Swedish Democracy Commission started adding party logos to ballot papers next to the candidates' names, which makes it easier to recognise their party affiliation.

A local mayor had an easy-to-understand video on the City Council's most important decisions produced. These examples show that changes can be made, and they have a real effect.

“People with intellectual disabilities are maybe the part of the population who most value their right to vote. They are well aware of how easily it can be taken away”

People with intellectual disabilities are maybe the part of the population who most values their right to vote. They are well aware of how easily it can be taken away.

As activist László Bercse says, “For me it is very important to vote at the European elections. I care about who is going to represent me in the European Parliament. I would like the European Parliament to make decisions which are good for me and for other people with disabilities.”

People with intellectual disabilities have clear ideas of what they want, and they are eager to vote. You want a higher turnout at European elections? People with intellectual disabilities are ready.

About the author

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