

Public Policy and the Political Participation of Individuals with Neurodevelopmental Disorders: Examining Legislative Frameworks and Civic Engagement Across Different Countries

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of public policy on the inclusion and political participation of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders, specifically dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), across 30 countries globally. The research aims to assess the effectiveness of legislative frameworks and civic engagement initiatives that promote political participation for these populations. Despite progress in disability rights, the complete inclusion of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders in political and civic spheres remains limited.

The quantitative study involved 459 participants, with half being top-level public policymakers responsible for the development and implementation of national policies concerning inclusion and disabilities, and the other half consisting of individuals diagnosed with dyslexia, ADHD, and ASD. The data collection focused on analysing the accessibility of political systems, representation in legislative bodies, and participation in advocacy. The findings indicate that, although there are ongoing efforts, the inclusion of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders in political processes is still far from being fully realized. Barriers such as insufficient accommodations in voting processes or limited awareness of cognitive needs, and persistent societal stigma remain widespread across the countries studied.

Nevertheless, the study identifies notable efforts by some states to bridge these gaps. Nations that have implemented robust legal framework and targeted public policies have recorded high levels of political participation among individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders. Reforms such as improving voting accessibility, increasing the representation of people with disabilities in political institutions, and promoting advocacy for the rights of people with disabilities have contributed to these improvements.

While the data reveal that significant progress is still required to achieve complete inclusion, this paper underscores the importance of continued government and civil society efforts to enhance the political participation of individuals with dyslexia, ADHD, and ASD. This research provides a comprehensive global perspective on current initiatives and highlights areas for further development to achieve equitable political engagement.

Keywords

Political participation, disability policy, disability rights, inclusion, neurodevelopmental disorders.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background: Political Participation of Individuals with Neurodevelopmental Disorders Globally

Political participation is essential to being an active citizen in a democratic society, enabling individuals to have a participatory and consultative role in decision-making processes that affect their lives and communities. Yet, people with neurodevelopmental disorders—such as dyslexia, ADHD, and autism—often face unique challenges that prevent them from completely engaging in political activities. These challenges include difficulties accessing voting systems, insufficient legal protections, and societal attitudes that diminish their involvement in civic and political life. Studies demonstrate that people with neurodevelopmental disorders remain underrepresented in politics. Research indicates they are less likely to vote or engage in advocacy compared to the general population. Beyond logistical and systemic hurdles, social stigma and misunderstandings about neurodevelopmental disorders further marginalize these individuals in political spaces. Misconceptions about cognitive disabilities can result in exclusion from important decision-making roles, reinforcing societal biases that dismiss their political contributions. This often leaves individuals with dyslexia, ADHD, and autism feeling disempowered and unable to influence policies that affect their lives.

Globally, the extent to which individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders are included in political processes varies. Countries with strong disability rights protections, such as the United States, EU countries and Australia, have made strong efforts to break down such barriers, such as making voting systems easier to use or providing supportive technologies in order to increase the opportunities for political representation. In the U.S., for instance, laws like the Americans

with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) require that voting systems be designed to accommodate people with disabilities, including those with conditions like dyslexia and autism. In Europe, the EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030 focuses on making elections more inclusive and accessible for people with all kinds of disabilities. Germany and the United Kingdom have introduced measures to help individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders participate in elections. On the other hand, many developing countries lack comprehensive legal protections and have difficulty to include these individuals in exercising their political rights. Limited awareness and logistical obstacles in these nations often lead to their exclusion from the political process.

Meanwhile, international organizations are increasingly addressing the link between disability rights and political participation. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), ratified by more than 180 countries, acknowledges that people with disabilities should have the same opportunities to participate in political and public life as everyone else. However, many countries struggle to implement these commitments into meaningful actions, resulting in inconsistent implementation and continued barriers to inclusion.

In conclusion, while progress has been made in improving political participation for individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders in some regions, significant challenges remain globally. These range from physical and legal obstacles to social and cultural biases that hinder full inclusion. The next sections of this study will examine the effectiveness of public policies and legislative frameworks around the world, highlighting successes and gaps in efforts to promote political engagement for people with dyslexia, ADHD, and autism.

1.2 Problem Statement

For people with neurodevelopmental disabilities, navigating complex political information and voting processes can be difficult or even impossible. Issues such as unclear instructions, inaccessible polling stations, and in general voter education that does not address neurodiverse needs, often leave these individuals excluded and disempowered.

Legal protection is also lacking in many countries. In areas with weak disability rights laws, people with neurodevelopmental disabilities are often left out of the political decision making process. On the other hand, countries with strong legal frameworks face difficulty in the implementation of policies aimed at inclusion that are inconsistent, creating or perpetuating

inaccessibility. Without clear and enforceable mandates, political engagement and equality remains inaccessible to many citizens.

In addition to structural and legal inefficiencies, social attitudes may create barriers and limit political participation. Misconceptions and stigma surrounding neurodevelopmental disorders often marginalize these individuals, making it difficult or impossible for them to claim their rights and be able to participate in political spaces. The lack of representation of neurodiverse individuals in politics only reinforces this cycle of exclusion, as their perspectives are rarely included in decision-making processes. Despite international and national initiatives, the political inclusion of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders remains a huge unresolved issue. Addressing it requires more than just policy changes – it requires a cultural shift towards greater understanding, acceptance, and advocacy. By creating systems that respect accessibility and recognize the value of neurodiverse perspectives, societies can take meaningful steps to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in political life.

1.3 Research Objectives

This paper explores the grade public policy and civic engagement can help improve the political participation of people with neurodevelopmental disorders such as dyslexia, ADHD, and autism in 30 countries. Focusing on legislative framework, public policies and community initiatives, the research aims to identify what supports—and what blocks—political inclusion.

The first goal of the research is to estimate the current situation. It explores how people with neurodevelopmental disorders engage in politics today, focusing on issues like whether the voting process is accessible, whether they are represented in political spaces, and how involved they are in advocacy work. The research investigates public policies and laws that are meant to support their political participation, comparing countries with strong protections to those where such frameworks are weaker or missing entirely.

Beyond this, the paper searches the roadblocks these individuals face, including stigma, a lack of proper accommodations, and shortcomings in legal systems. It also highlights governmental and institutional efforts to break down these barriers, especially successful initiatives and advocacy campaigns that have made a difference.

Ultimately, the paper seeks to offer practical advice for policymakers on how to create political systems that are more accessible and inclusive. By addressing the unique needs of people with neurodevelopmental disorders, the research aims to help build a world where everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in political life.

1.4 Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Impact of Legislative Frameworks on Political Participation

Legislative frameworks determine whether individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders can completely participate in political life. Developed countries have developed significant initiatives for the accessibility of voting systems and encouraging political engagement for people with disabilities. However, the existence of strong laws doesn't always guarantee their effective implementation. Even in legally advanced nations, the enforcement of these policies can be inconsistent, leaving gaps in inclusion, integration and accessibility. Of course, in many developing countries, the absence of a clear legal framework makes it even harder for individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders to take part in political processes, further deepening their exclusion.

Although past research has highlighted the importance of legal protections in fostering political inclusion, there is still limited data on how differences in these frameworks across countries affect actual political participation. To address this gap, this paper examines the following hypotheses:

- H0: There is no measurable difference in political participation rates among individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders between countries with comprehensive disability rights laws and those without.
- H1: Countries with strong disability rights laws are more likely to have higher political participation rates among individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders compared to countries with weaker or no such protections.

This study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how legislative frameworks influence political participation and to identify where further improvements are needed to ensure equal opportunities for all.

Hypothesis 2: Barriers to Political Participation

Individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders often face technical or physical barriers to political participation. Voting systems are frequently inaccessible, with inadequate accommodations for cognitive challenges, such as simplified voting instructions or assistance for individuals with dyslexia, ADHD, or ASD (Schur et al., 2013). Research by Werner and Shulman (2015) highlights that societal stigma further compounds these challenges. The lack of understanding and awareness regarding the needs of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders perpetuates these barriers, preventing their meaningful participation in elections and other political activities (Liddiard et al., 2019).

This research addresses the gap in quantitative studies that measure the specific impact of these barriers on political participation by hypothesizing:

- H0: Individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders (dyslexia, ADHD, ASD) face no significant barriers to political participation in terms of accessibility and accommodations in electoral processes.
- H1: Individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders (dyslexia, ADHD, ASD) face significant barriers to political participation, including inadequate accommodations in voting processes and societal stigma.

Hypothesis 3: Effectiveness of Civic Engagement Initiatives

Civic engagement initiatives can empower individuals with disabilities to participate in political processes. These initiatives range from voter education campaigns to advocacy for legal reforms aimed at increasing accessibility in electoral systems (Liddiard et al., 2019). Inclusion Europe (2021) demonstrated that countries with active disability advocacy organisations report high political engagement among individuals with intellectual and neurodevelopmental disorders.

This study aims to fill the gap of qualitative evidence that links civic engagement efforts with political participation among neurodiverse individuals by testing the following hypothesis:

- H0: Civic engagement initiatives led by advocacy groups have no significant impact on political participation rates among individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

- H1: Civic engagement initiatives led by advocacy groups significantly increase political participation rates among individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

Hypothesis 4: Role of Political Representation

Political representation of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders is another critical factor that can influence the adoption of inclusive policies. Studies have shown that when individuals with disabilities or advocates for disability rights hold political office, they are more likely to push for policies that address accessibility and inclusion. Despite the theoretical support for this link, empirical quantitative studies measuring the impact of political representation on policy outcomes for individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders are not sufficient.

This study seeks to address this research gap by testing the following hypothesis:

- H0: The presence of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders in political representation has no significant influence on the adoption of policies aimed at increasing political participation for individuals with disabilities.
- H1: The presence of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders in political representation positively influences the adoption of policies aimed at increasing political participation for individuals with disabilities.

1.5 Importance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its potential to focus on disability rights, promote political engagement, specifically for individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders such as dyslexia, ADHD, and ASD and inform public policy. Political participation as a fundamental aspect of democratic societies is undermined by excluding any group and moreover undermines democracy and the principles of equality (Schur et al., 2017). This study links neurodevelopmental disorders with political participation and how policies can be not just designed, but implemented in terms to be more inclusive, as the public policy can either facilitate or restrict the political participation.

By examining the effectiveness of legislative frameworks in promoting accessibility and participation, this research will offer practical recommendations for policymakers to reform electoral systems and other civic processes. Concerning disability rights, relevant movements

have long emphasized the importance of equal political participation as a means of achieving broader social inclusion and recognition. As noted by Liddiard et al. (2019), civic engagement not only empowers marginalized communities but also enriches the democratic process by bringing diverse perspectives to the forefront of political decision-making. By providing empirical data on the barriers to political participation and identifying effective advocacy strategies, the study will contribute to ongoing efforts to strengthen the political rights of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders and examine how advocacy groups and civil society organizations can enhance political participation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Inclusion, Political Participation, and Civic Engagement

In a democratic society, it is essential to have equal access and representation for all citizens, including marginalized groups. The political participation of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs), such as dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is yet underexplored. The existence of legal frameworks advocating for equal political rights, systemic, institutional may ameliorate the situation, though they are not sufficient to diminish the obstacles which continue to limit the complete engagement of neurodivergent individuals in democratic processes. The theoretical framework of inclusion supports that institutions and political systems must be accessible to everyone, regardless of individual differences, in order to promote democratic principles (Huntington et al., 2020). Inclusion, especially for people with disabilities, extends beyond physical access and refers to the complete participation in civic life (Hall, 2021). According to Verba et al (1995) the various forms of political engagement can be the influence on the political decision making processes, voting or advocacy and protest (Verba et al., 1995). However the traditional forms of political participation, such as those proposed by Verba and Nie, seems to overlook the obstacles for individuals with cognitive disabilities. More recent theoretical approaches focus on the need for inclusive electoral systems and legislative bodies that represent the interests of neurodiverse populations (Karp & Banducci, 2008).

The Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1983) provides an important backdrop against which the political participation of neurodivergent individuals can be interrogated. By focusing on participation, countries create barriers not just through individual impairments but also through societal structures. It indicates that exclusion from the political sphere is not an intrinsic feature

of having a neurodevelopmental disorder, but the consequence of voting systems that cannot be accessed, bureaucratic processes that are too complex, and political communication that is not sufficiently accommodating. Research by Schur et al. (2013) suggests that individuals with disabilities (including those with cognitive disabilities) are usually excluded from participation in elections because of structural barriers, not personal factors.

Political Efficacy Theory (Campbell et al., 1954), which describes an individual's belief in their ability to effect action on political matters. Internal efficacy relates to confidence in understanding and participating in politics, whereas external efficacy relates to the sense that the government responds to what citizens care about. Individuals with cognitive disabilities tend to experience lower rates of political efficacy due to the complex interplay between damaging social attitudes, lack of representation, and inaccessible political discourse (Schur, Kruse, & Blanck, 2013). For example, though NDDs would classify as health conditions, recent work by Kirbiš, Mattila, and Rapeli (2024) similarly shows that people with health conditions are more likely to engage politically when they feel their voice is being heard but may disengage in the presence of institutional barriers.

So too is the accessibility theory in political participation (Schur et al., 2013)—an important aspect of political participation. The above theory indicates that institutional design influences political participation. The lack of policies meant to make voting systems, ballots, election materials, and political campaigns cognitively accessible creates barriers for many neurodivergent voters. Countries that have stronger disability rights legislation and voting accommodations, such as electronic voting, easy-to-read ballots, and alternative voting methods, report higher participation rates among disabled populations (Powell & Johnson, 2021). Pellicano and den Houting (2021) also found that making electoral information easier to digest and the voting process more accessible increased turnout significantly for those with cognitive disabilities.

Beyond accessibility, representation in political institutions is key to engagement. According to Representative Bureaucracy Theory (Meier & Bohte, 2001), diversity in political institutions is associated with greater trust and engagement in political processes among marginalized groups. Yet, NDDs are still significantly under-represented in policy-making and governance. Research by Johnson and Doyle (2022) as well as Ne'eman and Pellicano (2022) points to the increasing influence of neurodivergent advocacy movements in our political systems and the call for inclusive political representation. Although some progress has been made, systemic

barriers remain for individuals with cognitive disabilities running for office or being engaged in political decision-making.

Applying Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) adds an extra layer of depth to the understanding of how various forms of marginalization converge, posing unique challenges to political participation for neurodivergent individuals. Neurodivergent people who belong to other marginalized groups—whether from low-income backgrounds or racial minorities—encounter overlapping barriers. This framework really opens up the discourse on how disability intersects with these other social identities to shape political identity.

Empirical studies have explored how electoral systems and public policies affect the participation of neurodivergent individuals. Karp and Banducci (2008) found that electoral systems based on proportional representation tend to foster higher levels of engagement among underrepresented social groups as they offer a broader political space. Legislation such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) in the United States have enabled improvements in electoral access. But implementation differs from country to country, and—even where it does exist—obstacles to full inclusion remain. Research by Leadbitter et al. (2021) indicates that although legal protections are theoretically applied, enforcement is inconsistent, and barriers still exist in accessing political rights for many neurodivergent individuals.

Emerging research highlights the importance of advocacy movements in advancing the political rights of neurodivergent people. According to Ne’eman & Pellicano (2022), the past two decades have observed an upsurge of stakeholder-led organizations that are becoming instrumental in shaping public policy to promote greater political inclusion for neurodivergent individuals. These initiatives involve advocating for streamlined voting procedures, increased representation in decision-making bodies, and legal safeguards against discrimination in political engagement.

This area of research would benefit from the interdisciplinary approach of political science, disability studies, and social psychology. These theoretical models help explain various structural barriers and potential solutions. At the same time, empirical literature suggests that inclusive electoral policies and disability rights legislation, along with a greater presence in representative processes, increase civic participation for neurodiverse people. In conclusion, policy action going forward must be focused on accessibility, representation, and inclusion, empowering all citizens regardless of cognitive difference to participate fully in democracy.

2.2 Literature Gaps

Despite the growing interest and recognition of inclusion in political participation, the literature concerning individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders remains limited. First, the majority of the existing research focuses on individuals with physical disabilities, and limited attention is given to cognitive disabilities such as dyslexia, ADHD, and ASD (Schur et al., 2017). Some studies have explored the barriers to political participation for these populations (Hendricks et al., 2017; Sayal et al., 2018), but still there is a lack of comprehensive, cross-national analysis that examines the effectiveness of public policies and legislative frameworks in promoting their political engagement.

Additionally, few studies have investigated the value of civic engagement initiatives and advocacy efforts in increasing political participation among individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders. Although qualitative research has documented the success of certain advocacy campaigns in raising awareness and driving policy reform (Liddiard et al., 2019), there is limited quantitative evidence linking these initiatives to measurable improvements in political participation rates. Moreover, while the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) provides a global framework for ensuring political inclusion, there is limited research on the implementation and effectiveness of these international commitments at a national level, particularly for individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

This paper seeks to contribute to the need for empirical studies that examine the real-world impact of disability rights policies on the political participation of neurodiverse populations, by conducting a quantitative analysis of the political participation rates of individuals with dyslexia, ADHD, and ASD across 30 countries, focusing on the effectiveness of public policy and civic engagement initiatives.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A quantitative research methodology was designed to explore the factors influencing the political participation of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders (dyslexia, ADHD, and autism) and the perceptions of high-level policymakers regarding legislative framework and political engagement initiatives. The research design was structured to provide a

comprehensive, data-driven analysis through the use of standardized questionnaires distributed to two distinct groups: policymakers and individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders. This approach ensured robust and generalizable findings, aligning with the study's aim to identify barriers, challenges, and best practices for inclusion in political processes.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

The study involved 459 participants, divided into two groups:

- Policy makers (n = 230): Senior public officials, parliamentary members, and ministers across 30 countries. These individuals were selected for their roles in shaping and implementing disability-related policies.
- Individuals with Neurodevelopmental Disorders (n = 229): Participants included individuals diagnosed with dyslexia (n = 80), ADHD (n = 80), and autism (n = 69). The sample was balanced to ensure diverse representation across the three disorders.

A sampling technique was used to ensure that participants were relevant to the research objectives. Policymakers, according to national and regional government lists, work in sectors such as education, health, social services and civic engagement. Invitations to participate were sent through professional networks and official correspondence. For people with neurodevelopmental disorders, participants were recruited through partnerships with advocacy groups, neurodiversity organisations and community outreach programmes in urban and rural areas.

Policymakers who participated should have three years of experience (minimum) related to disability rights decisions formulation or implementation. People with Neurodevelopmental Disorders, participants had to be aged 18 years or older, diagnosed with dyslexia, ADHD, or autism and have the capacity to provide informed consent.

The sample size of 459 was deemed sufficient to ensure statistical power. The inclusion of policymakers and individuals with lived experiences allowed a multidimensional exploration of the research questions.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

Two structured questionnaires were developed based on an extensive review of the literature and theoretical frameworks related to inclusion, political participation, and civic engagement.

Questionnaire for Policymakers (four sections):

1. Demographics and Policy Experience: Questions about participants' roles, years of experience, and policy focus domains.
2. Legislative and Policy Frameworks: Questions concerning the presence and effectiveness of laws protecting neurodiverse individuals.
3. Barriers to Inclusion: Questions investigating perceptions of societal stigma, voting complexities.
4. Civic Engagement Initiatives: Questions exploring the presence and impact of advocacy programs.

Questionnaire for Individuals with Neurodevelopmental Disorders (four sections):

1. Demographics and diagnosis.
2. Voting behavior and challenges.
3. Perceptions of societal stigma and accessibility of political processes.
4. Participation in civic engagement and advocacy groups.

Both questionnaires were pilot-tested with a smaller group of participants (10 policymakers and 15 individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders) to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability. Minor modifications were made based on feedback.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The study was conducted over a six-month period, from January to June 2024, following a systematic and ethical approach to ensure the validity and reliability of responses. Questionnaires were distributed to policymakers via email, utilizing official contact lists and professional networks such as LinkedIn and governmental forums. Participants were provided with a brief introduction to the study's objectives and clear instructions for completing the survey. For individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders, questionnaires were distributed

both online, through email and advocacy group platforms, and in person at community centers and advocacy events. Trained research assistants were available to voluntarily assist participants in understanding and completing the surveys, ensuring inclusivity and accuracy.

The response rates varied across the two groups. Among policymakers, 230 completed responses were received from the 400 invitations sent, resulting in a response rate of 57.5%. For individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders, 229 responses were collected out of 300 invitations, yielding a higher response rate of 76.3%. These robust response rates contribute to the reliability of the findings.

Ethical considerations were a cornerstone of the study's methodology. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. Participants were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without providing a reason. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the institutional review board of the lead research institution, ensuring compliance with all relevant ethical guidelines.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were entered into statistical analysis software (SPSS v28) for coding, cleaning, and analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarize demographic and categorical data. Advanced statistical techniques, including chi-square tests, ANOVA, and regression analysis, were applied to test relationships and validate hypotheses. Results were presented in tabular form for clarity and aligned with the study's objectives.

3.6 Limitations of the Methodology

Despite the robustness our methodology design ensures, some limitations must be acknowledged. The use of purposive sampling are effective in targeting the relevant participants, although may limit the generalizability of findings to a larger population sample. Both groups provided self-reported data, which may include response biases, including social desirability. The cross-sectional nature of the study provides a snapshot of perceptions and experiences at a specific time.

The use of diverse participant groups, validated instruments, and robust data collection procedures, ensures that the findings provide valuable insights into the barriers and opportunities for political participation among neurodiverse individuals. By incorporating the perspectives of both policymakers and individuals with lived experiences, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the systemic changes needed to promote greater integration.

4. Results

4.1 Policy-Makers

The sample consists of 35.2% senior civil servants, 25.2% ministers and 24.8% members of parliament. The expertise of the respondents amounts to 40% 5-10 years of experience in disability policy and 30% have more than a decade of experience. The respondents who are policy makers work mainly in education and health (25.2% each), the respondents working in social services represent 40%. Regarding the existence of legislative and policy frameworks, 60% of policymakers confirm the existence of specific legislation for neurodiverse individuals. However, 30% report a lack of legislative framework, and 10% of the policymakers cannot be sure and indicate several gaps in implementation. As for the effectiveness of existing legislation, this remains a significant concern. Half of the respondents consider it somewhat effective, only 20% rate it as very effective, and another 20% find it ineffective. Key measures identified in disability policies include accessible voting stations (30%), accommodations for cognitive disabilities (25.2%), and simplified voting procedures (25.2%). However, only 15.2% of respondents underline political education programs, revealing a critical gap in supporting neurodiverse individuals' political engagement.

Concerning the obstacles to inclusion, the complexity of the voting process seems to be the most serious barrier, with a score of 3.5 out of 5. Other challenges include the lack of accommodations (mean = 3.0), societal stigma (mean = 3.0), and insufficient political education (mean = 3.0). Notably, 70% of policymakers believe that societal stigma significantly or very significantly affects the political participation of neurodiverse individuals, emphasizing its role as a pervasive obstacle.

Political engagement initiatives demonstrated mixed results. 55.2% of policymakers refer to the existence of such programs, 35.2% indicate their absence, and 10% are unsure. Advocacy groups, crucial to driving inclusion, are perceived as somewhat impactful by 50% of

respondents, with only 30% considering them very impactful. This highlights the need to strengthen the reach and effectiveness of advocacy efforts. An x-square analysis reveals a statistically significant relationship between the effectiveness of legislation and the perceived impact of advocacy groups ($p < 0.05$). The importance of strong legal support in promoting inclusion is validated and the respondents agree that advocacy groups are more likely to be effective in countries where legislative frameworks are strong, strict and well-implemented.

In conclusion, the results highlight areas for improvement, including strengthening legislation, addressing barriers such as voting complexity and stigma, and expanding civic engagement initiatives. These findings align with the broader goal of enhancing the political participation of neurodiverse individuals and underline the necessity for targeted interventions to close the gap between policy and practice

Regression results

The regression analysis examining predictors of political engagement programs shows a complex link between societal factors and program availability. There is a weak but positive association between societal stigma and the presence of civic engagement initiatives, the relationship does not reach statistical significance. This result underlines the multifaceted nature of political program development, which cannot be fully explained by stigma alone or the roles of policymakers. In addition, the analysis underlines the significant correlation between the effectiveness of legislation and the perceived impact of advocacy groups, validating that strong legal frameworks foster inclusive practices and supporting marginalized populations. Policymakers working in countries with strong legislative protections are more likely to report impactful advocacy efforts, demonstrating how legal infrastructure directly influences the success of civic initiatives.

Moreover, perceptions of societal stigma appear to vary across public policy domains, suggesting the need for tailored interventions in specific fields such as education, health, and social services. Policymakers in certain domains may encounter unique challenges or hold differing views on the extent to which stigma affects political inclusion, emphasizing the importance of context-sensitive strategies.

Obstacles related to voting complexity emerge as a near-significant predictor of advocacy group impact. This finding demonstrates that a simple voting process enhances the effectiveness of advocacy efforts, as more accessible voting mechanisms reduce obstacles for neurodiverse individuals and encourage broader participation. These findings point to the interconnected

nature of legislative, societal, and procedural factors in shaping inclusive political systems, highlighting areas where targeted reforms could yield meaningful progress. The results also show significant disparities in the political inclusion of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs), shaped by the country-specific socio-political and legislative environments. Policymakers' responses and neurodiverse individuals' lived experiences reveal contrasting levels of sensitivity and implementation of inclusion measures, particularly between Western societies and other regions.

Policymakers from Western societies reported relatively higher awareness and implementation of disability-inclusive legislation. Approximately 75% of policymakers in these regions confirmed the existence of strong legal frameworks for neurodiverse individuals. On the contrary, policymakers from non-Western or developing nations displayed a mixed awareness of such policies, with 40% either uncertain or reporting an absence of specific legislation.

The effectiveness of disability laws was also perceived differently across regions. In Western democracies, 40% of respondents rated legislation as very effective, citing measures such as accessible voting stations, cognitive accommodations, and simplified procedures. Conversely, in non-Western contexts, these measures were less frequently implemented, with only 20% reporting accommodations specific to neurodevelopmental conditions. This disparity mirrors the findings of Inclusion Europe (2021), which noted a higher prevalence of disability-friendly voting systems in Western Europe compared to other regions.

Inclusion barriers proved that in countries with strong and developed legislative systems, societal stigma was cited as a moderate barrier, while procedural barriers such as voting complexity took precedence. In developing legislative environments, stigma emerged as a significant barrier, affecting over 70% of individuals according to policymakers. This aligns with the work of Werner and Shulman (2015), which highlights the heightened impact of stigma in societies lacking disability-specific policies.

Civic engagement initiatives demonstrated a similar divide. Western nations exhibited higher participation in advocacy groups and civic programs, attributed to strong partnerships between governments and non-governmental organizations. In contrast, non-Western countries showed a lack of structured initiatives, with 35% of policymakers reporting no such programs.

4.2 Results for the group of participants with Neurodevelopmental disorders

The analysis of participants with neurodevelopmental disorders (dyslexia, ADHD, and autism) proves significant findings. The obstacles for their political participation include insufficient accommodations in voting processes, societal stigma, and limited access to political information. The demographic distribution of the sample shows a balanced representation of participants across the three neurodevelopmental disorders: dyslexia (34.9%), ADHD (34.9%), and autism spectrum disorder (30.1%). The majority of participants fell into the 25-34 age group (27.5%), followed by those aged 35-44 (25.3%) and 18-24 (23.1%), reflecting a diverse range of experiences. However, a significant majority (57.2%) reported not participating in elections, and 58.1% indicated they had not voted in the last five years. These findings demonstrate the reasons for non-participation and align with the barriers identified in previous literature. Difficulty understanding the voting process was the most cited reason (31.4%), followed by a lack of accessible voting materials (26.2%) and physical barriers to polling stations (15.3%). These findings underscore the need for systemic reforms to address cognitive and logistical obstacles to voting.

Confidence in understanding political campaigns and candidates' policies was notably low among participants. Only 16.6% of respondents felt "very confident," while 37.1% reported a lack of confidence, and 36.7% felt "somewhat confident." This lack of confidence suggests that the communication of political information is not sufficiently tailored to the needs of neurodiverse individuals.

Regression analyses further indicate that confidence in understanding campaigns is not significantly influenced by perceived accessibility of political information or barriers such as societal stigma and lack of accommodations. This highlights the pervasive challenges these individuals face in engaging with political discourse.

Societal stigma remains a critical barrier to political participation, with participants rating it as moderately significant (mean = 3.02 on a 1-5 scale). Interestingly, no significant differences were observed in perceptions of stigma across the three disorder types, suggesting that stigma affects individuals with dyslexia, ADHD, and autism in comparable ways. These findings align with previous research by Werner and Shulman (2015), who emphasized the universal impact of stigma on the civic engagement of individuals with cognitive disabilities.

Similarly, the complexity of navigating voting procedures (mean = 2.98) and the lack of accommodations for neurodevelopmental conditions (mean = 3.10) were rated as moderate barriers, reinforcing the need for accessible voting systems that cater to diverse cognitive needs.

When examining the adequacy of voting systems, 61.6% of participants reported that their country's systems do not provide adequate support for neurodiverse individuals, while only 29.7% believed they were adequately supported. This reflects a significant gap in the implementation of inclusive practices, despite legislative frameworks in many countries mandating accommodations for individuals with disabilities. Chi-square analyses did not reveal significant relationships between the perceived adequacy of voting systems and participation in advocacy groups, further illustrating the disconnection between policy frameworks and practical outcomes.

The accessibility of political information also emerged as a key challenge. While nearly half of the participants (47.2%) found political information somewhat accessible, 35.8% rated it as not accessible, and only 17% considered it very accessible. This lack of clarity and accessibility hampers the ability of neurodiverse individuals to make informed political decisions.

ANOVA tests showed no significant differences in the perceived accessibility of information across age groups, indicating that this issue is widespread and not limited to specific demographics. Efforts to improve the accessibility of political information, such as simplifying election guides and using plain language, are essential to address this barrier.

Participation in civic engagement and advocacy groups was also low, with only 26.2% of participants reporting involvement. Regression analyses indicated that participation in such groups was not significantly predicted by challenges like societal stigma, voting complexities, or lack of accommodations. This highlights a deeper issue of systemic exclusion, where neurodiverse individuals are not adequately represented or supported in civic initiatives.

Overall, the findings emphasize that while some countries have made efforts to include neurodiverse individuals in political processes, these initiatives are insufficient to overcome the pervasive barriers they face. Legislative frameworks, although critical, are not enough to ensure full inclusion. Practical measures, such as simplifying voting systems, providing tailored accommodations, and reducing societal stigma, are urgently needed.

Furthermore, the role of advocacy groups must be strengthened to provide neurodiverse individuals with the resources and support they need to participate fully in civic life. These

results validate the conclusions presented in the abstract, underscoring the importance of continued efforts by governments and civil society to achieve equitable political engagement for individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

In Western societies, neurodiverse individuals reported slightly higher levels of political participation, with 50% indicating participation in recent elections. This aligns with findings by Schur et al. (2013), which emphasized the role of accessible voting processes in encouraging participation among disabled voters. However, even in these regions, barriers remain significant, particularly in understanding political campaigns, where only 20% of individuals expressed confidence.

In non-Western countries, participation rates were markedly lower, with only 35% of neurodiverse individuals reporting voting in the past five years. Procedural barriers such as difficulty understanding voting processes (31.4%) and lack of accessible voting materials (26.2%) were cited as key challenges. Additionally, societal stigma played a more prominent role, with 45% of individuals reporting discouragement from political activities due to their condition. These findings align with Gardiner and Iarocci (2018), who identified stigma as a pervasive barrier in culturally conservative societies.

Access to political information varied significantly by region. In Western countries, 40% of neurodiverse individuals found information somewhat accessible, while only 20% reported such accessibility in non-Western contexts. Tailored communication strategies, such as plain language election guides, were more prevalent in Western societies, contributing to the relative improvement. As noted by Goodley et al. (2019), the lack of culturally and cognitively tailored communication exacerbates exclusion in less developed regions.

5. Discussion – Findings

The political inclusion of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders, such as dyslexia, ADHD, and autism, remains a critical issue in the global discourse on disability rights and democratic participation. The findings from the policymakers' data provide a nuanced understanding of how legislative frameworks, societal barriers, and civic engagement initiatives shape the political participation of neurodiverse individuals. While efforts to include these populations have been observed, significant gaps persist, underscoring the necessity for tailored interventions and reforms.

This section contextualizes the statistical findings within the broader literature on disability rights, policy effectiveness, and civic engagement to analyse the extent to which the results support or challenge existing knowledge.

5.1 Hypothesis Examination

Hypothesis 1

H_0 (Null Hypothesis): Strong legislative frameworks are not significantly associated with the political participation of people with neurodevelopmental disorders (i.e., no association).

H_1 : Robust legislative frameworks contribute significantly to the political participation of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

Results: Legislators assert the existence of legislative frameworks; however, 61.6% of neurodiverse participants believe voting systems fail to meet their needs, and 58.1% have not voted in five years. Although legislation exists, practical implementation is challenging, leading to minimal improvement in participation. Therefore, H_0 is supported, as legislation alone is insufficient without effective implementation and enforcement.

Hypothesis 2

H_0 (Null Hypothesis): Societal stigma has no substantial impact on the political participation of people with neurodevelopmental disorders.

H_1 : Societal stigma significantly influences the political participation behavior of individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

Outcome: Societal stigma is recognized as a moderate to significant barrier by both policymakers and neurodiverse participants. Policymakers view stigma as a key obstacle, and neurodiverse participants scored it at a mean level of significance of 3.02 on a 1-5 scale. However, regression analyses found no statistically significant direct relationship between stigma and voting behavior or advocacy participation. Thus, H_1 is partially supported, indicating that stigma indirectly impacts participation through broader systemic issues.

Hypothesis 3

H_0 : Accessible voting systems do not increase political participation among individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

H₁: Accessible voting systems increase anxiety in individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

Result: Findings reveal that inaccessibility is a significant barrier, with 31.4% reporting difficulty understanding the voting process and 26.2% citing the lack of accessible materials as reasons for non-participation. Regression analyses showed no direct relationship between voting systems' adequacy and advocacy activities. Hence, H₁ is supported to a small extent, emphasizing the need for more comprehensive accessibility measures.

Hypothesis 4

H₀: Advocacy groups and civic engagement initiatives do not significantly influence political participation among individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

H₁: Advocacy and civic engagement organizations significantly enhance political participation among individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

Outcome: Advocacy groups are recognized as key by neurodiverse people and policymakers, but participation remains low (26.2%). Regression analyses did not find significant predictive relationships between participation and barriers like stigma or voting complexities. Thus, H₁ is partially supported, suggesting stronger and more inclusive advocacy programs are needed.

Hypothesis 5

H₀: Perceived understanding of political campaigns does not significantly affect the degree of political participation among individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

H₁: Individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders feel significantly less politically empowered, affecting their participation substantially.

Result: The study found that few neurodiverse participants had confidence in their success—only 16.6% were very confident, while 37.1% lacked confidence. Regression analyses showed no significant association between confidence and voting or advocacy participation. Thus, H₀ is supported, indicating that confidence alone does not promote political participation.

Summary of Testing Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: H₀ confirmed—Poor implementation: legislation is not enough.

Hypothesis 2: H₁ supported in part—Societal stigma affects participation indirectly and is not a direct predictor.

Hypothesis 3: H_1 supported in part—Accessible voting systems are necessary but not sufficient for participation.

Hypothesis 4: H_1 partially supported—One-size-fits-all advocacy but narrow outreach and effectiveness.

Hypothesis 5: H_0 supported—Confidence does not directly influence participation.

These results highlight the complexity of political participation for neurodiverse individuals and point to the need for systemic reforms involving enforcement, improved accessibility, stigma reduction, and advocacy outreach.

5.2 Legislative Effectiveness and Civic Engagement

The study found a clear link between perceived legislative effectiveness and participation in civic engagement programs. Countries with strong legal frameworks are associated with more effective civic engagement initiatives supporting neurodiverse individuals' political participation. This aligns with literature emphasizing the importance of comprehensive legislation in fostering inclusivity. For instance, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities mandates equal political rights. Research by Schur et al. (2013) finds strong legal protections correlate with increased access to political processes. However, despite robust laws, 20% of policymakers rate legislative frameworks as "not effective" due to implementation challenges, highlighting the need for enforcement and political will.

5.3 Barriers to Political Participation

The study confirms that societal stigma, insufficient voting accommodations, and political system complexity significantly hinder neurodiverse individuals' participation. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the disproportionate impact of inaccessible systems and discriminatory attitudes. Our study found 61.6% of participants reported inadequate voting support, with stigma rated moderately significant (mean = 3.02). However, our findings on voting behavior differ from prior studies, suggesting variations in accessibility measures' implementation across countries. Such discrepancies highlight the ongoing need to address systemic barriers, promoting inclusivity and participation.

5.4 Complexity of Voting

The complexity of voting systems turned out to be a significant predictor of the perceived effect of advocacy groups. These findings highlight that simplifying voting procedures is critical to meeting the cognitive needs of neurodiverse populations. That is, complex and difficult-to-follow voting instructions and polling stations that are hard for individuals with cognitive impairments (e.g., dyslexia and ADHD) to access place these individuals at a disadvantage in ways that are much less experienced by others (Firth & Frydenberg, 2017). Making these processes easier through measures such as ballot simplification, voting assistance technologies, and cognitive accommodations can result in overwhelmingly increased rates of participation.

5.5 Political Information Accessibility

The availability of political information proved to be a major challenge in this study, with 35.8% rating it as not accessible. This result is consistent with Goodley et al. "renaissance" by Smith et al. (2019), who noted the challenges of cognitive processing experienced by individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders in relation to complex political information. Worse, the absence of personalized communication strategies like simplified language and visual aids only adds to this challenge, making it difficult for neurodiverse people to make informed decisions.

Remarkably, our results show similar levels of perceived accessibility across age groups, indicating that these issues are ubiquitous and not isolated to certain demographics. This contrasts with Firth and Frydenberg (2017), who suggested that younger people with neurodevelopmental disorders may benefit from the use of digital platforms to present political information in a more simplified manner. These differences may be explained by variations in the availability and adoption of such platforms in the countries included in this study.

5.6 Confidence in Understanding Political Campaigns

A surprising result of this study is participants' low confidence in understanding political campaigns and candidates' policies. Only 16.6% of respondents said they were very confident, while 37.1% said they lacked confidence. This is in agreement with the findings of Hall et al. (2017), that political language complexity and un-tailored education on civic processes are both areas that pose substantial hindrances to neurodiverse persons.

Overall, our regression analysis did not reveal significant predictors of confidence, indicating that barriers such as societal stigma and voting complexities are indirectly related to confidence levels rather than acting as independent determinants. Moreover, this is consistent with the studies by Michols and De Graaf (2017), who suggested that a multifaceted approach in the fight against systemic barriers is necessary rather than just addressing isolated factors.

5.7 Political Participation and Civic Engagement

One salient symptom is the shockingly low portion of individuals in advocacy and civic engagement groups; only 26.2% of respondents reported participation—this reflects a critical gap neurodiverse individuals face in finding appropriate support systems. Indeed, this matches Inclusion Europe (2021), which indicates that many countries do not have structured initiatives to incorporate people with disabilities into civic life.

However, this study revealed no meaningful predictors of participation in the data, making us suspect that such organizations not only rely on a privileged few for modeling but are also cut off from and do not reach most of the people in question, which could signify systematic exclusion. This is particularly interesting as the conclusion contradicts, who argued that, on the contrary, strong legal frameworks would enhance civic engagement among disabled people. Since only a small fraction of such frameworks are actually implemented, this difference in findings could highlight the difference between frameworks and what people were actually observing, as shown by the large proportion of participants reporting they were unable to vote adequately.

5.8 Policy and Practice Implications

These findings highlight the importance of systemic change to remove the barriers to neurodiverse people participating in government. Streamlining voting processes, increasing the availability of political information for all people, and decreasing societal stigma are all important actions to promote inclusion. In this context, our findings are consistent with those of UNCRPD, which highlights the importance of equal participation in political and public life for people with disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

Moreover, inclusive civic education initiatives, together with collaborations with advocacy organizations, foster neurodiverse ownership and encourage their active participation in

political processes. Hall et al. (2017) emphasized that targeted civic education may help close knowledge divides and boost confidence, a finding closely aligned with our findings.

The findings also underscore that Western societies demonstrate a greater sensibility and adoption of disability-inclusive measures relative to their non-Western counterparts. Nonetheless, in both Western and non-Western contexts, these measures are insufficiently effective, as procedural and informational barriers hinder true inclusion. In lower-income parts of the world, lack of strong legal infrastructure and greater social stigma severely limits political engagement for neurodivergent people.

These disparities require action at a global level. While strong legislative frameworks—as seen in some Western contexts—need to be in place, those need to be supplemented by targeted interventions to tackle stigma, improve accessibility, and enhance civic education. According to Michels and De Graaf (2017), promotion of an institutional setting which supports local positionality through cooperation and partnership between governments and advocacy groups can promote inclusive and sustainable systems that connect policy and practice.

6. Future Research

Future research should consider longitudinal designs to assess the long-term impact of accessibility measures and initiatives. Comparative studies across high-income and low-income countries could also provide a deeper understanding of how economic resources influence the implementation of inclusive practices. Additionally, qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of neurodiverse individuals could complement the quantitative findings and provide richer insights into their challenges and needs.

7. Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on the political participation of neurodiverse individuals, highlighting the systemic barriers they face and the urgent need for reforms. The findings align with previous research in many domains, they also reveal gaps in the implementation of accessibility measures and advocacy initiatives. By addressing these gaps, policymakers and advocacy groups can work toward achieving equitable political engagement for individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders.

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