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Voting barriers and solutions: the experiences of people with disabilities during the Dutch national election in 2017

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Abstract

Exercising the right to vote at elections is frequently denied to people with disabilities. In this study, we examined the voting behaviour of individuals with physical or learning impairments and the barriers they encountered during the national elections in 2017 in the Netherlands. A survey design was chosen to allow large-scale questioning of both target groups. Over 90% of people with physical impairments voted and respondents found that voting was accessible. Voter turnout among people with learning impairments was much lower (46%). They experienced difficulty to prepare themselves and at the polling station. The Netherlands seems well on the way to achieving an inclusive environment for people with physical impairments. Recommendations are given about accessibility for all and for exploring alternative methods of voting such as proxy voting and tailoring information and procedures to the needs of people with learning impairments.

Points of interest

- The Netherlands seems well on the way to achieving an inclusive voting environment.
- Individuals with physical impairments report high turnout rates and few barriers.
- Representatives of individuals with learning impairments say there are significant challenges.
- The research recommended making information regarding elections and voting appropriate for all, but especially for people with learning impairments.
- Exploring alternative methods of voting and support systems is recommended.

Introduction

Exercising the right to vote during elections is a fundamental human right and is one of the rights that are more frequently denied to people with disabilities as a result of statutory and procedural barriers (Fiala-Butora, Stein, and Lord 2014 Fiala-Butora, J., M. A. Stein, and J. E. Lord. 2014. "The Democratic Life of the Union: Toward Equal Voting Participation for Europeans with Disabilities." Harvard

International Law Journal 55 (1): 71–104.). People with disabilities often have difficulties with participation, including participating in political activities (German Institute for Human Rights [2016](#) German Institute for Human Rights. 2016. Implementation of Selected OSCE Commitments on Human Rights and Democracy in Germany. Independent Evaluation Report on the Occasion of the German OSCE Chairmanship 2016. Berlin: German Institute for Human Rights.). Electoral participation is firmly grounded in international law, enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) as a disability rights issue as well as in the Council of Europe instruments and European Union primary and secondary legislation (FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [2014](#) FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. 2014. The Right to Political Participation for Persons with Disabilities: Human Rights Indicators. Vienna, Austria: FRA.). Nations that sign the CRPD are obliged to take action to ensure that electoral procedures are appropriate and accessible in order to create an inclusive environment in which people with disabilities can participate in public affairs (Keeley et al. [2008](#) Keeley, H., M. Redley, A. J. Holland, and I. C. H. Clare. 2008. “Participation in the 2005 General Election by Adults with Intellectual Disabilities.” *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 53: 175–81. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2007.00991.x.). As recommended by Priestley et al. ([2016](#) Priestley, M., M. Stickings, E. Loja, S. Grammenos, A. Lawson, L. Waddington, and B. Fridriksdottir. 2016. “The Political Participation of Disabled People in Europe: Rights, accessibility and Activism.” *Electoral Studies* 42: 1–9. doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2016.01.009.) for political involvement, European countries should continue to monitor outcomes and inform electoral authorities about disability equality and reasonable modifications for voters who experience a disability.

Less active electoral participation by people with disabilities may weaken their ability to promote their concerns on political agendas (Lollar and Crews [2003](#) Lollar, D. J., and J. E. Crews. 2003. “Redefining the Role of Public Health in Disability.” *Annual Review of Public Health* 24: 195–208.). This is seen as a serious problem, given that people with disabilities have distinctive health concerns and economic needs that may remain unaddressed in the absence of political interventions (Matsubayashi and Ueda [2014](#) Matsubayashi, T., and M. Ueda. 2014. “Disability and Voting.” *Disability and Health Journal* 7 (3): 285–91. doi:10.1016/j.dhjo.2014.03.001.). This may also prolong inequity in political power and reduce the opportunities for them to change the situation (Gollust and Rahn [2013](#) Gollust, S. E., and W. Rahn. 2013. “The Bodies Politic: Chronic Health Conditions Andparticipatory Inequalities. Paper prepared for the 2013 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting.” SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2301007>.). Additional efforts are necessary to reduce the voting gap so that the interests of people with disabilities are reflected in the policy-making process.

In this study, the focus is on electoral participation among individuals with physical impairments and individuals with learning impairments in the Netherlands. One out of eight individuals in the Netherlands has a long-term disability (Gijzen, Van Oostrom, and Schellevis [2014](#) Gijzen, R., S. H. Van Oostrom, and F. C. Schellevis. 2014. How Many Persons Have One or More Chronic Conditions, public Health Future Exploration, National Compass Public Health, “Hoeveel Mensen Hebben Één of Meer Chronische Ziekten. Volksgezondheid Toekomst Verkenning, Nationaal Kompas Volksgezondheid”. Bilthoven, The Netherlands: RIVM.). This proportion is increasing steadily as the population ages (Belt [2016](#) Belt, R. 2016. “Contemporary Voting Rights Controversies through the Lens of Disability.” *Stanford Law Review* 68: 101–61.). It is estimated that over 1.42 million individuals aged 20 years and older in the Netherlands have a physical impairment (de Klerk et al. [2012](#) de Klerk, M., H. Fernee, I. Woittiez, and M. Ras. 2012. Persons with Physical and Intellectual Disabilities “Mensen Met Lichamelijke en Verstandelijke Beperkingen”. The Hague: Social and cultural planning office (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau). Hoeymans et al. [2012](#) Hoeymans, N., A. Wong, C. H. Van Gool, D. J. Deeg, W. J. Nusselder, M. M. de Klerk, M. P. van Boxtel, and H. S. Picavet. 2012. “The Disabling Effect of Diseases: A Study on Trends in Diseases, Activity Limitations, and Their Interrelationships.” *American Journal of Public Health* 102 (1): 163–70. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2011.300296.). The number of individuals with learning impairments in the Netherlands (intelligence quotient lower than 70) is estimated to range

between 112,000 and 231,000 (de Klerk et al. [2012](#) de Klerk, M., H. Fernee, I. Woittiez, and M. Ras. 2012. *Persons with Physical and Intellectual Disabilities “Mensen Met Lichamelijke en Verstandelijke Beperkingen”*. The Hague: Social and cultural planning office (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau).). Previous national and international studies have found differences in voter turnout between people with disabilities and the general population (Belt [2016](#) Belt, R. 2016. “Contemporary Voting Rights Controversies through the Lens of Disability.” *Stanford Law Review* 68: 101–61. Hofstede, Meulenkamp, and Cardol [2014](#) Hofstede, J., T. Meulenkamp, and M. Cardol. 2014. *Voting with an Intellectual Disability Not yet Taken for Granted; “Stemmen Met Een Verstandelijke Beperking Nog Niet Vanzelfsprekend”*, Factsheet. Utrecht: NIVEL. ; Keeley et al. [2008](#) Keeley, H., M. Redley, A. J. Holland, and I. C. H. Clare. 2008. “Participation in the 2005 General Election by Adults with Intellectual Disabilities.” *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 53: 175–81. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2007.00991.x. Schur, Adya, and Kruse [2013](#) Schur, L., M. Adya, and D. Kruse. 2013. *Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties*. New York: Research Alliance for Accessible Voting. ; Schur et al. [2002](#) Schur, L., T. Shields, D. Kruse, and K. Schriener. 2002. “Enabling Democracy: Disability and Voter Turnout.” *Political Research Quarterly* 55 (1): 167–90. doi:10.1177/106591290205500107.). The rate of electoral participation among people with disabilities varies with the type of disability (Matsubayashi and Ueda [2014](#) Matsubayashi, T., and M. Ueda. 2014. “Disability and Voting.” *Disability and Health Journal* 7 (3): 285–91. doi:10.1016/j.dhjo.2014.03.001.). The study by Matsubayashi and Ueda ([2014](#) Matsubayashi, T., and M. Ueda. 2014. “Disability and Voting.” *Disability and Health Journal* 7 (3): 285–91. doi:10.1016/j.dhjo.2014.03.001.) demonstrated a low rate of voting among persons with mobility or learning impairments. Subsequent research in the United Kingdom drew attention to the specific barriers faced by individuals with learning impairments and the importance of social capital and networks of support as enablers of political participation (Keeley et al. [2008](#) Keeley, H., M. Redley, A. J. Holland, and I. C. H. Clare. 2008. “Participation in the 2005 General Election by Adults with Intellectual Disabilities.” *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 53: 175–81. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2007.00991.x. Redley et al. [2012](#) Redley, M., E. Maina, A. Keeling, and P. Pattni. 2012. “The Voting Rights of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities: Reflections on the Arguments, and Situation in Kenya and England and Wales.” *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 56 (11): 1026–35. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2012.01635.x. Belt [2016](#) Belt, R. 2016. “Contemporary Voting Rights Controversies through the Lens of Disability.” *Stanford Law Review* 68: 101–61.). For example, Inclusion Scotland targeted the under-representation of people with disabilities in politics and public life by the Access to Politics work, in which a pilot evaluation showed that additional funds made available to disabled candidates in elections have been well received (Inclusion Scotland [2017](#) Inclusion Scotland. 2017. *Access to Elected Office Fund (Scotland) – 2016/2017 Pilot Evaluation Report*. Scotland: Inclusion Scotland.). This suggests that establishing political rights and providing accessibility may not be sufficient to achieve full participation without also engaging and proactively supporting people with disabilities in civil society (Priestley et al. [2016](#) Priestley, M., M. Stickings, E. Loja, S. Grammenos, A. Lawson, L. Waddington, and B. Fridriksdottir. 2016. “The Political Participation of Disabled People in Europe: Rights, accessibility and Activism.” *Electoral Studies* 42: 1–9. doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2016.01.009.). Exercising the right to electoral participation may be hindered by a variety of barriers (Lord, Stein, and Fiala-Butora [2014](#) Lord, J. E., M. A. Stein, and J. Fiala-Butora. 2014. “Facilitating an Equal Right to Vote for Persons with Disabilities.” *Journal of Human Rights* 6 (1): 115–39. doi:10.1093/jhuman/hut034.). The accessibility of information is not yet optimized, according to several institutes for human rights (German Institute for Human Rights [2016](#) German Institute for Human Rights. 2016. *Implementation of Selected OSCE Commitments on Human Rights and Democracy in Germany. Independent Evaluation Report on the Occasion of the German OSCE Chairmanship 2016*. Berlin: German Institute for Human Rights. ; Swedish Agency for Participation [Myndigheten för delaktighet] 2014). Research has shown that individuals with learning impairments often do not understand the meaning and content of elections, find it difficult to use the voting paper and, as a result, are not interested in politics

(Hofstede, Meulenkamp, and Cardol [2014](#) Hofstede, J., T. Meulenkamp, and M. Cardol. 2014. Voting with an Intellectual Disability Not yet Taken for Granted; “Stemmen Met Een Verstandelijke Beperking Nog Niet Vanzelfsprekend”, Factsheet. Utrecht: NIVEL.); Schur, Adya, and Kruse [2013](#) Schur, L., M. Adya, and D. Kruse. 2013. Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties. New York: Research Alliance for Accessible Voting.). There is a debate as to what extent voting should be facilitated for people who have difficulty understanding the meaning of their vote. Individuals with learning impairments do not have the right to receive assistance in the voting booth, whereas individuals with physical impairments do have that right and can designate someone to assist them at the polling station (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights [2017](#) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. 2017. The Netherlands, Parliamentary Elections, 15 March 2017, OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report. Warsaw: OSCE ODIHR.). Absence of accessible parking places near the polling station and absence of ramps create barriers for individuals with mobility impairments (Belt [2016](#) Belt, R. 2016. “Contemporary Voting Rights Controversies through the Lens of Disability.” *Stanford Law Review* 68: 101–61. Schur, Adya, and Kruse [2013](#) Schur, L., M. Adya, and D. Kruse. 2013. Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties. New York: Research Alliance for Accessible Voting.). For those who cannot leave their homes or live in hospitals or institutions, mobile voting mechanisms or postal votes may not be offered (Lord, Stein, and Fiala-Butora [2014](#) Lord, J. E., M. A. Stein, and J. Fiala-Butora. 2014. “Facilitating an Equal Right to Vote for Persons with Disabilities.” *Journal of Human Rights* 6 (1): 115–39. doi:10.1093/jhuman/hut034.). Lastly, election officials may discourage voters if they are poorly trained in the rules that are applicable or if they are visibly uncomfortable implementing them (Research Alliance for Accessible Voting [2014](#) Research Alliance for Accessible Voting. 2014. “RAAV Poll Worker Training Project 2.”). Inaccessibility may reduce voter turnout not only by making it more difficult to vote, but also by sending the message that people with disabilities are not fully welcome in the political arena (Schur, Adya, and Kruse [2013](#) Schur, L., M. Adya, and D. Kruse. 2013. Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties. New York: Research Alliance for Accessible Voting.). Assessing the accessibility of national elections is important so that regulatory bodies can be kept up to date about the implementation of the CRPD and legislation from the FRA. We are providing information to the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights through this study about the participation of people with disabilities at national elections. They will use this information in discussions with policy-makers about the adequacy and acceptability of measures that could be taken to live up to the CRPD with regard to electoral participation in the near future. In this study, we examined the barriers that individuals with physical or learning impairments encountered when voting and to what extent they were present during the national elections in March 2017 in the Netherlands. We also obtained a picture of what improvements they would like in order to make voting easier. How elections are organized and the rules that apply in the Netherlands are described in more detail in [Box 1](#).

Box 1.

The National Elections Act provides guidance for the practicalities and formalities regarding elections in the Netherlands, from sending out voting ID cards to counting votes. It also describes the suffrage (i.e. who is eligible to vote). Every individual aged over 18 years who has not lost that right (which can only be removed by a judge) receives a voting identity card by post. They can vote at the polling stations on election day using this voting card and personal identification. All Dutch citizens who are entitled to vote can delegate the power of signature to another person, known as proxy voting. The law states that ‘a voter who does not expect to be able to vote in person may vote by proxy ...’ but the law does not require that the voter provides any justification or delegates in advance the right to vote. In practice, this means that any voter can vote by proxy. In the Netherlands, proxy voting is a longstanding practice and is considered a method of ensuring the universality of the vote (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights [2017](#) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

2017. The Netherlands, Parliamentary Elections, 15 March 2017, OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report. Warsaw: OSCE ODIHR.). The National Elections Act only allows voters with physical impairments to be assisted in the voting booth. Assistants are either individuals designated by the voter or election officials at the polling station, and interpretation of this provision is provided at the polling station by an election official. Individuals with learning impairments have no right to assistance in the voting booth; however, as already explained, any voter, including individuals with learning impairments, can vote by proxy. Individuals with learning impairments do not receive assistance in the voting booth due to the possible increased risk of deception. Furthermore, the National Elections Act states that at least 24% of the polling stations must be accessible for individuals with physical impairments, with strict criteria formulated for the interior and for accessibility. At least three election officials must be present at the polling station. They are obliged to complete a training course on the application of the National Elections Act so that they can interpret the rules and guidelines on the day of the elections (Electoral Council [2017](https://www.kiesraad.nl) Electoral Council. 2017. "Elections Act." www.kiesraad.nl.).

Research process

Procedure

A survey design was chosen that would allow large-scale questioning of both target groups. Nationwide panel studies were used in which the participants are people with physical impairments as well as representatives of people with learning impairments. Incontestably, questions regarding voting by individuals with learning difficulties should preferably incorporate the experiences and voices of the people themselves rather than their representatives. Within the context of the current study reported, there were not enough means available in terms of time and resources to individually interview people with learning impairments in a careful and respectful way. Since we did have access to a panel involving representatives of individuals with learning impairments we decided to administer the questionnaire to the representatives and asked them to fill in the survey together with the individual with an intellectual impairment. Qualitative methods were used to meet the need for in-depth understanding from the target group itself. The study was conducted from January to July 2017 in the Netherlands, where national elections were held on 15 March 2017.

Recruitment of respondents

Individuals with physical impairments

The National Panel of people with Chronic illness or Disability (NPCD) of the Netherlands Institute for Health Service Research (Nivel) was used to select respondents.¹ A representative sample of 610 individuals from this panel with moderate or severe physical impairments was selected and approached to participate in this study.

Individuals with learning impairments

Representatives of people with mild or moderate learning impairments participate in the existing panel 'Living Together'. All representatives participating in this panel were approached to participate in this study.² Representatives could be family members, close friends or mentors (professionals). The accompanying letter encouraged representatives to fill in the questionnaire together with the individual whom it concerned.

Data collection and analysis

Firstly, a draft questionnaire was developed based on literature and previous studies. The questionnaire contained a total of 25 questions regarding socio-demographic characteristics, actual

voting, the experience of voting (including preparations to vote, accessibility of information, accessibility of the polling station, the situation at the polling station, election officials), needs for assistance when voting, proxy voting and questions for non-voters about possible reasons for not voting, concluding with a general section about solutions suggested for improving the accessibility of the national elections. This draft was discussed with experts and stakeholders from various Dutch organizations, including the National Electoral Council, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Kingdom Relations, the Dutch Association for Civil Affairs and disabled people's organizations (Ieder(in) and LFB). The draft questionnaire was tested by cognitive interviews with the target groups and by a survey methodologist and was adjusted according to the outcomes.

On the day of the national election, the questionnaires were administered to both groups. In the sample of people with physical impairments, two-thirds were approached online ($n = 408$) and one-third ($n = 202$) by post. In the panel of representatives of individuals with learning impairments, 60% received the questionnaire by post ($n = 208$) and 40% ($N = 141$) online. Reminders were sent after two weeks and submission concluded after another two weeks (14 April 2017).

The quantitative data were analysed descriptively using Stata 14.0. Those results were discussed with voluntary representatives ($n = 12$) of the target groups, including people with physical or learning impairments and representatives of people with learning impairments. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants of the focus group discussion to discuss the results and practical implications. The discussion, lasting two hours, focused on whether the participants agreed with the results and on thinking about the suggested solutions and other improvements they brought forward.

Results

We will first describe the response and sample characteristics in both groups. We then present the results in the group of individuals with physical impairments and continue with the results of the representatives of individuals with learning impairments. Finally, solutions suggested by both groups will be presented.

Response and sample characteristics

In total, 426 questionnaires were returned out of 610 questionnaires sent to individuals with physical impairments (response rate 70%). Socio-demographic details of the respondents are presented in Table 1, including population estimates.³ Their age and sex reflected the population estimate. Respondents were slightly more highly educated than the wider population of people with physical impairments; 20% of the group had higher education versus only 15% of the population. The group of individuals with severe impairments was also slightly smaller (37%) than among the population (40%).

[Table 1.]

The response rate for the representatives of individuals with learning impairments was 60% (208 questionnaires returned of 349 sent out). The sex of the respondents, their relationship with the individual concerned and socio-demographic characteristics of their friend or relative with a learning impairment are presented in Table 1. Regarding the severity of the learning impairment of the person concerned, 54% had a moderate learning impairment. This is higher than among the estimated population (45%). Over 60% of the respondents completed the questionnaire while discussing it with the person concerned. The remaining nearly 40% did not, but some of them had discussed politics and the elections previously.

Voter turnout and experiences of individuals with physical impairments

Voter turnout in elections

Ninety-two per cent of individuals with physical impairments voted, which is a higher voter turnout than the general population in this national election (82%). Ninety-eight per cent of the respondents who believe that exercising their right to vote is important actually went to vote independently or by proxy (Table 2). A lower percentage (46%) of respondents who thought that exercising their right to vote was not very important did actually vote.

[Table 2]

Individuals with physical impairments experienced some barriers to voting. Nevertheless, they found the elections in general accessible to them (see [Figure 1](#)). Only 3% of the respondents found it in general hard to vote. One out of five respondents (20%) indicated one or more specific areas as being difficult. Four per cent of the respondents experienced difficulties in more than one area. Specific barriers and issues are now presented.

[Figure 1]

Accessing the polling station

A small number of respondents reported problems accessing the polling station, as in getting to the polling station ($n = 10$) and entering the station ($n = 19$). Almost 70% of the respondents were aware of the fact that every municipality has to provide designated accessible polling stations (see [Box 1](#)). Of all respondents, 17% ($n = 42$) deliberately used these stations and all but one found this polling station accessible or very accessible.

Voting at the polling station and voting booth

Of all respondents who went to the polling station to vote, 17% received assistance. Assistance was mostly given by relatives (53%) and election officials (15%) for entering the polling station, putting the voting paper in the ballot box and finding practical information about voting. Nine per cent of the voters indicated that they needed more assistance.

Proxy voting

Almost all respondents in this group were aware of the possibility of proxy voting. In total, 8% ($n = 33$) used proxy voting. Health issues were the major reason (61%) for using proxies. Other reasons were being unable to get to the polling station (24%) and the overall ease of having somebody else going through the whole process of voting (18%). None of the respondents who used proxy voting experienced any difficulty arranging it.

Experiences of non-voters with physical impairments

Of the respondents, 8% ($n = 35$) did not vote. They stated various reasons. The most common reason was that their health status hindered them from voting (29% of non-voters), as well as a lack of political interest (26%) and difficulties reaching the polling station (11%). Eight non-voters indicated they would have voted if they had received assistance, for instance in getting to the polling station, entering the station and reading the voting paper.

Voter turnout and experiences of individuals with learning impairments

Voter turnout

For individuals with learning impairments, the voter turnout was 46% according to the representative who filled in the questionnaire on behalf of the individual. Of these individuals, 39% voted in person ($n = 82$) and 7% ($n = 14$) voted by proxy. Eighty-six per cent of individuals with a learning impairment who found voting very important exercised their right to vote in this election, based on the reports of representatives (Table 3). Only 24% ($n = 27$) of the people who did not find voting (very) important actually did vote (Table 3). Of all the respondents who did not find voting very important, 72% did not vote according to their representatives.

[Table 3]

Representatives indicated that 70% of individuals with a learning impairment knew about the national election. One respondent reported: 'My son told me who he would vote for and I agreed with his choice'. Among non-voters, according to their relative, almost two-thirds of them had a moderate learning impairment. More than half of the respondents who reported that their relative went to vote encountered barriers in at least one area of voting.

Preparations and information

According to the respondents, individuals with learning impairments who went to vote experienced difficulties preparing, mostly due to the lack of understanding of the meaning and content of elections (40%, [Figure 1](#)). One respondent explained: 'The mentors organized a rehearsal election, and simulated a polling station to practice, and that made it easier for my sister'. The difficulty preparing was also the main reason for non-voters, especially reading and understanding practical information, parties' manifestos and the voting paper (81%). Accessing information is part of the preparation for voting. According to more than two-thirds of respondents with learning impairments, mainstream gatherings about the coming election and websites are not seen as accessible sources of information. Half of the respondents reported that social media and newspapers were also not accessible. These numbers need careful interpretation due to the high percentage of respondents who did not answer this question. In the open questions, some respondents reported their doubts about the capability of people with learning impairments to vote: 'He wants to vote but doesn't really understand what it is about.'

Voting at the polling station

The other main difficulty was the actual voting at the polling station (39%, [Figure 1](#)). They especially found it hard to read, understand and fill in the voting paper. For example, 'She said she casted a ballot, but could not recall who she voted for'. Representatives said that they very much doubted the level of understanding of the differences between parties' programmes, or that they just voted the same way as their relative.

Assistance of election officials and relatives

According to representatives, 75% of the individuals with learning impairments were treated respectfully by election officials. One respondent explained: 'He could find the polling station well and knew which party he was going to vote for. He found it difficult to find that party on the large voting paper, and so he asked the official for help'. In general, almost 65% of individuals with learning impairments were assisted by their own support network in the process of voting, according to their representatives. Most of the voters who were assisted received help in the form of finding and understanding the practical information about voting (85%). The assistance was provided by both

mentors (33%) and relatives (42%). The respondents said in comments that voting would not have been possible without assistance throughout the entire process.

Proxy voting

Of the group of voters with learning impairments, 43% knew about the option of proxy voting according to the respondents. A small group ($n = 14$) voted by proxy. The proxy was a family member, a partner, a mentor or a friend of the individual concerned. Reasons for using proxy voting were the difficulty individuals experienced preparing to vote ($n = 10$) and the barriers getting to and inside the polling station ($n = 8$). For people with learning impairments who did not vote, only a small group (10%) knew about the option of proxy voting; most were unaware of it (71%).

Experiences of non-voters

Almost 50% ($n = 101$) of the individuals with learning impairments did not vote, according to the respondents. They reported the following reasons: preparations were too difficult (81% of non-voters), especially not understanding the information from the parties and the electoral procedures (65%) and the voting paper (32%). Their representatives indicated that the situation at the polling station would be perceived as difficult if their relative had to go there and vote (40%), especially understanding (31%) and filling in (16%) the voting paper in the voting booth. Sixty-five per cent of the representatives reported that whether assistance was provided would not have made any difference to whether their relative would vote or not. Additional explanations in the questionnaires were often about the low level of understanding of the individual concerned, resulting in a general lack of understanding of elections and voting.

Solutions suggested for improvement

On the questionnaires of both target groups, respondents were asked whether they needed any improvements and if so what. More than half of the people with physical impairments considered the national elections to be accessible and reported no need for solutions to improve. Others in this group did suggest solutions, for example postal votes (17%) and voting by computer in the voting booth (15%). Furthermore, suggestions were made that the political manifestos of parties should be translated into appropriate language (13%). Ten respondents also suggested investing in online voting using the governmental digital identification system (DigiD).

Nearly three-quarters of the representatives of individuals with learning impairments said that the accessibility of national elections could be improved. They suggested allowing assistance in the voting booth and emphasized the need for more assistance by the disabled person's network of support (relatives and mentors) during preparation for national elections. It was also suggested that information about the elections should be tailored to the level of understanding of people with learning impairments. Suggestions in this regard were using pictures or logos on the voting paper to make the large paper more manageable, producing simple texts about the parties' programmes, making a video about the parties in simple language and providing courses about voting and elections. One respondent stated that 'because not much attention is paid at the management level of residential institutions to voting by individuals with learning impairments, not much attention is paid to it by mentors either. A push to bring up this topic and assist the individuals in preparations and the voting itself could help.'

The results and the suggestions for improvement from the respondents were discussed in a focus group discussion with participants from all target groups. Barriers experienced by both groups were confirmed by the attendees of this group. They confirmed, for example, that individuals prefer to vote in person than by proxy. The difficulty of using the voting paper was acknowledged. Most commonly highlighted were the complexity of the election procedures and party programmes and the availability of appropriate information. They confirm that exercising the right to vote is part of everyone's dignity.

An additional solution mentioned in the focus group discussion was mobile polling stations. For individuals with learning impairments, it was suggested that assistance for them should be allowed in the voting booth, but the complication arises immediately of how to identify who is allowed to receive help from election officials and who is not. For example, an identifying 'A' for Assistance on the voting ID card could be a solution, but might also be stigmatizing. Finally, increasing the attention paid by management and mentors in residential institutions was mentioned as a priority, to encourage individuals with learning impairments to exercise their right to vote.

Discussion

This study shows that voter turnout and accessibility are relatively good for people with physical impairments; improvements are necessary, however, for the group of people with learning impairments. In general, apart from the type of impairment, people with disabilities value voting because participation in elections is perceived as a precondition to full personhood and rights realization (Lord, Stein, and Fiala-Butora [2014](#) Lord, J. E., M. A. Stein, and J. Fiala-Butora. 2014. "Facilitating an Equal Right to Vote for Persons with Disabilities." *Journal of Human Rights* 6 (1): 115–39. doi:10.1093/jhuman/hut034.). Individuals in this study who wanted to vote did actually vote, contradictory to other representative surveys in, for example, the United States (Schur, Adya, and Kruse [2013](#) Schur, L., M. Adya, and D. Kruse. 2013. *Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties*. New York: Research Alliance for Accessible Voting.; Miller and Powell [2016](#) Miller, P., and S. Powell. 2016. "Overcoming Voting Obstacles: The Use of Convenience Voting by Voters with Disabilities." *American Politics Research* 44 (1): 28–55. doi:10.1177/1532673X15586618.). It seems that the Netherlands is relatively far along the road to inclusive elections.

For individuals with physical impairments, policies seem to yield high turnout rates and physical barriers that might hinder accessibility were not reported as such. It could be that the law requiring accessible polling stations is bearing fruit in terms of the turnout and experiences of individuals with physical impairments, given that the accessibility of polling stations during this election was rated at 8.2 out of 10 (Cebeon [2017](#) Cebeon. 2017. *Report Research; Inventory of the Accessibility of Polling Rooms during National Elections on 15th of March, 2017*. Amsterdam: Cebeon.). The group of individuals with physical impairments is a relatively large group in the Netherlands for whom measures are taken to ensure electoral participation, so this covers a large number of individuals who do seem to be able to exercise their right to vote.

For individuals with learning impairments, this study produced a different picture in both turnout and barriers during preparation and actual voting. Their voter turnout is lower than the group of people with physical impairments and the general population, as has also been seen before in the United Kingdom and in the Netherlands (Keeley et al. [2008](#) Keeley, H., M. Redley, A. J. Holland, and I. C. H. Clare. 2008. "Participation in the 2005 General Election by Adults with Intellectual Disabilities." *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 53: 175–81. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2007.00991.x. Hofstede, Meulenkamp, and Cardol [2014](#) Hofstede, J., T. Meulenkamp, and M. Cardol. 2014. *Voting with an Intellectual Disability Not yet Taken for Granted; "Stemmen Met Een Verstandelijke Beperking Nog Niet Vanzelfsprekend"*, Factsheet. Utrecht: NIVEL. ; Emerson et al. [2005](#) Emerson, E., S. Malam, I. Davis, and K. Spencer. 2005. *Adults with Intellectual Difficulties in England 2003/4*. London: National Statistics, NHS Health and Social Care. Information Centre.). The barriers experienced seem to have consequences for the possibility of voting, as well as for the general interest and value that people with learning impairments and their representatives place on voting.

Addressing the barriers experienced by individuals with learning impairments, three types of barriers were found: preparing to vote by getting appropriate or easy-to-read information; the decision-making capacity to understand and process this information into a vote; and, lastly, practical barriers regarding voting in the polling station. For preparing to vote, Lord, Stein, and Fiala-Butora ([2014](#) Lord, J. E., M. A. Stein, and J. Fiala-Butora. 2014. "Facilitating an Equal Right to Vote for Persons with

Disabilities.” *Journal of Human Rights* 6 (1): 115–39. doi:10.1093/jhuman/hut034.) remarked that voter education and information can be improved by illustrated or pictorial information, a finding that is underlined by our study. This seems necessary to enhance voters’ awareness of their voting rights, increase knowledge about the election processes and improve the understanding of procedures before and during the election, including aspects of candidates, parties and key issues (Lord, Stein, and Fiala-Butora [2014](#) Lord, J. E., M. A. Stein, and J. Fiala-Butora. 2014. “Facilitating an Equal Right to Vote for Persons with Disabilities.” *Journal of Human Rights* 6 (1): 115–39. doi:10.1093/jhuman/hut034.). This could also help relatives and mentors to screen whether the person understands, retains and evaluates the information in order to make a decision. We do not intend to argue that the information barrier solely accounts for the lower level of electoral participation by people with learning impairments. Merely giving information and voting instructions is not enough to make and communicate a decision (Schur and Adya [2013](#) Schur, L., and M. Adya. 2013. “Sideline or Mainstreamed? Political Participation and Attitudes of People with Disabilities in the United States.” *Social Science Quarterly* 94 (3): 811–39. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6237.2012.00885.x.; Andren, Agran, and MacLean [2015](#) Andren, K. A. K., M. Agran, and W. MacLean. 2015. “I Never Thought about It: Teaching People with Intellectual Disability to Vote.” *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities* 50 (4): 388–96. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2012.01635.x.). Specifically understanding the meaning and content of elections was a barrier reported in this study, including deciding on whom to vote for. There are no guidelines on how best to support the decision-making capacity of voters with learning impairments or what the guide should do if they doubt a person’s capacity to understand the political choices or the process of voting (Redley et al. [2012](#) Redley, M., E. Maina, A. Keeling, and P. Pattni. 2012. “The Voting Rights of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities: Reflections on the Arguments, and Situation in Kenya and England and Wales.” *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 56 (11): 1026–35. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2012.01635.x.). Article 29 of the CRPD states that people with disabilities must be enabled to effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, including the right and opportunity to vote. As suggested by the results of our study, people with disabilities need assistance in exercising their right to vote, and reasonable adjustments should be made for voters with impairments (Priestley et al. [2016](#) Priestley, M., M. Stickings, E. Loja, S. Grammenos, A. Lawson, L. Waddington, and B. Fridriksdottir. 2016. “The Political Participation of Disabled People in Europe: Rights, accessibility and Activism.” *Electoral Studies* 42: 1–9. doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2016.01.009.). Our results suggest in particular that providing assistance in the practical process of voting, for example at the voting booth, should be considered. However, according to the Dutch National Elections Act, assistance in the voting booth is not allowed for individuals with learning impairments. One way to create inclusive elections would be to lift legal and administrative barriers to voting, by enabling proxy supervision in the voting booth for individuals with learning impairments. It does not matter who helps them – an election official, a family member or a mentor – but it does matter that individuals should be encouraged to vote (Agran, MacLean, and Kitchen [2016](#) Agran, M., W. E. MacLean Jr., and K. A. Kitchen. 2016. “My Voice Counts, Too’: Voting Participation among Individuals with Intellectual Disability.” *Intellect Dev Disabil* 54 (4): 285–94. doi:10.1352/1934-9556-54.4.285.). Other studies present the potential significant role that other persons in the network, such as cohabitants in different residential types, can have upon the likelihood of voting (Keeley et al. [2008](#) Keeley, H., M. Redley, A. J. Holland, and I. C. H. Clare. 2008. “Participation in the 2005 General Election by Adults with Intellectual Disabilities.” *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 53: 175–81. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2007.00991.x.; Andren, Agran, and MacLean [2015](#) Andren, K. A. K., M. Agran, and W. MacLean. 2015. “I Never Thought about It: Teaching People with Intellectual Disability to Vote.” *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities* 50 (4): 388–96.). Widening social networks will help to discuss not only the right to vote but also the content of the elections (Kjellberg and Hemmingsson [2013](#) Kjellberg, Anette, and Helena Hemmingsson. 2013. “Citizenship and Voting: Experiences of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities in Sweden.” *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 10 (4): 326–33. doi:10.1111/jppi.12056.). People with learning impairments

are susceptible to the influences of others (Antaki et al. [2008](#) Antaki, C., M. Finlay, C. Walton, and L. Pate. 2008. "Offering Choice to People with an Intellectual Impairment: An Interactional Study." *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 52 (12): 1165–75. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2008.01101.x).

Concerns over the susceptibility of possible malign influences of supporters may be heightened in proxy voting and assisted voting (Redley et al. [2012](#) Redley, M., E. Maina, A. Keeling, and P. Pattni. 2012. "The Voting Rights of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities: Reflections on the Arguments, and Situation in Kenya and England and Wales." *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 56 (11): 1026–35. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2012.01635.x).

Solutions mentioned in our study for improving the accessibility of national elections reflect the mentioned barriers: online voting to overcome possible barriers in getting to the polling station; providing appropriate information during campaigning about the parties' programmes and the procedures in the voting booth; and encouraging a greater network of support prior to voting as well as at the polling station through assisted voting and active involvement of family and mentors. Online voting has also been put forward in a previous study by people with disabilities, to overcome accessibility issues (Spagnuolo and Shanouda [2017](#) Spagnuolo, N., and F. Shanouda. 2017. "Who Counts and Who Is Counted? Conversations around Voting, Access, and Divisions in the Disability Community." *Disability & Society* 32 (5): 701–19. doi:10.1080/09687599.2017.1324765.). With regard to proxy voting, our study demonstrated a high level of awareness of the possibility of proxy voting. However, it was not recommended as such for overcoming the barriers mentioned. It seems that there is a sense of insecurity about voting for the correct party and politician, according to the individual's will (without abuse). Individuals might feel deprived of their 'own' right to vote. Voting by proxy is not the same as voting alone or voting with assistance when it comes to expressing equal respect. Especially in the case of voting by individuals who are 'incapable' of voting themselves, proxy voting does impinge upon their dignity (Fiala-Butora, Stein, and Lord [2014](#) Fiala-Butora, J., M. A. Stein, and J. E. Lord. 2014. "The Democratic Life of the Union: Toward Equal Voting Participation for Europeans with Disabilities." *Harvard International Law Journal* 55 (1): 71–104.).

The results of this systematic survey may be affected by some methodological limitations. Because we used the representative panels of people with physical and learning impairments, our results might be affected by a response bias. Individuals who are engaged in electoral participation and therefore wish to exercise their right to vote might be more likely to fill the questionnaire. Another reason could be that people with disabilities value their right to vote more, because they feel directly affected by policies regarding healthcare, housing and economic needs. Consequently, we gained a less clear picture of the voting behaviour of individuals who attribute less value to electoral participation. The stakeholders and the commissioner preferred to ask individuals with learning impairments themselves in face-to-face interviews. This could have better reflected their views on electoral participation than the information given by their representatives. This was not feasible, given the time slot for the whole study. It was agreed that the questionnaire for representatives should explicitly ask whether they had filled in the questionnaire with the person concerned. They were also asked how often they had contact with that person and whether they talked about the election as a conversation topic. In addition, individuals with learning impairments did participate in the study: they helped develop and test the questionnaire and they discussed the results and policy implications.

Conclusion and policy implications

The Netherlands seems to have created an inclusive environment for electoral participation by setting policies on accessibility that especially benefit individuals with physical impairments. However, the lower voter turnout and the number of barriers stated as being experienced by individuals with learning impairments present a serious challenge for this group. Our results suggest that the type of disability is strongly related to the likelihood of electoral participation. As demonstrated by people with physical impairments who have benefited from policies to improve accessibility, some of the

barriers experienced by people with learning impairments can be overcome to increase their participation as well.

Our results yield the following recommendations for policy-makers and further research: pay attention to the group who experienced most barriers (i.e. individuals with learning impairments); investigate the need for assistance in preparing for voting, decision-making and practical aspects at the polling station and create systems that encourage people with disabilities to vote; make information appropriate for all, but especially for people with learning impairments, and embed voting in (institutional) support systems; explore alternative methods of voting, besides the physical polling station, such as online voting and mobile polling stations; and, lastly, study individuals' thoughts and considerations about using or not using proxy voting. Most people know about it; there may therefore possibly be other reasons why individuals do not use this method more often.

Notes

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

1 Notes

1 The NPCD is a panel that represents people with chronic illness or physical impairment in the Netherlands. The NPCD is registered with the Dutch Data Protection Authority. All data are collected and handled according to the privacy protection guidelines of the Authority. As of 2017, the total panel consists of 3998 people aged over 15 years with one or more chronic disease and/or physical impairment. Participants with physical impairments within this panel were recruited from data provided by Statistics Netherlands. The severity of the physical impairments was measured with self-reported scales that indicate the difficulty in performing activities due to motor limitations. Individuals who experience difficulty in their daily activities but can perform all of these activities without assistance are then categorized as having a moderate physical impairment. Individuals who need assistance with one or more of the daily activities listed are referred to as having a severe physical impairment.

2 The Living Together panel consists of 349 relatives of people with a mild or moderate learning impairment. Panel members are recruited through general practitioners and health institutes providing care and support for individuals with learning impairments. The panel uses the definition of learning impairment as stated by the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in 2002 (American Association on Mental Retardation 2002). According to the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, intellectual disability is a disability that occurs before age 18 years. It is characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning as demonstrated by an IQ test score of around 70 or as high as 75. Activity limitations have been shown in social skills, activities of daily living, relaxation, work and school tasks.

3 Population estimates regarding sex, age and severity of disability are not available for individuals with physical impairments in the Netherlands (Hoeymans et al. [2012](#) Hoeymans, N., A. Wong, C. H. Van Gool, D. J. Deeg, W. J. Nusselder, M. M. de Klerk, M. P. van Boxtel, and H. S. Picavet. 2012. "The Disabling Effect of Diseases: A Study on Trends in Diseases, Activity Limitations, and Their Interrelationships." *American Journal of Public Health* 102 (1): 163–70. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2011.300296.). Numbers for the NPCD differ from the general population in terms of severity as the panel contains a lower percentage of individuals with mild physical impairment than the general population. No population estimates are available for educational level and living

situation. Population estimates are based on the panel in previous years; in this study they are based on numbers from 2009. For individuals with learning impairments, the population estimate is based on three prevalence studies, conducted and reported in Dutch. This provides various estimates on sex, age and severity of impairment. It is impossible to define a population estimate for the living situation since this is strongly related to the severity of impairment.

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Tables and figures

Box 1 .

The National Elections Act provides guidance for the practicalities and formalities regarding elections in the Netherlands, from sending out voting ID cards to counting votes. It also describes the suffrage (i.e. who is eligible to vote). Every individual aged over 18 years who has not lost that right (which can only be removed by a judge) receives a voting identity card by post. They can vote at the polling stations on election day using this voting card and personal identification. All Dutch citizens who are entitled to vote can delegate the power of signature to another person, known as proxy voting. The law states that 'a voter who does not expect to be able to vote in person may vote by proxy ...' but the law does not require that the voter provides any justification or delegates in advance the right to vote. In practice, this means that any voter can vote by proxy. In the Netherlands, proxy voting is a longstanding practice and is considered a method of ensuring the universality of the vote (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights 2017). The National Elections Act only allows voters with physical impairments to be assisted in the voting booth. Assistants are either individuals designated by the voter or election officials at the polling station, and interpretation of this provision is provided at the polling station by an election official. Individuals with learning impairments have no right to assistance in the voting booth; however, as already explained, any voter, including individuals with learning impairments, can vote by proxy. Individuals with learning impairments do not receive assistance in the voting booth due to the possible increased risk of deception. Furthermore, the National Elections Act states that at least 24% of the polling stations must be accessible for individuals with physical impairments, with strict criteria formulated for the interior and for accessibility. At least three election officials must be present at the polling station. They are obliged to complete a training course on the application of the National Elections Act so that they can interpret the rules and guidelines on the day of the elections (Electoral Council 2017).

Table 1. Respondent characteristics (percentages).

Individuals with physical impairments (n = 426)		Individuals with learning impairments (n = 208)		Representatives of individuals with learning impairments (n = 208)	
Sex		Sex		Sex	
Female	65 (67)	Female	42 (45)	Female	72
Age (years)		Age (years)		Relationship	
18–39	4 (4)	18–39	35 (40)	Parents	46
40–64	40 (41)	40–64	50 (50)	Siblings	27
65 and older	56 (55)	65 and older	15 (10)	Professionals	12
Severity of physical impairment		Severity of learning impairment		Others	15
Moderate	63 (60)	Mild	46 (55)		
Severe	37 (40)	Moderate	54 (45)		
Use of mobility aids	50	Use of mobility aids	23		

Individuals with physical impairments (n = 426)		Individuals with learning impairments (n = 208)		Representatives of individuals with learning impairments (n = 208)	
Educational level					
Low	36 (42)				
Average	44 (43)				
High	20 (15)				

Note: Population estimates in parentheses. For an explanation of the population estimates, please refer to note 3.

Table 2. Importance of voting and voter turnout of individuals with physical impairments (n = 426).

	Voter turnout (%)		
	Individuals with physical impairments who voted independently (n = 358)	Individuals with physical impairments who voted by proxy (n = 33)	Individuals with physical impairments who did not vote (n = 35)
High importance	89	8	2
Low importance	44	2	54
Unknown importance	64	7	29

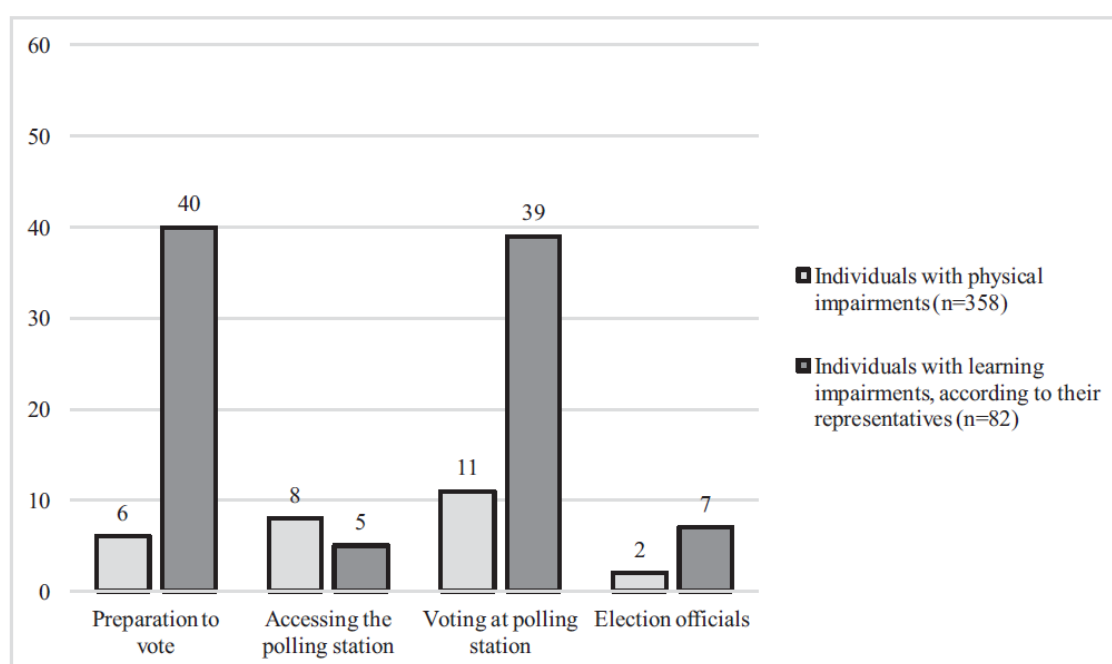


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who voted independently and experienced barriers in each domain.

Table 3. Importance of voting and voter turnout of individuals with learning impairments ($n = 208$).

	Voter turnout (%)			
	Individuals with learning impairments who voted independently ($n = 82$)	Individuals with learning impairments who voted by proxy ($n = 14$)	Individuals with learning impairments who did not vote ($n = 101$)	Individuals with learning impairments, unknown if voted ($n = 11$)
High importance	82	4	13	1
Low importance	14	10	72	4
Unknown importance	0	7	60	33