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## Disability policy and UK political parties: absent, present or absent-present citizens?

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### ABSTRACT

In his study of disability and policy making in Canada, Michael Prince conceptualised the idea of 'absent citizens' to describe how people with disabilities were marginalised in the political process and disability policy treated in a piecemeal fashion. This article examines whether disabled people in the UK also constitute absent citizens by analysing the election manifestos produced by the two main parties over the past decade. The research finds an asymmetry in the parties' attention to disability policy from 2017 onwards when disabled people were present as part of the wider critique of the Conservative's austerity agenda. Conversely, disabled people constituted a sort absent-presence for the Conservatives, as they were subjected to policies which disproportionately affected them, yet this was not made explicit. Finally, there is evidence to suggest a similar piecemeal approach to disability policy, but it would be difficult to frame disabled people as totally absent citizens.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Disability; UK politics; party manifestos; ableism

### Points of interest

- Disabled people in the UK have been disproportionately affected by the austerity politics of the past decade, but UK political parties have not always recognised or responded to disability inequality.
- This paper looks at disability policy pledges contained in UK political party manifestos since 2010.
- This paper finds a lack of attention paid to disability policy in 2010 and 2015 but an increased number of disability policies in Labour's manifestos in 2017 and 2019.
- This paper argues that although disabled people are absent from earlier Conservative manifestos they were subjected to policies that negatively affected them, making disabled people simultaneously absent and present.

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- Finally, this paper also argues that the approach of the political parties to disability policy can best be described as piecemeal.

## Introduction

According to the UK Government, around 21% of the UK population are disabled (UK Government, Family Resource Survey, 2018–2019), defined here, and in line with UK legislation, as ‘a physical or mental impairment... [that] has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’ (UK Government and Equality Act 2010). Disabled people constitute a significant and diverse social group, and yet despite this heterogeneity research has found that they share a set of policy preferences (Reher 2021). How disabled people and disability policy are represented by political parties has, however, attracted little by way of scholarly analysis. This article seeks to fill that gap by exploring whether and how political parties seek to engage with disability by analysing the election manifestos produced by the Conservative and Labour parties covering the last four general elections (2010–2019), a period in which debates over austerity politics have dominated the policy agenda in the UK. The article finds an asymmetry in the parties approaches to disability policy, with disabled people more present in Labour manifestos from 2017 onwards; conversely, for the Conservatives, disabled people were subjected to welfare policies which disproportionately affected them, yet this was not made explicit thus rendering disabled people simultaneously absent and present – an absent-presence. Finally, the research uncovers that although there is evidence to suggest a piecemeal approach to disability policy, it would be difficult to frame disabled people as totally absent from the process.

Political parties play a central role in the representative process (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011), especially in a parliamentary system like the UK, moreover the policies they include within their election manifestos give a good indication of which groups they want to appeal to, as well as detailing their policy priorities for governing (Janda et al. 1995). Policies included in election manifestos can sometimes raise awareness of specific issues, or help develop public debate; indeed, parties can play an important role in initiating policy development (Laver 2003). Of course, not all commitments contained in a manifesto can be understood as a guarantee of what a party will actually deliver once in power, although research shows that manifesto pledges are usually fulfilled (Brouard et al. 2018), and this is particularly true in the UK (Bara 2005). In his study of British election manifestos, Mads Thau found that disabled people were the 11<sup>th</sup> out of 20 most frequently targeted groups (Thau 2019), and yet policy discussions surrounding disability rarely attracts national level attention during general elections, beyond that covered

by specialist media sources (for example, Disability News Service n.d.). Similarly, there has been limited academic attention paid to how political parties in the UK have engaged with disability. Conversely, discussions surrounding gender, and to a lesser extent race and ethnicity, have in recent years been fairly high-profile during UK-based election campaigns, whether that's related to the diversity of the candidates or policies designed specifically to appeal to women or racialized minorities (Ashe 2019).

In his study of disability, politics and policy making in Canada, Michael Prince argued that disabled people were effectively rendered 'absent citizens' and that this produced 'significant cultural, material and political disadvantages' (Prince 2009: 3). Prince observed that disabled people and disability policy were not considered a high priority for Governments, and that approaches to disability tended to consist of 'piecemeal' actions with policies and initiatives emerging in a sporadic fashion which indicated a lack of any strategic or joined-up approach to disability policy (33). Moreover, Prince noted that disabled people 'struggle to participate' in political processes (4) in part due to ableist cultural discrimination and stereotyping (70). Hence, the absences of disabled people from political processes and disability from policy development have a detrimental impact on tackling the interconnected nature of the social inequalities faced by disabled people. This article explores these findings in relation to the UK through a focus on three key areas: political participation, cultural discrimination and, and welfare reform. These three, interconnected, areas are important as they traverse the political, cultural and economic contexts which determine the lived realities of disabled people's lives in the UK.

This article focuses on the UK in order to more thoroughly contextualise the findings in light of the impact of austerity policies, alongside the Labour party's ideological shift under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, a veteran left wing MP who had long espoused an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist politics (Whiteley et al. 2019). The politics of the past decade crystallized around a number of key themes which shaped the four elections under study. In brief, the financial crash dominated the 2010 election at which Labour was seeking a fourth term of office (Drake and Higgins 2012), while the (incorrect) prediction of another hung parliament and the potential influence of the Scottish National Party monopolized much of the 2015 election campaign, which was seen as a vote on the performance of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016). For the 2017 and 2019 election campaigns, Brexit was the key issue, while a putative 'culture war' was emerging alongside high levels of dissatisfaction with the democratic process, both of which underscored the increasingly divided nature of UK politics (Hobolt 2018; Flinders 2020).

Given its traditional role in appealing to socially marginalised groups, disability policy might be considered to be the preserve of the left. Certainly,

research into the political attitudes of disabled people has revealed that they tend to hold left-leaning views (Reher 2021), although activists within the US disability rights movement have worked across the partisan divide in order to advance the interests of disabled people (Gastil 2000); while the positive correlation between ageing and disability is an important factor to consider given Conservative parties often prioritise and gain support from older voters (Chrisp and Pearce 2019). Thus, it is worth, as this article does, comparing the approaches of the two main parties in the UK. The focus is on the two main parties because although electoral support for third parties has been growing since 1974, the Conservatives and Labour party between them secured between 65% and 82.3% share of the vote over these four elections; moreover, they are the only parties with a realistic chance of forming a majority government at Westminster.

This research speaks to those interested in policy development and political representation, in particular the extent to which parties generate and promote policies related to under-represented and politically marginalised groups. Furthermore, the research also provides a useful case study for scholars interested in understanding how disability is treated by political parties during elections. The article begins by setting out the methods and case study context; the article then moves on to explore each of the three dimensions, including a brief literature review for each in order to contextualise the findings, paying attention to inter-party differences and intra-party changes over time; the article concludes with a discussion of whether or not disabled people could be considered absent citizens within a UK context.

## Methods

This research defines disability in accordance with UK legislation but, perhaps more importantly, the approach is also shaped by the social model of disability. The social model, developed by disability rights activists, describes the ways in which society disables individuals and groups; in other words, one cannot 'have' or possess a disability, rather it is a phenomenon produced by society and reproduced through discourse, formal institutions and structures, and cultural norms (Campbell and Oliver 1996). Disability is thus understood as a system in which people with impairments (whether physical, mental, cognitive, developmental or intellectual) experience discrimination and stigma (Shakespeare 2006). Recognising that disability is not an area which has tended to attract much attention from political scientists, this article examines the extent to which the two main political parties in the UK engage with disability policy through a focus on the manifestos produced by the Conservative and Labour parties for the 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019 UK General Elections.

The first step of the research process involved reading through each manifesto to understand its broad themes, this was juxtaposed with reading

academic work published as part of the post-election analysis which offered a discussion of the main thrusts of each party's offerings alongside a potted overview of the campaign. The second stage involved a simple keyword search of the manifestos for the following: disability/disabled/disabilities; impairment; accessible/accessibility; carer/s; illness; chronic health; sick/sickness; and mental health. Any specific policy pledges related to those keywords were then compiled into a dataset. Pledges which were more general, in other words those not just targeted at disabled people or addressing disability specifically were excluded, e.g. Labour's 2017 pledge to introduce a National Care Service. The number of specific Conservative pledges related to disability by election is as follows: 8 in 2010; 7 in 2015; 7 in 2017; and 8 in 2019; for the Labour Party, the numbers are: 7 in 2010; 13 in 2015; 27 in 2017; and 39 in 2019. From 2015 onwards the Labour Party produced a separate manifesto for disabled people, these manifestos were also read with specific policy pledges identified and included. The production of a separate policy document indicates that the party took disabled voters seriously and made efforts to speak to them directly; for the purposes of this research process it is worth noting that virtually all of the pledges included in the manifesto for disabled people were *also* included within the main manifesto.

The final stage involved a more detailed reading of any relevant sections related to political participation, cultural stereotypes and discrimination, and work and welfare reform, to properly understand the direction and substance of the specific policy pledges. Trying to code the pledges in this way, did on a couple of occasions pose some difficulty, specifically identifying if and when a policy could be considered solely as being in one or other category, where a policy crossed two or more of the themes – this was principally in relation to policies on tackling discrimination and work and welfare reform – it was included in both columns. Certainly, there were other significant policy areas of importance for disabled people which could be analysed, notably education and health, however, this research focuses primarily on participation, stereotyping and welfare reform because they enable greater analysis of the interconnectedness between the broader categories of ableism and austerity.

This study provides a close textual analysis of the manifestos, in order to identify and analyse disability policy pledges. Such an approach allows for a greater contextual analysis of the policies in relation to other key themes within the manifestos. The research adopted this approach to analysing the manifestos rather than using existing data from the Manifesto Project, a dataset which codes and categorises parties' policy preferences in order to provide a quantitative measure of each parties' emphasis on these categories (Manifesto Project n.d.), not only in response to the concerns raised about inter-coder reliability but also its theoretical underpinnings, and specifically

it's focus on emphasis (i.e. the number of times a topic or issue is mentioned) rather than the actual position of the parties (Gemenis 2013). Accordingly, the policies were analysed in relation to the wider manifestos but also in relation to the broader political milieu which shaped the development of the manifestos, e.g. internal party debates about ideological direction or external factors such as Brexit.

## Political participation

Studies exploring the relationship between disability and political participation have typically focused on issues of access, exclusion, and marginalisation (Schur, Krus, and Blanck 2013). For example, research has noted that voter turnout and political participation is lower amongst people with disabilities (Schur and Adya 2013), indeed, disabled people were less likely to vote in the 2005 UK general election than non-disabled people (Clarke et al. 2006), this pattern is shaped by a range of factors related to resourcing and recruitment, hence the emphasis on improving accessibility to, and awareness of, the electoral process (Atkinson, Aaberg, and Darnolf 2017). Scholars have also found that disabled people are under-represented in positions of power (Sackey 2015; Levesque 2016), thus the removal of barriers related to inaccessibility, resourcing and discriminatory attitudes, has been considered a key part of enabling greater political representation (Evans and Reher 2020). A few studies have sought to explore how the issues and interests of disabled people are represented by politicians and governments; for example, Paul Chaney's analysis of activity in the UK Parliament found that although there had been some progress since the 1990s, the representation of disabled people was far from being a 'mainstream feature' of policy debate at Westminster (Chaney 2015). In fact, research has highlighted that political parties have not always been inclusive of disabled people (Levesque 2016; Evans and Reher 2020), although when it comes to advocating for disabled people, disabled elected representatives play a critical role (Guldvik, Askheim, and Johansen 2013; Langford and Levesque 2017).

The two main political parties in the UK have not introduced many policies related to increasing and improving the political participation of disabled people. The Conservatives have had just one policy pledge on this issue: to 'improve the electoral registration process, to make it as accessible as possible' (Conservative Party Manifesto 2017: 42), however no further details were given regarding what the focus would be or indeed how it would be achieved. By comparison, Labour have issued three policy pledges in this area: to establish a cross-government committee to develop disability policy (Conservative Party Manifesto 2015:7); to ensure that selection processes for election candidates across the local, national and regional levels are accessible with all reasonable adjustments made (Conservative Party Manifesto

2017: 24; 2019:25); and to reinstate the access to elected office fund - set up to provide financial assistance to cover the costs faced by disabled candidates – which had been scrapped by the Conservatives (Conservative Party Manifesto 2019:68).

Neither party could claim to have put much emphasis on the political participation of disabled people, and the handful of policies that do appear are somewhat sporadic. Comparatively speaking Labour's slightly more substantial policies to address the issue can perhaps be explained by their approach to developing their election manifestos from 2017 onwards, which emphasised the participation of disabled people. In 2015 Labour undertook a two-year long Disability Equality Roadshow, which involved local meetings and consultation with disabled people and their carers around the UK to help develop policies for their 2017 manifesto based upon the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities framework. Meanwhile, the Conservatives more top-down approach to policy development, left principally to the leader and the Conservative Research Office, provides little space for the inclusion of disabled people, or even from the internal Conservative Disability Group.

Even though the Conservative party made strides to appear more socially progressive under the leadership of David Cameron, which partly included a focus on increasing the diversity of political candidates (Childs and Webb 2011), there is little evidence to suggest that the political participation of disabled people was seen as an important policy area. Meanwhile, the Labour party, who have traditionally sought to take the lead on matters relating to the political participation of traditionally marginalised and excluded groups, only really developed policies in this area from 2017 onwards when disabled people became more closely involved in policy development. Although Labour twice pledged to make selection processes accessible, research conducted with aspirant Labour candidates in subsequent years has revealed that candidates still face significant barriers (Evans and Reher 2020). Their 2015 pledge to introduce a cross-departmental committee was not included in subsequent years and indeed this type of approach is reminiscent of Prince's critique of disability mainstreaming approaches which he described as 'modest opportunities' which are unlikely to have a radically transformative effect (Prince 2009:109).

Finally, linking what the parties have to say about the political participation with the issue of representation of disabled people as candidates for elected office, the data for the past few elections reveals that the numbers of self-declared disabled politicians has been fairly static - it is worth noting that parties have not tended to collect or disclose the numbers of disabled candidates that they field at each election, despite this being a recommendation of the cross-party Speaker's Conference report into Parliamentary Representation (UK Parliament 2010). Survey data of the 2015 and 2017



election candidates in the UK, show that around 10 and 11% of candidates, respectively, indicated a disability; however, this data should be treated with caution because of both the low response rate and the reliance on self-reporting, furthermore according to the findings there were no Conservative disabled candidates (Evans and Reher 2020). Self-declared disabled MPs appear to constitute a very small number both within their own parties and also within the House of Commons more broadly, currently constituting around 1% of all MPs (2 Conservative, 3 Labour and 2 from other parties) – a significant under-representation when we consider that just over 20% of the UK population are disabled. And yet, despite this under-representation, the issue does not seem to attract much attention from the political parties.

### **Tackling discrimination**

Public opinion surveys have demonstrated that attitudes towards disabled people have become more positive over the past few decades (Office for Disability Issues 2009). For example, the British Social Attitude Survey has consistently reported the public's support for extra public spending for disabled people, coming second only to increased retirement benefits (British Social Attitudes Survey 2015). Concomitantly, levels of reported hate crime against disabled people in the UK has risen (BBC 2020), as have the number of disability employment discrimination cases (Disability Rights UK 2020). One way to explain this paradox is through the concept of ableism, which refers to structural forms of discrimination and marginalisation against disabled people, in part through perpetuating the idealisation of able-bodied and able-minded individuals (Campbell 2009). Ableism, captures the variety of ways in which states and societies are structured so as to disadvantage and exclude disabled people, and to ultimately render them as second-class or even disposable communities. Ableism helps explain why people are reluctant to identify with such a stigmatized group, a group typically presented as helpless or incompetent, or to engage in political activity stemming from that identity (Hahn 1988; Scotch 1988; Schur 1998; Schur, Krus, and Blanck 2013). Hence, examining the role that political parties play in challenging cultural stereotypes and discrimination against disabled people is important.

Both Labour and the Conservatives have developed a number of policies to address this issue. The Conservatives have developed six distinct pledges in this area, with some repeated across subsequent manifestos: to promote equality and tackle discrimination to 'help disabled people live independently' (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010:35); to remove the barriers that stop disabled people from entering the workforce (Conservative Party Manifesto 2015:17); to reduce the disability employment gap (Conservative Party

Manifesto 2015:19; 2017:57; 2019:17); to review legislation governing hate crimes on the basis of disability (Conservative Party Manifesto 2015:60; 2017:44); to tackle the stigma of mental health and disability discrimination (Conservative Party Manifesto 2017:48,70); and to protect people, including disabled people, from harassment (Conservative Party Manifesto 2019:20). For their part, Labour published 13 pledges, again with some repeated over subsequent manifestos: to introduce the Equality and Human Rights Commission to ensure people, including disabled people, are not held back at work (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010:24); to change our 'society's attitude to mental illness' (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010: 44); to introduce a new offence on disability hate crime (Conservative Party Manifesto 2015:37; 2019:74); to give mental health the same priority as physical health (Conservative Party Manifesto 2015:24); to halve the disability employment gap (Conservative Party Manifesto 2017:113; 2019:14); to tackle discrimination against disabled children in accessing education (Conservative Party Manifesto 2017:15); to introduce a duty on Higher Education Institutions to ensure courses are accessible (Conservative Party Manifesto 2017:17); to ensure annual reporting of disability hate crime (Conservative Party Manifesto 2017: 57); to strengthen the Equality Act to empower disabled people to challenge discrimination (Conservative Party Manifesto 2017: 57); to work to improve awareness of Autism and neurological difference (Conservative Party Manifesto 2017:113; 2019:68); to require employers to report on and act to close the disability pay gap (Conservative Party Manifesto 2019:68); to update the Equality Act to introduce disability leave as separate from sick leave (Conservative Party Manifesto 2019:68); and to strengthen the Equality Act to reflect social model of disability (Conservative Party Manifesto 2019:74).

Overall, the analysis reveals that while both parties increased the number of pledges in this area, from 2017 onward Labour committed themselves to a notably higher number of specific pledges. The analysis of the policies produced by the parties is organised into policies related to the main themes covered by the policies: hate crime; employment discrimination; and tackling the stigma of mental health issues.

The Conservatives commitment to reviewing legislation pertaining to hate crime on the basis of disability was first introduced in the 2015 manifesto appearing again in 2017 (although not 2019). While disability hate crime, was covered by the 2003 Criminal Justice Act, the actual law only allows for a sentencing extension, meaning that it can only be applied to those who have been convicted of a crime against a disabled person if there is proof that the person was motivated by hostility or prejudice towards the person's disability. Dissatisfied with the current provision, disability rights campaigners have argued for a strengthened legal framework to ensure higher conviction rates in order to deliver justice for disabled people. The Conservative's discussion of the proposal in their 2015 manifesto was restricted to a review

of the current legislation (rather than the introduction of a new offence), also, and perhaps more importantly, they did not focus on disability per se but rather discussed it alongside hate crime on the basis of sexual orientation and transgender identity (62), this was the same framing included in their 2017 manifesto (46). For its part, the Labour party had a specific pledge in its 2015 manifesto to introduce a new offence on disability hate crime in order to send a 'clear message that abuse of disabled people must be stamped out' (14). Labour kept a version of this policy for subsequent manifestos. In 2017 Labour committed to introducing a new duty to ensure the annual reporting of levels of disability hate crime and violence against disabled women (22, repeated in 2019:22) drawing attention to the fact that the Conservatives had 'failed' to expand the scope of the law to cover disability (22).

In 2015 the Conservatives committed to halving the disability employment gap by 'transforming policy practice and public attitudes' and to 'remove the barriers' to women and disabled people entering the workforce (19), although this is not stated this is implicitly linked to the welfare reform agenda (discussed below) which aimed to move disabled people off of benefits and into work. The discourse used in 2015 however is one in which the disability employment gap is presented as a set of cultural barriers to be overcome, rather than a reflection of the fact that some disabled people and those with chronic illnesses cannot work. In their 2017 and 2019 manifestos Labour also linked forms of discrimination to the workplace, but instead focussed on the discrimination faced by those already in the workplace, making specific reference to autism, including a commitment to raise awareness of 'neurological differences' and 'neurodiversity' in 2017 (113) and again in 2019 (16 of the manifesto for disabled people). Drawing attention to the high levels of discrimination experienced by neurodivergent workers, Labour pledged to work with trade unions and employers in order to raise awareness and tackle discrimination.

The Conservatives have included policies specifically related to mental health in all of their past four manifestos, and they have prioritised trying to ensure parity between mental and physical health, indeed, the pledge to tackle the 'stigma' of mental health is mentioned on three separate occasions, and there is a specific section entitled the Mental Health Gap. Labour's policies on mental health were underpinned by significant spending commitments, for instance in 2017 they pledged an extra 1.6 billion for the NHS to spend on mental health care (33), in 2010 they committed to fund an additional 8,000 new therapists (33), while in 2015 Labour also promised to ensure that NHS staff all received mental health training (24). The increasing emphasis placed upon mental health and raising its status to the equivalent of physical health is an important step in tackling the discrimination often faced by those who experience mental illness, specifically the stigma

circulated by a media which links mental illness to violence (Mental Health Foundation 2021).

Both Conservatives and Labour have included a number of policy commitments in their manifestos that recognise the importance of tackling discrimination against disabled people, they also both emphasise that this can be addressed through hate crime legislation. It is clear that Labour has had much more of a focus on this from 2017 onwards, again perhaps underscoring the importance of the presence of disabled people in the policy-making process. Of course, part of the negative stereotyping which blights the lives of disabled people in the UK stems from the ways in which they are presented in the national media, (Briant, Watson, and Philo 2013); for example, the BBC ran a TV show from 2009 to 2015 called *Saints and Scroungers* which sought to expose benefit thieves. The combined impact of concrete reforms along with popular representations of disabled people as scroungers meant that for the first half of the 2010s disabled people were treated with suspicion, especially those in receipt of state benefits, which to some extent enabled and facilitated the welfare reform agenda.

### **Welfare reform**

In 2019 the UN published a report which revealed the heavy cost of the UK Government's austerity agenda; the report presented an unflinching analysis of the scale and depth of poverty, highlighting in particular the disproportionate effect of welfare reform on the lives of disabled people (Ryan 2019). A key plank of the austerity agenda was reducing benefit payments, for example restricting access to the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), a welfare benefit for disabled people or those living with a long-term medical condition who are unable to find work and are not yet at the state retirement age (Beatty and Fothergill 2015). Alongside the cuts there was an emphasis on getting disabled people into work (Garthwaite 2011), partly through the increased use of work capability assessments (WCA's), which resulted in increased numbers of disabled people being deemed 'fit for work' (Clifford 2020). During the same period, the Conservative Government introduced Universal Credit (UC), which replaced a number of benefits and allowances with a single payment (Royston 2012); the Conservatives also replaced the Disability Living Allowance with Personal Independence Payments (PIP), which were accompanied by planned reductions and attempts to restrict who counted as disabled (Roulstone 2015). These reforms have resulted in a much-reduced income for disabled people (Ryan 2019).

Over the past four elections the Conservatives have issued nine policies related to disabled people and welfare reform: to provide financial support through Incapacity Benefit to the 'genuinely disabled' (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010:15); to protect the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and

attendance allowance (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010:53); to maintain government contributions to Child Trust Funds for families with disabled children (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010:19); to devolve control so that people have access to a single budget that combines health and social care (Conservative Party Manifesto 2010:48); to reform the welfare system to stop 'benefit cheats' (Conservative Party Manifesto 2015:28); to exempt those receiving DLA or Personal Independent Plans (PIP) from the maximum household benefit rule (Conservative Party Manifesto 2015:28); to exempt those in receipt of disability benefits from the 2 year freeze to working age benefits (Conservative Party Manifesto 2015:28); to provide tailored employment support for unemployed disabled benefit claimants (Conservative Party Manifesto 2017:57); and to reduce the number of reassessments for disabled people to access support (Conservative Party Manifesto 2019:17).

Labour, meanwhile pledged to introduce 19 policies in this area: to extend work capability assessments for Incapacity Benefit (Labour Party 2010:23); to provide an additional £100 per year for Child Trust Funds for disabled children (Labour Party 2010:26); to overhaul the work capability assessments (Labour Party 2015: 33); to abolish the Bedroom Tax, a cut in housing benefit for those deemed to have a spare bedroom (Labour Party 2015:33; 2017:63; 2019:73); to scrap targets for sanctions in Jobcentre Plus (Labour Party 2015:10); to devolve benefits that support disabled people to Scotland (Labour Party 2015:44); to offer disabled people the option of personalised budgets (Labour Party 2015:46); to scrap the work capability and PIP assessments (Labour Party 2017:57; 2019:74); to scrap the sanctions regime (Labour Party 2017:57; 2019:72); to reverse cuts to PIP, ESA and Universal Credit (Labour Party 2017:56); to explore how to expand access to work (Labour Party 2017:57); to reverse the cuts to Access for All (Labour Party 2017:18); to increase carer's allowance (Labour Party 2017; 2019:74); to replace the Department for Work and Pensions with a Department of Social Security (Labour Party 2019:72); to end migration onto Universal Credit and co-design a new system with disabled people (Labour Party 2019:72); to increase ESA (Labour Party 2019:74); to raise the basic rate for disabled children to the level of child tax credits (Labour Party 2019:74); to provide extra support for severely disabled people without a carer (Labour Party 2019:74); and to end the privatisation of assessments (Labour Party 2019:74).

Unsurprisingly, and as the above lists demonstrate, Labour introduced twice as many policies related to disabled people and welfare reform as did the Conservatives, even though the policies introduced by the latter party had direct implications for disabled people they were not explicitly articulated. Indeed, while the parties' manifestos contained a similar number of policies in this area at the 2010 and 2015 elections, Labour developed a much higher number of specific pledges related to disability and welfare reform in their 2017 and 2019 manifestos. The election of Jeremy Corbyn

as leader of the Labour Party following the 2015 election resulted in the development of anti-austerity manifestos which contained many policies related to halting or reversing welfare reform. The pledges contained in those later Labour manifestos also took a different turn, and tone, from those in previous manifestos. For example, in 2010 Labour pledged to 'extend tough-but-fair work capability tests' in order to reassess the incapacity benefits claims of 1.4 million people (18), such a policy went further than anything promised by the Conservatives in that election, who included a vaguer commitment to provide financial support for the 'genuinely disabled' (26). Hence, at the 2010 election both parties presented policies which suggested that there were too many people in receipt of benefits and that there were people cheating the system. Concomitantly, at the 2010 election the Conservatives also pledged to protect the Disability Living Allowance (53), which they actually ended up phasing out from 2013 onwards.

By the 2015 election Labour had changed its position on WCA's calling instead for an 'overhaul' of the system, drawing particular attention to their pledge to scrap the targets for sanctions in Jobcentre Plus (a government-funded agency tasked with getting people into work and administering social security benefits). According to a report produced by the National Audit Office a benefit sanction is 'a penalty imposed on a claimant meaning a loss of income when someone does not meet conditions like attending jobcentre appointments. Sanctions are not rare: 24% of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants received at least one between 2010 and 2015.' (National Audit Office 2016). Conversely, in 2015 the Conservatives strengthened their commitment to reforming the welfare system pledging to stop 'benefits cheats' and to ending 'welfare abuse' (28). The disability policies in their 2015 manifesto were largely focussed on increasing the number of disabled people into work. In 2017 any reference to work capability assessments and tackling benefits abuse through reforming the welfare system had disappeared from the Conservatives manifesto; furthermore by 2019 the Conservatives committed themselves to reducing the number of reassessments that disabled people have to go through in order to 'prove their disability' in order to get support (17). Hence, for the Conservatives the discourse surrounding benefits cheats had largely been dropped from 2017 onwards, once the reforms had been achieved.

At the 2017 election Labour dropped its plans to 'overhaul' WCA's, instead pledging to 'scrap' the programme, to end the sanctions regime and to reverse the cuts that had been introduced to various benefits and allowances including the Employment Support Allowance. The manifesto itself contained a lengthy critique of the Conservatives austerity programme and in particular its damaging effects on disabled people. The 2019 Labour manifesto went further still, pledging to replace the Department for Work and Pensions with a new Department for Social Security which would be 'supportive and

enabling' of disabled people (72), they also retained their commitment to ending WCA's, the sanctions regime and the privatisation of assessments. In their place Labour promised to work with disabled people to co-develop a replacement system for benefits and to halt the migration of more people onto the Government's Universal Credit scheme.

Given the impact of the welfare reform agenda on disabled people, their absence from the Conservative manifestos is striking and suggestive of an absence from the policy-making process. Having set out the key policies that were presented by the two main parties in relation to our three key dimensions the next section of the paper considers the extent to which we can consider disabled people absent citizens.

### **Absent, present or absent-present?**

Michael Prince's analysis of disability and policy-making in Canada demonstrated the various ways in which people with disabilities and their policy issues and interests were effectively absented from the policy-making process (Prince 2009). Where disability policy *was* developed it was done in an ad-hoc and piecemeal fashion. Having analysed the manifestos produced by the two main parties over the past four general elections, it would be difficult to argue that disabled people were absent *per se* although the policies that are included in the manifestos can in part be characterised as piecemeal. It is clear from reading the Labour manifestos and indeed the wider coverage and analysis of the elections, that disability became a much more important and high-profile policy area for the Labour party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. For example, in his 2018 speech to the Labour party conference Corbyn declared that the Conservatives had 'created a hostile environment for disabled people' through creating a social security system which inculcated a form of 'institutionalised bullying.'

As the data discussed above illustrates, from 2017 onwards Labour had a strikingly higher number of specific pledges related to disability, indeed the specificity and range of the policy proposals from Labour demonstrates that they saw disability policy and disabled people as constituting both an important plank of their critique of the Government but also as a means by which to attract disabled voters. Pledges related to disability appeared in relation to a whole host of policy areas including housing, health, education, transport and the economy. It is also evident that a number of Labour policies included in the 2017 manifesto, though by no means all, also appeared in their 2019 offering thereby offering some continuity in terms of their disability policy, e.g. around scrapping WCA's and sanctions regimes. As such, it would be difficult to argue that disabled citizens are absent from Labour's manifestos from 2017 onwards. However, it is also the case that the Labour 2019 manifesto was frequently judged to lack credibility, in part



due to the sheer number and range of policies as well as concerns about affordability (Sloman 2021).

Meanwhile, the overall number of Conservative pledges suggests a relative failure to either engage with disability policy or, indeed, to appeal to disabled voters, yet despite this seeming absence, the welfare reform agenda, and in particular the use of work capability assessments to drive down the number of benefits claimants, had a significant and disproportionate impact on disabled people. The policies included in the 2010 and 2015 manifestos which promised to clamp down on 'benefits cheats' and 'welfare abuse' had direct implications for disabled people. The impact was of such significance, as highlighted in the UN report, that it would be difficult to argue that disabled people were completely absent because they constituted a key, yet unspoken, target of the attempts to reduce the benefits bill. Concomitantly, disabled people although not frequently present in the Conservative manifestos could not necessarily be considered wholly absent. In fact, it might be more accurate to consider them as constituting a sort of absent-presence, in recognition of the liminal space occupied by disabled people and disability within the welfare regime policy agenda, this was especially prevalent in the 2010 and 2015 manifestos. For the latter manifestos which were produced during a time at which the focus was on Brexit, and many of the key welfare reforms had been achieved, it is much easier to identify a more ad hoc and piecemeal approach to disability policy with policies appearing in one manifesto and not repeated in subsequent manifestos, e.g. in 2019 they dropped any reference to disability hate crime; such an approach could reflect a sense of disabled people as absent citizens.

The data pertaining to the number of disability related policy pledges reveals that there were more policies than those captured by the three areas that this article has focussed on – indeed in addition to those discussed there were 7 Conservative and 33 Labour policies which did not fit the categories. Surveying these policies reveals a somewhat piecemeal approach, similar to the policy areas that this article has focussed on, some pledges were introduced at one election and then not included in subsequent manifestos or were not tied to the wider issue of disability equality. For Labour some of these policies related to education and in particular a commitment to better supporting special education needs and disability (SEND) students and to embedding SEND training for all teachers, as well as introducing a new duty on higher education institutions to ensure all courses are accessible. Indeed, accessibility shaped the policies that tended to emerge in either transport sections, for example making all new buses talking buses to help the visually impaired, or in relation to housing, for instance ensuring all new build homes were accessible. Similarly, the Conservatives also had some more ad hoc policies such as introducing mental health check-ups for those who had left the armed services; although they did pledge to publish



a national strategy for disabled people by the end of 2020 (eventually published during the summer of 2021). The sense that the main political parties did not really consider disability policy in a strategic fashion, or as part of a wider policy agenda, is evident in the reactions of some disability rights activists. For instance, *Disability News Service* carried stories criticising the Conservatives in 2019 for only introducing five new policies for disabled people (Pring 2019) and criticising Labour for using its disability roadshow as a ‘tick boxing’ exercise rather than as a way of genuinely engaging with disabled people (Pring 2021)

The political climate in the UK has changed considerably since the early 2010s. In a speech delivered to the Conservative Party conference in October 2018, then Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May declared an end to austerity; one year later Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer Sajid Javid also declared ‘an end of austerity’ (BBC 2019). Despite increased public spending as a result of COVID, the Conservative government have recently announced increased tax rises alongside the ending of the temporary uplift to Universal Credit, both of which will result in many, especially low-income households, seeing their income reduced. Indeed, the combined impact of COVID and Brexit means that many disabled people will likely experience very difficult economic conditions over the next few years. Consequently, it is imperative that political parties undertake genuine engagement with disabled people’s organisations in order to ensure that the wide range of issues and interests that are important to disabled people are made present in the policy-making process and especially during election periods when voters decide who to vote for, or indeed whether to vote.

## Conclusions

If political parties act as linkages between the electorate, the legislature and government, then questioning which policy areas they prioritise in their election manifestos can reveal which social groups are rendered absent or present in the representative process. While the representation of social groups by political parties is a well-established field within political science, there has not traditionally, been much attention paid to the representation of disabled people in the UK. Hence, this article has sought to contribute towards developing our knowledge in this area by exploring the ways in which the main political parties have engaged with disabled people by including disability policy within their manifestos over the past four elections. In particular, the paper has focussed on the extent to which they have addressed three key policy areas: political participation; tackling discrimination; and welfare reform. The research has found that the parties have tended to pay little attention to the political participation of disabled

people, with many of their policies directed towards work and welfare reform.

Drawing upon Michael Prince's idea of disabled people as absent citizens in the political and policy-making process in Canada (Prince 2009), this paper has considered whether or not we can apply the same idea in the UK. Studying the manifestos closely and situating them within the wider political context of the post-2008 economic crash has revealed that it was not until Jeremy Corbyn's term of office as leader of the Labour party that they expanded the breadth of the disability policies included in their election offerings. The research finds that there is an asymmetry in the parties' attention to matters related to disability, but that this only emerged at the 2017 general election under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour party when disabled people were present as part of the wider critique of the Conservative's austerity agenda. Meanwhile, disabled people constituted a sort of absent-presence for the Conservatives as disabled people were subjected to policies which disproportionately affected them, yet it was not made explicit, this meant that they did not form part of the process, deliberation or debate. Finally, the article finds that there is evidence to suggest a similar piecemeal approach to disability policy, as identified by Prince in relation to Canada, but it would be difficult to frame disabled people as totally absent from the process.

Of course, this paper has only explored one way in which disability policy is articulated – through political party manifestos; further research could usefully examine the ways in which disability policy is treated at the governmental level, specifically in terms of the development and, perhaps more importantly, its implementation and the evaluation of its effects. The representation of disabled people, a diverse social group, is an important issue, not just in terms of thinking through the politics of inclusion but also in relation to policies which can either address or exacerbate existing patterns of social inequality, both in the UK and around the world.

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