

Spain

Mar Galcerán makes history as Spain's first parliamentarian with Down's syndrome

After being elected to Valencia's regional assembly, Galcerán says she wants to be seen as a person, not for her disability



📷 Mar Galcerán attends parliament in Valencia. Photograph: José Jordan/AFP/Getty Images



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For decades she battled to ensure that people with intellectual disabilities were part of the conversation. The extent of the progress she had made, however, was laid bare recently when Mar Galcerán became Spain's first parliamentarian with Down's syndrome.

"It's unprecedented," the 45-year-old told the Guardian. "Society is starting to see that people with Down's syndrome have a lot to contribute. But it's a very long road."

Her feat has been decades in the making. When Galcerán was 18 years old, she joined the conservative People's party (PP) after being attracted to what she described as its embrace of tradition.

Slowly she worked her way up the party apparatus. Her commitment paid off last May when she was added as the 20th name on the list of candidates the PP was fielding in Valencia's regional elections.

News that Galcerán had obtained a seat in the regional parliament came soon after. "Welcome Mar," the region's PP leader, Carlos Mazón, [wrote on social media](#). "Great news for politics, overcoming barriers."

The achievement catapults Galcerán to the top of the ranks of the handful of people with Down's syndrome who have crashed through barriers to enter the world of politics. In 2020, Éléonore Laloux [became the first person](#) with the genetic disorder in France to be elected to public office, as a city council member in the northern town of Arras, while Ireland's Fintan Bray was hailed for making history after [he was elected](#) to a political position in the country in 2022.

In Spain, Galcerán's path into politics was blazed by Ángela Bachiller, who in 2013 became Spain's [first city councillor](#) with Down's syndrome in the northern city of Valladolid.


Galcerán may be the first in [Europe](#), however, to join a regional or national parliament, according to Spain's Down's syndrome federation.

“We haven’t heard of anyone else,” said Agustín Matía Amor of [Down España](#). “It’s a huge step forward and an example of real inclusion.”

He was quick to point out that the achievement was also a reflection of the decades Galcerán had spent working to advance the status of people with Down’s syndrome in Spain. For more than 20 years Galcerán had worked as a civil servant in Valencia, most recently helping to carve out inclusive policy, adding to the four years she spent at the helm of [Asindown](#), a Valencian organisation dedicated to helping families with children that have Down’s syndrome.

“It’s both great news and a recognition of her work and the many initiatives she was involved in,” said Matía Amor. “It’s a good example of what is possible.”

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While Galcerán’s September swearing in was [hailed by Spanish media](#), she said the reaction online had been mixed. “You find all sorts on social media,” she said. “There are people who support me. But there are also others who think I’m not capable. But these are people who don’t know me or my background.”

As she gets acquainted with her new role, she described it as a tremendous responsibility. “I want to learn how to do it well, for Valencianos, and more importantly, for those of us who have different abilities.”

Ultimately she hoped her presence in the regional parliament would help to dismantle the many prejudices that continue to linger in society, particularly when it comes to people with Down’s syndrome. “I want people to see me as a person, not just for my disability.”

Well, 2023 didn’t exactly go to plan, did it?

Here in the UK, the prime minister, Rishi Sunak, had promised us a government of stability and competence - not forgetting professionalism, integrity and accountability - after the rollercoaster ride of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss. Remember Liz? These days she seems like a long forgotten comedy act. Instead, Sunak took us even further through the looking-glass into the Conservative psychodrama.

Elsewhere, the picture has been no better. In the US, Donald Trump is now many people’s favourite to become president again. In Ukraine, the war has dragged on with no end in sight. The danger of the rest of the world getting battle fatigue and losing interest all too apparent. Then there is the war in the Middle East and not forgetting the climate crisis ...

But a new year brings new hope. There are elections in many countries, including the UK and the US. We have to believe in change. That something better is possible. The Guardian will continue to cover events from all over the world and our reporting now feels especially important. But running a news gathering organisation doesn’t come cheap.

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Happy new year!