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Strengthening Democracy and Human Rights Through the Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities in the European Union

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Finally, I wish to honour all those, past and present, who have fought, and continue to fight, for the rights and political participation of persons with disabilities. Progress can be slow, and the road long, but it is thanks to their tireless efforts that we have come this far. Their courage lights the path forward.

Summary: Easy-to-Read Language

The European Union is a group of 27 countries in Europe.

These countries work together to make life better, safer, and easier for all people.

They believe in the same important things.

For example, they believe that democracy is very important.

In a democracy, everyone can vote.

And everyone has the same rights.

In the European Union, 27 out of 100 people have a disability.

But less than 1 out of 100 politicians have a disability.

In the European elections, about 800,000 people with disabilities were not allowed to vote.

Many others who were allowed to vote did not vote.

People with disabilities are often left out of politics in the European Union.

I ask two important questions in this text:

1. What does the European Union do to help people with disabilities take part in politics?
2. What can the European Union do better?

To answer these questions, I read many books, rules, and texts.

I found out that:

- The European Union has made some rules and projects to help people with disabilities take part in politics.
- But these rules and projects do not always work well.
- The European Union can do more to help people with disabilities take part in politics.

I also give ideas for how the European Union can make things better.

These ideas were created together with people with disabilities.

If the European Union uses these ideas:

More people with disabilities will be able to take part in politics.

Democracy will be stronger.

And the rights of all people will be better respected.

The ideas are presented in easy-to-read format on page 81.

More details about the use of easy-to-read language can be found on page 30.

Abstract: Academic Language

A strong democracy can only exist when all voices are included, and human rights are upheld for everyone. Persons with disabilities make up over 27% of the European Union (EU) population. Nevertheless, they remain vastly underrepresented in EU politics, with fewer than 1% of politicians self-identifying as persons with disabilities. In the European elections, approximately 800,000 persons with disabilities were denied the right to vote due to their disability and participation rates remain low even among those eligible. This systemic exclusion stands in direct contradiction to the EU's foundational values and places a clear responsibility on the EU. Therefore, this dissertation addresses two key research questions: (1) *What legal and institutional measures does the European Union take to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, and what shortcomings exist in their implementation?* (2) *What recommendations can be implemented at the EU level to enhance the political participation of persons with disabilities in the European Union?* Grounded in an interdisciplinary framework of human rights, democratisation, disability studies and political science, this study employs a qualitative analytical approach. The literature analysis reveals that, although the EU has developed legal measures, their implementation remains inconsistent. Binding commitments are often limited in scope, and the EU does not fully leverage its legislative and policy powers to advance disability rights. Institutionally, the EU has undertaken targeted initiatives, developed strategic frameworks, and established structures within its institutions. However, significant barriers remain. EU institutions are not fully accessible, inclusive recruitment is lacking, data gaps persist, and symbolic actions have limited impact. To address these limitations, eight key recommendations are presented, developed in collaboration with an advisory board comprising individuals with disabilities. By implementing these measures, the EU can enhance the political participation of persons with disabilities, thereby strengthening democracy and human rights for all.

Table of Abbreviations

CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DG EMPL	Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
DREE	Disability Rights in the European Elections
EDE	European Disability Expertise
EDPD	European Day of Persons with Disabilities
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EDF	European Disability Forum
EEAS	European External Action Service
EPPD	The European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities
ENIL	European Network of Independent Living
EU	European Union
EUD	European Union of the Deaf
FRA	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
MEPs	Members of the European Parliament
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Ri
OPDs	Organisations of Persons with Disabilities
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UN-OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
UPIAS	Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A strong democracy can only exist when all voices are included, and human rights are upheld for everyone. In the European Union (EU), approximately 101 million persons live with disabilities, representing 27 per cent of the total population (Council of the EU, n.d.a). Despite constituting a substantial demographic, persons with disabilities remain profoundly underrepresented in EU political institutions and processes (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 25). This weakens both the EU's democracy and its commitment to human rights, which are both core values on which the EU is built (EU, n.d.b).

If political representation reflected the demographic reality, persons with disabilities would hold over a quarter of all political positions (Council of the EU, n.d.a). This would correspond to approximately 194 Members of the European Parliament, seven ministers in the Council of the EU, seven European Commissioners, and seven heads of state or government. The existing political landscape, however, does not reflect this. An investigation by Noteworthy revealed that, during the 2019-2024 term, only six Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) openly declared that they have a disability, accounting for 0.83% of all MEPs (European Data Journalism Network, 2024). According to research by Priestley et al. (2016), no centralised public record consistently notes whether elected representatives have disabilities. Even where some information exists, varying definitions of disability make it extremely challenging to draw meaningful comparisons between countries.

Political rights extend beyond being elected. The right to vote is fundamental. According to the European Commission, approximately 800,000 EU citizens with disabilities were denied the right to vote in the European elections, due to their disability (European Commission, 2021a, p. 9). Even where legal voting rights are granted, significant disparities remain in voter participation. The disability voter gap, defined as the difference in voter turnout between individuals with and without disabilities, persists across Europe. Persons with disabilities consistently vote at lower rates than persons without disabilities (Teglbjærg et al., 2022, p. 1342).

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in its *Concluding Observations on the periodic reports of the* EU*,* published in March 2025*,* expressed concern about the barriers people with disabilities face in participating in politics in the EU. These include being denied the right to vote or stand for election, inaccessible voting procedures, and a lack of accessible information (UN, 2025, p. 17). As a result, the perspectives of persons with disabilities are often excluded from EU political decision-making. This exclusion underscores the persistent reality that persons with disabilities are still viewed and "treated as second-class citizens" (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2017).

"The opportunity to be involved in political life is at the heart of what it means to live in a democratic society" (FRA, 2014b, p.1). When a large segment of the population faces legal, administrative, or physical barriers to participation, this not only infringes on their rights but also undermines the legitimacy of democracy itself (Teglbjærg et al., 2022, p. 1344; Lecerf, 2024, p. 2). Ensuring respect for the political rights of persons with disabilities is a democratic issue and relevant to the entire population (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2017). Inclusive political processes not only enhance the diversity and representativeness of democratic institutions but also contribute to the quality and effectiveness of political outcomes (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 44). Parliaments that include persons with disabilities are more likely to pass equitable laws and actively combat discrimination (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 77).

Political participation is a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948). This right is also guaranteed in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which the EU has ratified. It obliges the EU to eliminate existing barriers to ensure the political participation of persons with disabilities (UN, 2006). Enhancing political participation by removing barriers for persons with disabilities benefits not only persons with disabilities but society as a whole. Accessibility fosters inclusion across a wide range of groups, including older people, individuals with limited literacy, language learners, and those with temporary injuries. Take older voters, for example: without accessible election processes, many are unable to exercise their right to vote. And their numbers are growing. By 2050, that number is expected to reach 129.8 million. The population aged 75 to 84 alone is projected to increase by over 56% (Eurostat, 2020). Therefore, accessibility must be treated not as a special accommodation, but as a basic, universal requirement (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p.42).

In the EU context, the role of Member States is central to the political participation of persons with disabilities. National legislation and policy frameworks primarily shape participation at the EU level. Member states act as gatekeepers. If political participation is limited at the national level, access to EU-level processes is also obstructed. This is particularly evident in voting rights: individuals denied the right to vote nationally cannot vote in European elections. While existing research has examined national-level barriers, the contribution and responsibility of EU institutions in promoting the political participation of persons with disabilities have received insufficient academic attention. The impact of EU-level legal frameworks, governance mechanisms, and institutional initiatives remains underexplored. This study aims to shed light on the political participation of persons with disabilities by shifting the analytical focus from the national level to the supranational level. The first research question asks:

> *What legal and institutional measures does the European Union take to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, and what shortcomings exist in their implementation?*

Addressing this question is essential to examine the legal and institutional efforts by the EU and acknowledge that the existence of these measures is primarily the result of persistent advocacy and activism by persons with disabilities, organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), and the broader disability rights movement. Therefore, it is crucial to make these efforts visible. At the same time, a rigorous evaluation of current shortcomings is necessary, as political power remains overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of those without disabilities. The second research question turns toward action. It builds on the findings derived from the analysis conducted to address the first research question. Drawing on that assessment, this question identifies areas where concrete steps can be taken to strengthen the EU’s core values of democracy and human rights through the political participation of persons with disabilities. The second question asks:

> *What recommendations can be implemented at the EU level to enhance the political participation of persons with disabilities in the European Union?*

Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organised into nine chapters, each building upon the before ultimately answer the research questions introduced in Chapter 1. This opening chapter provides a thematic introduction, outlines the study's relevance, and presents the guiding research questions.

Chapter 2 explores the concept of disability from a theoretical perspective. It discusses the evolution of disability from a medical model to a social-relational and human rights model. It examines how the disability is viewed within the EU and its Member States.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the international legal framework for disability rights, focusing on the development of key UN initiatives that culminated in the CRPD. It examines the provisions of the CRPD, particularly those related to political participation, and introduces the role of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Chapter 4 outlines the research approach, highlighting the interdisciplinary framework and methodological tools used throughout the study. It also introduces the advisory board, discusses the adoption of an emancipatory disability research paradigm, and reflects on the accessibility of the dissertation itself.

Chapter 5 presents a comprehensive literature review on the political participation of persons with disabilities. It engages with existing literature on voting rights, representation, and accessibility, while also focusing on key factors that influence the political participation of persons with disabilities.

Chapter 6 examines the legal measures adopted by the EU to support the political participation of persons with disabilities. It reviews the development of disability rights in EU primary law, as well as the roles of various directives and international agreements, and highlights their limitations.

Chapter 7 analyses the institutional measures taken by the EU to promote political inclusion. It considers the accessibility of EU institutions, strategies, initiatives and various awareness projects and recognition programs, while also highlighting limitations.

Together, Chapters 6 and 7 provide a detailed response to the first research question, which focuses on the legal and institutional efforts undertaken by the EU to ensure political participation for persons with disabilities, as well as the limitations of these measures. Chapter 8 provides a direct answer to the second research question**,** which concerns future recommendations for enhancing political participation among persons with disabilities in the EU. Based on the findings of the previous chapters and the advisory board, this section presents practical and targeted recommendations for removing existing barriers and advancing the political participation of people with disabilities.

Finally, Chapter 9 reflects on the implications of the findings, discusses the study's limitations, suggests future research directions, and concludes with thoughts on democracy and human rights.

Chapter 2: Concept of Disability

This chapter explores the evolving understanding of disability through various theoretical lenses. It begins with the medical model of disability, which views disability primarily as an individual impairment or medical condition that requires treatment. This model is also linked to the charity model that is briefly introduced in this chapter. While the medical model is influential, it has been increasingly criticised. In response, alternative frameworks have emerged that broaden the perspective on disability. The chapter introduces the social model, which highlights the role of societal barriers in disabling individuals, and the social-relational model, which emphasises the dynamic interaction between individuals and their social environments. Additionally, the human rights model is examined, framing disability as a matter of dignity, equality, and rights. Then, the models of disability adopted in this dissertation are outlined, along with the reasons for this choice. The chapter concludes by examining how the concept of disability is interpreted and implemented across the Member States of the European Union (EU).

Evolving Concept of Disability

Disability has traditionally been perceived as a person's failing, often regarded as a personal tragedy and a burden on society. In Western industrialised societies, disability has been conceptualised predominantly through a medical or biological framework, emphasising abnormalities, disorders, and impairments as the primary causes of functional limitations and the condition referred to as disability (Callus and Camilleri-Zahra, 2017, p. 3). The medical model approaches disability by emphasising the individual's health condition as the leading cause of disability. Medical treatment or intervention may be necessary to diagnose, manage, or improve the person's physical or mental functioning (Lecerf, 2017, p. 4). According to this model, disability is primarily viewed as a medical issue that should be addressed by healthcare professionals to minimise or eliminate the disability, allowing the individual to function in a manner that aligns with what is considered typical or normal (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 22).

The charity model is closely related to this approach. It is based on the idea that persons with disabilities are to be pitied, that their lives are filled with suffering or sadness, and that they need sympathy or charitable support (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 22). This charity model fosters the notion that individuals without disabilities can subtly affirm their superiority while simultaneously viewing themselves as virtuous through their charitable acts (Zames and Fleischer, 2011, p. 20).

The 1960s marked a turning point for the disability rights movement. Early in the decade, the deinstitutionalisation movement began to take shape, led by individuals with lived experiences and parents advocating for community-based alternatives to the large state institutions that had been the standard solution for decades (LEAP, n.d.). This shift marked the beginning of what would evolve into the Independent Living Movement. Ed Roberts was one of the most influential figures in the emerging independent living movement, significantly shaping the U.S. movement during the 1960s and into the early 1970s (Callus and Vella, 2021, p. 19). Around this time, more and more people with disabilities began to demand to move away from the medical model of disability, toward a more holistic approach. They started to adopt the social model. This model emphasises that the real problem is not the persons with disability, but rather discrimination and a lack of accessibility (LEAP, n.d.). Building on this shift in perspective, the following section delves deeper into the social model of disability, exploring its core principles and how it redefined the understanding of disability in society.

The Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability shifts attention from the individual to the structures and norms of society that exclude persons with disabilities. According to Lecerf (2017, p. 4), the barriers created by society can be physical or social restrictions that prevent individuals from realising their full physical, social, or professional potential. Disability, in this view, is not something inherent in the person but emerges from environments that are not inclusive. OSCE and ODIHR (2019, p. 22) offer a clear example: if a person cannot access a presentation without a sign language interpreter, the issue is not the person’s deafness but the necessary support. It was Mike Oliver who, in 1990, formulated the social model of disability in his book *The Politics of Disablement* (Oliver, 1990). However, the origins of this model can be traced back to the 1975 discussion between the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) and the Disability Alliance. UPIAS argued that disability results from societal exclusion rather than the disability itself. They stated:

> In our view, it is a society which disables physically impaired persons. Disability is imposed on top of our impairments by the unnecessary isolation and exclusion from full participation in society. Disabled people are, therefore, an oppressed group in society (UPIAS and Disability Alliance, 1976, p. 20).

This shift in perspective laid the groundwork for understanding disability as a social construct that arises from environmental and societal barriers. Disability, in this context, encompasses a wide range of limiting factors, including personal prejudice and institutional discrimination, as well as inaccessible buildings and inadequate transportation systems (Thomas, 2004, p. 24). The social-relational model of disability offers a more nuanced understanding by emphasising the interplay between individual experiences and socially imposed restrictions. This model will be introduced in the next section.

The Social-Relational Model of Disability

Over the years, the social model of disability has been increasingly criticised by both academic scholars and disability activists. A central point of concern is that it often fails to address the role of impairment and illness in limiting activity, causing pain, and shaping the everyday lives of persons with disabilities (Morris, 1991 and Thomas, 2004). As Thomas (2004, p. 25) points out, the model does not fully acknowledge how these factors influence lived experience. Jenny Morris, a feminist and person with lived experience, makes a similar observation, noting that:

> There is a tendency within the social model of disability to deny the experience of our bodies, insisting that our physical differences and restrictions are entirely socially created. While environmental barriers and social attitudes are a crucial part of our experience of disability and do indeed disable us, to suggest that this is all there is to it is to deny the personal experience of physical and intellectual restrictions, of illness, of the fear of dying (Morris, 1991, p. 10).

Unlike the social model, the social-relational approach acknowledges that not all limitations are socially constructed. It recognises the existence of disabilities, which refer to restrictions that result directly from physical or cognitive impairments (Thomas, 2004, p. 29). Despite her criticisms, Thomas does not advocate discarding the social model. Instead, she argues that it should continue to play an important symbolic and political role within disability studies. It should be seen less as a tool for explanation and more as a point of identity and disciplinary grounding. Rather than continuing to debate the model, Thomas suggests that future efforts should focus on developing a broader and more nuanced social relational theory of disability (Thomas, 2004, p. 33). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) also adapted the understanding of disability that can be best placed in the social-relational model of disability. The CRPD sets out the most widely accepted international concept of disability in Article 1 of the Convention:

> Persons with disabilities include those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (UN, 2006).

Article 1 highlights two key aspects. First, disability encompasses individuals with enduring physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments. Second, disability arises from the interaction between impairments and external barriers. The significance of this second point cannot be overstated, as removing such obstacles is a fundamental principle of contemporary disability rights advocacy (UN, 2006). It can also be argued that the CRPD adopts a human rights model of disability, which will be introduced in the following section.

The Human Rights Model of Disability

Degener (2014) argues that the CRPD goes beyond the social-relational model and formally establishes the human rights model as the primary framework for addressing the rights of persons with disabilities. Although the social-relational model served as the main point of reference during the drafting of the CRPD, she understands the Convention as moving beyond it and codifying the human rights model of disability (Degener, 2014, pp. 4–5). In her view, while the social-relational model helps to explain discrimination against persons with disabilities, it lacks the normative foundation needed to guide policy development (Degener, 2014, p. 7).

According to Degener, one of the core features of the human rights model is its rejection of the belief that impairment limits a person's ability to hold or exercise human rights.

She writes, “The human rights model of disability defies the presumption that impairment may hinder human rights capacity” (Degener, 2014, p. 8). This sets it apart from medical and paternalistic approaches, which often prioritise protection over self-determination for persons with disabilities. Furthermore, she notes, “The human rights model of disability includes both sets of human rights: political, civil and economic, and cultural rights” (Degener, 2014, p. 10). This comprehensive perspective aligns with the CRPD’s aim to address every aspect of life for persons with disabilities, including education, healthcare, and legal capacity. Lawson and Beckett (2021) present a different perspective, however. While they also endorse the human rights model, they view it not as a replacement for the social model, but rather as a means of building on and complementing it. Lawson, Beckett, and Degner adopt the exact definition of the human rights model:

> The human rights model focuses on the inherent dignity of the human being and, subsequently, but only if necessary, on the person’s medical characteristics. It places the individual centre stage in all decisions affecting them and, most importantly, locates the main ‘problem’ outside the person and society” (Degener, 2014, p. 6; Lawson and Beckett, 2021, p. 350).

This dissertation adopts an integrative approach by drawing on both the social-relational and the human rights models of disability, recognising that each contributes valuable and complementary insights into the understanding of disability. In the next section, the concept of disability in the EU Member States will be discussed.

The Concept of Disability in European Union Member States

While there is an internationally accepted understanding of the concept of disability outlined in the CRPD, the concepts of disability vary considerably across the EU. Member States have different historical, cultural, economic, and social backgrounds on disability. While some countries apply a purely social model or a social-relational definition, others employ a mixed approach or focus on medical aspects (Lecerf, 2017, p. 6). For example, in Germany, the definition is outlined in the Social Code IX, while in Spain, it has a legal basis in the Law on the Social Integration of Persons with Disabilities. There is no standardised legal definition in some countries, such as Belgium or Denmark. Scandinavian countries often deliberately refrain from defining terms to avoid stigmatisation and promote inclusion. Even within countries, the definition can vary depending on the context, such as social or professional, education or financial support (Lecerf, 2017, p. 6). Although there is no standardised definition at the EU or national level, the 2006 CRPD is a general reference. With the ratification of the Convention in 2010, the EU committed itself to this definition. By 2018, all EU Member States had officially ratified the CRPD, thereby further entrenching this definition at the national level (UN-OHCHR, n.d.a).

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the understanding of disability has evolved, shifting from a purely medical perspective to more diverse and holistic approaches. The social model and the social-relational model draw attention to the role of societal structures and social interactions. The human rights approach builds on these models by focusing on the recognition and protection of rights, as well as emphasising equality, dignity, and active participation in society. As demonstrated, the implementation of these models varies significantly across EU Member States. As stated earlier, this study adopts an understanding of both the social-relational and the human rights approaches to disability.

Chapter 3: Legal Framework of Disability Rights in the United Nations

Understanding the role of the United Nations (UN) is essential to tracing the development of international disability rights, particularly through the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Since its ratification by the European Union (EU), the CRPD has become a key reference point for aligning EU legal and policy frameworks with the rights of persons with disabilities. This chapter examines the UN's evolving approach to disability, beginning with its early initiatives and culminating in the adoption of the CRPD. Special attention is given to Article 29, which affirms the right to participate in politics and public affairs. The chapter also examines the role of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in overseeing implementation and providing guidance on the interpretation of its provisions. Together, these elements demonstrate how the UN framework continues to influence the development of inclusive policies and legal obligations at the EU level.

The Evolution of Disability Rights at the United Nations

The United Nations had been addressing the rights of persons with disabilities before adopting the CRPD. A significant early milestone was the Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons in 1971 (UN, 1971), followed by the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons in 1975 (UN, 1975), both of which laid out fundamental rights and protective measures for individuals with disabilities (UN and Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2007, p. 10). In 1976, the UN General Assembly designated 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons (UNDESA, n.d.a). The initiative laid the foundation for a broader global agenda to advance the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. Building on this momentum, the General Assembly adopted the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons in 1982 to foster full participation and equality in all aspects of life. To facilitate the implementation of the Programme, the UN declared the period from 1983 to 1992 as the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (UN, 1982).

In 1989, the General Assembly adopted the Tallinn Guidelines for Action on Human Resources Development in the Field of Disability, providing a basis for inclusive education, training, and employment of persons with disabilities across all levels of government policy (UN, 1982). The following year, the Principles for the Protection of Persons with Mental Illness and the Improvement of Mental Health Care (UN, 1991) were adopted. These principles aimed to prevent severe human rights violations in psychiatric institutions, such as unjustified restraint or forced treatment. However, their effectiveness has been debated recently (UN and Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2007, p. 10). Another key development occurred in 1993 with the adoption of the Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (UN, 1993). These rules require governments to eliminate barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from fully participating in society. Although they were not legally binding, they served as a foundation for national legislation in many countries. They played a crucial role in shaping the later CRPD (UN and Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2007, p. 11).

The CRPD was adopted on December 13, 2006, at the UN Headquarters in New York, twenty years after the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons. The CRPD opened for signature on 30 March 2007 (UN-OHCHR, n.d.d). The following section examines the adoption of the CRPD. This landmark agreement marked a turning point in the global recognition of disability rights.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The CRPD is an international treaty on human rights that seeks to promote, safeguard, and ensure the equal and full enjoyment of all rights by persons with disabilities (UN, 2006). While the CRPD does not introduce new rights, it redefines how existing rights are applied to persons with disabilities. The CRPD emphasises the need for concrete action to eliminate disability-based discrimination, outlining specific obligations for states to ensure equal treatment. The treaty serves as a policy framework and a human rights instrument, designed to be inclusive of different types of disabilities and applicable across various sectors (Inclusion Europe, n.d.a). Significantly, the Convention strongly emphasises the autonomy of persons with disabilities and their ability to make choices and exercise control over their lives (Callus and Camilleri-Zahra, 2017, p. 2). The Convention explicitly links human rights to fundamental freedoms, emphasising their indivisibility, interdependence, and interrelation, and affirms that these rights apply equally to all persons with disabilities in the Preamble (UN, 2006).

As of June 2025, the Convention has been ratified by 192 parties, including 191 states and the EU. The last ratification was on January 6, 2025, by Eritrea. The only three UN Member States that haven't ratified the CRPD are Tonga, Tajikistan and the United States of America (UN-OHCHR, n.d.a). It is essential to note that the 50 articles of the CRPD are based on the fundamental principles outlined in Article 3, which apply to all provisions of the Convention. These principles include respect for dignity, individual autonomy, and personal independence; non-discrimination; full and effective participation and inclusion in society; recognition of diversity; equality of opportunity; accessibility; gender equality; consideration of the evolving capacities of children with disabilities; and the right to preserve one's identity. These overarching principles form the foundation for all Convention provisions (UNDESA, n.d.c).

The CRPD is unique because it is the first legally binding international agreement dedicated to safeguarding the rights and freedoms of persons with disabilities and ensuring their full and equal participation in all aspects of society (Inclusion Europe, n.d.a). The CRPD was the fastest concluded human rights treaty in history (UNDESA, n.d.b). A particularly significant feature of the CRPD is the unprecedented involvement of persons with disabilities in its development. Those directly impacted by an international human rights treaty actively drafted and negotiated it for the first time. Under the slogan *Nothing about us without us*, individuals with disabilities played a central role in shaping the Convention's content. For this dissertation, the political rights of persons with disabilities outlined in the CRPD are of great importance. This is why the next section turns to Article 29 of the Convention.

Participation in Political and Public Life in the Convention

Article 29 of the CRPD (UN, 2006) is particularly significant for this dissertation, as it addresses the political and public participation of persons with disabilities. Article 29 ensures that persons with disabilities enjoy political rights equally with others and obligates states to take measures that enable their full and effective participation. Article 29(a) affirms that persons with disabilities must have the opportunity to engage in political and public life on an equal footing with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives. This includes the right to vote and to stand for election. To uphold this right, voting procedures, facilities, and materials must be appropriate, accessible, easy to understand, and user-friendly (UN, 2006). Additionally, Article 29(a)(ii) emphasises the importance of safeguarding the right of persons with disabilities to cast their votes in elections and referendums through secret ballots, free from intimidation. Furthermore, persons with disabilities must be allowed to run for office, effectively hold public positions, and carry out public responsibilities at all levels of government. To facilitate this, states should promote assistive and innovative technologies where necessary (UN, 2006).

Another key provision in Article 29(a)(iii) ensures that individuals with disabilities can freely express their political will. If required, they must be permitted to receive assistance from a person of their choice when casting their vote. In paragraph (b), the Convention encourages states to foster an environment that enables individuals with disabilities to participate in public affairs on an equal basis with others without discrimination. This includes the right to engage in organisations and associations concerned with public and political life, as well as in political parties (UN, 2006). Moreover, Article 29(b)(ii) underscores the significance of supporting the formation of organisations that represent individuals with disabilities at international, national, regional, and local levels. It also guarantees that individuals with disabilities can join such organisations and participate in their activities (UN, 2006).

Only Malta entered a reservation to Article 29, stating merely that it reserved "the right to continue to apply its current electoral legislation concerning voting procedures, facilities, and materials and to apply its current electoral legislation concerning assistance in voting procedures" (FRA, n.d). After discussing the CRPD, particularly Article 29, it is essential to examine the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which plays a crucial role in implementing the CRPD.

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities comprises 18 independent experts responsible for monitoring how state parties implement the Convention. States must submit an initial report within two years of ratification, followed by subsequent reports every four years. The Committee examines these submissions and then provides concluding observations and recommendations to strengthen compliance with the Convention's provisions. Under the Optional Protocol, the Committee is further empowered to receive individual complaints and conduct inquiries into credible allegations of serious and systematic violations of the Convention.

It also publishes general comments that clarify its interpretation of the Convention's articles and meets twice a year in Geneva to fulfil its mandate (UN-OHCHR, n.d.c). The CRPD underscores the importance of directly involving persons with disabilities in decision-making processes that affect them. Ultimately, it is their perspectives that are central, and they must be the ones to determine whether the Convention is being effectively implemented and whether it is leading to meaningful and positive change in their daily lives (UN, 2004). That's why persons with disabilities are also part of the Committee (UN, n.d.).

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the role of the United Nations in shaping international disability rights. It explored the development of the UN's approach to disability, from its initial efforts to the adoption of the CRPD. The CRPD was presented as a milestone in international law, particularly through its emphasis on political and public participation, as set out in Article 29. The chapter also discussed the function of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in monitoring implementation and providing guidance.

Chapter 4: Research Approach

This chapter outlines the research approach adopted in this dissertation to address the two central research questions. This chapter begins by introducing an interdisciplinary framework that underpins its approach, highlighting how perspectives from human rights and democratisation are enriched through insights from disability studies and political science. Following this, the two primary research methods are presented: a literature review and consultations with an advisory board. The literature review serves to answer the first research question, while the advisory board assists in answering the second research question. The chapter then turns to the emancipatory disability research paradigm that is being applied in this dissertation. Finally, it discusses the accessibility of the chapter itself, an essential element in ensuring alignment with human rights principles, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and emancipatory disability research.

Interdisciplinary Framework

This research is grounded in the broader fields of human rights and democratisation, enriched through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates disability studies with political science. Human rights and democracy are deeply interrelated, and one cannot be fully realised without the other (International IDEA, UN & OHCHR, 2013, p. 2). The human rights-based approach (HRBA) offers a normative and analytical structure that recognises individuals as rights-holders and states as duty-bearers (European Commission, n.d.a). The integration of human rights frameworks establishes clear legal and ethical obligations for states to combat discrimination and ensure the full participation of persons with disabilities in all aspects of public life (UN-OHCHR, n.d.b). The HRBA is grounded in the core principles of non-discrimination, inclusive participation, accountability, transparency and access to information (European Commission, n.d.a). These principles align closely with the CRPD.

Democratisation, in this context, is not limited to institutional development. It involves dismantling structural barriers and actively including marginalised groups as agents of change (European Commission, n.d.a). The political participation of persons with disabilities is therefore not an optional element of democratic governance, but a fundamental indicator of its legitimacy and inclusiveness. Human rights and democratisation serve as essential tools for setting policy standards and holding governments accountable. Within this context, disability studies offer a critical perspective that challenges traditional, medically oriented conceptions of disability. It emphasises the social, political, and structural dimensions of exclusion (The Oxford Review, n.d.). This field foregrounds the rights, agency, and knowledge contributions of persons with disabilities (DISTA, n.d.), thereby aligning with core human rights principles such as equality, dignity, and inclusion. Political science, as another intersecting field, examines how institutions, governance, and policymaking shape participation and representation (Roskin, 2025). However, disability remains frequently overlooked within mainstream political science discourse (Priestley et al., 2016). Disability studies address this gap by highlighting systemic barriers to political inclusion and advocating for transformative change (DISTA, n.d.).

Research Methods

Carrying Out the Literature Review

This study employs a qualitative and analytical research design. The analysis is grounded in a critical review of the literature, including peer-reviewed academic publications and official institutional sources. The primary aim of this approach is to provide a structured and substantiated overview of existing developments related to the EU's legal and institutional efforts to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities. As a rigorous method of academic inquiry, literature reviews enable the purposeful identification, evaluation, and synthesis of relevant studies, following a transparent, replicable, and theoretically guided process (Susanto et al., 2024, p. 264). The research question was clearly defined from the outset to ensure coherence and precision in the search strategy (Heil, 2020, p. 6).

Predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria ensured that only sources meeting the criteria of thematic relevance, institutional credibility, and temporal adequacy were considered (Heil, 2020, p. 8). The review covers materials published from the 1990s to 2025, a period that captures both the emergence and evolution of the EU's disability rights agenda. The choice of the 1990s as a starting point reflects the initial phase of EU legal and institutional engagement with disability rights. This temporal range facilitates a comprehensive examination of key developments across time. Geographically, the study focuses on the EU. The source corpus consists of two main categories of documents. The first includes materials issued by EU institutions such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the EU. These encompass treaties, directives, communications, policy strategies, legal instruments, and resolutions. The second category comprises external sources, including academic literature, reports from civil society organisations, and publications by international organisations such as the UN and the OSCE. These materials serve to contextualise and critically assess the institutional frameworks identified in the primary sources. Database selection was based on thematic relevance and academic reputation. The literature was retrieved from scholarly databases, including Google Scholar, Springer, and Taylor & Francis Online, as well as legal documents accessed via EUR-Lex. Additional materials were located through the official websites of the relevant institutions.

The development of search terms was guided by the PICO framework, which breaks the research question into four components: Population (P), Intervention (I), Context (C), and Outcome (O) (Heil, 2020, pp. 14-15). In this study, these components were operationalised as follows: persons with disabilities (P), political participation (I), EU legal and institutional measures (C), and inclusion (O). The initial set of keywords was expanded with synonyms and related concepts, such as voting rights, accessibility, disability rights, democracy, human rights, and political rights. Terminological refinement was further informed by preliminary search results and controlled vocabularies provided by the databases, enhancing both reliability and reproducibility. The literature search was carried out between February and June 2025. Search strategies were continuously reviewed and adjusted in response to overly broad or excessively narrow results, ensuring methodological rigour and relevance throughout the process (Heil, 2020, pp. 22–23).

Following the selection process, an in-depth content analysis was carried out. Emphasis was placed on critically examining the sources. This approach facilitated the identification of the legal and institutional measures undertaken by the EU, along with their respective limitations. Through the deliberate selection of high-quality and thematically relevant sources, including academic literature and official EU documents, the study provides a well-founded and comprehensive analysis of developments since the 1990s. However, some limitations also arise, as no original empirical data were collected, the analysis is therefore confined to existing literature. Additionally, an advisory board was employed as a method, which will be introduced in the next section.

Advisory Board

To address the second research question, the study formulates a set of policy recommendations derived from the findings of the initial analysis for the first research question. The development of the recommendations was conducted in close consultation with an advisory board composed of individuals with disabilities. This participatory approach aligns with the principles of inclusive and emancipatory research paradigm, which will be introduced in the following section. Ensuring that those directly affected by the issues under investigation are actively involved in developing the proposed measures. The inclusion of individuals with disabilities in advisory processes enriches the research by introducing experiential and lived expertise that is often absent in conventional academic or institutional discourse. Their contributions enhance both the practical relevance and the legitimacy of the recommendations, aligning policy suggestions with real-world challenges and needs (Kailes, 2012, p. 4).

Careful attention was paid to selecting advisory board members with lived experience. Diversity was a central consideration in board composition, with deliberate inclusion of a range of disability types, age groups, genders, and ethnic backgrounds (Kailes, 2012, p. 15). The final board members ranged in age from 23 to 73 years, with balanced gender representation. The advisory board consisted of seven individuals with disabilities from across the EU and one neighbouring country, including Belgium, Germany, Greece, Malta, Portugal, and Switzerland. Five members held the European Passport, while one advisory board member had European refugee status. Their input drew upon personal experience, lived knowledge, and professional expertise in areas such as accessibility, political advocacy, and policy engagement.

Prior to consultations with the advisory board, a draft of the recommendations was prepared. This draft was based on the analysis of the initial research questions and two recent reports: *The Alternative Report submitted by the European Disability Forum (EDF) for the second review of the European Union* (EU) *by the CRPD* Committee, published in February 2025 (EDF, 2025), and the *Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on the EU*, released in March 2025 (UN, 2025). The EDF report was included due to the Forum's recognised status as a legitimate representative of persons with disabilities and their organisations within the EU. The UN Committee's observations were considered particularly important given its role in monitoring the implementation of the CRPD, which the EU has ratified. As both reports were published earlier this year, they provide timely and highly relevant perspectives.

Before consultations, each advisory board member received a draft of the recommendations in their preferred working language of the EU: English, French, or German. An easy-to-read version in the preferred language was also made available to enhance accessibility. Individual consultations were then conducted, with format, pace, and language tailored to each participant's needs. The recommendations were reviewed point by point, and participants were invited to suggest amendments, removals, or additions. Each online session lasted approximately 75 minutes. To maintain scholarly independence and uphold academic standards, no financial compensation was offered. Participants were, however, invited to utilise the final recommendations and dissertation in their professional or advocacy work.

This validation phase ensured that the recommendations are not only theoretically sound but also contextually appropriate and practically implementable. The chosen method for developing recommendations offers clear strengths but also presents some limitations. Its participatory approach, involving a diverse advisory board of persons with disabilities, enhances the relevance, legitimacy, and practical value of the outcomes. The selection criteria ensured diversity. However, the small size of the seven-member advisory board limits the generalizability of the findings. This is also due to the process, which is time-consuming and resource-intensive, potentially limiting its replicability in projects with tight timelines. Additionally, the method's qualitative nature offers depth but not statistical breadth. Overall, it is a methodologically sound and ethically strong approach, best complemented by broader empirical data. The study adopts a paradigm of emancipatory disability research, which will be elaborated in the following section.

Emancipatory Disability Research Paradigm

This dissertation is situated within the framework of the Emancipatory Disability Research Paradigm, drawing on the six principles developed by Stone and Priestley (1996). Each principle is briefly summarised and followed by a critical reflection on how it is applied within the scope of this research.

The first principle, *Choosing the Epistemology*, calls for a fundamental shift from the medical model of disability to the social model, which centres on identifying and dismantling structural and environmental barriers (Stone and Priestley, 1996, pp. 4-5). Rather than focusing on individuals' ability to adapt, the emphasis is placed on changing disabling conditions. This dissertation adopts the social-relational and human rights models of disability. These frameworks enable a nuanced analysis of political exclusion while also acknowledging the lived and embodied dimensions of the disability experience.

The second principle, *Surrendering Objectivity*, challenges the conventional notion of detached, neutral research, advocating for an engaged, politically committed stance (Stone and Priestley, 1996, p. 5). I draw on my longstanding involvement in the disability rights movement to inform the academic process. As the founder of inclusion360, I collaborate closely with persons with disabilities and activists to promote inclusive political participation. I have organised public demonstrations, supported electoral campaigns for persons with disabilities, and advocated for the voting rights of all persons with disabilities. This lived engagement not only informs the research but also reinforces the dissertation's central aim of advancing the political participation of persons with disabilities.

The third principle, *What's in it for (them) Persons with Disabilities*, highlights the need for research to be relevant and beneficial to the lives of persons with disabilities, addressing barriers and proposing tangible improvements (Stone and Priestley, 1996, p. 6). Academic work should serve the interests of those most affected rather than reproduce abstract or irrelevant debates. This dissertation addresses an existing gap in the literature and provides concrete policy recommendations developed in consultation with an advisory board. While the impact of the dissertation cannot be guaranteed, the study prioritises practical outcomes that may support advocacy efforts by organisations of persons with disabilities and disability activists.

The fourth principle, *Reversing the Social Relations of Research Production*, emphasises the importance of shifting control over the research process toward persons with disabilities, recognising that research has historically been shaped by the privilege of researchers without disabilities (Stone and Priestley, 1996, p. 7). Participatory and community-led approaches are central to this goal. While an advisory board was consulted, the core research questions were developed independently. Earlier inclusion of stakeholders with disabilities would have strengthened the research.

The fifth principle, *Personalising the Political and Politicising the Personal*, asserts that personal experiences of disability must be understood as inherently political and recognised as valid sources of knowledge (Stone and Priestley, 1996; Morris, 1991). This approach bridges collective analysis with individual narratives, reinforcing the link between lived experience and systemic critique. Although the dissertation initially aimed to include interviews with individuals with disabilities, delays in obtaining ethics approval prevented their completion. Nonetheless, personal inputs from the advisory board helped shape the recommendation.

The sixth principle, *Qualitative and Quantitative*, advocates for the integration of both methodological approaches to gain a deeper understanding of the complex realities of disability and oppression (Stone and Priestley, 1996, p. 10). Rather than viewing qualitative methods as inherently liberatory, Stone and Priestley emphasise the necessity of using them thoughtfully and critically. Although this dissertation does not involve original data collection, it draws on existing sources, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative evidence. The lack of comprehensive EU-wide data on the political participation of persons with disabilities is acknowledged as a significant limitation in current research.

The dissertation aligns with the broader framework of the emancipatory paradigm, and parallels can be observed throughout. It is essential to acknowledge that even leading advocates of emancipatory research have not fully achieved a truly emancipatory approach. Still, the value lies in confronting these tensions and continuing to work within them. There will always be a gap between the ideals that research seeks to uphold and the realities of its practice (Stone and Priestley, 1996, p. 11).

Accessibility of the Dissertation

When writing about strengthening democracy and human rights, it is equally important to consider the accessibility of the work itself. If the form of a text is not accessible, it risks excluding individuals and may violate fundamental human rights obligations, including those outlined in the CRPD (UN, 2006). Article 21 of the CRPD is particularly relevant in this context, as it guarantees access to information in accessible formats (UN-OHCHR, n.d.b). To meet this standard, specific measures have been implemented. Although this is an academic work that follows the conventions of scholarly writing, both the abstract and the key recommendations are provided in two versions: one in easy-to-read language and one in academic language.

These two sections were selected for translation because they serve critical functions for a broad audience. The abstract provides a concise summary of the work's central ideas, purpose, and key findings. Making this section accessible ensures that all readers can understand the research's essence and its relevance. The recommendations are significant because they provide practical guidance and tools that can be applied directly and effectively. People with disabilities may wish to use these recommendations to advocate for change. Presenting them in easy-to-read language empowers a broader audience to act on the insights gained from the work. An easy-to-read version is a way to make information accessible and understandable for everyone (EU, n.d.d).

Inclusion Europe has created a symbol called "the easy-to-read logo" to indicate that the text is easy-to-read (Inclusion Europe, n.d.b). This symbol is being used in this dissertation to show which part of this work is easy-to-read. The easy-to-read version of the abstract and recommendations was translated using ChatGPT (OpenAI), an artificial intelligence tool (see appendix). Artificial intelligence tools like this can help bridge the gap between complex academic discourse and accessible communication, contributing to the removal of structural barriers in knowledge production.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological foundation of the dissertation by presenting a research design that is both interdisciplinary and emancipatory. By combining insights from human rights, democratisation, disability studies, and political science, the study adopts a comprehensive framework to address the research questions. The use of a literature review, combined with the involvement of an advisory board, ensures both analytical depth and the inclusion of diverse perspectives. Grounding the research in the emancipatory disability paradigm reinforces the commitment to inclusive and rights-based knowledge production. Finally, the emphasis on the accessibility of the dissertation itself aligns with the study's aim to strengthen human rights and democratisation, through the participation of persons with disabilities.

Chapter 5: Literature Review

This chapter offers a structured examination of existing research on the political participation of persons with disabilities. It outlines the current state of scholarly discourse and assesses the conditions under which participation occurs or is limited. The discussion begins with a reconsideration of conventional understandings of political participation. Attention then turns to the legal frameworks limiting voting rights and to the persistent disparity in political participation between persons with and without disabilities. This is followed by an analysis of the accessibility of elections and the degree to which persons with disabilities are politically represented, particularly within the EU. Further attention is given to the role of political parties in enabling or constraining participation. The review then considers a range of factors that influence political participation, including access to education, employment, financial resources, everyday accessibility, disabling perceptions and intersectionality.

Rethinking Political Participation

The notion of political participation has undergone significant development and broadening in recent decades. Traditionally, research primarily addressed electoral participation, focusing extensively on voter turnout. Early foundational work, notably by Campbell et al (1960), provided one of the first systematic analyses of voting behaviour in the United States. However, in recent decades, scholars have significantly broadened their perspective. Dalton (2008) illustrates that contemporary understanding encompasses much more than voting. It extends to attending political meetings, signing petitions, and participating in protests or social movements.

Numerous studies highlight socioeconomic factors as influential determinants of political participation. For instance, Brady et al. (1995) research indicates that individuals with higher education, higher income, or stable employment conditions are significantly more likely to participate politically than those facing economic disadvantages. Beyond economics, social characteristics such as gender and ethnicity also play pivotal roles. For example, Burns et al. (2001) investigated gender-specific patterns in political activity, while Koopmans and Statham (2000) emphasise ethnicity as a crucial determinant.

Despite extensive research on political participation, persons with disabilities have been mostly neglected as subjects. This gap highlights a more profound societal issue. Persons with disabilities are often overlooked as relevant political actors, and their limited participation frequently remains unnoticed. This oversight is equally apparent in the European context, where scholarly attention to the political participation of individuals with disabilities remains insufficient. Often, research is limited to physical disabilities, while persons with less visible or intellectual or psychosocial disabilities are excluded. In academic research, the political participation of persons with disabilities has received relatively little attention. Many European countries lack up-to-date studies on the engagement of this group (Priestley et al., 2016, p. 25).

There is limited research on the barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from being elected to office, with some occasional exceptions (D'Aubin and Stienstra, 2004; Langford and Levesque, 2017; Levesque, 2016; Sackey, 2015; Waltz and Schippers, 2020; Evans and Reher, 2020). A study worth noting is the research by Priestley et al., *The political participation of disabled people in Europe: Rights, accessibility and activism.* This study presents the first comprehensive comparative analysis of the electoral and political participation of persons with disabilities, drawing on research conducted across the 28 Member States (before Brexit) of the EU (Priestley et al., 2016, p.2).

According to the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), it remains challenging to understand how persons with disabilities participate in political life across the European Union (EU). One of the main reasons is the lack of consistent and reliable data. In most Member States, there is little structured information on how individuals with disabilities experience elections or political engagement in general. Another challenge is that many persons, such as those living in institutions or those who are non-verbal, are frequently excluded from standard surveys. This makes it clear that existing methods must be improved and better funded to gather data that accurately reflects the diversity of experiences (FRA, 2014b, pp. 9-10).

This is not surprising, as parties, legislatures, or governments have shown little to no interest in increasing the number of persons with disabilities in politics (Evans and Reher, 2020, p. 2). Integrating the experiences of persons with disabilities into broader discussions of political participation reveals unique challenges. While universal factors, such as access to political resources and motivation, also apply to this demographic, disability-specific barriers further complicate their political involvement. This disability-specific barrier will be discussed in the following sections. The following section discusses the restrictions on the right to vote for persons with disabilities.

Restriction on the Right to Vote

The EU is not competent in determining who is eligible to vote. This responsibility lies solely with the Member States. Therefore, Member States act as the key gatekeepers regarding the political participation of persons with disabilities. As mentioned before, it is estimated that around 800,000 EU citizens with disabilities were excluded from the EU elections because of their disability (European Commission, 2021a, p. 9). This is despite the ratification of the CRPD by all EU Member States. The FRA report 2014 showed that in 21 of the 28 Member States (before Brexit), persons with disabilities experienced some restrictions on their right to vote (FRA, 2014b, p. 3). The situation has only progressed a little in the last few years. The research of Lecerf in 2024 shows that, in 14 EU countries, individuals under partial or complete guardianship automatically or effectively lose their voting rights. Only six countries - Austria, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, and Sweden - guarantee the right to vote regardless of one's legal status (Lecerf, 2024, p. 6). These exclusions are frequently based on discriminatory legal terms such as incapacity or lack of judgment, which are deliberately used to justify disenfranchisement (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 36).

A particularly troubling aspect is the absence of effective legal remedies. The study by Priestley and his colleagues shows that in 2016, in 18 EU Member States, persons with disabilities were significantly restricted from legally reclaiming their right to vote. In countries such as Estonia, Greece, Ireland, and Slovakia, individuals with disabilities must go to court to regain their legal capacity and the right to vote (Priestley et al., 2016, p. 13). As of 2024, no EU country fully guarantees the right of persons with disabilities to retain their legal capacity in all circumstances. In 12 Member States, individuals can still be entirely deprived of legal capacity; in 9 others, partial removal is permitted (EDF, 2025, pp. 48–49). This legal exclusion restricts the ability of persons with disabilities to make fundamental decisions regarding political participation. The right to vote remains linked to legal capacity in many Member States. As documented by the FRA (2014b, p.4) and reiterated by the *CRPD Committee* (UN, 2014). Individuals deprived of legal capacity are often stripped of electoral rights without an individual assessment or judicial review.

Another important issue in voting is the decision-making process. While many states rely on legal guardianship substitute decision-making, international bodies such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) call for a shift toward supported decision-making.

This approach enables individuals with disabilities to make their own choices, supported by trusted individuals (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 18). In 2014, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stated in their General Comment that: “A person’s decision-making ability cannot be a justification for any exclusion of persons with disabilities from exercising their political rights” (UN, 2014, p.12). However, the right to vote and participate in elections alone is not enough to increase the political participation of people with disabilities. Even among those who do have voting rights, voter turnout tends to be lower. This will be explained in the following section.

Disability Gap in Voter Turnout

The disability gap refers to the difference in voter turnout between persons with and without disabilities and represents a key issue in the political participation of persons with disabilities. One of the few studies that have examined this closely is the study by Henau Teglbjærg, Mamali, Chapman, and Dammeyer, titled *The disability gap in voter turnout and its association with the accessibility of election information in EU countries.* The study shows that across Europe, persons with disabilities are significantly less likely to vote in national elections than persons without disabilities (Teglbjærg et al., 2022, p. 1342). This study examined the disability gap in voter turnout during the 2016 national elections across 24 EU countries. The analysis was based on data from the European Social Survey and the FRA. While the reported average disability gap was 8.38% (Teglbjærg et al., 2022, p. 1342), this figure appears surprisingly low when considering individual cases. For instance, in Italy, the gap reached 23.17%, a much higher value that suggests the average may obscure substantial disparities between countries. Interestingly, Lithuania reported a negative gap of -3.59% (H Teglbjærg *et al.*, 2022, p. 1353), raising further questions about the reliability of the data.

The data relied entirely on self-reports. Respondents were asked whether they voted and whether they had a disability, defined through the question: “Are you hampered in your daily activities in any way by any longstanding illness, or disability, infirmity or mental health problem?” (Teglbjærg *et al.*, 20,22, p.1350). This broad and subjective definition leaves room for varying interpretations. Some individuals may have overstated their health status, while others may have misreported their participation in elections, whether intentionally or due to memory biases. As a result, the reported disability gap might be significantly underestimated.

Another significant limitation is that the data only captures whether persons voted, not how they voted. It remains unclear whether persons with disabilities were able to cast their ballots independently and with dignity, or whether their voting rights were restricted in practice. For example, some individuals may have been unable to fill out the ballot independently or may not have been permitted to vote with the assistance of a trusted person. These procedural and accessibility issues are not reflected in the turnout figures but are crucial in assessing the full scope of political inclusion. To more accurately assess the true extent of the disability gap, more robust data collection methods are needed. Ideally, future studies should link actual voting records with verified disability data from official registries, rather than relying solely on self-reported disability data. The limitations of self-reported data make it challenging to capture the full scale of the problem.

Persistently low voter turnout rates suggest that the CRPD is not adequately implemented in practice and that there is a lack of effective measures for inclusion. At the same time, many of those affected report dissatisfaction with democracy in their countries, possibly due to experiences of marginalisation and discrimination within the political system (Priestley et al., 2016, p. 21). The disability gap is the result of structural barriers that hinder political engagement. Having introduced the difference in voter participation with the disability gap, it is essential to get a deeper insight into accessible elections. This will be explored in the next section.

Accessible Elections

Accessible participation in elections is a fundamental aspect of democratic inclusion, but it remains inadequately ensured for persons with disabilities across many EU Member States. One of the core issues lies in the limited accessibility of electoral procedures, information, and technologies. The FRA report shows that most EU Member States have accessibility rules for building and renovating public buildings. About half also have standards for polling stations. However, there is a lack of reliable and comparable data on actual accessibility. As a result, it is unknown how many public buildings or polling stations are truly accessible. Even when data exists, it is often unreliable. The main reasons are inconsistent assessment methods and a strong focus on physical disabilities. At the same time, other impairments are frequently overlooked (FRA, 2014b, p. 5).

A key shortcoming is the lack of accessible electoral information. Accessible information goes beyond technical explanations of the voting process. It also includes explicit, understandable content about political parties, candidates, and their policy agendas. One area of progress has been the growing use of subtitles in election-related TV programs. However, access to other essential features, such as audio descriptions and national sign language interpretation, remains limited (FRA, 2014b, p. 6). A forward-looking solution lies in universal design. Designing products, services, and environments that can be used by all individuals, regardless of their abilities (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 42).

The barriers to vote are especially severe for individuals with disabilities living in institutions. Approximately 1.5 million persons with disabilities in the EU (EDF, 2025, p.67) live in institutional settings, although the precise number is still unclear. A recent Eurofound study indicates that the number of individuals with disabilities in institutional care has increased in 13 EU Member States over the past ten years. France, Poland, Malta, and Portugal recorded the most significant rises. They often reside far from their families and communities of origin (Hammersley, 2024). Although at least 18 EU countries have legal provisions for setting up polling stations directly within such institutions, these measures are tied to burdensome application processes (Priestley et al., 2016, pp. 14–15). Moreover, the question arises whether polling stations in institutions further isolate people with disabilities from society. In addition to polling stations, there is a need for trained assistance within these institutions to support individuals effectively. When political parties and governmental structures fail to consider the diverse needs of all citizens, they systematically exclude persons with disabilities from participating fully in democratic processes (Waltz and Schippers, 2020, pp. 526–527). Political participation includes not only the right to vote but also passive political rights, that is, the right to stand for election. The following section examines the representation of persons with disabilities in the EU politics.

Representation of Persons with Disabilities in Politics

As explained in the previous paragraph, the active political participation of persons with disabilities remains severely limited in many EU Member States. This directly affects their passive voting rights. People not allowed to vote are also banned from running for office. Even though many persons with disabilities have the legal right to be elected, they are significantly underrepresented in EU politics. There is no public source that systematically records the disability status of elected representatives (Priestley et al. 2016). As mentioned earlier in the 2019-2024 term, the rate was only 0.83%. of the Member of Parliament declared officially to have a disability (European Data Journalism Network, 2024). A survey by Waltz and Schippers (2020) based on literature reviews and interviews estimates that only around one per cent of EU politicians have a disability. At the same time, the authors suggest there may be a group of individuals who choose not to disclose their disability due to fear of stigma (Waltz and Schippers, 2020, pp. 517, 520).

Priestley et al. (2016) identified members of parliament who disclosed having a disability in seven EU countries through targeted inquiries. Croatia had the most, with seven individuals and followed by Poland with three. Since 1996, two requests for accessibility accommodations have been submitted to the Greek parliament. In Portugal, one member of parliament applied for a tax reduction related to disability. No member of parliament with disabilities was identified in Cyprus or Luxembourg based on official data. In six other countries, relevant information was obtained through unofficial sources, including campaign websites and media coverage. In the remaining 13 Member States, no data were available. At the local government level, public data on officials with disabilities was only available in Croatia, Greece, and the UK. In Austria and Sweden, there were some unofficial indications (Priestley et al., 2016, pp. 20–21). While this study examines representation at the national level, it also has implications for EU politics, as underrepresentation at the national level tends to persist at the international level.

Whether politicians with disabilities are better equipped to represent the interests of persons with disabilities than their peers with no disabilities is a question that has received little attention so far. One likely reason is the small number of politicians who openly identify as having a disability, which makes systematic data collection difficult (Evans and Reher, 2020, p.5). Persons with disabilities face a wide range of barriers depending on the type of disability, personal circumstances, and cultural, institutional, or socioeconomic factors. Nevertheless, persons with disabilities share lived experiences that persons without disabilities often cannot relate to (Würmli et al., 2022, p.19). Political parties play a significant role in the political participation of persons with disabilities. If parties themselves are inaccessible to persons with disabilities, how can they actively engage in political life or run for office? The following section examines the role of political parties more closely.

The Role of Political Parties

Political parties act as crucial gatekeepers to political participation for persons with disabilities. Their decisions about accessibility, recruitment, and internal policies directly determine whether persons with disabilities can engage in politics or remain excluded (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 47). In most cases, individuals seeking political office must be affiliated with a political party. If the party excludes them, they may be barred from running for office or even from participating in regular party meetings. Inaccessible party structures and the absence of proactive inclusion efforts systematically prevent persons with disabilities from joining parties, participating as voters, or standing as candidates. Inaccessible manifestos and information campaigns exclude voters with disabilities from the democratic process.

Although some EU Member States offer accessible party manifestos, this remains inconsistent and fragmented, resulting in unequal access to political information (FRA, 2014b, p. 6; OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 62). Conducting accessibility assessments of party structures, in cooperation with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPD), is essential for dismantling barriers that would otherwise restrict political engagement (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 49). Without such evaluations, persons with disabilities continue to face hidden obstacles that inhibit full participation within party processes. After examining political parties, it is essential to consider broader factors that influence the political participation of persons with disabilities. The following section discusses the factors that affect the political participation of individuals with disabilities.

Factors That Influence Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities

The previous sections have examined the political participation of persons with disabilities within the EU, focusing on voting rights, the disability voter gap, political representation, accessible elections, and the role of political parties. However, the political participation of persons with disabilities is shaped by a broader, more complex set of interrelated challenges. This section analyses the main factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of persons with disabilities. Both EU-focused and international studies frequently highlight a consistent set of influences on their political inclusion. This section synthesises the six most commonly discussed factors: education, employment, financial resources, everyday accessibility, disabling perceptions, and intersectionality. Although these elements are recognised in academic discourse, it is essential to acknowledge that this list is not comprehensive. Other factors may also play a significant role in shaping political participation for persons with disabilities.

Education

Education has a profound influence on the political participation of individuals with disabilities. It forms a critical foundation for understanding democratic systems, engaging actively within them, and learning about one's rights (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 35). Within the EU, barriers to inclusive education limit community participation, including in the political arena, for persons with disabilities. While access to education during childhood remains crucial for all aspects of life, meaningful political engagement also requires sustained educational opportunities throughout a person's life. Lifelong learning fosters the knowledge and skills necessary for active citizenship (Vukomanovic, 2017). From an early age, many children and youth with disabilities in EU Member States are placed in segregated educational systems, which deprives them of the chance to engage with their peers without disabilities (EDF, 2025, p. 83).

However, educational exclusion extends well beyond school years. Adults with disabilities often encounter significant obstacles when seeking further education and training, making it challenging for them to build or maintain the civic competencies required for political participation (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 35). Structural barriers, including inaccessible school facilities, a lack of adapted learning materials, and insufficient professional support, hinder the acquisition of critical political knowledge and civic skills (Right to Education Initiative, n.d.). These challenges are particularly acute for individuals with more complex disabilities, who face additional financial and logistical barriers in accessing education (Würmli et al., 2022, p. 8). Beyond structural obstacles, pervasive social attitudes further diminish access to civic education. It is often wrongly assumed that persons with disabilities are either uninterested in or incapable of engaging politically (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 35).

As a result, persons with disabilities are frequently excluded from civic education programs, limiting their understanding of democratic institutions, voting rights, and policymaking processes (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 35). Ensuring continuous access to quality education throughout all life stages is essential to enable persons with disabilities to claim their political rights and contribute meaningfully to public decision-making. Education also has a crucial impact on employment.

Employment

Employment status is a critical determinant of political participation among persons with disabilities. It influences not only their economic independence but also their ability to access political spaces and processes. The comparatively low employment rates among persons with disabilities in the EU, where only 50.6% of men and 45.9% of women with disabilities are employed, significantly restrict their capacity to engage in political life (EDF, 2025, p. 94). Beyond financial constraints, employment is essential for developing the social capital necessary for political engagement. Through work, individuals build networks, gain public visibility, and acquire skills directly transferable to political participation.

To run for political office, it is crucial to have visibility to grow a strong network. Those excluded from the labour market are deprived of these opportunities, making it less likely that they will engage in political activities or run for office (Waltz and Schippers, 2020, p. 527). Moreover, the quality of employment available to persons with disabilities has important implications. Research by Schur et al. (2017) shows that employees with disabilities earn less for equivalent work (p. 4) and experience lower job security and satisfaction (p. 5). These disadvantages limit the development of leadership skills and further reduce the visibility often necessary for entering political spheres. As discussed, without an education, securing a job is very difficult. Financial resources are limited without a job, which further impacts one's ability to participate in politics.

Financial Resources

Financial resources play a crucial role in shaping the political engagement of persons with disabilities. Economic barriers such as campaign expenses, membership fees, and the need for reasonable accommodations make active political participation costly. For individuals facing higher rates of unemployment and lower earnings (Ananian and Dellaferrera, 2024, p. 1), these costs are often insurmountable, leading to their political marginalisation. The heightened risk of poverty among persons with disabilities constitutes a structural barrier to political participation. According to Eurostat, in 2022, nearly 30% of people with disabilities in the EU faced the risk of poverty or social exclusion, while this was the case for just under 19% of those without disabilities (Eurostat, 2022).

Poverty influences participation, as individuals facing economic hardship are less likely to trust political institutions and participate in political processes (Würmli et al., 2022, p. 10). In many European countries, state-funded personal assistance services are limited to support for basic daily living activities and do not cover assistance for political engagement, thereby preventing those who wish to be active in public life (Waltz and Schippers, 2020, p. 524). The unclear allocation of responsibility for funding reasonable accommodations, such as interpreters or personal assistants, poses another barrier for political candidates with disabilities. Next to education, employment and financial resources, everyday accessibility plays a fundamental role in the participation of persons with disabilities.

Everyday Accessibility

Accessibility in transportation, infrastructure, and communication is not merely a societal concern but a decisive factor that enables or restricts political participation. Research by Schur et al. (2005) has demonstrated that physical barriers are directly associated with lower levels of political engagement among persons with disabilities. When public transportation is inaccessible, individuals with disabilities often struggle to travel to political meetings or participate in door-to-door campaigning, thereby limiting their ability to engage actively in the political process (Evans and Reher, 2020). Inaccessible buildings, including polling stations, party offices, and meeting venues, prevent many persons with disabilities from attending political events and participating in political decision-making. Even when attendance is possible, the absence of an adaptive interior significantly restricts meaningful participation in political gatherings (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 37).

Communication barriers also severely impact political engagement. Websites incompatible with screen readers, a lack of sign language interpretation at political events, and the absence of easy-read materials effectively block persons with disabilities from accessing essential political information. Moreover, when political communication fails to include or represent persons with disabilities, it signals exclusion and discourages their active participation in politics (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 38). After examining accessibility, it is essential to consider the disabling perception of disability and the hierarchy of disability. For persons with disabilities to be elected, they need the support of the parties, but they also need to win over the voters. The social perception of disability has a significant influence on this. The hierarchy of disability also plays a role in that.

Disabling Perceptions

Social perceptions significantly influence the political participation of individuals with disabilities by shaping both their internal self-image and external opportunities. Disabling perception undermines the political self-efficacy of persons with disabilities and discourages active engagement (Loja et al., 2011). The concept of the disability perception gap, introduced by Dixon et al. (2018, p. 3), highlights how repeated experiences of discrimination diminish individuals' self-perception over time, ultimately limiting their likelihood of engaging in political processes. Moreover, Carol Thomas states: "The oppression that disabled persons experience operates on the inside as well as on the outside: it is about being made to feel of lesser value, worthless, unattractive, or disgusting" (Thomas, 2004, p. 31). One example of this oppression is the systematic exclusion of a person with a disability from political participation, such as when they are denied their political rights because of their disability. Experiences like these can profoundly affect a person's self-image and emotional well-being.

Thomas refers to this as psycho-emotional disablism, which not only limits what people can do but also who they can be (Thomas, 2004, p. 31). The OSCE and ODIHR (2019, p. 35) note that persons with disabilities are seldom encouraged by their social networks to engage politically, and in many cases, they experience active discouragement from family members, friends, and the broader community. The notion of a hierarchy of disabilities is another critical factor. Rachel Stewart states that "Disability hierarchies position specific impairments as more or less disabling than others, with the idea that some impairments are better or less severe than others" (Stewart, n.d). Intellectual or psychosocial disabilities are often perceived as less capable of participating in politics than physical disabilities, a perception that directly diminishes the political opportunities available to persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities (Waltz and Schippers, 2020, pp. 525-526). While discussing disabling perception and the hierarchy of disability, it is also essential to discuss intersectionality because it can profoundly affect how persons with disabilities can participate in politics.

Intersectionality

Persons with disabilities face intersecting barriers that deeply influence their political participation. When disability coincides with other marginalised identities such as gender, ethnicity, age, or socioeconomic status, the obstacles to political engagement become more complex and entrenched. Women with disabilities, for example, often face heightened barriers to political participation because of caregiving responsibilities, but also because they are less encouraged and taken seriously in politics (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 39). As a result, their representation and influence within political institutions remain limited. Young persons with disabilities also encounter unique barriers to political engagement. They frequently lack access to the networks, mentorship, and political education necessary to navigate political systems effectively (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 39).

This intersectional discrimination also becomes visible when looking at the Roma and Sinti communities, who already face systemic ethnic discrimination, experience compounded exclusion when disability is added to their marginalisation. Obtaining valid identification documents significantly impedes voter registration and candidacy. Moreover, registration procedures are often inaccessible for persons with disabilities, meaning that Roma and Sinti individuals with disabilities face a double burden. These intersecting barriers substantially exclude them from electoral processes and diminish their visibility in political life (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, pp. 40–41). The lack of data on Roma and Sinti individuals with disabilities further exacerbates their political invisibility. Without accurate representation in research and public discourse, their specific barriers remain unaddressed, perpetuating their exclusion from political participation (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 41). Intersectionality demonstrates that political systems must address not only disability-specific barriers but also the multiple layers of discrimination experienced by individuals with intersecting marginalised identities if genuine political inclusion is to be achieved (Teglbjærg et al., 2022, p. 1357).

Conclusion

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on the political participation of persons with disabilities. It makes clear that political participation involves much more than voting and is shaped by disability voter gap, representation, accessible elections and political parties. The analysis highlights that political participation is not merely a matter of individual motivation but is also heavily influenced by broader factors. This chapter has examined six key factors that influence the political participation of individuals with disabilities. These factors are also relevant when addressing the first research question, as they affect the political participation of individuals with disabilities. The following chapter now turns to answering this first question.

Chapter 6: Legal Measures by the European Union: Progress and Limitations

This chapter addresses the first part of the first research question of this thesis: *What legal measures does the European Union take to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, and what shortcomings exist in their implementation*? It focuses on the key legal measures adopted by the European Union (EU) to promote the participation of persons with disabilities, while also highlighting their shortcomings. The chapter is structured chronologically, starting with the earliest legal foundations and continuing through to the most recent developments. This approach provides a clear timeline of how the EU's legal and institutional framework has evolved about disability rights. It begins with the historical development of disability rights in EU primary law, followed by an analysis of citizen rights within the EU and the role of EU institutions through resolutions and calls for action. It then addresses the Employment Equality Directive and the ratification of the CRPD. Subsequent sections examine specific regulatory initiatives, such as measures to ensure accessible transportation and the implementation of the Marrakesh Treaty. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the European Accessibility Act, representing the most recent step in the EU's legislative efforts to promote accessibility and non-discrimination for persons with disabilities.

The Development of Disability Rights in Primary Law

The acknowledgement of disability as a ground for anti-discrimination in EU primary law was first introduced with the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997 (EU, 1997). What was originally Article 13 of the Treaty establishing the European Community has since been incorporated into Article 19 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (EU, 2007a). This article provided the legal basis for a broader anti-discrimination framework, granting the EU the authority to take appropriate measures to combat discrimination on various grounds, including disability (EU, 2008). This occurred against the backdrop of an ageing population, a changing labour market, and the goal of keeping older persons in employment for longer. The primary motivation was therefore not necessarily to protect persons with disabilities per se, but rather to address labour market and economic concerns (Hvinden, 2004). Furthermore, Article 10

TFEU enshrines the principle of mainstreaming, requiring that all EU policies actively address discrimination, explicitly including disability. Within this legal structure, the Union is committed to ensuring equality and tackling discrimination across all areas of policy development and implementation (EU, 2012).

A significant milestone in the protection of persons with disabilities was marked by the adoption of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU in December 2000 (EU, 2000a). Article 21 of the Charter explicitly prohibits discrimination on several grounds, including disability, thereby reinforcing the principle of equal treatment within the scope of EU law. In addition, Article 26 affirms the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to promote their independence, social integration, and professional integration, as well as their active participation in community life (EU, 2000a). Since the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force in 2009, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU has held the same legal value as the EU's founding treaties, as specified in Article 6 of the Treaty on the EU. This elevation in legal status has further strengthened the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities within the EU's legal order (Grousset and Pech, 2010). EU citizens' rights, as part of primary law, are central to political participation. The next section looks at this.

European Citizen Rights

Citizen rights are the freedoms and legal guarantees that individuals receive as members of a specific country. These rights can differ depending on the political system, but in democratic societies, some core rights are considered fundamental (Jafari and Batebi, 2015, p. 1). In the EU, these rights are included in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in articles 39-46 (EU, 2012b). According to Article 39, every citizen of the EU has the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in elections to the European Parliament. This applies in the country where they live, under the same conditions as local nationals. Elections must be conducted through direct, universal, free, and confidential voting (European Commission, n.d.b). However, as shown in previous chapters, the reality looks different. There are still many citizens with disability denied the right to vote, due to their disability (European Commission, 2021a). This limits the political agency of persons with disabilities (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2017).

On paper, elections must be conducted through direct, universal, free, and confidential voting, but this is not being implemented in practice. Even in jurisdictions that have attempted reform, legal systems rely on outdated substituted decision-making models due to a lack of training and investment in supported decision-making systems. Despite the *CRPD Committee's 2015 concluding observations* (UN, 2015), the EU has failed to prioritise supported decision-making (EDF, 2025, p. 49). Another crucial article in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union *is Article 44*, which grants the right to petition the European Parliament. The right to petition is a vital component of political participation. The online portal of the European Parliament's Committee on Petitions allows citizens and residents to raise issues that fall within the EU's competencies(European Commission, n.d.c). Moreover, the Committee on Petitions receives a substantial number of petitions each year from persons with disabilities (Waddington and Broderick, 2022, pp. 98–99).

However, a report by the European Disability Forum (EDF) indicates that this tool is not accessible to sign language users, individuals who rely on screen readers, or persons with intellectual disabilities (EDF, 2025, p. 133). The inaccessibility of this platform effectively excludes these groups from a process that should be open to all. Also, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in their *Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of the* EU, published in March 2025 raises concerns*:* "The Committee is concerned that tools for participation in the EU remain largely inaccessible to persons with disabilities." (UN, 2025, p. 22). Following this overview of EU citizens' rights, the following section examines resolutions and calls for action by the EU Institutions.

Resolutions and Call for Action by the Institutions

The EU cannot organise elections or determine who is eligible to vote, even for the European Parliament elections. This responsibility lies solely with the Member States. While the EU cannot directly enforce voting rights, it can encourage Member States to take action, which it has done on several occasions. These calls for action are briefly outlined in this section. On 7 July 2016, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution in response to the recommendations directed at the EU during the constructive dialogue with the CRPD Committee held in Geneva in 2015. In this Resolution, the Parliament emphasised the importance of implementing diverse measures to make democratic participation accessible to everyone. These measures include the provision of election materials in sign-language, braille, and easy-to-read formats;

comprehensive assistance during voting procedures; promotion of postal and proxy voting where feasible; elimination of barriers for candidates with disabilities; and reform of existing legal capacity rules that hinder full participation in the democratic process (Waddington and Broderick, 2022, pp. 98–99).

In December 2017, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the 2017 Citizenship Report, which drew attention to voters with disabilities and called on the European Commission to take measures against discrimination (European Parliament, 2017). A subsequent resolution on 29 November 2018 urged the EU to remove existing barriers to voting rights for women with disabilities (European Parliament, 2018). Following the 2019 European elections, the Parliament welcomed the increased turnout of 50.6 per cent, the highest since 1994, in a resolution dated 26 November 2020. However, it also expressed regret that an estimated 800,000 citizens with disabilities were denied the opportunity to participate in the election due to their disability. The Parliament called on Member States to exchange best practices to address challenges such as physical access to polling stations and access to relevant election information (European Parliament, 2020).

In 2020, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) called on the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, and Member States to urgently amend the 1976 Electoral Act to ensure that all EU citizens with disabilities can fully exercise their right to vote in the 2024 elections. The EESC emphasised that it is unacceptable and contrary to EU values that, due to legal and technical obstacles, no Member State can guarantee fully accessible elections. Referring to Article 29 of the CRPD, the EESC advocated for a clear definition of the principles of universality, directness, and secrecy in the electoral process. It urged Member States to remove existing barriers and adopt common standards for accessible voting. It also proposed a ban on excluding persons with disabilities or health conditions from voting. Furthermore, it recommended the provision of mandatory accessible election information and alternative voting methods in cases where polling stations are inaccessible. Additional support measures, such as the right to choose a personal assistant, were also considered necessary for voters with visual impairments or limited motor function (EESC, 2020).

In the Citizenship Report 2020 (European Commission, 2020, p.11), the European Commission announced its plan to collaborate with Member States through targeted discussions within the European Cooperation Network on Elections, as well as with the European Parliament, to ensure equal political rights for persons with disabilities. The Commission aims to promote full electoral participation and accessibility for voters and candidates in the European elections. This includes efforts to include underrepresented groups, such as persons with disabilities, to safeguard equal political participation. As part of this initiative, a guide on good electoral practice focusing on the involvement of citizens with disabilities is scheduled for development in 2023, in cooperation with Member States within the European Cooperation Network (European Commission, 2021a, p. 10).

In May 2022, the European Parliament adopted a legislative resolution proposing the repeal of the existing electoral law and its replacement with a new regulation issued by the European Council. One of the main goals of this reform was to harmonise electoral rules further and increase voter turnout, particularly by strengthening accessibility requirements for persons with disabilities (European Union, 2022). However, it remains challenging to determine the true extent of these efforts. EU resolutions of the European Parliament are not legally binding. In addition, the effectiveness of the EU's call for action and resolutions has not been the subject of systematic evaluation. The current realities of political participation for persons with disabilities across the EU make it evident that the Union has not reached its objectives in this area (Priestley et al., 2016). Following this overview of Resolutions and Calls for Action by the EU, the next section focuses on the Employment Equality Directive, which provides more specific regulations to ensure equal treatment in the workplace. This was introduced in 2000, three years after the Amsterdam Treaty and the same year as the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU.

Employment Equality Directive

As discussed in the literature review, employment plays a crucial role in participation in politics and public life. In 2000, the EU Employment Equality Directive was adopted, establishing a legal framework to promote equal treatment in the workplace (EU, 2000b). It explicitly includes disability as one of the grounds on which discrimination is prohibited. The aim is to prevent direct and indirect discrimination based on disability, religion, age, or sexual orientation and to promote fair access to employment (European Commission, n.d.d). EU directives are legally binding and establish goals that Member States must achieve; however, each country can choose how to implement them within its national law. This flexibility can lead to differences in how directives are applied. Since directives are not part of the EU treaties but are based on them, they are considered secondary law within the EU. This can lead to inconsistencies and delays in harmonising laws across the EU (EU, n.d.c).

The Directive requires employers to make reasonable accommodations to support persons with disabilities' access to jobs, training, and professional development unless this would burden the employer excessively. These rules cover all areas of employment, including access to jobs, vocational training, working conditions and participation in professional or workers organisations. The Directive also allows for positive measures to help address existing inequalities. Crucially, it gives individuals the right to take legal action if they believe they have faced discrimination, even after their job has ended. A significant development in this Directive is the reversal of the burden of proof. Once discrimination is alleged, it is up to the employer to show that no unlawful treatment occurred. The Directive also protects individuals from being penalised for complaining. Overall, the Directive clarifies that disability is a recognised ground of discrimination and provides persons affected by it with real legal means to claim their right to equal treatment in the workplace (European Commission, n.d.d).

However, the EDF states that the Employment Equality Directive remains poorly implemented and enforced in several Member States. Although national governments are responsible for transposing and applying EU legislation, the European Commission ensures this is done effectively and within the required timeframe. It must also take appropriate action against Member States that do not meet their legal obligations. While the Commission has the power to act in cases of non-compliance, the lack of transparency surrounding the grounds for infringement proceedings makes it difficult for organisations representing persons with disabilities to monitor or participate meaningfully in the process (EDF, 2025, pp. 23-24). The following section examines the most significant international treaty regarding disability rights, the CRPD, which was ratified by the EU in 2011.

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The CRPD was the first human rights convention in which the EU became a party (European Commission, n.d.e). For the EU, the Convention came into effect on 22 January 2011. The Union ratified the CRPD even though some Member States had not ratified it. This step was intended to convey a strong message, emphasising the urgency for Member States to ratify the Convention as soon as possible (Statewatch, 2011, p.1). On March 20, 2018, Ireland was the last EU Member State to officially ratify the CRPD (Gov.ie, 2024). All the EU Member States have also ratified the Optional Protocol. However, the EU did not ratify the Optional Protocol. That means that the CRPD Committee cannot receive communication from individuals at the EU level. Since the CRPD applies only within the scope of the Union's competences, responsibility for its implementation in all other areas lies with the EU Member States (European Commission, n.d.e).

At the EU level, the European Commission is responsible for coordinating the implementation of the CRPD. Although disability coordinators have been appointed in various departments of the Commission, as well as in the European External Action Service (EEAS) and EU delegations worldwide, the integration of the CRPD into broader EU policies remains limited. Moreover, the Council of the EU still lacks an effective mechanism to promote disability mainstreaming (EDF, 2025, p. 19). In June 2014, the European Commission submitted its first report to the United Nations (UN), outlining the EU's implementation of the CRPD. The report highlighted measurable progress and demonstrated increasing efforts to integrate disability rights into EU policy frameworks. In 2015, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities published its concluding observations, which included recommendations for improving the political participation of persons with disabilities (UN, 2015). The Committee urged the EU to ensure, in cooperation with Member States and organisations representing persons with disabilities, that all persons with disabilities, including those under guardianship, can exercise their right to vote and to stand for election, through the provision of accessible communication and facilities (UN, 2015, p. 9).

In 2025, the Committee conducted a follow-up review of the EU as part of its regular CRPD reporting cycle. The resulting Concluding Observations were published in March 2025 (UN, 2025). However, due to the lack of progress since the previous review, the Committee reiterated its earlier recommendations. It called on the EU to ensure that all persons with disabilities, regardless of their legal capacity, have the right to vote and stand for election in the EU Parliament. Provide reasonable accommodations and accessible voting procedures (UN, 2025, p. 17). Following the ratification of the CRPD, the EU introduced several legislative and policy initiatives, beginning in 2011 with regulations and actions focused on accessible transportation. These are outlined in the next section.

Regulations and Initiatives on Accessible Transportation

Transport is a crucial aspect of everyday accessibility, which, as previously mentioned, is a significant factor influencing the political participation of persons with disabilities. When public transport is not accessible, persons with disabilities frequently face difficulties reaching political events or engaging in activities such as door-to-door campaigning, which in turn restricts their full participation in the political process (Evans and Reher, 2020). This section summarises the EU's key efforts and existing barriers to accessible transportation for persons with disabilities. In its 2011 White Paper, titled *Roadmap to a Single European Transport Area* (European Commission, 2011), the EU emphasised the importance of enhancing transport accessibility for persons with disabilities (Rodríguez Guillén et al., 2024, p. 4).

On 11 December 2013, the EU introduced Regulation No. 1315/2013 (European Union, 2013a), establishing guidelines for developing the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T). A regulation is a binding legislative act that fully applies across the EU. It must be implemented uniformly by all Member States (EU, n.d.a). This regulation explicitly requires improved accessibility for older individuals and persons with disabilities. On the same date, Regulation No. 1316/2013 (European Union, 2013b) introduced the Connecting Europe Facility, similarly prioritising accessibility improvements for older persons and passengers with disabilities. Furthermore, on 19 December 2023, the European Council agreed on an updated TEN-T Regulation. The revised regulation provides timelines for developing the core network by 2030, the extended core network by 2040, and the comprehensive network by 2050. Additionally, it establishes nine European transport corridors to enhance rail, road, and air travel, as well as urban connections, thereby significantly improving transport accessibility for persons with disabilities (Rodríguez Guillén et al., 2024, p. 5).

The following section outlines key EU legal provisions on accessibility in transport, highlighting their practical limitations. In air transport, Regulation (EC) No. 1107/2006 (European Union, 2006) prohibits discrimination and guarantees assistance for persons with disabilities. Despite these formal rights, practical barriers persist, particularly regarding the transport of electric wheelchairs and safety-related restrictions (Rodríguez Guillén et al., 2024, p. 6). Rail transport is regulated by Regulation (EC) No. 1371/2007 (European Union, 2007b), which provides for assistance and passenger rights in cases of delay or cancellation, and by Regulation (EU) No. 1300/2014 (European Union, 2014), which sets technical accessibility standards for infrastructure. In practice, the advance notice required for assistance varies widely and often falls below the recommended 48 hours. Many services operate only during business hours. Furthermore, the renovation-based approach of the Regulation means that many older stations and trains remain inaccessible (Rodríguez Guillén et al., 2024, pp. 6–7).

Maritime and inland waterway transport is governed by Regulation (EU) No. 1177/2010 (European Union, 2010), which ensures the rights to assistance and information. However, the regulation does not impose technical accessibility requirements, leaving many smaller ships and tourist vessels without adequate facilities. Wheelchair users frequently face service refusals or limited access (Rodríguez Guillén et al., 2024, p. 7). Regulation (EU) No. 181/2011 (European Union, 2011) covers long-distance bus and coach transport, requiring accessible terminals and trained staff. Still, it excludes regional and local transport, where accessibility gaps are most common. Training and enforcement also vary across Member States (Rodríguez Guillén et al., 2024, pp. 7–8).

Despite these regulations, the EDF criticises ongoing accessibility barriers. Persons with disabilities still experience boarding refusals, damaged mobility aids, and a lack of compensation (EDF, 2025, p. 72; Felix, 2025b). The EDF advocates for legal amendments to prohibit boarding denials based on disability, to hold operators fully liable for assistive devices, and to guarantee free accompaniment when required for safety (Felix, 2025b). Urban public transport remains unregulated at the EU level. The lack of harmonised standards leads to inconsistent local approaches. Many operators still prohibit mobility aids, such as e-scooters or large electric wheelchairs, which limits users' independence (EDF, 2025, p. 75).

Furthermore, the European Commission has proposed introducing a European Disability Card and a strengthened European Parking Card, aimed at facilitating mobility across Member States. The Disability Card will provide proof of disability status across the EU and offer access to benefits, including discounts and priority services. The Parking Card aims to harmonise parking conditions. Both cards are expected to be introduced from 2028 (European Commission, n.d.f). However, the EDF criticises the Disability Card's limited scope, particularly in terms of employment and access to services. Although further improvements are planned, no concrete timeline has been established (EDF, 2025, pp. 20–21). The subsequent section discusses the Marrakesh Treaty, which was ratified by the EU in 2018.

The Marrakesh Treaty

Accessible information is another vital factor for the political participation of persons with disabilities. People cannot access education, learn about the political system, their rights, or how to participate in the political process. The Marrakesh Treaty is an international treaty that the EU ratified to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print-Disabled. It was created to tackle the book famine (World Blind Union, n.d.). This term refers to the reality that more than 90 per cent of published works are not accessible to individuals who are blind or have visual disabilities. In many countries, copyright laws restrict the conversion of books into accessible formats such as Braille, large print, or audio versions.

This significantly affects access to education, as many books remain unavailable to children and adults with visual disabilities. As mentioned earlier, education plays a crucial role in shaping the political participation of individuals with disabilities. It provides the essential groundwork for understanding democratic processes and for meaningful civic engagement (OSCE and ODIHR, 2019, p. 35). The World Blind Union, in collaboration with the World Intellectual Property Organisation, played a key role in developing this treaty. It was signed on June 28, 2013, in Marrakesh. The long-term goal is for all nations to adopt and implement the treaty, making it easier to share accessible books across borders (World Blind Union, n.d.).

The Treaty was implemented within the EU through a directive and a regulation, published in the Official Journal of the EU on 20 September 2017. Member states must transpose the directive into national law by 11 October 2018. The regulation became directly applicable on October 12, 2018. The directive obliges EU Member States to introduce a mandatory exception to copyright laws, allowing works to be converted into accessible formats for persons with visual impairments. It also permits the exchange of accessible copies of copyrighted works across borders between EU countries and non-EU countries that are parties to the Marrakesh Treaty. According to Article 6 of Directive (EU) 2017/1564, EU (European Union, 2017) Member States must inform the European Commission about the authorised entities operating within their territory. These are typically non-profit organisations or public institutions that help ensure access to education and information for persons with visual impairments (European Commission, n.d.g).

The Marrakesh Treaty has several notable shortcomings that have drawn criticism from disability rights organisations. One major issue lies in its limited personal scope, which fails to match the broader protections offered by the CRPD. Unlike the CRPD, the Treaty does not impose a binding obligation on publishers to provide works in accessible formats, thereby undermining its effectiveness in ensuring equal access to information and cultural participation (Ferri, 2024, p. 99). Further criticism focuses on the controversial compensation provision included in the Directive. This provision allows EU Member States to require non-profit organisations to pay rightsholders when converting copyrighted works into accessible formats. The European Blind Union (EBU) argues that such a mechanism constitutes a financial barrier that limits the availability of accessible books and places an undue burden on organisations that serve persons with disabilities. It describes this as a tax on accessible books, calling for the removal of the provision and urging more substantial alignment with the CRPD (Ferri, 2024, p. 100; European Blind Union, n.d.). Continuing with the EU's accessibility legal efforts, the European Accessibility Act will be introduced in the next section, which was introduced one year after the ratification of the Marrakesh treaty in 2019.

European Accessibility Act

The European Accessibility Act (EU, 2019) is another crucial directive that positively impacts the political participation of persons with disabilities. The EU introduced this to enhance the internal market for accessible products and services. Its primary goal is to harmonise the diverse national accessibility regulations across EU Member States, thereby minimising business obstacles and eliminating barriers for individuals with disabilities (European Commission, n.d.h). On 2 December 2015, the European Commission presented a proposal for the EAA, prompting widespread advocacy, including strong efforts by the EDF. The European Parliament adopted the directive on 13 March 2019. Member States must adopt and publish the necessary laws, regulations, and administrative provisions by June 28, 2022, and the directive became fully enforceable on June 28, 2025 (European Commission, n.d.i).

Under the EAA, specific products and service providers are required to ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities. This includes electronic devices such as computers, smartphones, and TVs, as well as ATMs, ticketing and check-in machines, telecommunications services and related hardware, access to audiovisual media services like TV broadcasts, transportation services, banking services, e-books, and e-commerce platforms including websites and mobile applications (European Commission, n.d.h). The directive promises significantly better access to essential areas of life. It opens a broader range of accessible products and services, often at more affordable prices, due to increased market competition. At the same time, it reduces barriers to education, transportation, and employment while creating new job opportunities in the accessibility sector. Businesses also benefit from the EAA, as the harmonised requirements across the EU lead to lower costs, simplify cross-border operations, and unlock new market potential for accessible offerings. For companies looking to operate in multiple EU countries, the EAA provides greater clarity and economic efficiency. Failure to comply with the directive may result in penalties or other sanctions for public entities within the EU (European Commission, n.d.h).

However, the EDF states that the European Accessibility Act has not been effectively implemented or enforced in many Member States. Although the responsibility for transposing and applying EU legislation lies with national governments, the European Commission monitors whether this is done correctly and within the required timeframe. It must also take appropriate action when Member States fail to meet their obligations. Even though the Commission can launch infringement proceedings against non-compliant countries, the lack of transparency surrounding these actions makes it difficult for organisations representing persons with disabilities to follow or understand the process (EDF, 2025, pp. 23-24).

Furthermore, it does not fully live up to its promise of being a comprehensive, cross-sector regulation, as its focus is primarily limited to the digital realm. It overlooks areas such as accessible transport vehicles and infrastructure, particularly in urban settings. Including the built environment is left to the discretion of individual Member States, making it optional rather than mandatory. The Act also permits delays in implementing several of its measures. For instance, the European emergency number 112 may remain inaccessible until 2027 (EDF, 2025, pp. 35–36). These aspects are essential and integral to everyday accessibility, which has a significant impact on political participation, as outlined in the literature review. Having presented and critically examined the EU's legal measures in response to the first part of the research question, this section now turns to a discussion of the results.

Discussion of Results

This chapter addressed the first part of the first research question by examining the legal measures adopted by the EU to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, as well as the existing shortcomings in their implementation. It is important to note that the EU does not possess competence in areas such as voting rights or election procedures, which remain within the exclusive authority of the Member States. The EU holds legislative competence in only a limited number of fields, as defined by the treaties (EU, 1992). These institutional limitations significantly restrict the EU's ability to legislate directly on matters of political participation. Consequently, it becomes even more critical to ensure that, in areas where the EU has legal authority, persons with disabilities are actively considered and the existing instruments are utilised to their fullest potential.

As highlighted in the literature review, political participation is shaped not only by formal rights but also by a wide array of indirect factors. These include access to education and employment, financial resources, everyday accessibility, disabling perceptions, and the impact of intersectional discrimination. They are foundational for enabling equal political participation. These areas create the structural conditions necessary for individuals to engage meaningfully in public and political life. Together, these elements form the broader context in which political participation becomes either accessible or exclusionary for persons with disabilities. Accordingly, a legal framework that focuses solely on direct political rights is insufficient. What is needed is a comprehensive and inclusive approach that addresses the wider structural and societal barriers. Only through such a holistic perspective can the EU contribute meaningfully to ensuring that persons with disabilities are fully able to exercise their political rights on an equal basis with others. That's why this chapter also examined the Employment Equality Directive, the European Accessibility Act, and various legal initiatives aimed at improving accessibility in transportation, even though they don't directly target political rights.

The first part of the research question is: *What legal measures does the European Union take to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, and what shortcomings exist in their implementation?* It is addressed by examining the relevant legal and policy framework established at the EU level. The EU has introduced a range of measures aimed at fostering the political participation of persons with disabilities. These include provisions in EU primary law that uphold equality and non-discrimination, the recognition of citizenship rights that guarantee participation in public life, and various resolutions and calls to action issued by EU institutions aimed at strengthening inclusive political engagement. Furthermore, the EU has adopted directives such as the Employment Equality Directive, supported the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and launched several initiatives, including the European Accessibility Act, the Marrakesh Treaty, and regulations on accessible transportation. These legal instruments and policies collectively demonstrate a formal commitment to advancing the political inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Despite these efforts, significant shortcomings remain in the practical implementation of these measures. For instance, while all EU citizens should have equal access to participate in political processes such as submitting petitions, the European Parliament's petition portal remains partially inaccessible to persons with disabilities. These implementation gaps reveal a disconnect between legal commitments and practical outcomes, suggesting that more robust action is needed to ensure the meaningful political participation of persons with disabilities across the EU. Moreover, the EU does not consistently utilise its full legislative and policy-making powers to advance disability rights, and the issue often lacks prioritisation in broader political agendas. A striking example of this is the EU's failure to ratify the Optional Protocol to the CRPD, even though all Member States have already done so. Although the Optional Protocol would apply only within the scope of the EU's competences, its non-ratification reflects a lack of political will and weakens the EU's credibility in fully committing to disability rights.

Furthermore, there are only a few legal instruments within the EU that are specifically designed to address the rights of persons with disabilities. These include the CRPD, the Marrakesh Treaty, and the European Accessibility Act. In most other legal frameworks, disability is mentioned only marginally. Considering that approximately 101 million persons in the EU live with a disability (Council of the EU, n.d.a), this limited legal attention is inadequate. These findings are not unexpected. As demonstrated in the literature review, persons with disabilities remain significantly underrepresented in political processes. The insufficient implementation of existing instruments and the scarcity of dedicated legal measures reflect structural exclusion, a phenomenon widely acknowledged in both academic research and policy discussions.

Conclusion

This chapter addressed the first part of the research question by examining the legal measures adopted by the EU to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, as well as the shortcomings in their implementation. It examined the development of disability rights in EU primary law, the significance of Union citizenship, and binding legal instruments, including the Employment Equality Directive and the European Accessibility Act. Additionally, it considered resolutions and calls to action issued by EU institutions. The chapter also reviewed various legal initiatives aimed at improving accessibility in transportation, as well as the relevance of international frameworks, particularly the CRPD and the Marrakesh Treaty. Despite these efforts, considerable gaps remain in the practical implementation of these measures. The EU does not fully utilise its legislative and policy-making powers to advance the rights of persons with disabilities, and only a limited number of legal instruments are specifically dedicated to protecting the rights of persons with disabilities.

Chapter 7: Institutional Measures by the European Union: Progress and Limitations

This chapter addresses the second part of the first research question: *What institutional measures does the European Union take to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, and what shortcomings exist in their implementation?* It outlines relevant EU-level efforts and identifies the challenges associated with their application. The chapter begins with an examination of accessibility within the EU institutions, as well as the efforts and limitations of the European Commission and Parliament. It then presents initiatives by the European Commission, particularly those led by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion. These initiatives are presented in chronological order and include the European Day of Persons with Disabilities*,* the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030*,* th*e* Access City Award*,* the European Disability Expertise (EDE)*,* and the European Accessibility Resource Centre. In addition, the chapter briefly addresses the Erasmus Programme. Next, the chapter focuses on the European Parliament, covering the Disability Intergroup, the European Parliament's Committee on Persons with Disabilities, and Disability Rights Week. This is followed by an overview of the European Disability Forum (EDF) as a civil society actor that cooperates closely with EU institutions. Finally, the chapter considers the European External Action Service (EEAS) and its Election Observation Missions. The efforts are presented in chronological sequence to reflect the development of institutional engagement over time.

Accessibility Within the Institutions

Accessibility within EU institutions plays a crucial role in ensuring the political participation of persons with disabilities. For the EU to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, it must start within its walls, be taken seriously, and demonstrate a strong commitment. The European Parliament has made notable progress in addressing physical and architectural barriers across its facilities. The Parliament's official website reaffirms its goal of providing "an accessible physical environment for all users, whether members, staff or visitors, and the greatest independence of use of all buildings" (European Parliament, n.d.c). Concrete measures have matched this commitment. Between 2015 and 2019, extensive audits were conducted in all parliamentary buildings, which concluded that while general conditions were acceptable, some areas still required improvement. A significant finding from these assessments was the lack of consistent accessibility standards across sites.

In response, the European Parliament launched its first institutional policy on physical accessibility in 2023, becoming the first EU body to introduce such a framework (European Parliament, n.d.c). The policy aims to establish a uniform set of criteria for accessibility across Member States and ensure that these standards are applied in new construction, renovations, and property acquisitions. By embedding accessibility from the initial planning stages, the Parliament fosters inclusivity and encourages efficient, sustainable design (European Parliament, n.d.c). To implement this policy, a dedicated budget of €13.8 million was earmarked for 2023–2024. The funds are intended for 261 targeted actions, including enhanced building mobility, improved lighting and acoustics, standardised signage, and staff training in accessibility best practices, particularly in high-use areas such as entrances and cafeterias (Vasques, 2023).

However, obstacles remain. Parliamentary chambers and committee rooms often remain difficult to navigate for wheelchair users, due to inaccessible entryways, internal staircases, fixed seating, and elevated speaker platforms. In the Brussels Hemicycle, temporary adjustments are still present. Although the Strasbourg Hemicycle has seen partial upgrades, further work is ongoing. For persons with visual impairments, tactile guidance is limited to entrances, leaving much of the building without adequate navigation aids. Many institutional events, consultations, and workshops, whether conducted by the Parliament or the Commission, still lack accessible formats (EDF, 2025, p. 121). Moreover, it raises the question of whether, in the event of an emergency, such as a fire in the European Parliament or Commission, there is an evacuation plan that truly includes persons with disabilities. Publicly available information about this was not found.

Digital accessibility is another critical concern. The European Parliament has committed to making its online services inclusive for users with visual, auditory, cognitive, and motor disabilities (European Parliament, n.d.a). While progress has been made, significant challenges persist. Parliamentary livestreams often miss captions and sign language interpretation. The European Council’s streaming platform faces similar problems. When pre-recorded videos are made accessible, they usually cover only disability-specific content. Audio descriptions are rare. Although the Commission has introduced an easy-to-read section on its website explaining the EU, such resources are still exceptions rather than the rule (EDF, 2025, p.125).

A further example of digital exclusion occurred during the Conference on the Future of Europe. This high-profile initiative, jointly launched by the EU institutions, aimed to collect ideas from the public through a multilingual online platform. However, persons with disabilities could not participate meaningfully because the platform failed to meet the minimum accessibility standards established by EU legislation regarding public sector websites and mobile applications. Although the EDF commissioned an accessibility audit, the platform's deficiencies remained unaddressed. In addition, the conference sessions streamed online lacked sign language interpretation and live subtitling, and key documents were not made available in accessible formats (EDF, 2025, p.133).

While the European Parliament has publicly shared a clear and measurable strategy, other institutions have shown a less committed approach. There is limited public information about accessibility efforts by the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, or the European Council. The Commission acknowledges its website's shortcomings: "Despite our best efforts to ensure the accessibility of the European Commission website, we are aware of some limitations, which we are working to fix". These limitations are detailed online and show 12 shortcomings in the website's accessibility (European Commission, n.d.j).

Also the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in their *Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of the European Union (EU)* published in March 2025 state that*: "*The Committee is concerned about Barriers to access the European Parliament, European Commission and other EU buildings, including European Delegations in and outside Europe" (UN, 2025, p. 17). This indicates that the issue remains ongoing and problematic. The European Network on Independent Living (ENIL) succinctly captures the issue: "Where do we start the discussion when the very place where we want to talk is not accessible?" (ENIL, 2022). When people with disabilities cannot even access the buildings of democracy, the barrier becomes visible. When EU institutions are inaccessible, the question arises: how do persons with disabilities work at the European Union? The next section looks at this.

Staff With Disabilities in Institutions

An essential indicator of accessibility within the EU is the presence of diversity among staff, particularly the inclusion of persons with disabilities, which is especially relevant in the context of this study. Although the EU institutions employ around 60,000 individuals (European Parliament, 2021, p. 3), there is no official data on the number of staff members with disabilities the EU have. The EU has been criticised for systemic shortcomings in treating employees with disabilities (EDF, 2025, pp. 13). The EDF's March 2025 article highlights persistent barriers in recruitment, particularly within the European Personnel Selection Office (Felix, 2025a).

Many candidates do not receive responses to their requests for reasonable accommodation, and, unlike in several national administrations, there is no binding quota system to support the employment of persons with disabilities (EDF, 2025, p. 132). Even after being hired, staff members face challenges, including inconsistent workplace adjustments, limited health insurance coverage, and inaccessible physical infrastructure. The lack of reliable data on employees with disabilities within EU institutions makes it difficult to understand the accurate scale of underrepresentation. As Vardakastanis of the EDF stated, the EU must uphold its motto, United in Diversity, by holding itself accountable (Felix, 2025a).

The limited presence of staff with disabilities results in policies and institutional measures that frequently fail to accommodate their needs, whether in the design of petition systems, accessibility frameworks, or projects. Not only is it a problem if persons with disabilities are excluded from politics, but it is also a problem if they are underrepresented in the EU staff, which is responsible for the daily business of the EU and shaping the political participation of persons with disabilities. After examining the measures, the EU takes to promote internal accessibility, it is essential to take a closer look at what the European Commission and the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion are doing to enhance the political participation of persons with disabilities in the EU.

European Commission

To understand what the European Commission is doing to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, it is essential to examine the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) of the European Commission. The DG EMPL is responsible for shaping and implementing EU policies related to employment, social affairs, skills development, labour mobility, and inclusion, as well as for managing relevant funding programmes (European Commission, n.d.k). As the key body within the European Commission responsible for promoting social justice, equal opportunities, and inclusion, DG EMPL plays a central role in protecting and advancing the rights of persons with disabilities.

It is responsible for several critical institutional measures, including the European Day of Persons with Disabilities, the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021–2030), the Access City Award, the European Disability Expertise Network, and the European Accessibility Resource Centre. A critical initiative of the European Commission, which is not part of the DG EMPL, is the Erasmus project. The following section will present these projects in more detail and highlight existing limitations to provide a clearer understanding of DG EMPL's role in this policy area. The initiative will be presented chronologically.

European Day of Persons with Disabilities

In December 1993, in collaboration with the European Parliament, the European Commission launched a significant initiative as part of its new action programme: the First European Day of Persons with Disabilities and the European Parliament for Persons with Disabilities, held in Brussels on the 3rd December 1993. This event marked a turning point in how disability was framed within the EU, focusing on disability as a fundamental human rights issue. The discussions emphasised the urgency for the EU to implement binding legislation to combat discrimination against persons with disabilities (Kelemen and Vanhala, 2010, p.11). Since then, the event has evolved into the annual European Day of Persons with Disabilities (EDPD), hosted by the European Commission, DG EMPL, in partnership with the EDF.

This conference has become a cornerstone of the EU's broader strategy to promote inclusion and awareness, providing a vital platform to highlight the challenges and barriers that persons with disabilities continue to face in their everyday lives (European Commission, n.d.l). Nevertheless, the actual impact of the European Day of Persons with Disabilities remains limited, despite its existence for 32 years. One might question whether it serves more as a symbolic gesture than as a driver of tangible change. Furthermore, it is worth asking how many Europeans are aware of the Day. The following section examines the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was first introduced in 1996, three years after the first European Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030

In 1996, the EU introduced the New European Community Disability Strategy, based on the principle of equal opportunities (European Commission, 1996). In the following years, the EU introduced several targeted action plans, including Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities: A European Action Plan 2004-2010 (European Commission, 2004), A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe 2010-2020 (European Commission, 2010), and Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 (European Commission, 2021a). The current Strategy, adopted in March 2021, is building on the achievements of the 2010-2020 strategy. The Strategy is in line with the CRPD. It considers the recommendations issued by the CRPD Committee to the EU in 2015 (EDF, 2025, p. 20).

The new strategy outlines several priorities. Among them, accessibility is explicitly identified as a key objective. This refers not only to physical accessibility, which allows unrestricted mobility and the freedom to choose one's place of residence, but also to equal participation in democratic life. Beyond that, the strategy promotes equal participation in all areas of life. It emphasises adequate protection against discrimination and violence while ensuring equal access to justice, education, culture, sports, tourism, and all healthcare services. At its core, the strategy defends the right of persons with disabilities to be fully included in every aspect of society, including political life (European Commission, n.d.m). The approach aligns with the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Through this strategy, the EU commits to supporting its Member States in implementing the CRPD. It aims to remove existing inequalities and ensure that persons with disabilities can fully participate in an inclusive, green, and digital society by 2030. In doing so, it upholds the values of the Union of Equality and promotes disability rights globally (European Commission, 2021a; European Commission, n.d.m).

The Disability Platform serves as an expert group to support and coordinate the strategy at the European level. It brings together all EU Member States, EU institutions, and 14 selected civil society organisations to advance the implementation of the CRPD in a joint effort. It replaces the former High-Level Group on Disability. However, there is a clear imbalance in the composition of this group: while there are 27 representatives from Member States, only 14 seats are allocated to civil society organisations. Moreover, not all of them are organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs). This undermines the principle of *Nothing about us without us* and limits the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in decisions that affect their rights (European Commission, 2021b).

Furthermore, the EDF raises concerns, while certain actions outlined in the Strategy are specific and time-bound, others remain more general and aspirational (EDF, 2025, pp. 20–21). Despite the Strategy's overall timeframe extending to 2030, the current set of concrete actions only runs until 2024. In June 2025, the European Commission had not confirmed whether new measures would be introduced to cover the 2025–2030 period (EDF, 2025, pp. 20–21). After gaining a clearer understanding of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, a shift is made to the Access City Award, which was introduced in 2010.

Access City Award

Since 2010, the European Commission DG EMPL, in collaboration with the EDF, has presented the Access City Award to European cities that demonstrate a strong commitment to accessibility for persons with disabilities. For more than 101 million EU citizens, accessible towns are not just beneficial, they are essential for equal participation in society. Equal access to public spaces, information, and civic infrastructure is a prerequisite for fully engaging in democratic life. The 2025 edition marks the 15th anniversary of the award. The award is open to all EU cities with a population of more than 50,000 residents and urban areas in smaller countries that meet the population criteria. This year's winner is the city of Vienna (European Commission, n.d.n). Vienna aims to achieve Inclusive Vienna 2030, a City for Everyone, to enhance the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the city. The Vienna Social Fund (Fonds Soziales Wien) initiated a broad participatory process, inviting various groups and persons with disabilities to contribute ideas on achieving this goal. Vienna stands out for its inclusive and participatory process, particularly in the visible involvement of persons with disabilities (Fonds Soziales Wien, n.d).

In contrast, the process behind the Access City Award lacks clarity. The EU's official website states that a European Jury decides who wins the award. Still, there is no detailed information on the jury's composition or whether persons with disabilities are included in the decision-making body. Furthermore, the evaluation criteria and their weighting are not publicly disclosed (European Commission, n.d.n). As has also been observed in the context of the European Day of Persons with Disabilities, the largely symbolic nature of such initiatives and their immeasurable impact raise questions about the effectiveness of initiatives like this (bpb, n.d.). It is unclear whether the award serves as a genuine incentive for cities to implement substantial improvements. While the monetary reward of €150,000 (European Commission, n.d.n) is notable, the actual costs of making a city fully accessible are significantly higher. Whether this alone is enough to encourage a city to become accessible is debatable. In 2020, the DG EMPL initiated a vital project to evaluate data on disability across the EU. This project focuses on European Disability Expertise and will be introduced in the next section.

European Disability Expertise

The DG EMPL initiated the European Disability Expertise (EDE) project by signing a contract that began in July 2020. This agreement spans 18 months and includes an option for renewal, which was done. EDE is tasked with evaluating data on disability across the EU. Its primary goal is to gather, interpret, and deliver independent scientific information on national disability laws and policies, and to link these to EU-level legislation. Additionally, it aims to present a clearer picture of the living conditions and challenges faced by persons with disabilities across Member States. This work draws on the expertise of existing research institutions in the disability field, complemented by input from national experts, thematic specialists and other relevant networks in disability policy (European Commission, n.d.o).

The project involves continuous monitoring of both EU-wide and national legislation and policy developments. It spans 30 countries, including EU Member States, candidate countries and associated states. The data gathered is compiled into the DOTCOM database, which offers clear policy insights. Additionally, an annual compilation of comparative statistical indicators is published to help track trends and progress. EDE's approach to research and reporting is organised into thematic areas defined in collaboration with the European Commission. Political participation is also among the key issues addressed through EDE's thematic research (European Commission, n.d.o).

Even though research about the reality of persons with disabilities has been focused since 2020, complex data is still lacking. There is currently no consistent EU-wide system for tracking the political participation of persons with disabilities. Where data exists, it is often incomplete or outdated and lacks disaggregation by type of disability. This is especially problematic for individuals with intellectual, cognitive, or psychosocial disabilities, who are frequently excluded from both data collection and public discourse (Waddington and Broderick, 2022, p. 89).

While Eurostat launched a disability database in 2024, which consolidated data across various domains, its coverage remains limited. The data does not distinguish between types of disability, excludes individuals living in institutions, and continues to rely on national statistics that follow inconsistent definitions and methodologies (EDF, 2025, pp. 106–107). Moreover, the European Commission and other EU institutions have not used the collected data meaningfully. They also fail to offer insights into the specific barriers encountered by persons with disabilities in the political process (EDF, 2025, p.134).

Furthermore, persons with disabilities are rarely represented in major EU research and innovation programs, including the EU Missions that aim to address global challenges in health and climate policy. These persistent exclusions not only limit visibility but also reinforce harmful stereotypes (EDF, 2025, pp. 34–35). Moreover, the question arises as to how the EU can implement effective measures without sufficient information about the affected group. Data serves as the foundation for designing effective policies and measuring their outcomes (Turbes, 2024). The European Accessibility Resource Centre project, also under the DG EMPL, is another example of an initiative that impacts the political participation of persons with disabilities. It will be discussed in the next section.

European Accessibility Resource Centre

The European Accessibility Resource Centre, also known as AccessibleEU, was launched on 4 July 2023 by the European Commission, DG EMPL (EUD, 2023). AccessibleEU significantly enhances the political participation of persons with disabilities by serving as a central hub for knowledge exchange, capacity building, and policy development throughout the EU. As one of the key initiatives under the European Commission's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, AccessibleEU goes beyond technical accessibility; it lays the groundwork for inclusive governance and policymaking by ensuring that accessibility is integrated into all areas of public life, including democratic processes and political engagement (European Commission, 2021a, p8).

The centre focuses on several key objectives: building national capacity in accessibility, supporting legislative implementation, connecting professionals and authorities responsible for accessibility, creating a unified European knowledge hub, and offering training to foster expertise in the field (European Commission, n.d.p). AccessibleEU provides an extensive online library with direct links to databases, standards, guides, studies, and examples of good practice. It also facilitates networking by establishing a community of practice composed of accessibility and disability experts and delivers training through workshops, online courses, and mutual learning events. Regarding surveillance and compliance, the centre aids EU Member States in monitoring adherence to accessibility laws. It organises 88 annual events at European and national levels, using online, in-person, and hybrid formats. These include awareness-raising events, with one at the European level, two in larger EU countries, and one in smaller and medium-sized states. Training sessions and networking events are also held at EU and national levels, covering areas such as the built environment, transport, ICT, and policies (EDF, n.d.a).

Although the European Commission initiated the AccessibleEU project to raise awareness about persons with disabilities, it fails to mainstream disability. The Commission does not consistently include disability perspectives in broader awareness-raising efforts. This lack of inclusion is particularly noticeable in campaigns targeting vulnerable groups. For instance, individuals with disabilities were largely absent from COVID-19-related communications and initiatives, such as the “I will keep my eyes open” campaign on victims’ rights (EDF, 2025, pp. 34–35). The following section further examines the efforts of the European Commission that fall outside the authority of DG EMPL. It focuses on the EU’s most extensive education program, the Erasmus program. This initiative will be introduced and critically assessed in the following section.

Erasmus

Erasmus+ is one of the most widely recognised educational programmes of the EU. As a key EU programme for education, training, youth, and sport, it aims to foster learning and collaboration across borders. As mentioned in the literature review, education is a crucial factor that influences the political participation of persons with disabilities. Education, especially when paired with cross-border exchange, is known to enhance democratic awareness and promote active citizenship. By encouraging critical thinking, intercultural dialogue, and shared European values, Erasmus+ helps lay the foundation for meaningful political participation among young persons, with a strong emphasis on social inclusion, digital transformation, and youth engagement in democratic life (European Commission, n.d.q).

All universities and higher education institutions have endorsed the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education, pledging to provide equal access and opportunities to participants regardless of their background (InclusiveMobility.eu, n.d). To support this goal, Erasmus+ offers additional funding for participants with physical, mental, or health-related conditions through its inclusion support mechanism. These grants cover specific needs such as adapted accommodation, travel assistance, medical support, or the presence of an accompanying person. Institutions must provide clear guidance on requesting such support (European Commission, n.d.r).

Interestingly, the European Commission does not explicitly refer to people with disabilities on its website, but instead uses the broader term participants with physical, mental or health-related conditions (Council of the EU, n.d.a). This language excludes certain types of disabilities, such as those affecting persons with visual disabilities. Between 2014 and 2017, individuals with disabilities represented only 0.17% of participants in educational exchange programmes and 2.5% in Erasmus+ funded youth activities. The figures of 0.17% and 2.5% are striking, especially considering that 27% of the EU population lives with a disability (Council of the EU, n.d.a).

In many cases, students with disabilities are forced to choose shorter exchange periods or attend institutions other than their preferred options due to inadequate funding for essential support, such as sign language interpretation or personal assistance (EDF, 2025, p. 84). The argument of lack of funding is surprising, considering that the current programme, which runs from 2021 to 2027, is backed by a significant budget of €26.2 billion (European Commission, n.d.q). The fact that this budget cuts spending on students with disabilities shows a lack of prioritisation. Furthermore, some host universities still lack the necessary infrastructure to accommodate students with disabilities. Programme information is often unavailable in accessible formats, and many digital platforms used for application and communication fail to comply with established accessibility standards.

A significant ongoing barrier is transferring critical disability-related services from a student’s home institution to the host university. While virtual mobility can improve inclusion, it may also serve as a temporary solution that delays urgent structural reforms by national agencies to tackle the financial and accessibility barriers (EDF, 2025, p. 84). Although Erasmus+ has the potential to promote political participation among persons with disabilities, it remains largely inaccessible to many students with disabilities. This is not only due to insufficient political will and pressure but also reflects deeper structural problems, including the lack of accessibility at many school and universities. After examining the initiatives by the European Commission and the DG EMPL to promote political participation, it is worthwhile to consider the European Parliament's efforts in this regard. This will be looked at in the next section.

European Parliament

The European Parliament represents the voice of European citizens (Europeana, n.d.). Therefore, it is essential to understand the measures it takes to promote the political participation of citizens with disabilities in the EU. This section presents the initiatives undertaken by the European Parliament in chronological order, beginning with the establishment of the Disability Intergroup by Members of Parliament in 1980. It continues with the European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities and concludes with the most recent initiative introduced in 2023, the European Parliament’s Disability Rights Week.

Disability Intergroup

The Disability Intergroup is one of the oldest intergroups within the European Parliament, established in 1980 by members of the European Parliament (EDF, n.d.b). The group promotes the full and equal enjoyment of all universal human rights and fundamental freedoms for persons with disabilities. Over the years, the Disability Intergroup has played a significant role in shaping legislation that supports the inclusion of persons with disabilities, particularly in areas such as transport, employment, research, accessibility, non-discrimination, and structural funds. The Intergroup has made a significant contribution to its advocacy, the EU adopted an ambitious Directive on the European Disability Card and the European Parking Card in record time. Intergroup members played a key role in ensuring that the card can be used during mobility programmes and will be issued free of charge. Additionally, the Intergroup called on the European Commission to develop a comprehensive European Disability Rights Strategy for 2021–2030 and supported initiatives such as AccessibleEU (Felix, 2024).

It also maintains an open dialogue with persons with disabilities and their representative organisations. It enables members to organise debates, submit amendments, raise parliamentary questions, and participate in key European events focused on disability issues (EDF, n.d.b). However, the effectiveness of the Disability Intergroup remains limited. Although it has existed for 45 years (EDF, n.d.b), the group remains structurally weak. As an informal body, the Disability Intergroup holds no legislative authority. Its recommendations are non-binding, which significantly limits its influence. Furthermore, its effectiveness largely depends on the personal commitment of individual Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (European Parliament, n.d.b). An effort by the European Parliament was the European Parliament's Persons with Disabilities Committee, which will be introduced in the next section.

The European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities

The European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities (EPPD) is a unique forum representing a crucial step toward the full political inclusion of persons with disabilities within the EU. It was first established in 1993 in conjunction with the European Day of Persons with Disabilities (Kelemen and Vanha, 2010, p. 11). Since then, the EPPD has evolved into a recurring platform that gives persons with disabilities a space to voice their concerns, engage with EU decision-makers, and actively shape the European agenda. In 2017, the EDF published a manifesto in the run-up to the 2019 European elections, adopted by the Fourth European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities, which called for fully accessible and inclusive elections (Priestley, M. et al., 2016, pp. 25–26).

The 5th edition of the EPPD, held on 23 May 2023 in the hemicycle of the European Parliament in Brussels, gathered over 700 participants, including disability advocates, MEPs, Parliament, national ministers, and representatives from international organisations (EDF, n.d.c). Yannis Vardakastanis, President of the EDF, stated that hosting the EPPD in the heart of EU democracy sends a clear signal: the Parliament itself recognises persons with disabilities as legitimate political actors with the right to shape it (Felix, 2023a).

However, the actual political impact and improvement for the political participation of persons with disabilities in the European Disability Parliament remains limited. For example, although a manifesto for the elections was adopted during the fourth session, it carried no binding force for the European Parliament. The term Parliament of Persons with Disabilities is somewhat misleading. It primarily refers to the symbolic setting within the European Parliament, rather than a space where persons with disabilities genuinely exercise power in political decision-making. The European Parliament's latest initiative to enhance the political participation of persons with disabilities was introduced in 2023, through the European Parliament’s Disability Rights Week, which will be discussed in the next section.

European Parliament Disability Rights Week

In line with the European Disability Strategy for 2021-2030 and ahead of the Committee on the EU's report on the CRPD, the European Parliament hosted its second Disability Rights Week from 2 to 6 December 2024. This initiative highlights the Parliament’s aim to integrate disability rights across policy areas. Throughout the week, MEPs and various committees participated in discussions and events focused on current and future policies to support persons with disabilities in reaching their full potential and living equally alongside others. The first Disability Rights Week was held in 2023 and is set to take place annually around 3 December, which marks the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (European Parliament, 2024).

The EDF considers the European Parliament’s introduction of the European Parliament Disability Rights Week a welcome development. Nevertheless, similar to other recurring initiatives, such as the European Day of Persons with Disabilities, the European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities and the Access City Award, its overall influence remains limited. These efforts tend to engage only a small audience, and awareness among the broader EU population remains low. Many citizens are unaware of the existence of these initiatives and the ongoing lack of political participation among persons with disabilities (EDF, 2025, p. 33). After having examined the efforts by the European Parliament, the focus is shifted to the EDF, which is an independent NGO active at the EU level that defends the interests of persons with disabilities in the EU.

European Disability Forum

During the 1990s, the EU underwent a significant shift in its approach to disability policy, transitioning from a traditional medical or welfare-based model to one centred on rights and anti-discrimination (Kelemen and Vanhala, 2010, p.11). The Commission established the European Disability Forum (EDF), a consultative body comprising 24 disability NGOs from across Europe, and committed to deeper cooperation with these groups. The EDF quickly gained influence as a strong advocate for embedding disability rights within EU treaties and legislation (Kelemen and Vanhala, 2010, p.11).

In 2023, the European Commission granted €1,444,815 from the total annual EDF budget of €4,423,132.94, ensuring continued support for its advocacy and operational work (EDF, 2023a). This raises the question of how critical the EDF can be to the EU, given that the European Commission allocates a significant portion of its budget. However, without the grant from the European Commission, the EDF would not be able to work as it does. Moreover, examining documents such as the *Alternative report for the second review of the European Union by the CRPD Committee*, it becomes evident that the EDF does voice intense criticism of the EU. Since few reports beyond those produced by the EDF address the EU's approach to political participation of persons with disabilities, the EDF plays a crucial role in holding the EU accountable (EDF, 2025). The EDF's sixth Human Rights Report, published in May 2022, was about the political participation of persons with disabilities (EDF, 2022).

The EDF has also launched several initiatives to improve the six key factors identified in the literature review, strengthening the political participation of persons with disabilities (EDF, n.d.d). One project that deserves greater emphasis, as it directly aimed to improve political participation, is the *DREE project*. The Disability Rights in the European Elections (DREE) project ran from January 2023 to June 2024, coinciding with the European Parliament elections in 2024. Its central goal was to raise awareness of disability rights secured at the EU level, promote key priorities among national stakeholders and election candidates, and advocate for greater participation of persons with disabilities by addressing legal and practical voting obstacles. As part of this effort, DREE trained 90 disability activists across Europe, empowering them to lead activities that inspired political engagement throughout the EU (EDF, n.d.e). The following section expands the perspective to the broader international arena, examining what the EU is doing beyond its borders to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities. It therefore shifts the focus to the European External Action Service and provides a closer examination of EU Election Observation Missions.

European External Action Service

Since 2000, the European External Action Service (EEAS) has conducted over 180 Election Observation Missions in more than 65 countries (EEAS, 2025). Atkinson et al. emphasise the importance of these missions, noting that “election access observations are a highly effective method for integrating disability rights into the electoral process” (2017, p. 390). Although these missions have taken place exclusively outside the EU they still provide valuable insight into the EU’s broader commitment to promoting democratic governance worldwide and advancing the political participation of persons with disabilities in non-EU countries (European Commission, n.d.s).

Election observation is an essential practice for identifying barriers to equal electoral participation. Election observation is key to analysing the challenges that restrict equal political participation. Observers examine the accessibility of polling places, the possibility of casting a vote without assistance, and the extent to which persons with disabilities are represented in the political process (Atkinson et al, 2017, p. 376). In 2005, the EU formally endorsed the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation at the UN. This declaration explicitly calls for the protection and inclusion of persons with disabilities (UN, 2005, p. 1). The International Foundation for Electoral Systems recommends that at least 15 per cent of election observers be persons with disabilities (Atkinson et al, 2017, p. 385). This would increase representation and expertise and draw more attention to barriers to participation.

The EU has begun responding to these concerns. The *Handbook for European Union Election Observation* (EU, 2016) included a section focusing on the political rights of persons with disabilities for the first time. In addition to addressing physical accessibility, the Handbook also considers structural barriers, such as the lack of accessible voting information and the low visibility of persons with disabilities as candidates or observers. The Handbook does not explicitly mention concrete measures such as the use of easy-to-read language. While it refers to “accessible voting information”, there is a risk that formats like easy-to-read may be overlooked or insufficiently addressed, unless they are specifically mentioned. Moreover, the handbook recommends assigning at least one core team member to work on accessibility issues and encourages partnerships with local organisations of persons with disabilities (EU, 2016).

However, the direct involvement of persons with disabilities as election observers remains limited (Atkinson et al, 2017, p. 385). Despite these improvements, many observations reports still insufficiently reflect the participation of persons with disabilities in electoral processes. Academic research about election observation also fails to focus on disability. Even well-known researchers on election observation largely neglect the topic of inclusion in their work (Atkinson et al, p. 377). The EU must, therefore, ensure that its commitment to inclusion is fully realised both in its partnerships abroad and in implementing its practices. Having presented and critically examined the EU's institutional measures in response to the second part of the research question, this section now turns to a discussion of the results.

Discussion of Results

This chapter has analysed the institutional measures taken by the EU to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, while also identifying significant limitations in their implementation. In contrast to legal instruments, the EU has introduced several concrete institutional initiatives explicitly targeting persons with disabilities. These range from internal accessibility reforms and awareness-raising activities to broader strategic frameworks, funded programs, and projects. Notably, the analysis has shown that even in policy areas where the EU holds no direct legislative competence, it can nonetheless act through soft governance, projects, and financial support to improve the situation of persons with disabilities.

The second part of the first research question is: *What institutional measures does the European Union take to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, and what shortcomings exist in their implementation?* It is addressed by examining the relevant institutional actions established at the EU level. The EU has implemented various initiatives aimed at enhancing the political participation of persons with disabilities. This includes multiple measures undertaken by EU institutions, reflecting efforts to create more inclusive political processes and improve accessibility within democratic structures. However, these measures also have certain limitations. The EU’s approach reveals a particular reliance on symbolic measures, such as the European Day of Persons with Disabilities, the Access City Award, the Disability Intergroup, the European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities and the

European Disability Rights Week. Although relevant for raising public awareness and visibility, they have only limited substantive impact and reach a relatively narrow audience. These initiatives play a role in agenda-setting but are insufficient to ensure structural inclusion.

Positively, the EDF emerges as a central actor, both in terms of advocacy and in the implementation of EU-supported projects. Its institutionalised funding and recognition by the EU represent a significant step toward participatory governance in the disability field. Similarly, the existence of the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion demonstrates a strong commitment to disability inclusion within the Commission. The EU's continuity in publishing disability rights strategies, most recently the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, is commendable and indicative of long-term planning. Nonetheless, significant gaps remain in their practical implementation.

One of the most striking barriers is the persisting lack of full accessibility within EU institutions themselves. This shortcoming undermines the EU's credibility in urging Member States to ensure accessible political participation, and it reflects the limited presence of persons with disabilities within EU decision-making structures. The physical inaccessibility of EU premises is emblematic of deeper institutional exclusion. This is a symbolic reflection of the state of political participation. It also sends a clear message: persons with disabilities are not being considered and welcomed as part of politics. The fact that the EU, an institution that stands for progress and innovation, has still not ensured that its buildings are accessible speaks volumes. It reveals a more profound lack of commitment to genuine inclusion. Moreover, EU institutions continue to face ongoing criticism for failing to ensure accessible recruitment processes and adequate workplace accommodations for staff with disabilities.

A further structural deficit is the lack of robust data. Despite efforts such as the European Disability Expertise network, reliable and disaggregated data on the political participation of persons with disabilities remain scarce. This impedes both the identification of inequalities and the formulation of evidence-based policy responses. For example, the absence of precise data on the number of politicians with disabilities at the EU level severely limits the capacity to monitor progress or formulate targeted interventions. How can the EU design a project or initiative without first understanding the target audience?

The Erasmus+ programme highlights the challenge of mainstreaming people with disabilities. Its low participation rates among this group reflect systemic barriers and a lack of targeted outreach. This suggests that inclusion in mainstream EU programmes remains inadequate, highlighting a broader disconnect between disability-specific initiatives and general policy implementation. A similar observation can be made at the EU Election Observation Missions, where disability is considered only a little. In conclusion, while the EU has taken a range of institutional measures to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities, many of these remain fragmented, symbolic, or insufficiently implemented. For genuine political participation to be achieved, more comprehensive mainstreaming, improved institutional accessibility, better data collection, and a more consistent policy prioritisation of disability rights across all EU sectors are essential.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the second part of the first research question, focusing on the institutional measures taken by the EU to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities. These include targeted programs, strategic frameworks, and symbolic initiatives aimed at raising awareness and visibility. Positive developments include the EDF's prominent role, the EU's continued commitment to issuing disability rights strategies, and the establishment of dedicated structures within the European Commission. However, the analysis also reveals significant shortcomings in implementation. Persistent barriers include the lack of full accessibility in EU institutions, inadequate inclusive recruitment processes, insufficient data collection, and the limited impact of symbolic actions. For genuine political inclusion to be achieved, disability rights must be more thoroughly mainstreamed across all EU projects and policy areas, supported by better data, consistent prioritisation, and concrete measures to address physical, institutional, and systemic barriers.

Chapter 8: Recommendations for the European Union

This chapter responds to the second research question: *What recommendations can be implemented at the EU level to enhance the political participation and representation of persons with disabilities in the European Union?* To answer this question, the chapter first provides a brief overview of the process through which the recommendations were developed. It then outlines the eight main key recommendations that were formulated in collaboration with an advisory board.

Developing the Recommendations

The previous chapter examined the progress and persistent barriers within EU institutions regarding the promotion of the political participation of persons with disabilities. Drawing from that assessment, this section identifies areas where concrete steps can be taken. These recommendations were guided by key insights from two recent reports by the EDF and CRPD Committee, both published earlier this year. As discussed in Chapter 4, the recommendations presented in this dissertation were developed in close consultation with an advisory board of persons with disabilities. Their input was essential in refining the proposals to ensure they are grounded in lived experience and reflect actual needs. The advisory board is composed of seven individuals with different disabilities, aged 23-73 years, from across the EU, from Belgium, Germany, Greece, Malta, and Portugal, as well as one member from the neighbouring country, Switzerland. Five members held the European passport, while one advisory board member had European refugee status.

Given the action-oriented nature of the recommendations, they are presented in bullet-point format to enhance clarity, readability, and practical applicability. The overarching goal is to contribute to a more inclusive democratic process in the EU by promoting equal political rights and participation in politics for persons with disabilities. These recommendations are intended as practical tools for EU institutions seeking to advance the political participation of persons with disabilities in the EU, as well as for organisations of persons with disabilities and advocates pushing for reform from the grassroots level. All the recommendations align with the CRPD. The recommendations are first presented in easy-to-read language and then in academic language.

Ideas for the European Union: Easy-to-Read Language

More Rules That Help People with Disabilities

There is an important agreement.

It is called the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**.**

It says that people with disabilities have the same rights as all people.

There are also more rules.

These rules help people with disabilities complain if their rights are not respected.

They can complain if the European Union does not follow the agreement.

The European Union must agree to these rules fast.

Make the European Union Plan for Disability Better

The European Union has a plan for the rights of people with disabilities.

This plan must be better.

It needs better goals, a plan that says when things must happen, and more money.

People with disabilities must help check if the plan works.

They must be able to speak up if the European Union does not follow the plan.

Collect Information About People with Disabilities

The European Union must collect more information about people with disabilities.

People with disabilities must help with this work.

People who live in care homes must be included.

The information must be safe and private.

Know Who Has a Disability in the European Union

The European Union must know how many people with disabilities work at the European Union.

And how many politicians with disabilities work at the European Union.

This helps to check if people with disabilities are included.

The information must be safe and private.

Let All People with Disabilities Vote

In some countries, not all people with disabilities can vote.

The European Union must tell all countries that all people with disabilities should vote.

The European Union must check what countries are doing.

Make Voting Easy for People with Disabilities

Voting must be easy for all people.

Voting information must be easy to understand.

The European Union must help countries make this happen.

The European Union must check that all countries do it right.

Help People Make Their Own Choices

Sometimes, people with disabilities are not allowed to make their own choices.

Other people decide or vote for them.

People with disabilities must be able to make their own choices.

They can get support if they need it.

But the choice must be made by the person with a disability.

The European Union must help countries make this happen.

Make Petitions Easy for Everyone

People with disabilities must be able to take part in petitions.

The European Union must make petitions easy to use for all people.

People with disabilities must test if the petitions are easy to use.

Tell People Persons with Disabilities Can Participate

The European Union must run campaigns to tell all people:

People with disabilities can vote.

People with disabilities can be politicians.

These campaigns must be easy to understand for all people.

Make European Union Buildings and Information for All People

The European Union must have good rules for buildings and information.

All buildings must be easy to enter for all people.

All information must be easy to understand for all people.

People with disabilities must help make and check these rules.

Give More Jobs to People with Disabilities

The European Union must make job applications easy to use for all people.

It must give more jobs to people with disabilities.

All staff must learn about the rights of people with disabilities.

Recommendations for the European Union: Academic Language

Ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

- The EU should ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) to enable persons with disabilities and their representative organisations (OPDs) to lodge complaints when EU institutions fail to comply with the Convention. This step would strengthen the EU's credibility in promoting the rights of persons with disabilities and close the gap between Member State commitments and EU-level action. A clear and immediate policy initiative is needed to begin the ratification process and align EU practice with the commitments already made by its Member States.
- The EU must strengthen its Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 to ensure effective CRPD implementation. This requires concrete, measurable goals, clear timelines, and dedicated funding. The current lack of specificity weakens accountability and progress. Monitoring must be led by persons with disabilities and OPDs. The current imbalance, 27 Member State representatives versus only 14 civil society groups, contradicts the principle of *Nothing About Us Without Us*. The number of OPDs must be increased, and the body must have enforcement powers, including the ability to submit formal complaints to EU institutions when commitments are not met.

Improve Data Collection on Persons With Disabilities

- The EU should establish a unified framework for collecting comprehensive, disaggregated, and accessible data on persons with disabilities across all Member States. This framework must be developed in collaboration with persons with disabilities and OPDs. Persons living in institutions must be actively included in data collection. Methods must be inclusive, accessible, and designed for all types of disabilities. Data should be disaggregated by disability type, gender, and poverty to reflect diverse experiences. Strong data protection is essential to build trust and participation. Such a framework would enable cross-country comparisons, inform targeted policies, track progress, and expose structural inequalities to support full inclusion and equality.

- The EU should actively promote the regular, voluntary, and anonymised collection of data on disability status among political candidates, elected representatives, policymakers, and institutional staff. This data should be systematically gathered across all EU bodies, made publicly available and used to track progress, identify gaps, and inform concrete measures to enhance accessibility, representation, and inclusion within EU governance structures.

Guarantee Voting Rights for All Persons with Disabilities

- The EU must clearly and urgently call on all Member States to reform electoral laws in full compliance with the CRPD. Denying the right to vote based on disability violates human rights, contradicts EU democratic values, and breaches the CRPD. The Commission must issue enforceable guidelines and push for legislative harmonisation to ensure that all persons with disabilities can fully exercise their political rights, including voting and standing for election.
- The EU must establish continuous monitoring of the disenfranchisement of persons with disabilities across the EU. It should publish impactful, comparative reports exposing legal and systemic barriers, naming non-compliant Member States. This data must feed into broader rule of law and fundamental rights reviews and be used to exert political pressure. The Commission must make it clear that discrimination in electoral rights violates EU obligations and will not be tolerated.

Close the Disability Gap in Political Participation

- The EU should lead by example by ensuring that all EU-level election-related information is fully accessible and inclusive. This includes formats such as easy-to-read language, sign language interpretation, subtitles, and Braille. Persons with disabilities and OPDs must be meaningfully involved in the development, delivery, and testing of this information to ensure its actual accessibility. As a central democratic institution, the EU must set a strong precedent for its Member States to follow.
- The EU should utilise its financial instruments to actively support Member States in making polling stations fully accessible. Accessibility must extend beyond physical infrastructure to include sensory, cognitive, and communication access. Investments should also focus on training election staff, providing accessible voting materials, and developing inclusive communication strategies throughout the electoral process.
- The EU should develop a harmonised EU-wide monitoring tool to assess polling station accessibility in all Member States. This tool must be co-designed with persons with disabilities and OPDs, and its findings should be publicly reported. Establishing common accessibility indicators will promote transparency, comparability, and accountability across the Union.
- The EU should establish clear accessibility standards to ensure that persons living in institutions can exercise their right to vote independently, secretly, and on an equal basis with others. These standards must be co-developed with persons with disabilities and OPDs and should include measures such as supported decision-making, inclusive staff training, and accessible voting materials. However, political participation goes beyond voting; it requires true community inclusion. Therefore, promoting independent living is an essential prerequisite for full democratic participation.
- The EU should support Member States in transitioning from substituted decision-making to supported decision-making models. This includes funding training programmes, encouraging the exchange of good practices, and embedding supported decision-making into EU-level strategies, guidance documents, and monitoring frameworks. These steps are crucial to ensure that individuals with disabilities can make informed choices and exercise their political rights.

Ensure Accessible Petitions and Digital Participation in the EU

- The EU must ensure all digital tools for democratic participation, such as petition and consultation platforms, are fully accessible and inclusive. This includes compatibility with assistive technologies, easy-to-read formats, sign language, and universal design. Persons with disabilities and OPDs must be actively involved in development, implementation, and testing. It is unacceptable that the EU still fails to provide accessible tools, despite initiating the European Accessibility Act.

Awareness of Political Participation of Persons With Disabilities

- The EU must conduct inclusive and accessible awareness campaigns to promote the political participation of persons with disabilities. These must be co-designed with persons with disabilities and OPDs, use empowering narratives, and be shared widely across all EU communication channels. Accessibility in every format, including easy-to-read language, sign language, audio description, and alternative formats, must be ensured. Campaigns should directly engage individuals with disabilities, including those in institutions, by encouraging them to vote, run for candidacy, and participate in democratic processes. They must also target the general public to challenge stigma and promote persons with disabilities as leaders and equal participants. The EU must also increase the visibility and impact of initiatives such as the European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities and the Access City Award.

Guarantee Accessibility Within EU Institutions

- The EU must adopt a legally binding, cross-institutional accessibility strategy covering all institutions, agencies, and bodies. It must establish standards for physical access, emergency plans, websites, digital content, and communication, including tactile guidance, sign language, subtitles, easy-to-read documents, audio descriptions, and screen reader compatibility. These standards must be developed and reviewed in collaboration with persons with disabilities and OPDs, and then publicly evaluated.

Increase Representation of Persons With Disabilities in the EU Staff

- The EU should develop an inclusive recruitment standard to ensure that all job postings, application platforms, and recruitment procedures within EU institutions are fully accessible to all individuals, including those with disabilities. This includes ensuring compatibility with assistive technologies, using accessible communication formats, and removing physical, digital, and attitudinal barriers throughout the recruitment process. The development of this standard should be conducted in close consultation with persons with disabilities and OPDs.
- The EU must ensure that all staff, including politicians and outsourced personnel, participate in mandatory training on disability equality. These trainings must cover awareness-raising, accessibility standards, and inclusive workplace practices. They should provide practical guidance on removing physical, digital, and attitudinal barriers, using assistive technologies, and implementing reasonable accommodations. These trainings must be developed and delivered in close cooperation with persons with disabilities and OPDs, and their effectiveness should be regularly monitored and evaluated.
- The EU should introduce explicit, binding employment quotas for the inclusion of persons with disabilities across all its institutions, agencies, and bodies. These quotas must be accompanied by concrete targets, measurable actions, and a binding timeline to ensure meaningful progress. Staff within EU institutions play a crucial role in shaping and implementing policies, projects, and initiatives that impact millions of people with disabilities.

Conclusion

The recommendations presented here outline a comprehensive and interconnected approach to enhancing the political participation of persons with disabilities within the EU. Taken together, they form a consistent framework that addresses legal, structural, and societal barriers, and they are most effective when implemented as a whole. Ratifying the Optional Protocol to the CRPD would reinforce the EU's commitment to human rights and offer individuals a path to legal redress. Better data collection on persons with disabilities is essential to support evidence-based policymaking and to close existing gaps in participation. Ensuring voting rights for all persons with disabilities and providing accessible digital tools, such as those used for submitting EU petitions, are critical steps toward inclusion. Institutional reforms, including full accessibility across EU institutions and greater representation of persons with disabilities among EU staff, must support these efforts. Promoting public awareness of the political rights of persons with disabilities also plays a key role in reducing stigma and encouraging inclusive civic engagement. These recommendations not only directly benefit persons with disabilities but also contribute positively to society.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This final chapter of the dissertation concludes the study by reflecting on the implications of the findings. Following this, it addresses the limitations, offering a critical perspective on the scope and boundaries of the study. The chapter then suggests directions for future research, highlighting areas where further inquiry could deepen our understanding of the topic. Finally, it concludes with a reflection on democracy and human rights.

Implications of findings

This dissertation undertakes a critical evaluation of the European Union's commitment to its foundational values, with a focus on how it advances the political participation of persons with disabilities. An examination of the relevant legal and institutional measures reveals that, although notable progress has been made, further advances are still needed. As discussed in Chapter 5, political participation is influenced not only by formal legal rights but also by broader social, economic, and structural factors. Unless these elements are addressed in a coherent and integrated manner, legal and institutional efforts alone cannot ensure genuine political inclusion.

One significant implication that emerges from this analysis is the existence of a self-reinforcing cycle. The persistent underrepresentation of persons with disabilities within EU institutions contributes to their continued exclusion from political life. Their limited presence in decision-making roles results in policies and institutional measures that frequently fail to accommodate their needs, whether in the design of petition systems, accessibility frameworks, or legislative procedures. Without adequate representation, persons with disabilities lack the internal leverage to advocate for meaningful change. As a result, legal and institutional measures often prove inadequate in both conception and execution. Breaking this cycle requires more than procedural or technical adjustments. Increasing the participation of persons with disabilities across political and administrative roles, including elected officials, policymakers, civil servants, and advisors, would help establish accessibility as a core principle. To uphold the principle *Nothing about us, without us*.

Ultimately, the limited level of political participation of persons with disabilities at the EU level reveals a more profound disconnect between the EU's stated values and its institutional practice. This gap undermines the Union's credibility as a defender of democracy and human rights. The EU possesses the legal authority, institutional capacity, and financial resources to lead by example. What remains in question is whether the political will exists to act accordingly. This dissertation presents a series of concrete recommendations developed in collaboration with an advisory board comprising individuals with disabilities. While these proposals are not exhaustive, they provide a strategic framework for future reform. Their success will depend on sustained and inclusive consultation. Without the active involvement of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations, reform efforts risk reproducing the very exclusions they seek to eliminate.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Looking ahead also means critically reflecting on the limitations of this study and identifying avenues for future research to build on its findings. This dissertation represents the first comprehensive attempt to systematically examine the European Union's efforts to strengthen the political participation of persons with disabilities and identify the limitations of these initiatives. While it provides an initial mapping of EU-level initiatives, it only briefly addresses the broader contextual factors that influence political participation, such as education, employment, financial resources, everyday accessibility, disabling perceptions and intersectionality. As outlined in the literature review, these intersecting factors significantly shape the opportunities for political engagement. Each of these dimensions deserves more detailed investigation to uncover the structural and deeply rooted barriers that continue to impede meaningful political inclusion.

Future research would benefit from a mixed-methods approach. For instance, large-scale surveys across EU Member States, combined with in-depth interviews with persons with disabilities, could provide valuable insights into their lived experiences of political participation. This could help to identify perceived barriers, assess the quality of political representation, and explore which measures are most effective. Moreover, cross-national comparisons and disaggregated analyses by type of disability, age, or gender could further enhance the understanding of diverse participation experiences.

Another important step would be the systematic collection of data on political candidates with disabilities, including the number who run for office, the number who are elected, and how these numbers evolve. This is why one of the key recommendations of this dissertation, developed in consultation with the advisory board, is the need for improved data collection in this area. Such data would provide a solid basis for evaluating the real-world impact of EU-level measures on political inclusion. Ultimately, evidence-based insights could guide the development of more effective and targeted strategies to ensure truly inclusive political participation.

Final Reflections on Democracy and Human Rights

The dissertation's title, *Strengthening Democracy and Human Rights through the Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities in the European Union*, captures a core democratic truth: a strong democracy can only exist when all voices are included, and human rights are upheld for everyone. Inclusion is not a favour or a special concession; it is a democratic responsibility and a structural necessity. This shifts the perspective away from the idea of the rights of persons with disabilities as separate or secondary and instead emphasises what this is really about: Our shared rights, our human rights. Too often, persons with disabilities are seen as a separate group, with rights and participation that are somehow unrelated to the rest of society. This perspective is dangerous for democracy and human rights. Upholding the rights of persons with disabilities is not only a matter of justice for a particular group, but it is a matter of democratic integrity for all.

Accessibility, in this context, is a tool that benefits society as a whole. Enhancing accessibility promotes the inclusion of diverse groups, including older adults, individuals with limited literacy, language learners, and those with temporary injuries. Accessibility ensures that everyone can participate in democratic life throughout their lifetime, regardless of whether their personal circumstances change or remain the same. This is essential to prevent democracy from becoming conditional or exclusive. Ableism is the only form of discrimination that ultimately threatens all of us. No one is immune to disability, illness or the inevitable decline of ageing. Disability represents a universal human vulnerability. The tendency to overlook persons with disabilities and the barriers they face is often an unspoken fear of disability itself (Zames and Fleischer, 2011, p.20). Therefore, inclusion and accessibility are not only for today's people but are a safeguard for the dignity and participation of all persons in the future. In times of low voter turnout and declining trust in political institutions (Mascherini, 2024), making political participation more inclusive, understandable, and accessible is essential. Accessibility should not be seen as a special feature, but to foster engagement, trust, and legitimacy. This is not a niche issue. It is a matter of human rights, of long overdue justice, and of building a democracy that includes all.

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Appendix

Artificial Intelligence Declaration

Following the EMA Policy on Artificial Intelligence (Academic Year 2024-2025), I hereby declare that I used artificial intelligence (AI)-based digital tools during the writing of this master's dissertation in a transparent, ethical, and academically responsible manner. These tools were used to enhance language-related aspects, including grammar, clarity, translation and stylistic consistency of the text.

The following tools were used for specific purposes:

- *Grammarly Pro* was used to review and refine the grammar, spelling, and overall stylistic coherence of the text.
    - Grammarly Pro (2025) Available at: https://www.grammarly.com/pro (Accessed: February-July 2025)
- *DeepL Write* was employed to enhance the clarity, precision, and stylistic elements.
    - DeepL Write (2025) Available at: https://www.deepl.com/de/write (Accessed: February-July 2025)
- ChatGPT *(OpenAI)* was consulted to translate the abstract and recommendations into easy-to-read English.
    - OpenAI (ChatGPT) (2025). Available at: https://chatgpt.com (Accessed: 5 July 2025).
        - Prompt 1: Translate this abstract into an easy-to-read English summary. Explain at the beginning what the EU is and what Democracy is. Don't use any abbreviations.
        - Prompt 2: Translate these recommendations into easy-to-read English. Don't use any abbreviations.

All AI-assisted revisions and translations were critically assessed, modified where necessary, and fully approved by me. I remained solely responsible for all decisions and for ensuring the academic integrity and originality of the dissertation.