

# Breaking the glass ceiling: equal participation of people with disabilities in political life | Portugal



**MeCDPD**

**Mecanismo Nacional**

de Monitorização da Implementação da Convenção  
sobre os **Direitos das Pessoas com Deficiência**



## **INPUTS N.º 03/Me-CDPD/2025**

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### ***Breaking the glass ceiling: equal participation of people with disabilities in political life / Inputs from Mecanismo Nacional de Monitorização da Implementação da Convenção sobre os Direitos das Pessoas com Deficiência, Portugal***

#### **NATIONAL CONTEXT**

1. The National Mechanism for Monitoring the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (Me-CDPD) – an independent body responsible for promoting, protecting and monitoring the implementation of the Convention in Portugal<sup>1</sup> – with the aim of ensuring the participation and rights of all people with disabilities.
2. Under Article 29 of the CRPD (Participation in political and public life), States Parties shall ensure the full and effective participation of people with disabilities in political and public life, on an equal basis with other citizens. This right implies the elimination of physical, communication, legal and attitudinal barriers, ensuring that all people can vote, be elected and hold public office freely.
3. Portugal has one of the highest percentages of people with disabilities in the European Union: 23.3% of the population aged 16 or over report activity limitations (Eurostat, 2023), above the EU average (18.6%) and the euro area average (19.1%). This reality reinforces the urgency of policies that guarantee equality in the exercise of political and citizenship rights.
4. In recent years, progress has been made, notably through legislative reforms, electoral accessibility measures and awareness campaigns. However, structural and cultural barriers remain that limit full political participation, especially for people with intellectual, psychosocial and multiple disabilities. In fulfilling its functions, the Me-CDPD has issued public recommendations, notably Recommendation No. 02/Me-CDPD/2025 on the right to accessible voting in all electoral acts, a reference document for national policies in this area (Me-CDPD, 2025).

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<sup>1</sup> For further information, please consult Law No. 71/2019, of 2 September, Legal framework for the national mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.



## **CONTRIBUTIONS**

### **1. Existing Data and Mechanisms for Monitoring Political Representation**

Portugal does not have systematic and disaggregated data on the political representation of people with disabilities in elected positions at local, regional or national level. The databases of the National Election Commission (CNE), the National Statistics Institute (INE) and the Electoral Administration do not collect information on disability, which makes it impossible to monitor compliance with Article 29 of the CRPD and to monitor equality indicators.

This gap was also identified by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2024), which highlighted the lack of comparable data in Member States and recommended the creation of mechanisms for collecting disaggregated, voluntary and protected data (FRA, 2024).

The Me-CDPD has reiterated the need for a national system for the collection and publication of accessible data on the political participation of people with disabilities, in line with Article 31 of the CRPD (Statistics and data collection), including variables such as gender, age, type of disability and territory. This measure should be integrated into the national framework of human rights indicators provided for by the CRPD and contribute to the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 16.7) — ‘ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making’.

In 2024, in the contributions of the Me-CDPD to the Permanent Observatory of Portuguese Justice, it was reiterated that there is no official data on the number of people with disabilities elected, highlighting the urgency of collecting and disseminating this information to ensure evidence-based policies (Me-CDPD, 2024).

### **2. Legal Restrictions and Barriers**

Although the accompanied adult regime, introduced by Law No. 49/2018, represents a significant advance over the previous system of interdiction and disqualification, interpretative challenges remain as to its full compatibility with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD).

In particular, certain rules requiring ‘full legal capacity’ or ‘civil suitability’ for the exercise of political and civil rights may, in practice, give rise to indirect restrictions for people with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities subject to representation measures.

The legal regime for accompanied adults, which replaced the previous regime of interdiction and disqualification, represented a step forward, but still allows for restrictive interpretations regarding the exercise of political rights. In line with General Comment No. 1 (2014) of the UN Committee on Article 12 of the CRPD, Me-CDPD argues that no limitation based on disability can restrict the right to vote or be elected.



Recommendation No. 02/Me-CDPD/2025 proposes the revision of electoral laws (Decree-Law No. 319-A/76; Law No. 14/79; Organic Law No. 1/2001; among others), eliminating any provision that conditions active or passive electoral capacity on the basis of disability (Me-CDPD, 2025). It also advocates the introduction of decision-making support mechanisms and the implementation of accessible and autonomous voting models, in accordance with Articles 9, 21 and 29 of the CRPD and Articles 10, 49 and 71 of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (CRP).

### **3. Stigma and ableist attitudes**

Stigma and prejudice continue to be significant barriers to the full participation of people with disabilities in political and public life. Stereotypes persist that associate disability with incapacity, dependence or lack of decision-making ability, particularly affecting people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities (FRA, 2024).

The Me-CDPD notes that the visibility of people with disabilities in political positions is low and that political parties rarely include candidates with disabilities on their lists. This absence reflects internal attitudinal barriers within party structures and a limited social perception of the leadership and decision-making abilities of people with disabilities.

In addition, the media tend to reproduce stereotypes or omit these voices from public debate. Article 8 of the CRPD imposes on the State the duty to promote awareness campaigns to combat stigma and prejudice, training political actors, journalists and civil society to value the diversity and political capacity of people with disabilities.

### **4. Other Structural, Financial and Intersectional Barriers**

Political participation is conditioned by a set of structural, logistical and financial barriers that disproportionately affect people with disabilities.

#### **4.1. Physical, communicational and digital accessibility**

Many public buildings, municipal assemblies, party headquarters and polling stations still do not fully comply with the requirements of Law No. 163/2006, which defines accessibility conditions. Electoral processes present procedural obstacles, such as the absence of Portuguese Sign Language interpretation, lack of subtitles, lack of easy-to-read documents or inaccessible websites (Me-CDPD, 2024; 2025).

People with visual impairments face specific limitations, despite the previous pilot project aimed at this section of the population. However, the Braille voting matrix is only available for national and European elections, excluding local elections. This is a partial solution, accessible only to those who have mastered the Braille system (Me-CDPD, 2025).



## **4.2. Financial inequality and logistical support**

Conducting accessible election campaigns requires financial, human and material investment (e.g. Portuguese sign language interpretation, accessible transport, assistive technologies, personal assistance, resources available in multiple formats). However, it represents a State Party's commitment to the most basic right of citizenship – the right to vote – as expressed in the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic and reinforced by the CRPD.

At the same time, these barriers limit the candidacy of people with disabilities for political and public office, in contradiction with the principle of equal opportunities (Article 5 CRPD).

## **4.3. Intersectional discrimination**

Women with disabilities, LGBTI+ people with disabilities and citizens living in rural areas face multiple forms of exclusion, combining factors of gender, territory, poverty and disability. The absence of integrated measures to combat multiple discrimination further limits access to leadership and representative positions. In this regard, with reference to Article 6 of the CRPD (Women with disabilities), it is essential that the Portuguese State take measures aimed at women with disabilities, with a view to ensuring their full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including "(...) *the right to participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for people with disabilities to vote and be elected (...)*", according to Article 29 of the CRPD.

## **5. Examples of Measures and Good Practices**

Portugal has adopted relevant, albeit insufficient, measures to promote the right to vote and political participation on an equal basis.

### **5.1. National good practices**

- **Recommendation No. 02/Me-CDPD/2025 – Right to Accessible Voting:** proposes the implementation of an accessible and universal voting system based on the principles of universal design, guaranteeing autonomous and secret voting for all people with disabilities, as well as mandatory training for polling station officials and the production of electoral information in multiple accessible formats.
- **Working Group between the Me-CDPD and the National Election Commission:** to begin in November 2025, with the aim of promoting coordination, cooperation and joint work between these two independent bodies, with a view to resolving emerging issues that fall solely within the competences and remit of these two bodies.
- **Working Group for Accessible Elections:** an initiative coordinated by the National Election Commission in Portugal, which aims to ensure that the right to accessible voting is guaranteed in all electoral acts. Through its work, the group,



which includes various entities such as the National Institute for Rehabilitation, the General Secretariat of the Ministry of Internal Administration and associations representing people with disabilities, seeks to remove barriers and promote the full and informed civic participation of all citizens. In its Recommendation No. 02/2025, the Me-CDPD highlights the importance of this working group becoming a permanent, active and representative structure, with its activities focusing on ensuring the continuity, effectiveness and monitoring of electoral accessibility measures.

- **Joint Circular No. 1/2024 CNE/INR:** promoted improvements in the physical accessibility of polling stations, although without yet guaranteeing full accessibility.
- **Resolution of the Assembly of the Republic No. 97/2025:** recommended that the Government implement accessible voting for people with cerebral palsy and other disabilities. Developments on this matter are awaited, with the Me-CDPD having presented Recommendation No. 02/Me-CDPD/2025 – Right to Accessible Voting, in this regard.
- **Inclusive local projects:** some municipal programmes have been identified that aim to promote political accessibility, particularly in the cities of Lisbon and Cascais, reinforcing good practices of inclusion through local assemblies.

## **5.2. International good practices**

The FRA (2024) and the CRPD Committee identify effective measures in other countries, such as:

- Models of support for assisted decision-making (Sweden, Canada).
- Political mentoring programmes for women with disabilities (Australia, Ireland).
- Public funding for accessible campaigns (United Kingdom, New Zealand).

The Me-CDPD recommends that Portugal adapt and integrate these experiences, promoting a National Political Empowerment Programme for People with Disabilities and financial and technical support mechanisms for inclusive campaigns.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Equality in political participation is an essential condition for an inclusive and representative democracy. Portugal has made significant progress, but structural and cultural gaps remain that limit the full exercise of political rights by people with disabilities.

The Me-CDPD, in fulfilment of its mandate and in light of Articles 9, 12, 21 and 29 of the CRPD and Article 71 of the Constitution, makes the following priority recommendations:



1. **Revision of electoral legislation** to eliminate legal restrictions based on legal incapacity and ensure decision-making support mechanisms.
2. **Systematic collection of disaggregated data** on political representation, with respect for privacy and voluntariness.
3. **Implementation of an accessible and universal voting system**, ensuring autonomous, secret and independent voting for all people.
4. **Adoption of mandatory standards for physical, communicational, cognitive and digital accessibility** at all stages of the electoral process.
5. **Creation of accessible political training and mentoring programmes** aimed at candidates with disabilities (who express an interest in attending).
6. **Financial and technical support** for accessible campaigns aimed at promoting the participation of people with disabilities in political parties and representative bodies.
7. **Public awareness campaigns and training for political actors and the media** on the rights and capabilities of people with disabilities, in accordance with the human rights model advocated by the CRPD.
8. **Active involvement of organisations representing people with disabilities** in the design and monitoring of public policies (Article 4(3) CRPD).
9. **Independent and participatory monitoring** by the Me-CDPD and the CNE of the implementation of electoral accessibility measures.

Recommendation No. 02/Me-CDPD/2025 is the central instrument of this vision: the creation of an accessible voting system for all people as a condition of democratic legitimacy. The Portuguese State must ensure that no person is directly or indirectly deprived of the right to vote, be elected or participate in public life on the grounds of disability.

Me-CDPD reaffirms its commitment to collaborate with the State, the Assembly of the Republic, the Electoral Administration and civil society to achieve a full, participatory democracy that is accessible to all people.



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