



The political participation of disabled people in Europe: Rights, accessibility and activism



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ABSTRACT

This paper provides the first systematic cross-national assessment of disabled people's electoral and political participation, based on research in the 28 Member States of the European Union and in the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. A mixed methods approach included policy analysis, information requests to national experts and secondary analysis of European survey data. The evidence populated indicators which suggest four lines of action: (a) lifting legal and administrative barriers; (b) raising awareness; (c) making political participation more accessible; (c) expanding participation opportunities in public life. Civil society organizations as well as public institutions have an important role to play as change agents in this regard.

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This paper examines the political participation of disabled people in European countries through the development of human rights indicators. In so doing, it addresses a gap in the literature with the first cross-national assessment of this topic. Political participation is considered here in broad definition—grounded in human rights, encompassing individual and collective participation in the public sphere, and located within a context of multi-scalar governance from the global to the local.

Increasing concern has been expressed by the EU institutions about low participation in European elections (TNS Opinion and Social, 2013) and the EU's first *Citizenship Report* sought to identify obstacles to the exercise of its citizens' rights. In so doing, it

acknowledged that 'EU citizens with disabilities face additional obstacles' (European Commission, 2010a). Linking disability rights with European citizenship and political participation, the EU's European Disability Strategy 2010–2020 includes a specific commitment to 'address accessibility to voting in order to facilitate the exercise of EU citizens' electoral rights' (European Commission, 2010b). These observations hint at two dimensions to the challenge at hand—assuring equal political rights in principle and providing accessible participation processes in practice.

From a rights-based perspective, the EU and all of its 28 Member States have signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and all but three have now ratified it. This treaty provides a global frame of reference and legally binding obligations concerning civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. In particular, Article 29 obliges state Parties to ensure equal rights to participate in public and political life, including: engagement in non-governmental organizations and associations; joining political parties; free and accessible voting procedures, facilities and materials; standing for election and

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holding public office at all levels.

At the European level, Article 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) affirms that all nationals of an EU Member State also acquire citizenship of the Union. This includes the right to vote or stand for election in European and municipal elections while living in another EU Member State, on an equal basis with nationals of that state. Chapter V of the accompanying Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union also declares that 'everyone is equal before the law' and that 'any discrimination' on grounds of disability is prohibited, as it is on grounds such as gender or racial discrimination too (Articles 20 and 21).

In this way both the global human rights framework of the CRPD and the regional integration structures of the EU convey to disabled people 'post-national' citizenship rights that exemplify wider processes of multi-scalar governance. As Bhabha (1999) argues, '...it is the interface between globalization and human rights that challenges state autonomy most forcefully...'. Nevertheless, electoral and political process remain largely within the national competence of individual EU Member States so it is important to understand the realization of disabled people's political rights within each country while taking a comparative view in the frame of European and global treaty obligations.

1. Disability: a missing socio-economic variable?

Political participation gaps for other social groups have been shown often, notably in relation to gender inequalities (Baum and Espírito-Santo, 2007; Jennings, 1983; Morales, 1999) or ethnicity (Kasfir, 1970; Leighley and Vedlitz, 1999; Wrinkle et al., 1996) while Gallego (2007), for example, examined the multiplicity of gender, age, social class, education, income, ethnicity, and work status effects in 24 European countries. We know that political participation resources are 'distributed differentially among groups defined by socioeconomic status' (Brady et al., 1995) and that inequality within European countries 'magnifies the relationship between income and participation' (Lancee and Van de Werfhorst, 2012).

Despite compelling evidence that disabled people experience systematically higher risks of household poverty and social exclusion in terms of employment, education, relative income and material deprivation (Grammenos, 2013a) such comparative studies have not included disability status as a variable. Hence, there is a strong case that disability equality should be considered along with other socio-economic variables when researching political participation, but there are unique dimensions to consider too. For example, we know that voting opportunities in general make a difference to turnout in European Parliamentary elections (Mattila, 2003) but in the case of disability we need to consider both 'access to' and the 'accessibility of' political activities for people with impairments (e.g. for wheelchair users, blind people, deaf people, people with cognitive impairments, etc.).

There have been some pioneering national electoral studies that do consider disability in this way, notably in the USA (Shields et al., 1998a,b). Such researchers found voter turnout to be lower amongst disabled people than non-disabled people, and more so amongst those who were older, poorer or with significant mobility impairments (Schur et al., 2002). Despite prominent non-discrimination legislation these gaps have remained large, 'possibly due to the combined and interactive effects of polling place inaccessibility, social isolation, fewer economic resources, and perceptions that the political system is unresponsive' (Schur and Adya, 2013).

Such findings led also to the conclusion that 'the political involvement of people with disabilities may greatly depend on the extent to which political elites attempt to address their political

concerns' (Shields et al., 1998b) and 'indicating that outreach policies of disability organizations can play a large role in creating conditions that encourage political participation' (Schur, 1998). Subsequent research in the UK drew attention to the specific barriers facing people with intellectual impairments and the importance of social capital and networks of support as enablers of political participation (Bell et al., 2001; Keeley et al., 2008; Redley, 2008). These findings suggest that establishing political rights and providing accessibility may not be sufficient to achieve full participation without also engaging proactively with disabled people in civil society and with their political claims.

Relevant to this, Reudin's (2007) elaboration of Milbrath's (1965, 1981) seminal hierarchy of political participation showed empirically how 'both political institutions and social capital are significant contributors'. Indeed, social capital, community 'roots' and connectedness can all boost engagement in political activity (Anderson, 2010; Bandura, 1997, 2000; Caprara et al., 2009; Yeich and Levine, 1994) and, as Iris Marion Young has argued:

We deepen democracy when we encourage the flourishing of associations that people form according to whatever interests, opinions, and perspectives they find important. Strong, autonomous, and plural activities of civic associations offer individuals and social groups maximum opportunity in their own diversity to be represented in public life. (Young, 2002, p. 153)

Civil society organizations foster new forms of political participation (Dalton et al., 2004; Zakaria, 2007) and the rise of the disabled people's movement is no exception. Its mobilization and activism has placed disability rights on the political agenda and secured significant legislative gains—not least through the UN CRPD. It has evolved alternatives to traditional political engagement, created new forms of social capital, and developed new opportunity structures to influence publics, politicians and governments (Driedger, 1989; Fleischer and Zames, 2001; McNeese, 2013; Oliver and Barnes, 2012; Pfeiffer, 1993; Scotch, 1988; Shakespeare, 1993).

The European voices of this global movement are evident in relation to the concerns of this paper. For example, the European Disability Forum (EDF), which represents the collective voice of 80 million disabled people to the EU institutions, organized a 'Disability Votes Count' campaign in 2009 and, in the run-up to the 2014 European Parliament elections, disability platforms or manifestos were published by pan-European civil society organizations of disabled people including EDF, the European Union of the Deaf (EUD), and the European Blind Union (EBU).

As shown so far, there is a firm basis on which to seek full and equal political participation in Europe. Disabled people should be regarded as a significant socio-economic group whose political participation outcomes may be contingent on the transnational governance of basic citizenship rights, on the accessibility of mainstream political activities and on political engagement with their collective concerns in civil society.

Previous socio-economic variable studies have also demonstrated the potential to conduct political participation research comparatively in the EU context. As a starting point, in 2010, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) published a preliminary legal study on *The right to political participation of persons with mental health problems and persons with intellectual disabilities* followed by a report on legal capacity issues (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2010, 2013). These two reports suggested that, while some progress had been made in some EU Member States, much remained to be done even on basic rights. The 2014 European Parliamentary elections offered an opportunity to examine these issues. The present research was launched in this

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