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Politicians must recognise that people with learning disabilities have a right to vote too

Hundreds of thousands of eligible voters with learning disabilities are in danger of being ignored

Su Sayer
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Already, 2010 has seen a flurry of new manifesto pledges and advertising campaigns, with politicians of all persuasions using every means at their disposal to try to win votes, whether embracing new media such as Facebook or announcing US-style live television debates. Yet despite this, hundreds of thousands of eligible voters with learning disabilities are in danger of being ignored.

Over the last few decades, much progress has been made in recognising people with learning disabilities as citizens with a valuable contribution to make to society. Thankfully, many now live in their own flats, work, marry, raise a family, and play a part in their local communities. Yet when it comes to democratic rights, the overwhelming majority of adults with learning disabilities still find themselves largely excluded by the complexity of the system and low awareness of their right to vote. Our research found that while 80% of people supported by United Response in England were registered to vote in the 2005 election, only 16% used their vote. This compares with a turnout of 61% in the general population.

As regular users of social services, public transport, health services and much more, people with learning disabilities are affected by political decisions in the same way as everyone else. The majority of adults with learning disabilities do have the capacity, as well as the legal right, to vote, and would like to do so if given the opportunity.

Over the last three years, United Response's Every Vote Counts project, funded by the Electoral Commission, has explored the many barriers that people with learning disabilities face when trying to vote, and has developed a set of interactive guides. Designed in collaboration with people with learning disabilities and their supporters, the first set explains, in an accessible and highly visual way, what democracy is, why it is important, and how to take part. Crucially, it shows people how the democratic process affects every area of our lives.

The second set of guides provides political stakeholders with guidelines and tools to make their own information on policies and candidates easier to understand for people with learning disabilities, through more accessible language, avoidance of jargon, and the use of visual aids.

Today, at the House of Commons, we are calling on the social care sector and all politicians to recognise the right of adults with learning disabilities to vote, and to encourage them to do so. We need to involve people with learning disabilities and their families, and work together to open up the democratic process and make it easier to understand. We are asking the main political parties to release easy-to-read versions of

their manifestos and to work with the social care sector to increase the number of people with learning disabilities voting in the 2010 election to at least 40%.

Reaching this target will not be easy. It will require effort and creative thinking from us all, particularly politicians and disability organisations. But if we want a truly inclusive election this year, one that involves everyone who will be affected by the outcome, we must not ignore people with learning disabilities.

- Su Sayer is chief executive of United Response.

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