



**Written submission on article 29 of the
Convention on the Rights of Persons with
Disabilities**

**Submitted on the occasion of the 32nd session
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The report at hand is mostly based on documents from the Austrian Disability Council, the umbrella organization of over 85 member organisations representing approximately 1.4 million persons with disabilities in Austria. These documents on a broad range of topics relate to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the life of persons with disabilities in Austria.



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1. Participation of persons with disabilities in elections

In Austria, the right to vote is a fundamental right granted to all citizens, including persons with disabilities. A key aspect for persons with disabilities is that all individuals, once they reach a certain age, have the right to vote and stand for elections. Unlike in some other countries, there are no legal restrictions preventing persons with disabilities from exercising their right to vote. However, while there is no legal discrimination, there are significant barriers that hinder the full participation of persons with disabilities in the electoral process.

In 2023, there was a reform of the electoral law in Austria, which entered into force on 1.1.2024.¹ The reform includes several improvements for persons with disabilities, for example polling stations must be accessible by 2028. To make it easier for persons with disabilities to participate in elections during the transitional period until 1.1.2028, the law provides the mandatory installation of at least one accessible polling station in every building in which polling stations are set up. However, this transitional solution does not take into account that polling stations do not just have

¹ Wahlrechtsänderungsgesetz 2023 BGBl. 2023/7.

to be reachable in an accessible way, also their use must be accessible: they ought to be equipped with accessible toilets, fully accessible voting booths and offer the necessary support services.

Additionally, an election is not just about the act of casting a vote; it is a comprehensive process that includes thorough preparation, informed decision-making, and post-election follow-up. From ensuring accessible campaign materials to understanding the results, every stage plays a crucial role in true democratic participation. In summary, barriers exist long before elections, and accessibility and participation involve more than just getting to the polling station without obstacles.

a) Preparation for Voting

Preparation is a crucial aspect of ensuring that persons with disabilities can exercise their right to vote effectively. Several factors need to be addressed:

- **Accessible Election Information**

The lack of accessible information is a key factor contributing to the lower voter turnout among persons with disabilities compared to those without disabilities.² All election-related materials, including party programs, voting instructions, and official documents, must be available in accessible formats such as Braille and easy-to-read language.

While voting instructions are generally well implemented in easy-to-read language in Austria, allowing many persons with psychosocial and/or intellectual disabilities to cast their vote mostly independently, there is currently no legal obligation for political parties to publish their election programs in an easy-to-read format. As a result, many persons with disabilities, particularly those with psychosocial and/or intellectual disabilities, lack accessible information about the political content and goals of the parties.

- **Political Education**

The issue starts much earlier, in schools, where inclusive education is lacking³, and political education for persons with disabilities remains insufficient. The Federal Constitutional Law in Austria identifies education that promotes an understanding of

² Forschungsbericht, Politische Teilhabe, Wahlbeteiligung Menschen mit Behinderungen, 2018 (45), [forschungsbericht-politische-teilhabe.pdf](#) (last accessed: 10.02.2025)

³ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of Austria, CRPD/C/AUT/CO/2-3, 10 (57).

democracy and empowers participation in political processes as a key goal of the Austrian education system.⁴

However, outside of schools providing vocational education (Berufsschule), there is no specific subject dedicated to political education. The concept of political education is an instructional principle rather than a separate subject, which is why there is no specialized teacher training program for it. This principle of political education is meant to be integrated across all subjects. Typically, from the 9th grade onwards, political education is primarily taught as part of history and social studies lessons.⁵ As a result, political education is poorly covered in regular schools. For persons with disabilities, political education tends to play an even more subordinate role in Austria's still segregated education system, further limiting their opportunities for full participation in democratic processes.

Moreover, information about the political system, electoral processes, and key political issues is often not available in accessible formats, whether at the regional, national, European, or international level. This makes it significantly harder for persons with disabilities to fully understand their rights and actively engage in political discourse. Without equal access to political knowledge, meaningful participation remains limited. To promote true democratic inclusion, it is essential to ensure that political education is available in accessible formats for everyone.⁶

b) The Act of Voting

In Austria, voters with disabilities can bring a trusted person to assist them during the official act of voting.⁷ Persons with disabilities must have the opportunity to involve a person of their choice for support when casting their vote, should they wish to do so. At the same time, they must not be required to rely on any additional assistance if they prefer to vote independently. However, concerns remain regarding the implementation of these provisions in practice. There is a risk that, at the time of voting, these regulations may not be consistently applied in all electoral districts. This raises the concern that some voters with disabilities might not be granted the

⁴ § 14 Abs 5a Bundes-Verfassungsgesetz BGBl. 1930/1 i.d.F. BGBl. 2017/138.

⁵ Parlament Österreich, Welche Bedeutung hat politische Bildung für eine Demokratie?, [Welche Bedeutung hat politische Bildung für eine Demokratie? | Parlament Österreich](#) (last accessed: 10.02.2025).

⁶ European Human Rights Report. Issue 6 – 2022. Human Rights Report on political participation of persons with disabilities (2022), https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2022/10/edf_hr_report_issue_6_2022_accessible.pdf (last accessed: 05.02.2025) and FRA, Political Participation of People with Disabilities – New Developments (2024), <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/political-participation> (last accessed: 05.02.2025).

⁷ § 66 Abs 1 Bundesgesetz über die Wahl des Nationalrates, BGBl. 1992/471 i.d.F. BGBl. I 2023/130.

support they require to vote independently or, conversely, could be pressured into accepting assistance they do not want.

Particular attention must also be given to the situation of people living in institutions, as their right to self-determination is often restricted. Voter turnout among persons with psychosocial and/or intellectual disabilities is generally low, especially for those living in institutional care settings, where participation in elections can be even more limited.⁸ They are frequently dependent on others when they wish to leave the institution to access a polling station or another voting location. This dependency can create significant barriers to their political participation. Additionally, in such settings, the secrecy of the vote is highly questionable, as individuals may feel pressured by staff or fellow residents, whether intentionally or unintentionally, influencing their voting decision or preventing them from voting independently.

Moreover, in Austria, there is currently no available data or reports on the voting participation of individuals residing in institutions. Without reliable information, it is difficult to assess whether they face systemic obstacles in exercising their right to vote and to develop measures that ensure their full inclusion in the electoral process.

c) Post-Election Participation and Follow-Up

Voting does not end when the ballots are cast. Ensuring that persons with disabilities remain informed and engaged after the election is equally important. Accordingly, it is essential to ensure that the results and consequences of an election are accessible and published in an accessible way.

In Austria, there are more elections than just the National Council elections, as it is a federal state with a multi-level political system. In addition to parliamentary elections at the national level, each of the nine federal states holds its own state elections to elect regional governments. Furthermore, there are municipal elections, where mayors and local councils are elected.

During National Council elections, information regarding the election results is simultaneously translated and interpreted to ensure accessibility for a broad audience. However, at the state level, the situation is different. On January 26th, 2020, ORF Lower Austria, the public service broadcaster for the federal state Lower Austria, broadcasted election coverage without simultaneously providing Austrian Sign Language interpretation, which resulted in limited accessibility for deaf viewers.

⁸ Angela Wegscheider (2013): „Politische Partizipation von Menschen mit Behinderungen.“ SWS-Rundschau 53 (2), S. 216–234 (225).

The mediation was unsuccessful as ORF argued that providing Austrian Sign Language interpretation was economically unfeasible and technically impossible, and that there would be no legal obligation for accessibility. Additionally, they contradicted themselves regarding the legal framework and remained unconvinced by the argument that elections in Lower Austria are usually held only once every five years.⁹

2. Participation of persons with disabilities in parliaments and public office

A key indicator of full political inclusion is the representation of persons with disabilities in parliaments and public office. Representation of persons with disabilities in the parliament in Austria has historically been very limited. This absence is a strong signal of the systemic barriers that still exist in political participation. Additionally, each party represented in parliament has its own spokesperson for disability issues, responsible for addressing the concerns of persons with disabilities.¹⁰ However, these representatives rarely identify as persons with disabilities themselves.

This lack of representation extends to the European level. It appears that no Austrian politician with a disability was included on any party list for the European Parliament elections, at least none who openly identified as a person with a disability. This reflects a broader issue: if persons with disabilities are already underrepresented at the national level, their presence at the European level becomes even less likely. The barriers at the EU level are even greater, as political campaigns often require extensive resources and international mobility.

However, three Austrian representatives are members of the Disability Intergroup in the European Parliament, although they are not persons with disabilities themselves, highlighting that disability-related issues are at least recognized.¹¹

Moreover, local political parties, where one might begin their political career, are often not designed to be accessible or inclusive. As a result, persons with disabilities are excluded from the start, with limited opportunities to engage in political activities,

⁹ Fehlende Gebärdensprachdolmetschung bei Sondersendungen zur Gemeinderatswahl in Niederösterreich, [Fehlende Gebärdensprachdolmetschung bei Sondersendungen zur Gemeinderatswahl in Niederösterreich - BIZEPS](#) (last accessed: 07.02.2025).

¹⁰ Following the recent election, the spokespersons for disability issues in this new parliamentary term have not yet been fully determined.

¹¹ List of MEPs in the Intergroup by country, [Members of the Disability Intergroup - By Country - 2024-2029 - European Disability Forum](#) (last accessed: 10.02.2025).

join party structures, or gain experience in public office. This early exclusion creates significant barriers to political participation that persist throughout their lives.

Furthermore, the number of employees with disabilities in the federal public service has decreased by 8.97% since 2007, falling from 4,180 in 2007 to 3,805 employees with disabilities in the fall of 2023.¹²

3. Participation of persons with disabilities at the local level

The significance of local-level participation is undeniable, as it is often the closest point of interaction between citizens and political decision-making. However, persons with disabilities face major barriers to engagement at this level. Additionally, limited opportunities to represent themselves and external limitations further restrict their ability to engage fully in political processes.¹³

Other forms of involvement and participation include consultations and the inclusion of expertise from persons with disabilities in local issues. Recently, a negative example highlighted the ongoing disregard for the expertise of persons with disabilities on the local level. In December 2024, a government program was published in Styria that proposed the reduction of inclusive education.¹⁴ Neither persons with disabilities nor their organizations were involved in the development discussions for this program. It was only after a public protest that persons with disabilities were invited to engage in follow-up discussions. However, the government program has not been amended as of now. This incident underscores the need for consistent and meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

4. Participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making related to situations of risks and emergencies

a) COVID-19

The participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has been critically overlooked. The

¹² Anzahl der Bediensteten mit Behinderungen im Bundesdienst, BMKÖS: 2023-0.768.656, [86_16_mrv.pdf](#) (last accessed: 07.02.2025).

¹³ Angela Wegscheider (2013): „Politische Partizipation von Menschen mit Behinderungen.“ SWS-Rundschau 53 (2), S. 216–234 (216).

¹⁴ FPÖ/ÖVP, Starke Steiermark. Sichere Zukunft. Arbeitsübereinkommen der FPÖ Steiermark und der Steirischen Volkspartei 2024 – 2029 (15), media.steiermark.at/flexpaper/Regierungsprogramm/index.html (last accessed: 05.02.2025).

pandemic exposed the systemic exclusion of this group from emergency regulations and their consequences. Conflicting regulations and guidelines led to confusion, leaving the public unsure about the rules and actions to take. This was especially difficult for persons with disabilities. A survey conducted by the Styrian Monitoring Committee in March 2020 revealed several key issues: a lack of reliable and understandable information, particularly for persons with psychosocial and/or intellectual disabilities and the deaf community; insufficient counselling and support, especially for those with psychological disabilities; the disruption of personal assistance and communication; uncertainty due to frequently changing and conflicting COVID-19 regulations.¹⁵ The Tyrol Monitoring Committee also found that persons with disabilities were classified as a "high-risk group" during the pandemic, which led to them being subjected to stricter measures and restrictions on their rights.¹⁶ This designation exacerbated the challenges already faced by persons with disabilities, further limiting their participation in society, and fundamental freedoms.

As the studies show, persons with disabilities were neither consulted nor considered when policies and measures were being formulated. The lack of inclusive participation has resulted in challenges, including inadequate access to essential information and services, and, ultimately, worsened the impact of the pandemic on their lives. This failure to include persons with disabilities in decision-making processes highlights a fundamental issue in crisis management: the exclusion of a vulnerable group that often faces multiple layers of discrimination.

b) Climate crisis

Moreover, this issue extends beyond the immediate health crisis of the pandemic and can be observed in the context of other global challenges, such as the climate crisis. There are numerous barriers to participation, and it is evident that persons with disabilities are often left out of critical decision-making processes related to climate change and environmental resilience. This is particularly difficult and harmful as persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected by the impacts of the climate crisis. Extreme weather events, inaccessible evacuation plans, and the lack of disability-inclusive climate policies place them at greater risk, further exacerbating their vulnerability in an already challenging situation.

¹⁵ Steiermärkischer Monitoringausschuss für Menschen mit Behinderungen, Erst-Stellungnahme zum Thema „COVID-19“ (2), [Stellungnahme-Stmk-MA-COVID-19.pdf](#) (last accessed: 05.02.2025).

¹⁶ Tiroler Monitoringausschuss, Menschen mit Behinderungen im Krisen- und Katastrophenfall, 2021 (11), [Corona Stellungnahme](#) (last accessed: 05.02.2025).

Information on climate risks is frequently provided in difficult-to-understand formats, often using complex language or being presented only in foreign languages such as English, which can leave many persons with disabilities unable to access the information they need. This lack of accessibility in both the information and the decision-making processes must be addressed if we are to build inclusive, sustainable responses to the climate crisis.

The 2024 UN Climate Summit in Baku, Azerbaijan (COP29) was a significant event in some ways, but for persons with disabilities, it remained a missed opportunity. Despite a record attendance of persons with disabilities, the crucial demand for the UN climate agency to recognise an official Disability Constituency was denied.¹⁷ This exclusion, despite efforts from the global disability community, underscores the ongoing lack of equal representation and participation in climate negotiations, which in turn limits the involvement of persons with disabilities in critical decision-making processes. While the COP29 outcome documents did include some references to persons with disabilities, particularly in the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance¹⁸ and the Global Goal on Adaptation¹⁹, they were far from sufficient and, in total, are weak on human rights in general. This lack of inclusivity and recognition continues to marginalize the disability community, sending a clear message that their needs and voices are not valued in climate action efforts.

c) Participation in general

As stated in Art 4 of the CRPD, the inclusion of persons with disabilities in decisions affecting them is a fundamental right. Incorporating persons with disabilities into decision-making processes is essential for identifying barriers and understanding the risks they may face. This approach is crucial for ensuring their protection and addressing any challenges they may encounter, allowing for a more effective and inclusive response in crisis situations.²⁰ By considering their perspectives, it becomes possible to recognize and mitigate potential obstacles that could otherwise go unnoticed.²¹ For meaningful participation to be effective and impactful, it must be integrated from the outset of any crisis response. This principle applies to both crisis

¹⁷ European Disability Forum, "Disability still an afterthought at international climate negotiations", [Disability still an afterthought at international climate negotiations - European Disability Forum](#) (last accessed: 05.02.2025).

¹⁸ New collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance, [New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance | UNFCCC](#) (last accessed: 07.02.2025).

¹⁹ Global Goal on adaptation, [Global goal on adaptation | UNFCCC](#) (last accessed: 05.02.2025).

²⁰ European Commission, DG ECHO Operational Guidance 7.

²¹ European Commission, DG ECHO Operational Guidance 9.

preparedness and immediate response efforts, particularly within local coordination mechanisms.²² It should be an inherent part of the decision-making process and not treated as an afterthought. It is important to assess each situation on a case-by-case basis during the planning phase to ensure that the specific needs and circumstances of persons with disabilities are properly addressed.²³

In Austria, the inclusion of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes is highly limited, and these processes are not fully accessible. For persons with disabilities to truly and meaningfully participate, accessibility must be ensured. This includes the use of inclusive language and various communication formats, as well as accessible meeting places, spaces, documents, and more.²⁴

5. Participation of women with disabilities in decision-making processes

There is a significant underrepresentation of women in political decision-making roles, particularly at the Länder and municipal levels in Austria, despite efforts to promote gender equality. Women are also notably underrepresented in high-level and managerial positions, as well as on the boards of private enterprises.²⁵ These issues are even more pronounced for women with disabilities, who face additional barriers to participation.

The underrepresentation of women in political leadership is well-documented. Currently, only 11.1% of Austrian mayors are women.²⁶ However, there is little to no data on how many of these women—or elected municipal council members—identify as persons with disabilities. The lack of visibility and statistical data makes it difficult to assess their political participation and advocate for targeted support mechanisms. Without targeted data collection and greater visibility for this group, their political participation remains largely unrecognized, making it difficult to develop specific support mechanisms.

²² OCHA, "What is the Cluster Approach", [Cluster Coordination | Topics | ReliefWeb](#) (last accessed: 05.02.2025).

²³ European Commission, DG ECHO Operational Guidance 7.

²⁴ International Rescue Committee, Toolbox – Inclusive Client Responsiveness (2021) 3ff, [ircrtoolbox-screen.pdf](#) (last accessed: 10.02.2025).

²⁵ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Concluding Observations on the fifth periodic report of Austria (2015), CCPR/C/AUT/CO/5, 3 (13).

²⁶ Wissenswertes über unsere Bürgermeister*innen, [Bürgermeister:innen - Der Österreichische Gemeindebund](#) (last accessed: 05.02.2025).