**Making Political Parties Accessible for People with Disabilities:**

**A New Research Agenda**

**Abstract**

Despite constituting around 16% of the world’s population, we know little about the extent to which political parties encourage people with disabilities to participate in political parties. This article aims to fill that gap by providing a comparative analysis of political parties in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK. The research develops a framework for assessing the accessibility of political parties. The research finds evidence of activity in a small number of parties but finds relatively little evidence to suggest that parties are prioritising this issue, especially when compared with the participation of other social groups. The article argues that we need greater research into the relationship between disability and political parties, concluding with a future research agenda.

**Introduction**

The study of political parties is a cornerstone of political science. Party politics scholars examine internal organization, adaptation, decline and renewal (Sartori, 1976; Panebianco, 1988; Cross, 2011; Dalton et al, 2011); they analyze how parties both precipitate and respond to phenomena including most recently democratic backsliding, corruption, personalization, and the changing nature and use of technology (Scarrow, 2015; Rahat and Kenig, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2019). Party scholars also explore the participation of those from traditionally marginalized groups, a topic which concerns some but not all political parties as they seek to modernize and look more like the electorate; debates surrounding this issue tend to focus on those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, women, racialized minorities or young people (Bird, 2005; Kittilson, 2011; Scarrow et al, 2017; Allern and Verge, 2017). One group which has received little attention from either party scholars or from political parties are people with disabilities. Making up around 1 in 6 of the global population (WHO 2023), a number set to rise due to aging populations, ongoing military conflict and the spread of global pandemics, their absence from either the study or business of political parties is a serious omission, one which both political scientists and political actors should work to address.

Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities states that people with disabilities must be guaranteed the right to fully participate in the ‘activities and administration of political parties’ (2006); yet, people with disabilities remain amongst the world’s most politically and economically marginalized social groups (Charlton, 1998; Schur et al, 2013; Shandra, 2018; United Nations, 2020; Evans and Reher, 2024). Although a heterogeneous group, people with disabilities are different from most other social groups, in that many require adjustments or additional support to be able to participate on an equal basis (Schur et al, 2013). And yet, we do not know whether political parties have codified frameworks to support and promote the participation of people with disabilities. For political scientists to properly understand the extent to which parties effectively engage and facilitate the participation of citizens, it is important that they pay attention to questions of accessibility. Including disability in the study of political parties will also better enable scholars to address questions related to representation, organizational strategies, campaigning techniques, and the use of technology. Concomitantly, paying greater attention to the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities has the potential to increase and diversify the membership of political parties, as well as strengthening and legitimizing representative claim-making.

Recognizing that disability is marginalized within the study of political science (Herffernan, 2024), this article sets out a new research agenda for the study of disability and political parties. Given our limited knowledge in this area, exploring the formal approaches parties adopt towards people with disabilities is an important first step, and one that has been undertaken by scholars of other marginalized groups, for example Feminist Institutionalists map and analyze the formal party rules as they apply to women (Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2017; Kosiara-Pedersen, 2025). Accordingly, this article proposes a framework for analyzing the accessibility of political parties, this is then applied to parties across Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK. Overall, the research finds relatively little evidence that parties have developed formal rules to enable the participation of people with disabilities. Indeed, parties have developed fewer institutionalized mechanisms and processes to promote and encourage the political participation of people with disabilities than they have with respect to other traditionally marginalized groups. Using the results of this initial exploratory study as a springboard, the article moves on to consider a future research agenda for the study of disability and political parties, emphasizing its importance to the study of political science but also its potential impact on the real-world business of political parties. Because of the limited engagement with disability within political science, it is first necessary to provide some initial discussion of disability, and to briefly review some of the key findings from the small number of studies which have examined disability and politics (for a lengthier discussion see Heffernan, 2024).

**Disability and politics**

There are multiple definitions of disability (Goodley, 2014). This research understands disability to be a social phenomenon, i.e. one that is produced by society (Oliver, 2013); in other words, disability is a system in which people with impairments (whether physical, mental, cognitive, developmental, or intellectual) experience discrimination and stigma (Oliver, 1983, 2013). The World Health Organization (2023) estimate that around 16% of the world’s population live with a disability, although there are considerable variations amongst the official data published by national Governments (Grammenos, 2020: 14). In truth, the disability population is likely to be much higher because of the difficulties associated with collecting accurate data, such as differing state-level definitions (Schur et al., 2013). Furthermore, the negative stereotypes associated with disability means that people sometimes try to ‘normalize’ or distance themselves from disability identity (Anspach, 1979). Meanwhile, heterogeneity of impairment type poses a challenge to the idea that people with disabilities constitute a *distinct social group*; furthermore, even if someone does identify as having a disability they may not identify with the broader group.

People with disabilities constitute an extremely heterogeneous social group, but then *all* social groups are heterogeneous (Young, 1990). Diversity amongst people with disabilities need not be an obstacle to social group status, even if some members, such as those with more severe, visible and long-term disabilities, feel more connected to that part of their identity (Thorp, 2023). Disability rights campaigners argue that social group status is important to undermine individualized and overly medicalized approaches to disability (Campbell and Oliver, 1996; Charlton, 1998; Davis, 2013). For political scientists and political parties, viewing people with disabilities as a social group is a necessary first step toward identifying and thinking about their political rights, issues and interests. We know that, despite the wide range of impairments and conditions, people with disabilities do share a set of political issues and interests relating not just to matters of rights, accessibility, and healthcare, but also to other key policy areas such as education, social security, and transport (Prince, 2009; Gastil, 2000; Schur and Adya, 2013). Furthermore, there are similar differences in political preferences between candidates with disabilities and non-disabled candidates as there are between citizens with disabilities and non-disabled citizens, which suggests that increasing the number of politicians with disabilities will have a positive impact on the lives of people with disabilities (Reher, 2021). Hence, the need for political parties to ensure the active participation of people with disabilities.

Comparative research has found that people with disabilities have lower levels of electoral participation and political trust than non-disabled people (Schur et al, 2013; Priestley et al, 2016; Reher, 2022; Teglbjaerg et al, 2022): while this can partly be explained by lower levels of education and fewer socioeconomic resources (Schur et al, 2013), this is underpinned by institutional barriers to participation as well as pervasive negative stereotypes and stigma associated with disability (Charlton, 1998; Prince, 2009). All these experiences have a negative impact on the political citizenship of people with disabilities (Guldvik et al, 2013; Ocran, 2023); thus, political parties have an important role to play in enabling and promoting the political participation of people with disabilities.

Hitherto, a small number of strategies have been adopted by various countries and political parties to facilitate the participation of people with disabilities in politics. For example, research on EU member states has found: fewer people with disabilities deprived of legal capacity are excluded from voting in 2024 when compared with 2014; Belgium, Finland and Poland provide or pay for transportation to the polling station to facilitate people with disabilities to vote; and, there has been a very small increase in the number of party manifestos produced in accessible formats (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024). Mexico, Tunisia, Uganda and Kenya, have adopted either temporary or more permanent quotas to guarantee the representation of people with disabilities, meanwhile in South Korea parties receive subsidies for nominating candidates with disabilities.

Research on the relationship between political participation and disability has tended to focus on voting (Schur and Kruse, 2000, 2020; Priestly et al, 2016; Reher, 2022; Scott and Jones, 2024), political representation (D’Aubin and Stienstra, 2004; Guldvik et al, 2013; Sackey, 2015; Langford and Levesque, 2016; Waltz and Schippers, 2020; Evans and Reher, 2024) or on the policy process (Prince, 2009; Pettinicchio, 2019; Giordorno, 2021): where scholars *do* pay attention to political parties this tends to be in relation to one of these areas. Meanwhile, studies of party politics have not examined issues of accessibility for people with disabilities. A small number of studies principally related to political representation have indicated that people with disabilities face a range of barriers to engaging with political parties. For example, research from Canada found that political parties do little to either attract or promote the candidate selection of people with disabilities (Levesque, 2014). Sackey’s (2015) study of Ghana, emphasized that despite the growing population of people with disabilities, they faced a range of barriers to participation and selection as candidates. Waltz and Schippers’s (2020) comparative work on Europe found that political parties were doing little to facilitate the participation and representation of people with disabilities. Meanwhile, Guldvik and Lesjø’s (2014) research in Norway found that not all party leaders viewed disabled people as constituting a distinct social group in need of representation.

That people with disabilities experience barriers to participation matters, not just as a matter of fairness and equality, but because it can also impact the extent to which their policy preferences are represented as well as the chances of their being elected to serve in local and national legislatures (Evans and Reher, 2024). Moreover, we know that people with disabilities themselves want increased numbers of politicians with disabilities (Reher and Evans, 2024). Thus, a disability and political parties research agenda is one that should speak to those interested in the internal dynamics of party organization, campaigning and political recruitment, as well as to those keen to explore questions of equality and justice when it comes to political participation.

**Framework for analyzing the accessibility of political parties**

Political scientists have studied the relationship between parties and women, ethnic minorities, and young people (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Young, 2000; Hooghe et al, 2004; Kittilson, 2011; Bennie and Russell, 2012; Childs, 2013; Rainsford, 2018), however, we cannot assume that the theories, frameworks and methods used in those studies can be applied to people with disabilities. Not least because people with disabilities often require specific adjustments to facilitate accessibility - the extent to which environments (both built and online), processes and policies are such that people with disabilities can fully participate on an equal basis with non-disabled people. People with disabilities differ from other under-represented groups in that they can require additional levels of support to facilitate their participate. Previous work has highlighted how disabled candidates in the UK often must rely on informal support networks for e.g. driving, transcribing or assisting with campaigning as this is not often provided by the parties (Evans and Reher, 2024).

Instituting rules regarding accessibility recognizes that people with disabilities constitute a group with specific requirements; moreover, developing meaningful approaches to accessibility requires parties to engage with people with disabilities because accessibility is not simply about wheelchair access (although this is essential). Thus, framework indicators include both the codification of specific rules, as well as the recognition of people with disabilities as a distinct social group.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Table 1 above sets out a framework for analyzing the accessibility of formal rules and processes, drawing on three key areas of party institutionalization which are particularly important for encouraging participation from traditionally under-represented groups, as well as potentially making those from marginalized groups feel better engaged with democratic processes (Mansbridge, 1999).

*Codification of participation*: Constitutions are important documents for understanding the procedural and structural dimensions of party organization; moreover, they also reveal something about the ‘character’ of a party and its approach to intra-party democracy (Katz and Mair, 1992). While some are skeptical about the relationship between what is contained in the constitution and the day to day running of the party (Panebianco, 1998) – constitutional rules can and do shape how, when and in what ways members can be involved in the party. Of course, constitutions may not be the only documents in which rules surrounding accessibility or inclusion are set out, for example major policy documents or bylaws might be adopted, and analysis of these documents is important for revealing how parties organize (Kernell, 2024). However, party constitutions are routinely updated and often constitute the ‘final word’ in party procedure, thus presenting us with a good sense of the party’s priorities and how they respond to demands from members or to exogenous factors e.g. candidate selection laws (Smith and Guaja, 2010; Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010). For the purposes of this research, constitutions are especially important documents because even if many members do not read them, they can be used to codify, institutionalize, or recognize social groups, specifying the roles that they may play in the party. Of course, mentioning a particular social group in a constitution is not sufficient to facilitate their participation, for example Olayia’s research (2014) from Nigeria found that although many parties have the role of ‘youth leader’ institutionalized within their constitution, many of the occupiers of this role are in fact over the age of 50. Thus, any analysis of whether and how constitutions codify the role of people with disabilities within their parties can only tell us part of the story when it comes to the facilitation of their participation.

*Recognition of shared interests and issues*: The institutional organization of social groups tends to be most evident in the presence of intra-party groups or caucuses; autonomous organizing being a critical component of social group activism (Young, 1990). Feminist political scientists, for instance, have found that the formal recognition of women’s groups within political parties can provide a useful means by which to make gendered demands, for example in relation to policy or candidate selection processes (see Cross and Young 2004 on Canada; Childs and Webb, 2011 on the UK); conversely, comparative research has found that they also run the risk of ghettoizing women and women’s policy concerns (Kittilson, 2011). Mapping the presence, and analyzing the activity, of internal disability groups is therefore a key part of understanding the internal lives of political parties, and the extent to which people with disabilities are recognized as a distinct group with a shared set of interests.

*Political recruitment strategies*: Political parties can demonstrate their commitment to increasing the participation of traditionally marginalized groups by adapting their candidate selection mechanisms to diversify the candidates which they field at elections (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). The most obvious strategy in this respect is the use of quotas to guarantee the s/election of candidates from under-represented groups. There are of course a diverse range of quota types – some are determined at the national-level which means parties are required to field a certain percentage of women or ethnic minority candidates, whereas other countries have voluntary quotas meaning it is up to individual parties whether or not they adopt quotas – this obviously leads to a great deal of disparity within countries and across parties (Verge and Espírito-Santo, 2016). Hitherto, parties have used quotas to guarantee the election of women (Franceschet et al, 2012), ethnic minorities (Bird, 2014; Tan and Preece, 2022), and increasingly, young people (Belschner, 2021). Due to changes in population, there are also several post-conflict countries which have adopted reserved seats for people with disabilities, such as Uganda, Rwanda, and Kenya. Again, this research agenda can help build upon our existing knowledge of quotas and in particular thinking about whether disability quotas are used in democracies with no recent history of armed conflict, or whether this is a strategy that people with disabilities themselves would like to see adopted.

Having set out a framework for analyzing the accessibility of political parties, the article now presents an exploratory application of the framework to eight parties across four countries. The analysis highlights the paucity of attention paid to disability by political parties, which in turn underscores the urgency with which party scholars and political parties should address the topic.

**Methods**

The framework developed in the previous section set out three indicators for analyzing the accessibility of political parties; taken together this framework will help address the question of whether political parties have codified frameworks to support and promote the participation of people with disabilities. To examine how the framework operates in practice, it is applied to two major political parties across four Anglophone representative democracies: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK.

These four countries were selected as a useful set of test cases for several reasons. All are based on some variation of the Westminster system; although some question whether this term remains useful (Russell and Serban, 2020), the term remains a meaningful way in which to group countries with a shared set of approaches to party and parliamentary government (see Flinders et al, 2022). There are strong organized and established political parties and party systems in operation across all four cases, each with a principal large center-left and center-right party in operation, allowing greater opportunity for comparison across and within cases. English is the dominant language in each case allowing for more meaningful comparison in terms of the specific ways in which people with disabilities are represented; the use of a common language is important because of the key role it plays in the politics of disability e.g. the extent to which people with disability are presented as objects of pity (Goodley, 2014). All countries have ratified the UNCRPD thereby, at least on paper, committing to uphold, promote and protect the rights of all persons with disabilities – including ensuring their political participation. And finally, as noted above, despite the difficulties of securing reliable data (Schur et al, 2013), all cases have a roughly similar share of the population with a disability (see Table 2 below).

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Although, some of the countries have multiple party systems in operation, more typically at the federal or devolved level, the parties - listed in Table 3 below - are those with the highest vote share as well as the highest share of seats in their national parliaments, they also tend to be the oldest and most established parties.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

The first stage of the research involved collecting and analyzing party constitutions. These were available via the parties’ websites.[[1]](#footnote-1) Each constitution was read, before a search was conducted using the following keywords: disability, disabilities, disabled, illness, impairment, accessible, accessibility, sick and handicap (although this is an outdated phrase it was included in the initial search). All references to any of these keywords were recorded to quantify and qualify the details and context within which they were used. To compare the approaches to people with disability with the treatment of other traditionally marginalized groups, the following keywords were searched: women, gender, sex; race, ethnicity, indigenous, First Nation, Maori; youth, young people.

To map the existence of inter-party groups or caucuses for people with disabilities, the party’s official website was searched, if there was no mention of a specific group then an email was sent to the contact address listed on the website. A wider internet search was also conducted to find any that may have existed previously or be operating purely online and/or in a less formal capacity. Where a group existed, documents on their websites were read and a brief review of any social media activity was undertaken to get a sense of the types of activity and organizing they were engaged in. Finally, a review was undertaken of the number of self-declared politicians with disabilities elected at the national level – this involved contacting the parliaments in each of the countries as well as the largest disability organizations in each country to confirm whether they were aware of any politicians with disabilities who had been missed in the initial mapping exercise. At the party level, individual constitutions and the most recent election manifesto revealed whether there were any specific commitments or strategies in place to promote the political recruitment of people with disabilities.

One of the limitations of this study – and indeed one of the key challenges facing those seeking to work on issues relating to disability and politics – is the fact that parties do not collect and publish data on the number of members with disabilities. An issue to which we return in the final section of this article. We know that people with disabilities face a range of barriers to political participation (Priestly, 2016; Waltz, 2021), and we also know that people with invisible impairments might not self-declare as having a disability making the study of their involvement and engagement with political parties a difficult process. This study therefore focuses on what the parties are doing to facilitate access to participation but recognizes that this is only the first step in a research agenda which explores how disabled people experience political parties.

**Codification of participation**

As the data in Table 4 below illustrate, the codification of youth wings or the role of young people was institutionalized in all constitutions. Meanwhile, references to the role of women and/or the use of gender quotas were also present in most of the constitutions. Conversely, five parties codified the role of ethnic minorities and/or indigenous communities in their constitutions, while four referred to people with disabilities. Those party constitutions which did not refer to people with disability *did* codify the role of other social groups (although the Conservatives in Canada only referred to young people), this is an important point because the absence of people with disability cannot be explained by a wider decision not to address the inclusion of social groups. The widespread codification of the role played by young party members and women does perhaps reflect pragmatic concerns as well as wider political realities. On a purely pragmatic level, it is vital for a party’s survival that they recruit and mobilize younger activists. On a more political level, debates about women’s political participation and representation are simply more advanced than those that concern other social groups, reflecting the fact that women make up half of the population rather than constituting a ‘minority’ social group *per se*.

**[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]**

All the parties whose constitutions refer to people with disabilities are the major center-left parties from each country. While we might expect the length of a party constitution to shape whether they mention disability - the shortest at 17 pages was Canada’s Liberal Party and the longest at 154 pages was the UK’s Labour Party, with the average at 73.4 pages - both the shortest and the longest constitutions included some mention of disability.

Simply mentioning people with disabilities in a party constitution does not of course give us an indication of the strength of support provided to facilitate their participation. Accordingly, the constitutions were coded either as *absent*, or in terms of the strength of support: *weak* - where disability is mentioned in passing, typically as part of a list of identity characteristics; *medium* - where the constitution provides more than just a passing reference to disability but is not especially detailed; and *strong* - in which specific commitments and expectations are set out, making it clear to members with disabilities what they can expect as well as detailing how the party should conduct itself.

[INSERT TABLE 5 HERE]

Reading the constitutions in detail revealed that only one of the parties could be classified as having a strong commitment to facilitating the participation of people with disabilities: the UK Labour party. Labour’s constitution contained specific commitments to increasing the participation of people with disabilities, going beyond setting up groups or named officers by also mandating that all events should be accessible. Recognizing that negative stereotyping and stigma is often associated with disability, Labour mandates that those involved with candidate selection processes undertake disability awareness training, and they have specific rules guaranteeing the representation of people with disabilities through internal party quotas. Conversely, Australian Labor and the Canadian Liberals include disability solely as part of a broader list-based approach to the elimination of discrimination ‘on the basis of…’. While New Zealand’s Labour party has a *medium* commitment to increasing the participation of people with disabilities, specifically because of its commitment to ensuring there is representation for people with disabilities on policy and moderating councils.

Why UK Labour should be the only party with a strong commitment to codifying the participation of people with disabilities is perhaps unsurprising given that debates concerning disability and representation are relatively well-advanced in the UK (Evans and Reher, 2024). Similar commitments are not embedded in other ideologically aligned center-left parties beyond the UK. This absence is problematic because formal codified rules can be referred to by members with disabilities when requesting local parties improve their accessibility, moreover, constitutions provide guidance and establish expectations for how the party should conduct itself. People with disabilities face a range of barriers when participating in politics – much of this related to inaccessible venues and inaccessible material (Evans and Reher, 2024). That half of the parties in this study made no mention of disability in their constitution is troubling, especially when combined with those that only make a cursory reference to people with disabilities. Mandating that all meetings and events are held in accessible venues is an important rule that would certainly help facilitate the participation of people with disabilities in the activities of political parties.

**Recognition of shared interests and issues**

To understand the extent to which people with disabilities mobilize and organize within the party as a distinct social group with a shared set of interests and issues, it is instructive to map the presence, and analyze the activities, of internal party disability groups. As the data in Table 5 below illustrate, all except for one of the parties has a youth wing,[[2]](#footnote-2) and, all apart from one has a women’s group or association. Five of the eight parties have some form of group or association specifically set up for indigenous communities or racialized minorities, while only three have a disability group. Unlike the codification of people with disabilities in party constitutions, national differences are more significant than party differences, with both UK parties having a nationwide disability group.

**[INSERT TABLE 6 HERE]**

Australian Labor do not appear to have a nation-wide group – instead they operate at the state level under the name ‘Labor Enabled.’ There are eight state and territory branches within the party and of these, five have a Labour Enabled group or network: New South Wales; Queensland; Victorian; Tasmanian Labor; and ACT (Australian Capital Territory Branch). Hence, there is asymmetry across the party with regards the organization and mobilization of members with disabilities. In other words, where you live shapes the extent to which you may be able to participate in an internal party disability group. To complicate matters further, two of the state parties have a disability group on paper but for which no further information could be found – either via the state party website or on social media. For example, Tasmanian Labor name Labor Enabled in their Branch Rules as constituting a political action caucus but there was no further information or contact details to be found. Similarly, for ACT Labor the only trace of the group’s existence was a link to a conference resolution passed to establish Labor Enabled as ‘an informal, disabilities led body of ACT Labor.’ That there is little to no information available online or on social media with regards to these groups suggests that there is extremely limited, if any, activity occurring in at least two of these state-level branches.

For those three branches of Australian Labor that do have active disability networks it was clear that some were more institutionalized and better resourced that others. For example, the NSW Labor Enabled have their own website which lists their campaigns, details of a full executive committee and states their commitment to the social model of disability – they also include links to their active Facebook organizing page.[[3]](#footnote-3) Meanwhile, Queensland Labor Enabled maintains an active but closed members only Facebook group for its members, and, according to the details listed on the Queensland branch party website, the group meets monthly,[[4]](#footnote-4) while the Victorian branch of Labor Enabled has an active Facebook page.

Looking beyond the specifics of the Australian case, the aims, objectives and activities of all the disability groups across the countries are similar. Broadly their work can be grouped into three areas: providing a platform or voice for people with disabilities; increasing the participation of people with disabilities by making the party more accessible; and, influencing party policy specifically in relation to disability. Providing a voice for people with disabilities, was a common stated aim of the disability groups and suggests that unless people with disabilities raise issues and interests that are of concern to them then they will likely be overlooked or ignored. The UK Conservative Disability Group hold events and meetings at the party’s annual conference as well as working with prominent parliamentarians to promote awareness of disability across the party.

The disability groups also campaign to make the party accessible for members with disabilities, often lobbying or seeking to change the rules of the state or national party to remove barriers to participation. For example, the NSW branch of Enabled Labor lists a set of motions on their website which local branches can table to improve the accessibility of organizing.[[5]](#footnote-5) UK Disabled Labour have in the past made some in-roads in improving the accessibility of the annual conference, for example in 2018 the party had a space at conference for people experiencing sensory overload, however according to Disability Labour since 2021 the party has gone backwards with regards accessibility at conference.[[6]](#footnote-6) The disability groups also try to help shape party policy not just in relation to disability but also in relation to the wider policy agenda. For example, the Queensland Labor Enabled host a monthly meeting for members ‘focused on the lived experience of our members and how those experiences can inform policy change in health, housing, transport, employment and many other areas.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

The absence of disability groups or caucuses within most of the parties is problematic for the recruitment, mobilization, and organization of (potential) members with disabilities. In their analysis of Canadian politics, D’Aubin and Stienestra (2004) argued that having internal disability groups are important to ‘help to raise the profile of disability issues and possibly encourage candidates’ – yet two decades later and the two largest parties in Canada still have no disability caucus. Neither do the major parties in New Zealand. Given the importance of self-organization for disabled people – encapsulated by the slogan of the disability rights movement ‘nothing about us without us’ (Charlton, 1998) – the absence of disability groups is especially worrying as it limits the ability of members with disabilities to organize in semi-autonomous spaces to influence the wider party and to advocate for more accessible and inclusive structures and policy.

**Political recruitment strategies**

Turning to political recruitment, people with disabilities can sometimes require additional support to put themselves forward as a candidate, for example they may require transportation, a personal assistant, transcription or signing. None of the parties included in this study had formalized or codified plans to provide this kind of support to candidates with disabilities. Of course, the absence of an explicit and written commitment or strategy to provide additional support for disabled candidates does not necessarily mean that once a candidate is selected (especially if in a winnable seat) that support might not be made available, it might just be done on an ad hoc or informal basis. This informality would, however, likely be a barrier for people with disabilities because a potential candidate would not know in advance that they would get the support they required. Nor were there any plans to propose or promote innovative approaches to political representation that might facilitate the political recruitment of candidates with disabilities e.g. job-sharing or hybrid working.

The most obvious mechanism to increase the political representation of under-represented groups are quotas. All the countries have some version of gender quota law – in all countries it is up to the parties whether they choose to use a gender quota – three out of the eight parties do, or have in the past, used a form of voluntary gender quota.[[8]](#footnote-8) The term ethnic quota refers to the presence of any legal rules which permit the use of specific strategies, or which set out guarantees regarding the minimum number (or percentage) of representatives or candidates from a specific ethnic group – here ethnic group is understood as a group within a larger society with common histories and/or cultural traits e.g. language, kinship or religion (Tan, 2022). When it comes to ethnic quotas, only New Zealand has institutionalized minimum representational requirements using reserved seats for the indigenous Māori (Hughes, 2022). Meanwhile, Australian Labor is debating whether to introduce multicultural quotas for the selection of its candidates. Although ethnic quotas are not currently designated as legal under UK law, Labour has adopted measures to increase the number of ethnic minority candidates.

No parties use a disability quota. There was only evidence of the two UK political parties adopting any sort of strategy to increase the number of candidates with disabilities; these strategies were focused less on the point of selection and more on providing individual level support and mentoring. For example, the UK Conservative party’s disability group developed a Disability Toolkit to provide tailored support to potential candidates considering putting themselves forward for elected office, while Disability Labour provide a training guide for people with disabilities considering putting themselves forward to be a locally elected politician.

Previous research exploring the barriers to elected office have consistently reported problems that people with disabilities face in terms of accessibility as well as discriminatory attitudes (Priestly et al, 2016, Waltz and Schippers, 2020; Evans and Reher, 2022). People with disabilities typically have fewer financial resources and often have additional costs (e.g. personal assistance, taxis, or specialist software) associated with putting themselves forward for elected office. One way in which the financial element can be tackled is through the provision of governmental funding schemes, which people with disabilities can apply, to help them meet the costs. For example, in the UK there have been various iterations of an access to elected office fund - not currently in operation for Westminster elections in England but it is in operation across Scotland and Wales. While it is hard to prove a causal link between extra pots of funding and an individual being elected, evaluations of the fund in the UK demonstrated that the recipients of the funding believed them to have been necessary to enable them to put themselves forward. To date only one other country under study in this research has also introduced a similar scheme: New Zealand set up the Election Access Fund, with a limit of $50,000 total funding for a person, per election or by-election.[[9]](#footnote-9)

[INSERT TABLE 7 HERE]

That no party has adopted any measures (beyond targeted training) to increase the number of candidates with disabilities is troubling when we consider how few self-declared politicians with disabilities there are in each of the countries: as the data in Table 7 above reveals. No country has yet passed legislation in favor of all-disability shortlists, nor is there any evidence that this is something the political parties are pushing for. While civil society movements – as opposed to political parties – can play an important role in mobilizing support for increasing the number of politicians from under-represented groups, this is a question which directly affects parties. It is important that parties pay greater attention to how to increase and improve the numbers of politicians with disabilities, not least in those countries where there are currently no self-declared politicians with disabilities.

**Disability and political parties: future research agenda**

People with disabilities and questions of accessibility are not prioritized by political parties and this is a pattern we can also identify within political science and the study of political parties. Using the findings from the initial mapping exercise as a springboard, this final section of the paper sets out the case for a research agenda, highlighting some pressing research puzzles and questions as well as considering some of the empirical and methodological challenges of undertaking research in this area.

The comparative analysis presented above reveals a picture of political parties who are doing little to facilitate the political participation of people with disabilities. The lack of attention paid to accessibility, especially when compared to efforts made to mobilize and recruit members from other traditionally marginalized groups is perhaps indicative of a lack of knowledge, interest and commitment to disability and/or making their organizations accessible. A more generous explanation might also be found in lack of party resources to adequately address concerns of accessibility. However, as the size of the disability population grows, it is important that parties think carefully about how to organize accessibly.

Although the mobilization of women, racialized minorities and young people has increasingly attracted attention from political parties and scholars – the same cannot be said for people with disabilities, but why does this matter? It matters because political parties are key institutions within representative democracies and are the major route into electoral politics in many countries. If people with disabilities are not enabled to join and become active within political parties then they are less likely to have their voices heard, be selected as candidates or serve as elected representatives. The absence of people with disabilities therefore has the potential to negatively affect the extent to which disability-related policy is discussed or pursued in the interests of people with disabilities. Political parties are central actors in the mobilization of citizens: this role takes on additional importance when we consider the potential to enhance and improve the engagement of those from traditionally marginalized groups.

Given the centrality of political parties to the study of political science, it is vital that scholars pay attention to questions of accessibility and to the role of people with disabilities within those institutions. To help shape such a research agenda several questions and puzzles are outlined in Table 8 below. Following the framework outlined earlier in the article these initial, but by no means exhaustive, set of questions relate to the three indicators for accessibility.

[INSERT TABLE 8 HERE]

Answering these questions will require a mix of both quantitative and qualitative methods: surveys and experiments can help capture how, when, where and why parties engage with disability, and how people with disabilities perceive parties; while interviews, ethnographies, process tracing and text analysis can provide a more detailed understanding of party approaches to accessibility and disability, as well as how people with disabilities experience political parties. Hitherto, research on disability and politics has tended to adopt a single case study approach (see Guldvik et al, 2013 on Norway; Sackey, 2015 on Ghana; Langford and Levesque, 2016 on Canada; and Evans and Reher, 2022 on UK), hence more comparative research is needed to map differences across countries, regions and political systems. Additionally, systematic frameworks are required to help capture and explain cross national and within case variation when it comes to the relationship between disability and parties.

The list of questions set out in Table 8 above illustrate how little we know about the relationship between disability and political parties. To complicate matters further it is also important to acknowledge some of the methodological difficulties of undertaking this type of research. Chief amongst these is the difficulty of collecting accurate data on the numbers of people with disability (Schur et al, 2013); in addition to the stigma that surrounds identifying has having a disability, it is also worth noting that disability can be a fluid category that people move in and out of over their lifetimes (Thorp, 2023). Researchers must take difficult decisions about who to include within their studies, does for instance having cancer count as having a disability? Under some national laws the answer would undoubtedly be yes, but it is not clear that people with cancer view themselves as having a disability (Magasi et al, 2022). Similarly, there are those within the Deaf community who do not consider themselves to have a disability, rather they share a common culture and language (see Pray and Jordan, 2010). These are difficult decisions which scholars researching in this area must navigate, being clear about who is included is therefore essential.

In truth, there is a serious problem of knowability when it comes to the participation of people with disabilities. Parties themselves do not tend to collect or publish data relating to the percentage of their membership with a disability (Evans and Reher, 2024). However, these difficulties make it all the more important for political scientists and party actors to engage in this research agenda. One way forward would be for political scientists to develop meaningful and thoughtful ways in which to capture disability indicators – the WHO model survey on disability (2017) is a good place to start. Another is to survey and interview people with disabilities who have been, are currently, and might be future members of political parties to find out about their experiences, perspectives and accessibility needs.

Finally, co-producing, or at least co-designing, research projects that focus on disability with people with disabilities is important, reflecting the call of the disability rights movement ‘nothing about us without us’ (Charlton, 1998). Ensuring that the views, perspectives and experiences of people with disabilities are heard – and they are not written about merely as ‘subjects of interest’ - will help avoid the reproduction of ableist and paternalistic approaches towards people with disabilities. Co-producing research on disability with people with disability can also help produce more impactful research which has the potential to shape how parties themselves might transform to become more accessible. Making parties accessible in a meaningful way requires the participation and engagement of people with disabilities themselves, many of whom have over the years developed and tested approaches to accessibility.

The disability population is growing, and it is important for political parties that wish to engage with and represent the whole community to understand how best to engage and facilitate the participation of this marginalized group. More broadly, political parties which are fully accessible benefit everyone. For example, changes to the length or timing of meetings, whether they are organized online, and the opportunity for job-sharing benefits people with disabilities as well as those with caring responsibilities. Political scientists and party scholars have an opportunity to map, examine and analyze the relationship between disability and political parties, to help transform politics to become more accessible for all.

**Conclusion**

While a small but growing number of political scientists are seeking to examine the links between disability and politics, there remains much to do in terms of theorizing and analyzing how people with disabilities perceive, experience and are treated by political parties. Why people with disabilities and issues of accessibility fly under the radar when it comes to political analysis and the practice of politics, might perhaps best be explained by a combination of ambivalence, lack of knowledge, and the continued marginalization and stigmatization that surrounds disability. Such stigma means that many people simply feel uncomfortable discussing disability (Simplican, 2015), thereby reinforcing ableist cultures in which people with disabilities are viewed negatively (Campbell, 2009).

This article has called for a new research agenda focused on the relationship between disability and political parties. The potential role parties can play in facilitating people with disabilities to participate in politics is significant: it is vital that we understand the extent to which people with disabilities feel encouraged and enabled to join and become active members, as well as to think through how parties can be transformed to become more inclusive for all. Recognizing the dearth of research in this area, and following the strategy of other scholars who have examined the experiences of other marginalized groups (cf feminist institutionalists), this article developed a framework for analyzing the formal approaches to accessibility by identifying three key indicators - codification of participation, recognition of shared interests and issues, and political recruitment strategies.

Applying the framework to eight parties across four countries revealed very little attention paid to disability or accessibility in terms of formal rules and processes. Although there are several party and electoral systems in operation across our four country case studies, it is striking how few examples there are of political parties institutionalizing or codifying the rules to ensure and improve the political participation of people with disabilities. The UK, appears, at least from this initial exploratory study, to be relatively well-advanced on this issue – something which perhaps could partly be explained by the long-standing and well-organized disability rights movement in the UK (Campbell and Oliver, 2013) but is certainly a fruitful area for future research. Parties have an important role to play in enabling people with disabilities to participate - mandating accessibility and codifying the rules surrounding engagement in party constitutions is one step, another would be to set up and help resource disability groups and caucuses. Given that people with disabilities constitute a sizable (and growing) proportion of the population, and that they are often economically and politically marginalized, it is essential that political parties pay attention to facilitating and enabling their greater participation.

This article has highlighted a range of research questions and puzzles which it would be fruitful to examine, emphasizing the range of methods required as well as the importance of co-production. People with disabilities constitute a distinct social group, but the heterogeneity of the group should not overlooked, either in terms of impairment type which may result in different experiences and accessibility requirements, but also in terms of gender, race, class, religion and so on. Analyzing how parties formally approach people with disabilities and matters of accessibility is of course only the first step in fully understanding the relationship between disability and political parties. Future research also needs to take account of informal norms and cultures which shape the everyday experiences and interactions people with disabilities have with political parties. Given we know that people with disabilities are amongst the world’s most politically, economically and socially marginalized, it is necessary for both scholars and practitioners alike to pay greater attention to how party politics can become more accessible for all.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and Editors of the journal, and participants at the panels on disability at the 2024 APSA virtual conference for their thoughtful, helpful and encouraging feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

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1. Any constitution not available via the party website was collected from the database hosted by Georgia Kernell <https://www.georgiakernell.org/party-constitutions> [accessed 10.4.23] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Canadian Conservatives are the result of a 2003 merger between two parties, during the merger debates the newly established party voted against having a youth wing see Thompson, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For further details see the group’s website <https://www.nswlaborenabled.com/make-social-housing-accessible> [accessed 10.13.24] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For further details see the group’s website <https://queenslandlabor.org/members/get-involved/equity-groups/> [accessed 11.13.24] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For full details see their website <https://www.nswlaborenabled.com/model-clauses> [accessed 11.2.24] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Disability Labour’s website <https://disabilitylabour.org.uk/blogs/> [accessed 11.1.24] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Details available via the group’s Facebook website <https://www.facebook.com/LaborEnabled> [accessed 11.2.24] [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Australia Labor, New Zealand Labor, UK Labour. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For more information on the NZ Election Access Fund see the following website <https://elections.nz/getting-involved/election-access-fund/> [Accessed 12.19.2024] [↑](#footnote-ref-9)