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No Level Playing Field: Barriers to Disability Representation in Politics

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Abstract

While 1 in 5 people in the UK are disabled, their number among elected representatives remains disproportionately low. In ongoing efforts to make politics more inclusive and diverse, disabled people often remain sidelined. As a politically relevant identity, disability is associated with a shared set of experiences and policy interests, which are often overlooked – at least in part due to the under-representation of disabled politicians, which likely also contributes to a sense of political alienation. Tackling the barriers that disabled people experience in the political recruitment process is, therefore, not only a matter of democratic justice and equality but also essential for ensuring that disabled people's needs and concerns are recognised and met. This article outlines the obstacles that disabled people experience in pursuing elected office – including inaccessibility, inadequate financial resources, and ableist institutions and cultures – and offers recommendations to political parties, parliaments, and governments on how to mitigate them.

Keywords: political representation, disability, access to elected office

Introduction

When Pam Duncan-Glancy, who was elected to the Scottish Parliament in 2021, tried to get into the arena where the vote count took place, it took her 45 minutes to sit with the other candidates: “First, they didn’t believe I was a candidate, then I was told I’d come in the wrong door (which was the accessible one) & then no one knew where to put me.” she recounted on X.¹ This is just one of many examples where disabled candidates and elected politicians have been prevented from doing their jobs as politicians and, effectively, from accessing the spaces and processes where decisions are made. As part of our research into disability and political representation, we interviewed over 80 disabled politicians, candidates, and party activists across the UK between 2019 and 2022, many of whom described the barriers they faced.² For example, a local councillor told us that when the lift was broken he was forced to miss important council meetings, and a former disabled MP found getting documents in formats that can be read by screen readers or text-to-speech software “the ‘biggest barrier I’ve experienced in public life’”.

Political institutions and processes were not designed with disabled people in mind, and despite increasing awareness of, and willingness to promote, disability rights and equality, barriers like these still occur on a regular basis. These experiences are shared by disabled people around the world and not only within politics but across all areas of public and private life. It is clear, therefore, that the political representation of disabled people in politics – both in terms of their participation in decision-making in parties, legislatures, and government (in other words, their *descriptive* representation) and regarding the representation of their interests and views in political debates and policies (their *substantive* representation) – is an area that requires urgent attention.

According to the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 1, disabled people “have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”. While estimates of the prevalence of disability vary depending on the definition and methodology employed, the general consensus is that around 1 in 5 people in the UK are disabled.³ This number is often surprising to people, partly because not all health conditions and impairments included in the definition are commonly thought of as disabilities (e.g. mental health

¹ <https://x.com/glasgowpam/status/1390639766857728004>

² E. Evans and S. Reher, *Disability and Political Representation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024; E. Evans and S. Reher, ‘Disability and political representation: Analysing the obstacles to elected office in the UK’, *International Political Science Review*, vol. 43, no. 5, 2022, pp. 697-712.

³ E. Kirk-Wade, ‘UK disability statistics: Prevalence and life experiences’, 23 August 2023; <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9602/>; Office for National Statistics, ‘Disability, England and Wales: Census 2021, 19 January 2023; <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/disabilityenglandandwales/census2021>

conditions such as depression lasting over a year), and partly because many disabilities are invisible (between 70-80% according to research published by the UK Parliament).⁴

We do not have precise statistics about the numbers of politicians who are disabled because this information is not collected by the UK Parliament, although they collect data on other characteristics and identities. Among the MPs elected to the House of Commons in 2024, nine have publicly identified as disabled (all either Labour or Liberal Democrat). This number may be higher given that many disabilities are invisible and some elected politicians may choose not to disclose them for various reasons – including the widespread stigma and discrimination which disabled people continue to experience, or because they may fear being perceived solely as experts on disability issues while preferring to focus on other policy areas or, indeed, identities. Yet, even if the figure of eight MPs, who constitute only 1 per cent of MPs, underestimated the real number of disabled MPs by half, this would still be far below their 20 per cent in the population.

In this article we discuss why it matters that there are so few disabled people in politics, and what barriers prevent them from getting into elected office. We close by offering recommendations for how to make politics more accessible and inclusive for all citizens, including disabled people.

Why does it matter that there are so few disabled people in politics?

Disabled people are an extremely diverse group, with different impairment and disability types as well as different intersecting identities, such as social class, race, and gender. As such, they naturally have different experiences, preferences, and opinions. Nonetheless, many disabled people also share certain experiences, including barriers, stigma, and discrimination in education, the labour market, the healthcare system, as well as their social life. As a result, they have lower socio-economic outcomes on a range of indicators, including less access to education and employment, and a higher risk of poverty and social isolation.⁵ Shaped by these experiences, disabled Britons share certain political views and policy preferences as well: they tend to be more in favour of increasing public spending, particularly on the NHS, and income redistribution than non-disabled people.⁶ Research from the US furthermore finds disabled people to be stronger supporters of civil rights and liberties.⁷ It is clear, therefore, that disabled people have distinct policy preferences from non-disabled people on several

⁴ UK Parliament, 'Invisible disabilities in education and employment', 12 January 2023; <https://post.parliament.uk/research-briefings/post-pn-0689/>

⁵ F. Ryan, *Crippled: Austerity and the Demonization of Disabled People*, London, Verso, 2019; Office for National Statistics, 'Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2021', 10 February 2022; <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/outcomesfordisabledpeopleintheuk/2021>

⁶ S. Reher, 'Do Disabled Candidates Represent Disabled Citizens?' *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2022, pp. 520–534.

⁷ L. Schur and M. Adya, 'Sidelined or Mainstreamed? Political Participation and Attitudes of People with Disabilities in the United States', *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 3, 2024, pp. 811-839.

dimensions – and these are often less well represented. Our research shows that across Europe, governments are on average further away from the preferences of disabled than those of non-disabled citizens, and the political parties in the UK tend to pay scant attention to disability issues in their manifestos.⁸

There are also many specific examples where new policies are discussed and put in place but their effects on disabled people are ignored. For example, when York closed its city centre to cars in 2021 – and other cities introduced similar measures aimed at reducing traffic during the Covid-19 pandemic – the fact that this barred many people with mobility and other impairments from cities was only recognised and acted upon much later.⁹ Similarly, when policymakers decided to ban plastic straws, they ignored the barriers this posed for the many disabled people who need them to be able to safely drink outside their homes.¹⁰ In both cases, the policies were only adjusted after disability rights activists mobilised and campaigned to ensure that pro-environmental policies do not come at the cost of disability discrimination.

To what extent the wider disability representation gaps, as well as these specific examples, are caused by the underrepresentation of disabled elected politicians is difficult to determine conclusively. However, there is evidence that disabled politicians are more likely to share the views of disabled citizens¹¹ and that, over the past 140 years, disabled MPs in the Commons have frequently spoken up in the name of the disabled community.¹² Several of them have emphasised how their lived experience enables them to better understand the needs and views of disabled people. All our interviewees, from across the political spectrum, believed that it was crucial to have more disabled people in political office to improve the lives of disabled people.

In addition to improving the substantive representation of the interests of disabled citizens, having more disabled politicians is also likely to make disabled people feel more integrated into democratic society and positively affect their attitudes to and engagement with the political process. Disabled people tend to turn out to vote at lower rates, despite being as interested in politics as non-disabled people. They also have lower levels of political trust and perceptions of politicians being responsive to their demands.¹³ This alienation from representative politics may in part be caused by the lack of politicians ‘like them’; indeed, disabled citizens – and particularly those who

⁸ E. Evans and S. Reher, *Disability and Political Representation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 155-177.

⁹ J. Pring, ‘Coronavirus: Disabled people face discrimination from COVID traffic schemes’, *Disability News Service*, 6 August 2020; <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/coronavirus-disabled-people-face-discrimination-from-covid-traffic-schemes/>

¹⁰ B. Hemsley et al., ‘Going thirsty for the turtles: Plastic straw bans, people with swallowing disability, and Sustainable Development Goal 14, Life Below Water’, *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2023, pp. 15–19.

¹¹ S. Reher, ‘Do Disabled Candidates Represent Disabled Citizens?’ *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2022, pp. 520–534.

¹² E. Evans and S. Reher, *Disability and Political Representation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024.

¹³ S. Reher, ‘Mind This Gap, Too: Political Orientations of People with Disabilities in Europe’, *Political Behavior* vol. 42, 2020, pp. 791-818.

identify as a member of the disability community – tend to feel better represented by disabled politicians.¹⁴ Having more disabled politicians might encourage more disabled people to become politically engaged, thus starting a virtuous cycle where they act as role models for future generations of politicians while improving the policy outcomes for disabled people.

Why are there not more disabled people in politics?

Disabled people trying to become politically engaged face a range of barriers.¹⁵ Most politicians' political careers in the UK start with joining political parties, which is where many disabled people encounter the first barriers. Party websites, where prospective members can find out about parties' programmes and how to get involved, are not always accessible, for example for people with visual impairments. Meetings of local party groups are often held in venues that are not accessible, for example because they do not have elevators, accessible toilets, or hearing loops. Since especially the smaller parties have limited budgets, disabled people are frequently told that making meetings accessible to them is either not possible or that the resources would be better spent elsewhere. Standing for selection as a candidate can bring a host of further hurdles. Some disabled prospective candidates we interviewed experienced extensive questioning of their ability to run an election campaign and fulfil the job of a political representative, often with intrusive questions about their personal and medical history – although there were also those who were actively encouraged by their party and, in some cases, valued particularly for their lived experience and potential to diversify parliament.

Once selected, many disabled candidates experience barriers that can be grouped into three categories: issues with accessibility, lack of resources, and ableist political cultures and attitudes. Door-knocking is an essential part of campaigning in the UK but presents a number of challenges for candidates with various disability types: wheelchair users often cannot get to the doorstep; those with energy-limiting conditions often find it exhausting; and autistic candidates may find travelling to unfamiliar areas of their constituency difficult, as do many visually impaired candidates. Those who cannot drive often have to rely on friends and family or pay for taxis where public transport does not go. Similarly, hustings can present barriers for people with various impairment types: wheelchair users may find that they cannot enter the stage; Deaf candidates are disadvantaged in fast-paced debates because if they rely on sign-language interpreters; and candidates with anxiety may find the combative style difficult. This highlights that although candidates with different disabilities experience different kinds of barriers, they often find the same activities and spaces inaccessible.

¹⁴ S. Reher and E. Evans, 'Someone like me? Disability identity and representation perceptions', *Political Behavior*, forthcoming.

¹⁵ Evans and S. Reher, 'Disability and political representation: Analysing the obstacles to elected office in the UK', *International Political Science Review*, vol. 43, no. 5, 2022, pp. 697-712.

While alleviating some of these barriers requires a change in political culture and thinking about how campaigns ought to be run, others can be addressed through financial resources, for example paying for assistants, transport, assistive technology and mobility aids, and distribution of campaign materials. Yet, in most contexts disabled candidates do not receive financial support to help them cover these costs, placing additional financial burdens on people who already tend to have lower incomes and higher costs of living. The UK Government's Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund (2012–2015) and subsequent interim EnAble Fund (2019–2020) provided disabled candidates with funding to cover such additional costs, with a view to 'levelling the playing field'. However, despite being perceived as very helpful by disabled candidates¹⁶, and the promise in the 2021 National Disability Strategy that "Building on the experience of the Access to Elected Office fund and the EnAble fund, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) will support a new scheme from April 2022 to support those seeking to become candidates and – as importantly – once they have been elected to public office"¹⁷, no funding was in place for the 2024 general election. An Access to Elected Office Fund also existed in Wales in 2021-22 and in Scotland since 2017.

The third category of barriers includes ableist attitudes and cultures, ranging from expectations that disabled people adapt in order to fit into ideas of 'normalcy' to outright stigma and prejudice. Many disabled candidates feel that they have to work extra hard in order to prove that they can campaign in the same ways and with the same intensity as non-disabled candidates, sometimes in reaction to their abilities being openly questioned, and often resulting in exhaustion and sometimes even new health issues. Yet, while many candidates told us about experiences of prejudice and discrimination within their parties, from opponents, and journalists, their experiences of interacting with voters were overall much more positive. This is reflected in evidence from survey experiments, which suggests that voters perceive disabled candidates as more compassionate, honest, and hard-working than non-disabled candidates. They also see them as competent in handling issues commonly perceived as related to disability, including healthcare, welfare and social security, and minority rights, and as better at representing underrepresented groups. Non-disabled candidates only outperform disabled candidates when it comes to strength and authority. As a result, disabled candidates gain equal – if not more – amounts of voter support in elections.¹⁸

We currently do not know the precise reasons for why there are so few disabled elected representatives, but it is highly likely that these barriers play an important role – whether by deterring disabled people from joining political parties and considering to putting

¹⁶ E. Evans and S. Reher, 'Barriers to political representation: disability and the EnAble Fund', *Government Equalities Office*, 28 July 2021; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/barriers-to-elected-office-for-disabled-people/barriers-to-political-representation-disability-and-the-enable-fund>

¹⁷ UK Government (2022). *National Disability Strategy*, 28 July 2021;

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-disability-strategy>

¹⁸ E. Evans and S. Reher, *Disability and Political Representation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 132-152.

themselves forward for selection and election in the first place, or by making it more difficult for them to succeed. In any case, tackling the barriers in the political recruitment process and the political institutions, encouraging disabled people to become engaged in politics, and supporting them throughout the process are vital steps to increasing their participation and representation.

What needs to be done?

Tackling the range of barriers experienced by disabled people who want to participate in party and electoral politics requires the support and engagement of a range of political stakeholders, including political parties, parliaments, and governments. As a first step it is critical that voting regulations, laws, and processes are reviewed to facilitate higher levels of turnout amongst disabled people – all polling stations should be fully accessible for people with any type of impairment. We know from the experiences of disabled people during the 2024 election that this was not the case.¹⁹

All registered political parties should be required to be fully accessible – both online and in their in-person meetings. For instance, all parties have accessible websites and produce manifestos in range of accessible formats. Parties could organise internal campaigns to raise awareness of disability and accessibility among their party members, offering training run by disabled people for party officers and local branches. Political parties could undertake an internal review of their processes, systems, and cultures, involving disabled members, to identify experiences and patterns of discrimination and issues of accessibility. To ensure that disabled people are able to organise collectively within political parties, it is important to fund internal disability groups to ensure that disabled members can help feed into discussions concerning party organization as well as disability policy development.

Beyond the parties, there should be a permanent election fund established to help disabled candidates meet the additional election costs related to disability. This should be advertised to potential candidates well in advance, with applications evaluated by an independent group comprised of disabled people. Parliaments should reintroduce more options for hybrid working, including electronic voting and more online meetings. Proposals such as quotas for disabled people or job sharing for elected politicians should be explored as a potential way in which to increase the number of disabled politicians. Annual accessibility audits of all buildings should be undertaken by disabled people. And finally, parliaments should collect and publish data on the number of disabled politicians – this will not only clarify and emphasise the sheer scale of the under-representation of disabled people but also help elevate the problem amongst political actors.

¹⁹ See for instance <https://x.com/BlondeHistorian/status/1806678936727802098>