



Independent Living Survey

Special edition on the participation of
disabled people in the European Elections
December 2023



ENIL's Independent Living Survey Special Edition on the participation in the European Elections

1. Introduction

On 30 June 2020, the European Network on Independent Living launched its first Independent Living Survey, with the aim of collecting general information about access to Independent Living of disabled people¹ across Europe, and detailed information about Personal Assistance schemes or systems. The online survey targeted countries within the Council of Europe area and was disseminated to ENIL members, as well as to the general public, through our Newsletter, website and social media.

A total of 143 responses were received. After processing the replies was complete, sheets for 43 countries in the Council of Europe area, presenting facts about national Personal Assistance schemes went online in 2023. In addition, a summary report was published. The Independent Living Survey will be continued and expanded through annual editions, researching new topics and updating existing data.

The European Elections are going to take place in 2024. Although political participation is a right enshrined in Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there is evidence that many disabled people are still excluded from voting and being voted. Thus, ENIL decided to have the Independent Living Survey 2023 inquire about access of disabled people to participation in the European Elections.

The survey was conducted through an online questionnaire in English which contained 18 questions. First, the questions covered the personal situation of participants, asking about the ability to vote and run for office as a candidate. A second batch of questions covered the general situation of disabled people.

A call for participants was posted on the ENIL website, in the monthly members mailing, the monthly newsletter and on social media. The call

¹ ENIL prefers the term 'disabled people' over 'persons with disabilities' or 'people with disabilities', in order to reflect the fact that people are disabled by the environmental, systemic and attitudinal barriers in society. This is in line with the social model of disability.

was also forwarded via email to disabled people with good knowledge about the topic. 38 replies from 18 EU countries were received.

Survey participants reside in the following countries:

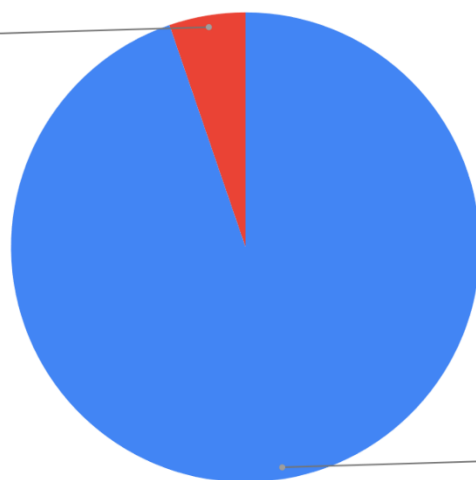


The largest group of participants came from Portugal, followed by Belgium and Germany. In those three countries, our member organisations showed a significant degree of motivation to advertise the survey among their members.

Almost all participants in the survey were disabled. One person indicated to be the parent of a disabled child.

"I am disabled "

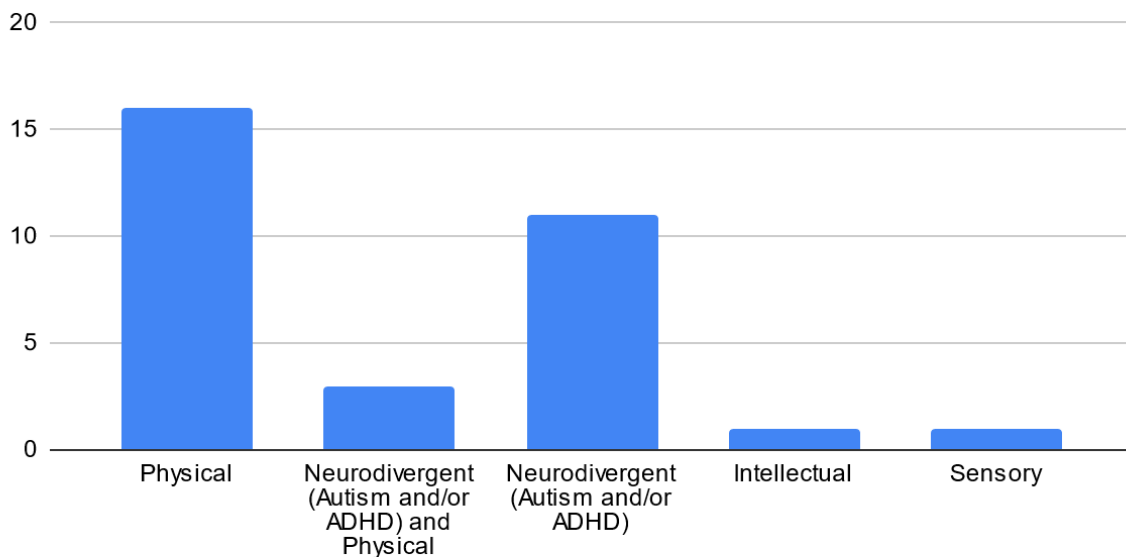
No
5,3%



Yes
94,7%

Participants were asked to give information about their impairment. It was made clear that this is a voluntary question.

"Type of impairment (voluntary question)"



Anzahl der Werte in "Type of impairment (voluntary question)"

The largest group of participants, 16, indicated they had a physical impairment. 11 said they had a neurodivergent condition. 3 participants indicated they had both. Only 1 participant with an intellectual impairment and one with a sensory impairment filled out the survey. It is good to have a balance between physical and neurodivergent impairments. Participation from other impairment groups is highly desirable.

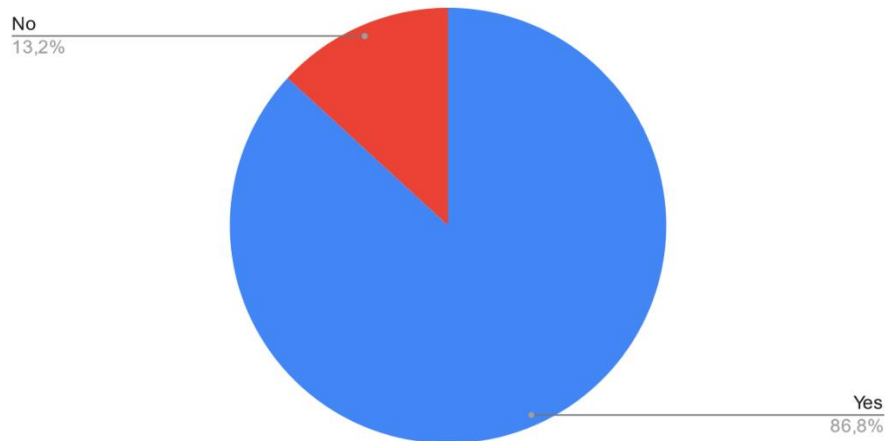
2. My personal situation

2.1 Voting in the European Elections

This section asked participants a series of questions about their personal access to participating in the European Elections.

Q 1: Have you voted in the European Parliament elections and/or are you going to vote in 2024?

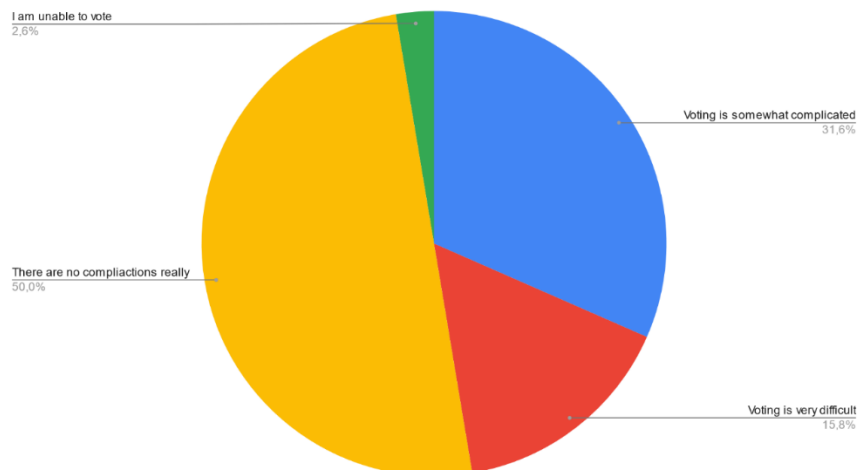
"Have you voted in European Parliament elections and/or are you going to vote in 2024?"



Our survey participants are overwhelmingly politically active people. 86% indicated they have voted or are going to vote in the elections.

Q 2: Are there factors complicating your right to vote or not?

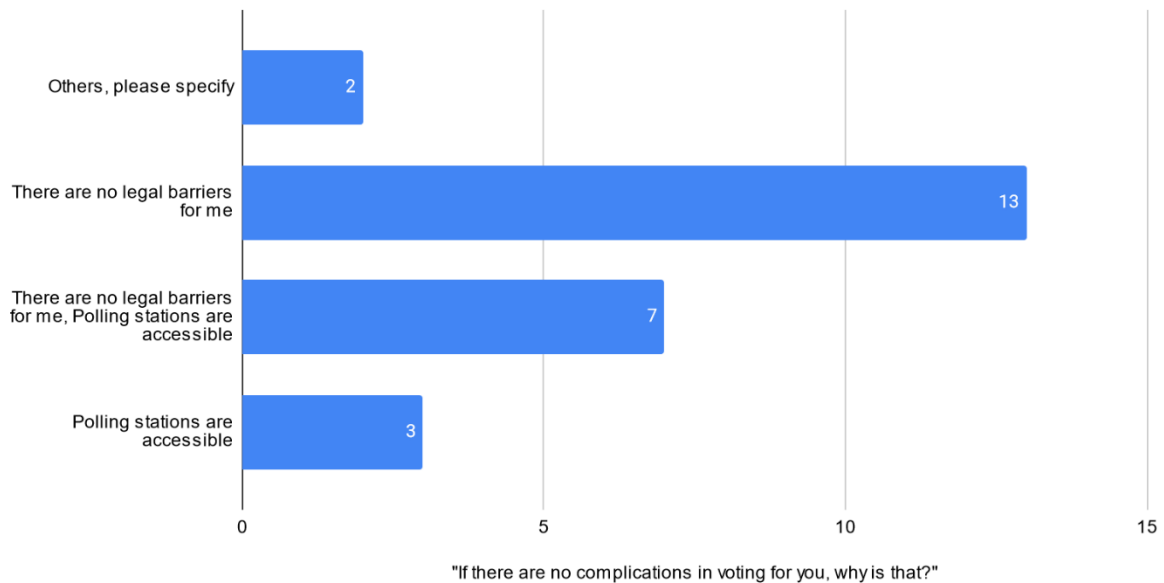
Anzahl der Werte in "Are there factors complicating your right to vote or not?"



Half of all participants said there were no factors complicating their right to vote. A significant number of respondents, 47,4%, replied that voting is somewhat difficult or very difficult. One respondent indicated that voting was not possible in her/his case. The fact that 50% of participants are reporting barriers in exercising their right to vote is of concern.

Q 3: If there are no complications in voting for you, why is that?

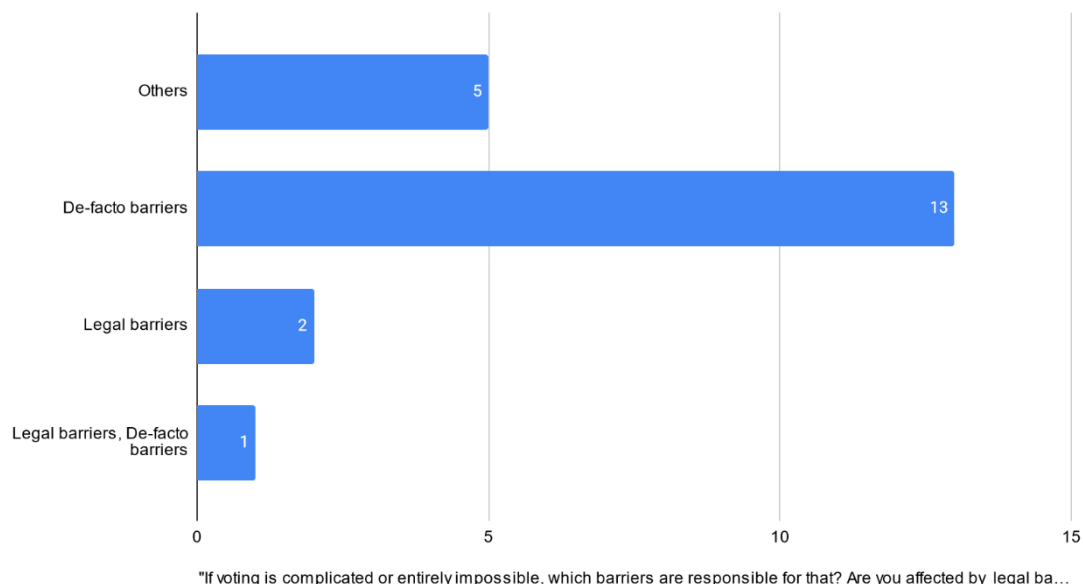
"If there are no complications in voting for you, why is that?"



It is important to shed light on what is working well too. Most of the respondents who felt there were no complications for them in voting, indicated this was because there were no legal barriers and because polling stations were accessible. The fact that some disabled people face no complications in exercising their right to vote is good news. Because of lack of comparative data, it is not possible to say if barriers have reduced over time.

Q 4: If voting is complicated or entirely impossible, which barriers are responsible for that? Are you affected by legal barriers and/or de facto barriers?

"If voting is complicated or entirely impossible, which barriers are responsible for that? Are you affected by legal barriers and/or de facto barriers?"



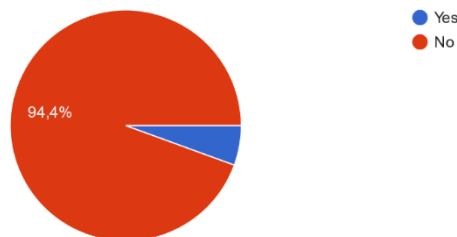
Among the proportion of respondents who encounter difficulties in voting, 61,9% are being hindered by de-facto barriers. Only 9,5% encounter legal barriers, a low percentage which is still too high. 4,8% are being hindered by both legal and de-facto barriers. (Legal barriers are for example being under guardianship, being banned from voting because of one's impairment, being in an institution and people in institutions are not allowed to vote, other reasons; de-facto barriers are present when there are inaccessible polling stations or authorities refuse to register disabled people although they have to do so, legally speaking.)

When asked to specify which legal or de-facto barriers were causing problems a number of points were raised. Some participants reported inaccessibility of the ballot both and polling stations. Another respondent indicated it was not allowed to bring the personal assistant along for support. One respondent reported that yes, polling stations had ramps for wheelchair users but that some physical disabilities were not taken into account. People with muscular tissue or neuromuscular disorders might be able to walk but not to stand for long periods of time. The respondent said that no chairs were provided in the polling station or that if you went to have a seat, other voters thought you had given up your spot in the waiting line.

2.2 Running for office in the European Elections

Q 5: Have you run for office in a European Parliament election and/or are you going to run in 2024?

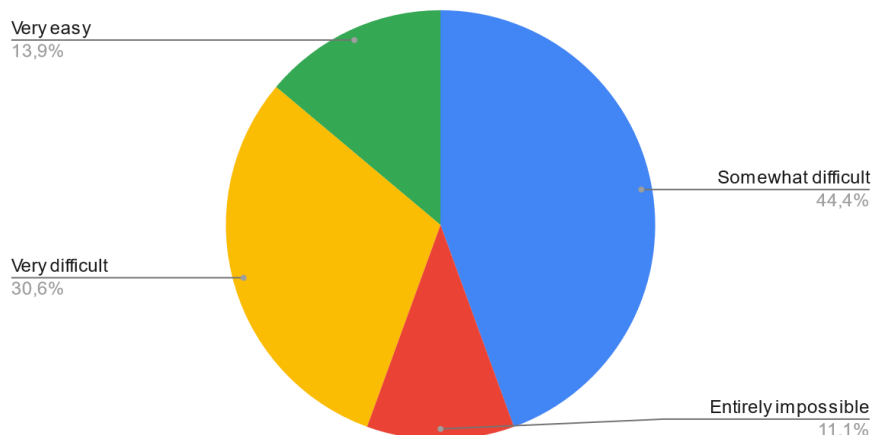
Have you run for office in a European Parliament election and/or are you going to run in 2024?
36 Antworten



Most respondents said they had not run for office in the European Elections, nor were they going to. However, two survey-participants indicated they did. Having two active politicians in a relatively small group of people is encouraging.

Q 6: Please rate how easy or hard you think it would be for you to run for office in an election (because of your disability)

"Please rate how easy or hard you think it would be for you to run for office in an election (because of your disability)"



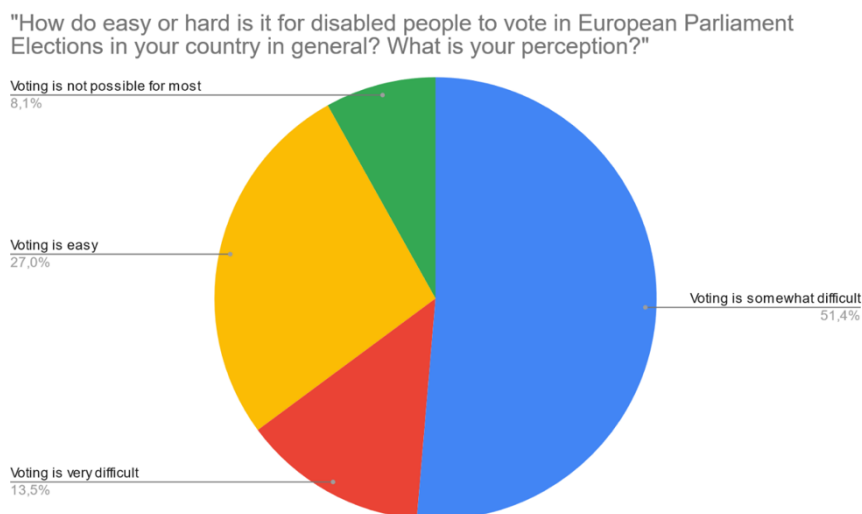
When it comes to running for office in a European Election, views are not as positive as when it comes to voting. 78% think there would be difficulties. 11% say, it would be entirely impossible. Only 13,9% say it would be easy. Passive electoral participation is a vital part of the right to political participation. At the moment, only 7 out of 705 MEPs the entire European

Parliament is disabled. Given that 87 million out of 448,4 million EU citizens have a disability, disabled people are severely underrepresented. Patronising attitudes towards disabled people in politics are still the norm. Politicians who want to create a humanitarian image of themselves, like to advocate for policy measures which are supposed to do something for disabled people. In reality, such measures are often counterproductive. This is because laws and policies affecting disabled people are still predominantly discussed without consulting disabled people and their representative organisations who struggle to be heard. Providers of services for disabled people often pretend to speak on behalf of us when in reality nobody has appointed them to play this role. It needs to become the norm that only disabled people and their representative organisations get to express the needs and requirements of disabled people in public policy.

3. The situation of disabled people in general

3.1 Voting in the European Elections

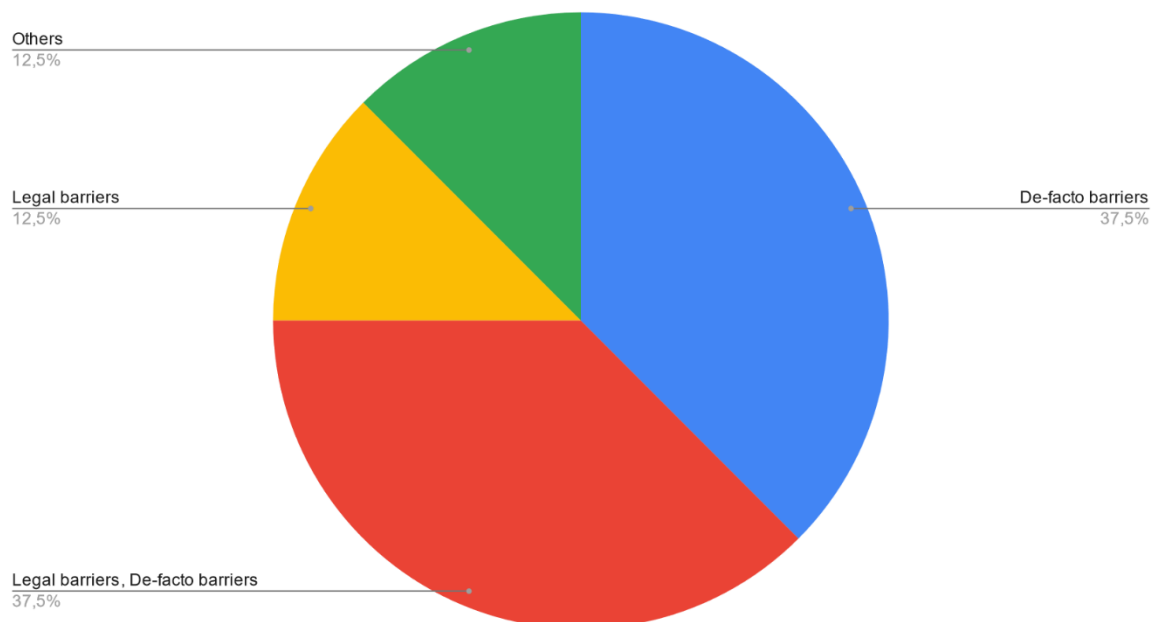
Q 7: How do easy or hard is it for disabled people to vote in European Parliament Elections in your country in general? What is your perception?



When it comes to the situation of disabled people in general, participants were much more pessimistic than about their personal ability to vote. Only 27% said voting is easy for disabled people. 64% indicated voting is somewhat or very difficult. 8,1% said it is not possible for most. The fact, that the situation is judged to be so difficult by an overwhelming majority is alarming. It indicates that there is a need for further reform.

Q 8: Is voting made difficult or impossible by legal or de-facto barriers?

"Is voting made difficult or impossible by legal or de-facto barriers?"



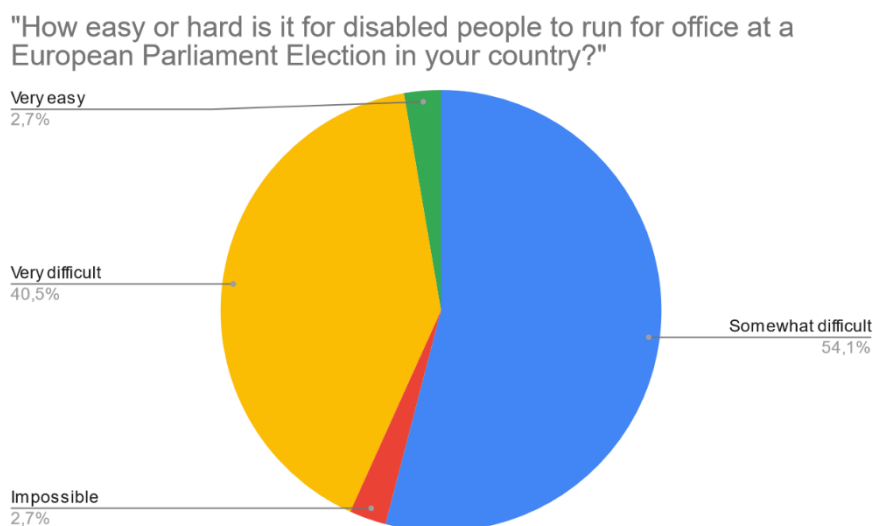
When asked why voting was difficult for most disabled people. De-facto barriers or a mix of legal and de-facto barriers were indicated to be the present. (Legal barriers are for example being under guardianship, being banned from voting because of one's impairment, being in an institution and people in institutions are not allowed to vote, other reasons; de-facto barriers are present when there are inaccessible polling stations or authorities refuse to register disabled people although they have to do so, legally speaking.)

Confinement to institutions or being under guardianship were pointed out to be important legal barriers by various respondents. Voting materials were often inaccessible because they were not available in easy to read or braille, making voting difficult for people with intellectual and visual impairments. A lack of assistance for the visually impaired or for people with reading difficulties were indicated to be other de-facto barriers. Polling stations were reported to be inaccessible for wheelchair users. A lack of transportation due to discrimination against wheelchair users was also mentioned. The possibility to be denied access to the election by the electoral register was mentioned too. In addition, some Member States still do not allow a support person to come to the polling station. One respondent presented a barrier standing out as particularly disturbing. The former personal assistant discouraged the person from participating in the European

Elections because of views that were extremely pro-Russian. The discouragement was presented with such aggressiveness that the disabled person got frightened and did not go to the elections. This example shows that even with personal assistance, a disabled person might still become a victim of abuse. A solution might be to install rapid intervention services or an effective complaints system, providing protection from an abusive person.

3.2 Running for office in the European Elections

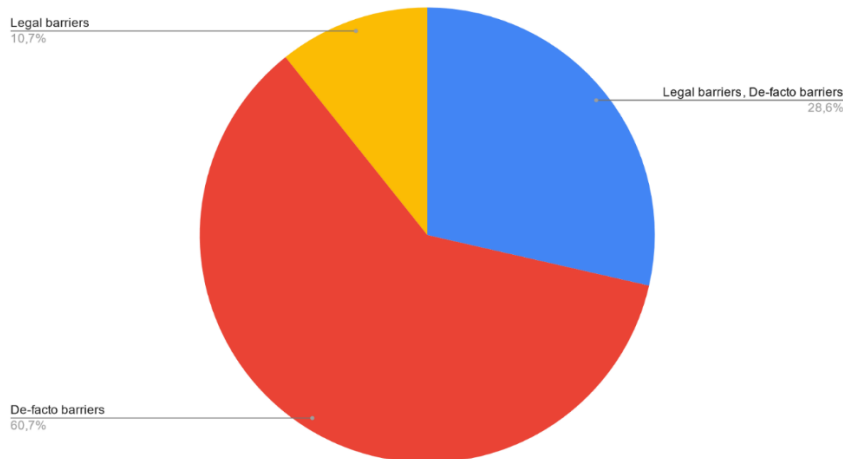
Q 9: How easy or hard is it for disabled people to run for office at a European Parliament Election in your country?



When it comes to passive electoral participation, the results are even more negative. Just one respondent indicated running for office to be easy. All other respondents said it was very difficult, somewhat difficult or impossible. These replies paint a bleak picture. The right to passive electoral participation seems to be largely theoretical. Without changes, it will not be possible to improve the representation of disabled people in the European Parliament.

Q 10: Is running for office made difficult or impossible by legal or de-facto barriers?

"Is running for office made difficult or impossible by legal or de-facto barriers?"



Respondents quoted de-facto barriers, a mix of legal and de-facto barriers and stand-alone legal barriers as barriers. (Legal barriers are for example being under guardianship, being banned from voting because of one's impairment, being in an institution and people in institutions are not allowed to vote, other reasons; de-facto barriers are present when there are inaccessible polling stations or authorities refuse to register disabled people although they have to do so, legally speaking.)

Confinement to institutions and legal guardianship were pointed out to be important legal barriers. Lack of personal assistance support in running a campaign was indicated to be a barrier. In contrast to voting, the prejudice of non-disabled voters and parties seems to be a more important factor hindering passive electoral participation. Parties were very reluctant to propose and voters hesitant to elect disabled candidates. The view that disabled people are not capable of being politicians seems to be still prevalent. One respondent indicated that non-disabled people held the view that disabled people are ugly or have the intellect of children. A politically active respondent said his disability was keeping him from being taken serious in his party. The view that internalised ableism, disabled people thinking becoming politicians was not possible for them, was cited too. Another problem is that parties do not ensure accessibility of the venue when setting up events. A respondent from Finland reported there had been only one disabled MEP, Kalle Könkkölä, in Finish history. Discrimination in accessing education was cited as a barrier too. Without an education on a level comparable to a non-disabled people, it is indeed difficult to compete in politics. Most politicians have higher education degrees.

4. Recommendations to policy makers

“Please, make disabled people's life easier”.

“Do more to ensure co-production of policy decisions with disabled people and their representative organisations.”

Survey participants were given the opportunity to formulate demands to policy makers.

of the most important measures to be adopted to ensure participation of disabled people in the European Elections on an equal level with others is the removal of all legal restrictions. Institutions need to be abolished, by replacing them with community-based services, ensuring access to financial resources and housing. Legal guardianship needs to be replaced with supported decision making. Institutions and legal guardianship cannot be a reason to deny disabled people their rights. Disabled people affected by those regimes need to have access to active and passive electoral representation on an equal level with others.

Respondents were adamant that full accessibility of the electoral process needs to become reality. This includes ballot stations, ballot sheets and electoral programs. One respondent suggested to introduce online voting as a standard feature. Also, since neurodivergent people often struggle with bureaucracy, registration to vote when being in another EU country should be simplified. Active and passive electoral participation need to be supported by personal assistance.

Respondents pointed out that we needed stronger efforts to combat ableism and anti-disabled prejudice. In some countries, election staff watches disabled people as they cast their vote. There needs to be a ban of this practice.

One participant criticised disabled politicians. A better understanding of their own privilege and more effort to help their peers were needed.

Respondents see a need to improve disabled representation in politics. Parties should include disabled candidates in their voting lists. One respondent proposed the introduction of quotas, if parties failed to do so voluntarily. There is also a need to support programs for disabled candidates, entailing for example access to accessible transportation and assistance, as well as funding for running in elections for disabled candidates.

To ensure opportunities on an equal level with others, including in political participation, equal access to education and employment were indicated as necessary. If disabled people do not have access to higher education and financial resources, how are they supposed to compete in politics?

Acknowledgements

This document was written by ENIL Policy Coordinator Florian Sanden. You can contact him under florian.sanden@enil.eu.

About the European Network on Independent Living

The European Network on Independent Living (ENIL) is a Europe-wide network of disabled people. It represents a forum intended for all disabled

people, Independent Living organisations and their non-disabled allies on the issues of independent living. ENIL's mission is to advocate and lobby for Independent Living values, principles and practices, namely for a barrier-free environment, deinstitutionalisation, provision of personal assistance support and adequate technical aids, together making full citizenship of disabled people possible.

ENIL has Participatory Status with the Council of Europe, Consultative Status with ECOSOC, is represented on the Advisory Panel to the EU Fundamental Rights Agency's Fundamental Rights Platform, and on the Advisory Council on Youth at the Council of Europe.

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