

'Record number' of people with intellectual disabilities casting vote for first time

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News

A "record number" of people with intellectual disabilities will for the first time get the chance to have a say in this week's European elections.



Photo credit: Press Association

According to Jyrki Pinomaa, President of the Europe-wide intellectual disability rights organisation Inclusion Europe, this is due to a "rapidly increasing" trend in Member States giving the right to vote to people "under guardianship."

Since the last European elections in 2014, six Member States states have completely abolished restrictions on the right to vote of people deprived of their legal capacity - France, Germany, Spain, Denmark, Ireland and Slovakia.

Changes in the three bigger countries - France, Germany and Spain - have been implemented during the last 12 months.

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Two other Member States (Belgium and the Czech Republic) have changed their laws to at least end the automatic deprivation of voting rights for people put under guardianship.

The changes constitute an “important step to recognise people with intellectual disabilities as fully-fledged citizens, with the same rights as everybody else”, Pinomaa said.

His assessment is shared by people who were previously deprived of their voting rights.

For Justine Lambole, for example, the amendment of the French law has influenced how she sees herself.

“In many cases, it is people with intellectual disabilities themselves who lead the way to change. It is encouraging to see more and more European countries start respecting the UN CRPD and give the right to vote under guardianship” **Jyrki Pinomaa, President of Inclusion Europe**

On the day she will cast her ballot, she explains, she will “finally feel equal to others” and “liberated”.

The young woman tells how she was deprived of her voting rights at the age of 18 by a judge who asked her about day-to-day politics that she was not following at the time.

She had started legal proceedings to recuperate her right to vote when the French President’s decision to overturn existing legislation was announced in July last year.

When she learned about it, she said was “happy”, adding, “I am a citizen, I consider myself able to vote, so I always wanted to. Finally, I will be able to do it.”

Inclusion Europe says it is hard to say how many citizens are affected by the Europe-wide move towards voting rights, initiated both through court decisions and amendments to existing legislation taken by national parliaments.

A report by the European Economic and Social Committee states that 500,000 people in the EU are still deprived of their right to vote, however.

According to another report, published earlier this year by the EU’S Fundamental Rights Agency

(FRA), more than 80,000 people in Germany have regained their right to vote.

In France the number is 65,000, in Denmark 1,900 and in Spain the figure is as high as 100,000 people.

One of them is Cristóbal Otero. He had voted only once when he was put under guardianship at the age of 23, depriving him, he says, of his voting rights - a situation which left him "angry".

The campaign "Mi voto cuenta" ("My vote counts"), led by Spanish disabled persons' organisation Plena Inclusión, successfully pushed for an amendment to the law, which was approved in October 2018.

Since then, Otero has already taken part in Spain's general elections in April, which made him "proud" and on May 26 he will vote both for the European Parliament and in local elections.

According to the FRA report, "legal capacity has been a focus of reforms at the national level linked to ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)".

Ratified by all EU Member States and the EU itself, the convention recognises the equal participation of people with disabilities in political and public life, including the right to vote and be elected.

Inclusion Europe says, "Certainly, greater awareness of discrimination suffered by people with disabilities and advocacy by disability rights organisations (who have pressured for voting rights in all countries that changed their laws) also plays a pivotal role."

"In many cases, it is people with intellectual disabilities themselves who lead the way to change", said Pinomaa, adding, "it is encouraging to see more and more European countries start respecting the UN CRPD and give the right to vote under guardianship."

But he asks for more countries to follow, with five EU Member States still denying the right to vote and 10 leaving the decision up to an individual assessment by a judge or guardian.

All countries must ensure elections are accessible, for example by providing information about the elections in easy-to-read language, he told this website.

"People with intellectual disabilities value their right to vote, maybe more than anyone else. So we should make sure they can exercise it."

About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at The Parliament Magazine

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[EU Election 2019](#) [7]

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[Society and welfare](#) [11]



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[5] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/interviews/giving-disability-voice-europe>

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