



Ableist institutions and party selection processes: Exploring the political recruitment of disabled candidates

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Political recruitment
Candidates
Disability
Accessibility

ABSTRACT

Political parties in the UK and elsewhere have, to varying degrees, tried to diversify the pool of candidates from which they can select. Attempts to eradicate the range of institutional and cultural barriers experienced by candidates from under-represented groups, such as women and racially minoritized communities, are beginning to bear fruit. However, less attention has been paid to the specific processes and norms which might make it harder for disabled people to get selected as candidates for elected office. Accordingly, this study takes the UK as its case study to address two inter related questions: 1) what are the political parties doing to make candidate selection more accessible for disabled people?; and 2) what are the experiences of disabled people who participate in the candidate selection process? Drawing upon qualitative analysis of formal party rules and processes, alongside interviews undertaken with over 80 disabled candidates, politicians, and party activists from across the political spectrum, we find a great deal of variation in party approaches. We also identify gaps between formal rules adopted to ensure accessibility and the experiences of disabled candidates. Along the way we also note some of the methodological and empirical challenges of studying candidate selection processes in relation to disability.

1. Introduction

Disabled people are amongst the most politically, economically, and socially disadvantaged groups (Katsui, 2021). Despite the difficulties of gathering quantitative data related to disability and politics (Schur et al., 2013), several studies identify that disabled people are under-represented in elected office (see D'Aubin and Stienstra, 2004; Guldvik et al., 2013; Sackey, 2015; Langford and Levesque, 2017; Evans and Reher, 2022, 2023, 2024; Waltz and Schippers, 2021).¹ Disabled people constitute 1 in 6 of the world's population (WHO, 2023), yet parliaments tend to include very few, if any, politicians who publicly identify as disabled. This is symptomatic of a wider problem – that electoral and representative politics do not work very well for disabled people (Evans and Reher, 2024). While we know that disabled people are less likely to turn out to vote (Schur et al., 2013; Teglbjærg et al., 2022), and that disabled candidates and politicians experience a range of obstacles (Evans and Reher, 2022; Friedman and Scotch, 2025), we know little about the in-between stage – the candidate selection process.

What role do political parties play in facilitating or inhibiting the selection of disabled candidates? *How* do disabled party activists perceive and experience the candidate selection process? What are some possible explanations for *why* there appear to be so few disabled candidates? This article addresses these questions by advancing an Ableist Institutions framework to help examine disability and candidate selection (Evans and Reher, 2024). It then provides a case study analysis of disability and candidate selection in Britain. Our research expands existing approaches to the study of candidate selection by introducing new empirical material and theoretical frameworks that can help explore an under-represented group within studies of political recruitment: disabled people.

We begin with a brief review of the political recruitment scholarship on the selection of candidates from marginalised groups, paying particular attention to the Feminist Institutionalism literature, before introducing our framework for identifying and analysing ableism, and our methods. We then use this framework to help examine and explain the role political parties play in facilitating or inhibiting the selection of

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¹ Language choices surrounding disability differ according to context. As scholars based in the UK, we use disability first terminology. This approach is the stated preference of the British disability rights movement who use it to emphasise that it is society which disables individuals (Morris, 2001).

disabled candidates, as well as how disabled party activists perceive and experience the candidate selection process.

2. The political recruitment of traditionally marginalised groups

Candidate selection processes can help or hinder the selection of those from traditionally marginalised groups (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). For instance, specially designed training schemes, soft targets for shortlisting, or quotas for selection can all, to varying degrees, help bring about greater diversity amongst election candidates (Lovenduski, 2005; Siavelis, 2012). Concomitantly, many of the barriers that candidates from under-represented groups often face are located within political parties. Parties sometimes choose (and are sometimes forced) to adapt their rules and norms to rethink *whom* they are selecting and *how* they are selecting their candidates, to address questions of under (and over) representation of different social groups (Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015): this is critical because parties are often the most important gatekeepers to elected office (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2019). Candidate selection processes tend to be deeply gendered and racialised processes (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995), especially within parties that advocate socially conservative policies (Debus and Himmelrath, 2024), with white wealthy men comprising the majority of candidates selected in competitive (and indeed even non-competitive) elections (Murray, 2014; Akhtar and Peace, 2019).

How to deal with the over-selection of traditionally privileged groups is difficult. Some studies have found centralised and exclusive processes (e.g. quotas) are the most helpful strategy for increasing numbers of women candidates (Hinojosa, 2012), whereas others have found that despite the introduction of such formalised and centralised processes, informal patterns of patronage and masculine cultures uphold the dominance of men and male candidates (Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015; Medeiros et al., 2019). Comparative research on the UK, Australia and the US has found that inter-party dynamics mean that centre-left parties are incentivised to select greater numbers of ethnic minority candidates and find it easier to do so than centre-right parties as there is a larger supply pool of aspirant candidates (Farrer and Zingher, 2018).

Feminist Institutionalism, which argues for the importance of understanding the subtle interplay between formal rules and processes and the informal norms and cultures, has helped reveal and explain the persistent or ‘sticky’ nature of gendered institutions (Kenny, 2014; Mackay et al., 2010; Krook and Mackay, 2010). Feminist Institutionalists have identified the complex interplay between the supply of, and demand for, candidates from under-represented groups – for example, potential candidates might choose not to pursue elected office for fear of how they might be perceived or treated by party gatekeepers (Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015; Piscopo and Kenny, 2020; Gatto and Wylie, 2022; Reiser, 2024). Drawing on these important insights, Evans and Reher (2024) developed the idea of Ableist Institutions to capture these dynamics in relation to disability. In the following section we explain and further delineate this concept to help us understand the ways in which disability and ableism shapes candidate selection.

3. Ableist institutions

Ableism emerged from the disability rights movement to capture how society idealizes, prioritizes and rewards non-disabled people, while disabled people are often presented as relationally inferior and as a problem population requiring management (Campbell, 2009; Goodley, 2014; Wolbring, 2012). Disabled people are obviously a heterogeneous social group (as are all social groups), and while there are many types of impairments, some visible and some invisible, all disabled people exist within ableist societies in which disability is presented as a negative.

Ableist Institutions exclude or marginalise disabled people either explicitly or implicitly. The concept captures the myriad ways in which disability (here understood as a socially produced phenomenon, in which society disables people with impairments - whether physical,

cognitive, psychological etc - through barriers, discrimination, stigma and negative stereotyping (Oliver, 1983)) interacts with both formal processes and rules, as well as informal cultures, norms, and practices, and, importantly, the gaps between the former and the latter (Evans and Reher, 2024). For example, political parties are not just ableist if they lack formal commitments and rules aimed to ensure that meetings take place in accessible buildings, but also if such formal commitments are at odds with the reality for disabled party members, who nonetheless may find themselves unable to attend local party events that are held upstairs in a building with no working lift or with no accessible toilet available.

Evans and Reher developed the concept of Ableist Institutions principally to analyse the experiences of disabled politicians within institutions which were not designed for disabled people, and which impacts upon their ability to carry out their representative duties (2024: 112). This work shows how issues specifically relating to questions of *accessibility* (e.g. buildings, printed material), *resourcing* (e.g. funding for specialist software, or personal assistants) and *culture* (e.g. debating norms, long hours and late nights) make the jobs of being a politician harder for disabled people. In this research we seek to expand and delineate this framework to apply it to the candidate selection process.

We combine insights on the types of barriers that make politics inaccessible for many disabled people with existing ways of analysing candidate selection processes. We develop a set of dimensions based on which parties’ formal selection processes and approaches to informal practices can be described and compared to disabled people’s experiences. Our first dimension, commitment to making the processes accessible, follows the key finding discussed above, that the political recruitment and representation process is frequently inaccessible for disabled people. We formulate a set of examples of how selection processes could be made more accessible.

For the second dimension, we draw upon Lovenduski’s (2005) tripartite approaches to increase the representation of under-represented groups: equality rhetoric, publicly encouraging those from under-represented groups to put themselves forward; equality promotion, offering training or mentorship schemes for targeted social groups; and equality guarantees, introducing aspirant quotas or candidate quotas for the under-represented groups. Finally, our third dimension draws on disability studies regarding the importance of co-production with disabled people, and the importance of centring disabled people in developing processes based on lived experience and lived expertise (Toombs, 1995; Knox et al., 2000).

These three dimensions enable us to analyse how far political parties facilitate or inhibit the selection of disabled candidates through their approaches to formal rules, informal practices and processes. They then allow us to compare these findings with the experiences and perceptions of disabled party activists. Ultimately, this will help us develop some possible explanations for *why* there appear to be so few disabled candidates. Our framework provides an important tool for studying both the formal processes and rules, while our interviews with disabled party members reveals the impact (or lack thereof) of processes on their perceptions and experiences. In Table 1 below we provide possible examples of how the indicators could work in practice, and one possible effect of such changes (recognising that each change might have multiple effects).

Table 1 illustrates dimensions for enabling accessible selection processes, along with examples of formal approaches to rules and processes, and informal practices, which will *potentially* improve the experiences and perceptions of aspirant disabled party members who might feel more encouraged and supported to put themselves forward. Changes to rules and processes are an important and necessary way to create change but unless they are accompanied by wider cultural change in which disabled people are valued, then any impact will be limited.

4. Methods

We adopt a single case study approach to provide an ‘intensive study’

Table 1

Framework for identifying and analysing ableism in candidate selection processes.

Dimensions of accessible and inclusive selection process	Examples of formal rules, actions, and activities	Examples of practices (informal culture)	Possible outcomes of institutional change
Commitment to make processes accessible	Formal rules concerning accessibility in party constitutions and selection rules. National, regional, and local party accessibility training events for selectorates. Funding provided from central to local parties for adjustments (incl. accessible venues).	Parties adapt to ensure that venues and processes are accessible, including for selections but also social activities. Parties adjust venues and processes to the needs of disabled individuals on an <i>ad hoc</i> basis. Parties, selectorates, or party members provide informal support for disabled aspirant candidates to make process accessible, e.g. financial, personal assistance through volunteers.	Disabled people are enabled to fully participate in local and national party events and selection processes. Disabled people can refer to formalised rules to challenge inaccessible processes. Potential disabled candidates are enabled to put themselves forward and are supported through the process.
Strategies for increasing the number of disabled candidates	Rhetorical commitment to increasing disabled candidates, e.g. in manifestos, speeches, published material (online and offline; internal and outward-facing). Targeted training events for potential disabled candidates. Mentoring schemes for aspirant disabled candidates. Additional financial resourcing to enable disabled people to put themselves forward (e.g. to pay for assistants or assistive technology). Adoption of quotas at the point of shortlisting or selection.	Support of disabled candidates by parties and the selectorate, e.g. by prioritising them over non-disabled candidates. Parties identify and encourage specific individual disabled people to put themselves forward. Informal mentoring, individual and/or group. Informal support through party volunteers. Parties normalize and promote the idea of disabled politicians.	Increases the likelihood that disabled people apply to be candidates. Increases chances of disabled politicians being selected. Creates community amongst disabled party members and helps address any shared concerns about the selection process. Provides individual support and guidance through the process – especially significant if the mentor is also disabled person. Reduces financial barriers for disabled aspirant candidates, which might encourage more disabled people to put themselves forward and/or increase their chances of being selected. Increases the number of disabled candidates elected.
Co-produced revisions to candidate	Require consultation of disabled party	Recognition and normalisation of the idea of	Enables disabled members to help shape processes.

Table 1 (continued)

Dimensions of accessible and inclusive selection process	Examples of formal rules, actions, and activities	Examples of practices (informal culture)	Possible outcomes of institutional change
selection processes	members or party disability groups about party constitution and selection rules. Consult disabled party members on any proposed changes to selection processes. Undertake disability audits of selection processes with disabled party members.	including disabled people as a specific group in any proposed changes to processes and rules. Parties promote the importance of accessibility and inclusion for disabled people amongst local parties.	Signals to disabled members that the party is committed to making processes accessible.

(Gerring, 2004) of Westminster candidate selection in Britain, which uses a single member plurality system. Party selectorates have a high degree of influence on who gets elected to Westminster – especially compared to open-list systems, where voters determine the ranking of candidates – by selecting candidates in winnable, competitive, or unwinnable seats (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Best and Maurizio, 2000). The process is often referred to as a ‘secret garden’ due to the importance of internal rules and informal practices (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988), which means that our approach of analysing both party rules and informal practices, and the experiences of disabled people is particularly useful.

Britain represents an interesting case for analysing the candidate selection process because access to politics for disabled people has been on the agenda for some time (House of Commons, 2010). Important steps towards greater accessibility have been taken: Britain is one of the few countries to have introduced (albeit temporarily) a targeted election fund to help disabled candidates meet the additional costs of putting themselves forward for election (Evans and Reher, 2022). Furthermore, all major parties have internal disability groups. Nevertheless, disabled people are still under-represented in Britain relative to the percentage of the population: there are currently only 13 self-declared disabled members of parliament (MPs), although this is relatively high compared with other countries (Evans, 2025). While the low numbers were relatively evenly spread across the two major parties before the 2024 election, after the 2024 election, 10 of the 13 disabled MPs are Labour (with 2 Liberal Democrats and 1 Conservative).²

We draw upon 82 semi-structured interviews undertaken with a diverse range of disabled politicians, candidates, aspirant candidates, party activists, and disability rights activists (see tables in the Appendix). One difficulty of doing research on disability is the reluctance of many to openly identify as disabled, often due to the stigma and discrimination (Schur et al., 2013). This is most obviously the case for those individuals with invisible impairments who can (sometimes) choose whether to disclose the fact they are disabled and can ‘pass’ as non-disabled. Therefore, we include those individuals who self-declare as disabled, both in the numbers of disabled MPs shown above and in our interviews. We recruited interviewees via the political parties, especially their internal disability groups, as well as by advertising on

² These numbers are based on our knowledge of MPs who have publicly declared that they are disabled. There is no official data collected by parliament or the political parties. It is possible that there are further disabled MPs who have either not identified as such publicly or whom we have missed in our data collection.

social media and via disability rights groups. We interviewed anyone from the groups listed above who self-identified as disabled and agreed to take part. Although not all our disabled interviewees had stood for selection as a Westminster candidate, all were actively involved in their parties and had views and perceptions of the selection process.

Interviewees were sent a detailed consent and information form in advance of the interview, which we talked through at the start of each interview. The interviews were conducted between 2019 and 2021 lasting between 30 min and 2 h: the first 51 interviews were conducted in-person; following the outbreak of COVID-19, the remainder were conducted online using videoconferencing software or over the telephone. How interviews are conducted can impact the quality (and quantity) of data captured (Gillham, 2005); our experience during the online interviews (conducted via Teams or Zoom), however, was that our interviewees had got very used to talking in that format, so we did not detect any meaningful differences in the quality or quantity of data.

The interviews were conducted over a long period of time (around 2.5 years), which can influence the types of topics covered and context within which the interviews occur (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Indeed, the substance and tone of the interviews shifted during and after COVID; as the world adapted to online working, many disabled people felt connected and able to participate in a way they had not previously (Evans and Reher, 2024). We interviewed people who had sought selection at the local, devolved, or national level, with some having had experience of multiple selection processes, including at more than one level. The contexts of the selection processes also vary over time: some participants had stood for selection very recently, whereas others' experience had dated back several years. As such, we do not draw specific or comparative conclusions about particular electoral contexts within Britain; rather, our aim is to gather a wide range of insights into the different ways in which parties commit to making selection processes accessible and more inclusive of disabled people, and how disabled people experience the process. All interviews were fully transcribed, and the data was analysed by initially taking notes on the main questions explored; we then grouped and coded the data by identifying categories and concepts, before drawing out overarching themes.

Of course, interviewing individuals about their experiences of selection processes only reveals part of the story. Interviewees may often have only partial recollections of their experiences and may be more likely to recall those which were difficult or in which they perceived that they had been treated unfairly (Gillham, 2005). To triangulate this data, we also interviewed party activists and representatives from disabled people's organisations and disability charities (the former are set up by and for disabled people). We also studied the formal rules and guidelines published by the main political parties in Britain – Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, and SNP (Scottish National Party) – to understand whether they made specific mention of disability or accessibility. While our interviewees provided us with information about party strategies to increase disability representation, we also searched the websites of the parties and their disability groups for further information on these. Below, we present our findings regarding each of the three dimensions outlined in our framework.

5. Dimension 1: commitment to accessibility

5.1. Formal rules, actions, and activities

All the parties have formal rules, policies and guidelines in place which signal their aim to make the selection processes accessible and inclusive. Yet sometimes the formal rules differ across documents. For

example, while the Conservative party's constitution does not mandate that meetings or events must be accessible,³ according to Conservative party rules regarding candidate selection, local associations must ensure that the process is 'inclusive' and 'free from discrimination', and that 'premises used for interviews are suitable for disabled access for the benefit of both applicants and members'.⁴ Labour's Procedural Guidelines for the Selection of Westminster Parliamentary Candidates require those running selection processes to 'comply with their duties to make reasonable adjustments for disabled members and candidates under the Equality Act 2010, including, where relevant, those required to ensure access to Party meetings and events which form part of this process'. The SNP's 2020 constitution requires 'that meetings of the party are held in appropriate and accessible venues' and 'provides funding for the reasonable costs required by disabled members to remove the barriers to equal participation in the activities of the Party'. For its selection processes, the party requires the Assessment Committee to include members with disability awareness.⁵

Beyond such formal rules, the parties also express their commitment to making the process accessible. For example, the Conservatives' 'Guide to Becoming a Candidate' encourages disabled applicants to contact the Candidates Team with specific concerns and assures them that they 'will make whatever reasonable adjustments we can to fit your personal circumstances. This includes any measures required at the venues for your Assessment Centre'.⁶ The Liberal Democrats state that they are 'absolutely committed to making the approvals process accessible to all applicants'.⁷ Indeed, the Liberal Democrats provide special training for those who want to serve on selection committees; moreover, each local party is expected to provide evidence that they are making 'sustained efforts' to improve the diversity of their membership prior to a Westminster selection process (Liberal Democrats: Preparing for Selections). Meanwhile, according to the SNP,⁸ the National Executive Committee (NEC) is responsible for developing a strategy to mainstream equality of opportunity for those from under-represented groups, with a particular focus on women, ethnic minorities and disabled members (p.111). The constitution specifies that those involved with candidate assessment must also include people with expertise in "the elimination of unconscious bias and disability awareness" (p.98).

5.2. Experiences of practices and informal norms

Despite formal commitments to make the selection process and the venues used accessible for disabled people, this was often not the case. We heard accounts of a lack of accessibility and reasonable adjustments at all stages of the selection process: several participants had been excluded from local party meetings because they had been held in

³ The constitution is freely available online <chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnbpcjpcglcfindmkaj/https://public.conservatives.com/organisation-department/202101/Conservative/Party/Constitution/as/amended/January/2021.pdf> [accessed 3.2.2025].

⁴ See Appendix 17 on 'Discrimination' <chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnbpcjpcglcfindmkaj/https://conservativepost.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Rules-for-the-Selection-of-Conservative-Party-Candidates-in-England-Wales-and-Northern-Ireland-2022-V1-1.pdf> [accessed 3.2.2025].

⁵ <https://worldofstuart.excellentcontent.com/uploads/SNPConstitution2020.pdf>.

⁶ Conservative Party. 2021. Guide to Becoming a Conservative Party Candidate. <https://public.conservatives.com/static/documents/candidates/Guide%20to%20becoming%20a%20Conservative%20Party%20Parliamentary%20Candidate-HH.pdf> [accessed 19th August 2024]. Assessment Centres are part of the selection process], where parties assess aspirant candidates' skills and competencies.

⁷ <https://www.libdems.org.uk/become-a-candidate/apply-to-be-a-parliamentary-candidate>.

⁸ <https://worldofstuart.excellentcontent.com/uploads/SNPConstitution2020.pdf>.

inaccessible venues, thus making it harder for them to build networks and garner support ahead of selection meetings (P7, P10). One aspirant Labour candidate did not receive any support even after explicitly asking for it:

When the general election was called [...] one of my first actions was to contact the Labour Party, the General Secretary, to say what funds are available for disabled candidates, because if they'd come back and said 'yes there are funds for X,Y,Z' I may have then made a decision to put in an application for some other seats. [...] I put in several calls to the General Secretary, and emails, and I had no response. (P23)

This quote demonstrates the additional labour that disabled people must undertake just to be able to consider standing for selection, and how a lack of effort by the party – in this case, responding to the query in the first place – can prevent them from putting themselves forward. One interviewee standing for selection for the Conservatives explained that while he didn't necessarily feel discriminated against, he had also never received any targeted support or offers of reasonable adjustments that he would have expected 'outside of politics' (P31).

Beyond a lack of basic accessibility measures and adjustments, many interview participants perceived the selection process to be stressful and difficult to navigate. The process requires a high degree of time commitment, presence at meetings and events, and intense campaigning, which tends to necessitate travelling and physical effort. In many cases, the issues are directly linked to the ways in which parties conduct the selection process. Several interviewees explained how they had felt traditional methods of campaigning, such as door-knocking, going to visit as many members as possible during the selection process, and being highly visible across the constituency, to be particularly difficult for disabled candidates as one Liberal Democrat described:

I couldn't go out canvassing for more than an hour at a time when I used a stick because I would just hurt too much. My wrists would hurt, my ankles would hurt, my knees would hurt. Once I was in a wheelchair, things got significantly worse because you can't get to doorsteps, you can't get up the steps, got to go on the path and the whole, you can't reach a bell to ring, which means you've always got to have somebody with you and that just wastes time. (P4)

One participant trying to get selected expressed concern that data was being collected by Labour about the number of door knockings completed during selection processes, which he worried could lead others to think that he wasn't putting in enough effort (P35). Another shared that 'in terms of going out to do door knocking, it's a very daunting experience, it takes a lot of guts. If you have a disability, it increases your level of disadvantage.' (P24) The expectation that candidates will engage in regular door knocking was also discussed by another interviewee (Labour) who had been asked about why she had not been out canvassing during her selection process:

I'd been using a stick for a number of years because I'm not very steady on my feet. One of the medications I'm on affects my balance as well. [...] I decided I'd use a scooter but it took me a month of the scooter being parked in the hall to get the nerve to use it. [...] I then decided I needed a hoist because then I could be completely independent [...] but all of that costs and it was so that I could go canvassing. (P41)

This individual ended up spending her own money to get a scooter and then a hoist so that she could canvass, which underlines how seriously individuals perceive the party to take this one activity – not just during the election campaign but already during the selection process.

Hustings, where candidates standing for selection address the party selectorate and debate with each other, can also present additional barriers. These are often timed, and a reasonable adjustment would be to extend the time for candidates who require it due to an impairment. Instead, we learned from one candidate who 'had mentored a few people

with speech impairments, [...] that their speeches were either not timed or the person stopped the clock' (P36), neither of which has the effect of placing them on a level playing field. Hustings remain important in the election campaign, and the prospect of having to participate in them prevents some disabled prospective candidates from putting themselves forward in the first place. One interviewee who was active with the Conservative Disability Group described the ways in which they worked with disabled party members to enable individuals to go for candidate selection:

I work with a fantastic young man who has autism [...] but he really, really struggles with being put on the spot in front of a massive group of people. So, he'd never put himself forward before because just the threat of a hustings would drive him insane [...] He could do everything else but because he couldn't commit to a hustings [...] So, we worked with his local association, spoke to the other candidates that were also running in the election, spoke to their teams and said, 'This is the situation. Could we run the hustings in a way where all the questions are pre-submitted?' (P66)

This level of support is resource-intensive: it requires volunteers to work with individuals and local associations to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made – in this instance changing the ways in which hustings were conducted. While this type of adjustment would not require the explicit approval of the other candidates, having their cooperation can help make the reasonable adjustment effective. It also demonstrates how disabled candidates often cannot rely on reasonable adjustments and support being provided but depend on the initiative and support of others within and beyond their party, which introduces the burden of unpredictability.

Timing can be a crucial factor. Election campaigns are intense periods for any candidate, but disabled people are often faced with additional obstacles which need to be considered and require more preparation and planning. One interviewee recounted that he had asked for the selection to be held earlier because if he were to make a real impact then he would need to have a longer 'lead in' (P19) – the Conservative party granted his request. Similarly, having a longer selection period can be helpful. This may not always be possible, especially when an election is called early and with less time to prepare (e.g. the 2024 General Election).

Overall, these accounts from aspirant candidates across different parties illustrate that despite parties' commitments, the way selection processes are conducted are often not accessible. To change this, the accessibility policies that are already in place must be consistently implemented and followed, but this is not sufficient: it also requires modifying practices to make them accessible, e.g. changing the rules of hustings; rethinking the ways in which selection candidates are expected to campaign, e.g. introducing alternatives to canvassing; and providing resources and financial support, e.g. to make buildings accessible or to provide assistance or mobility devices to candidates.

6. Dimension 2: strategies for increasing the number of disabled candidates

6.1. Formal rules, actions, and activities

While all parties have expressed a desire to recruit more disabled candidates, thus engaging in *equality rhetoric* with respect to disability (Lovenduski, 2005), this is often in the context of a wider push for increased diversity. For example, Labour's Rule Book states that "the Party will seek to select more candidates who reflect the full diversity of our society in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation and disability, and to increase working class representation".⁹

⁹ <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Rule-Book-2024.pdf> [accessed 27th January 2025].

Initiatives to encourage disabled people to consider putting themselves forward as a candidate or targeted support to help them get selected – i.e., *equality promotion* strategies (Lovenduski, 2005) – are few and far between, and more likely to be run by internal disability groups rather than by the national party. Some examples of strategies to specifically target disabled members include the Liberal Democrats, who require local party executives to contact specified internal party organisations – including the Liberal Democrat Disability Association – to notify them that a selection is taking place and to ask them to encourage qualified members to apply.¹⁰ The Liberal Democrats also run a bespoke mentoring scheme for candidates from under-represented groups as part of their Diversity programme.¹¹ While Labour has run sessions through its Future Candidates Programme aimed at disabled members, we could not find evidence within either Labour, Conservatives or SNP of systematic or sustained efforts to train up disabled members to become candidates.

Policies such as quotas, which go a step further than equality rhetoric or promotion, aim to *guarantee* (Lovenduski, 2005) the inclusion of disabled people, either at the point of selection or election. Under UK law, political parties can restrict shortlists either on the basis of sex or disability; however, parties are not allowed to restrict the shortlist to disabled candidates with particular types of impairments as this would constitute disability discrimination (EHRC, 2018). Parties have a certain degree of latitude when it comes to organising their candidate selection processes, with some being more open than others (Hazan and Rahat, 2010). The Conservative Party has in its past experimented with ways of diversifying their candidates. Under David Cameron's leadership (2005–2016) the party introduced the use of open primaries both as a means of empowering citizens as well as responding to demands for better representativeness (Alexandre-Collier, 2016). Ahead of the 2010 election the party leadership promoted an 'A List' of 'talented' candidates, at least 50 % of whom were to be women, as well as including a number of ethnic minorities and disabled people, from which local parties were encouraged to select. From that list at least one disabled candidate, Paul Maynard, went on to be elected as an MP.¹² Due to disquiet in the party – largely driven by mistrust at the central party's intervention in local party matters – the A list was dropped.

The Labour Party have traditionally been more comfortable using more formalised mechanisms to guarantee the election of under-represented groups than the Conservatives. For example, the party have used All-Women Shortlists on and off for around 20 years: they recently stopped using them following legal advice which suggested that they may be in breach of the Equality Act 2010 because the majority of their MPs are currently women.¹³ Labour has periodically debated whether to adopt ethnic minority shortlists and the party currently designates black and minority ethnic (BAME) representation priority selections (Labour Party, 2022), and Disability Labour have called for the party to use all disabled shortlists, arguing:

Historically, neither the Party nor many CLPs [constituency Labour Parties] have encouraged disabled members to become candidates and councillors. This has meant that those who have decided they want to stand for public office have found that it's been an uphill battle, with many obstacles. (Disability Labour, 2020)

Although Labour's selection guidelines for the shortlisting of candidates state that the official in charge 'must ensure that proper

consideration is given to any nominated candidates with a disability and to Black Asian Minority Ethnic and LGBTQ + candidates', guaranteed interviews and quotas on shortlists only exist for women and BAME candidates.¹⁴

Like the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats traditionally eschewed the use of quotas to address issues of under-representation, despite their lack of gender and ethnic diversity (Evans, 2011). However, in recent years there has been a turnaround in terms of their diversity: following the 2024 election women make up 44 % of their parliamentary party, while 5 of their 72 MPs are ethnic minorities (7 %). The party's published rules state that during the selection of Westminster Parliamentary candidates any local party should identify whether disabled people – among other groups with protected characteristics – are under-represented and, on this basis, must consider whether they want to adopt an all-disabled shortlist or reserve a space on the shortlist for a candidate with a disability.¹⁵ The SNP's long-term strategy is to recruit and retain more members from under-represented groups while also reserving the right to use 'hard targets' or other measures to ensure there is a 'balanced' list of candidates (p.112).

6.2. Experiences of practices and informal norms

Given the pervasive nature of stigma and discrimination experienced by disabled people, we should not be surprised to find evidence of this within candidate selection processes. However, we did hear from individuals who had benefited from the parties' attempts to increase the number of disabled candidates. Several described how their local party had tried to be more flexible in their approach to the process to help them navigate the selection process. Several were encouraged to stand for selection, primarily because the party recognised the individuals' skills and potential, but also to have more candidates and representatives who could speak to, and share the experiences of, disabled voters. One former Labour candidate recounted how she was encouraged to apply for a winnable seat further away from her home, which is very common especially in general elections, but it was not possible for her due to the physical and financial barriers associated with travelling and relocating:

Even though there was the will and the recognition that they thought I'd be a very good candidate, some of those physical barriers for a disabled person to relocate to a different place from where they would normally live, to go through that selection process. And the cost of doing that because I would have found it too tiring to have commuted every day to that place and to have the energy to then go and canvas members, while managing a full-time job, was too demanding and I didn't have the resource to do that. (P36)

She was later selected in a constituency closer to her home, but this was not a winnable seat. This example illustrates a specific challenge parties may face when trying to increase the representation of disabled people in politics in the context of a first-past-the-post electoral system.

Despite several accounts of encouragement and support by parties, many of our participants perceived that they had been treated unfairly, discouraged, or even discriminated against in the selection process. Several told us that they experienced outright prejudice and hostility from individuals in their parties during the selection process, which constituted a psychological burden and may in some cases have prevented them from being selected. Such experiences, while not shared by all participants, were evident across all parties. One long-serving local

¹⁰ <https://www.libdems.org.uk/preparing-for-selections>.

¹¹ See <https://www.libdems.org.uk/members-area/candidate-diversity> [accessed 29th January 2024].

¹² <https://www.channel4.com/news/articles/politics/david%2Bcameronaposs%2Ba%2Blist%2Bmps/3640687.html> [accessed 5th January 2024].

¹³ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/labour-drops-use-of-all-women-shortlists-general-election-legal-advice-unlawful_uk_622226bfe4b03bc49a9a2420 [accessed 12th June 2024].

¹⁴ <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Procedural-Guidelines-for-the-Selection-of-Westminster-Parliamentary-Candidates-v2.pdf>.

¹⁵ https://www.libdems.org.uk/fileadmin/groups/2_Federal_Party/Documents/Members_Area/Selection_Rules/Rules_for_the_Selection_of_Westminster_Parliamentary_Candidates_in_England_-_full_process_Revised_July_22_v1_0.docx_2_.pdfpage4.

councillor representing a rural ward left the Conservatives after they deselected her, in her view because of her disability and the fact that she could not walk around the constituency to undertake canvassing (P15). An aspirant candidate for the Labour party recounted experiencing similar hostility:

It was communicated that they didn't want a disabled candidate. I got one set of information, other candidates got a different set of, you know, information and it was a very aggressive campaign to sabotage my selection. I won the selection easily 'cause I had the support of the members 'cause I'd stood there in the 2017 campaign and reduced the margin to 92 but it has been incredibly hostile. (P37)

We also heard from interviewees who felt that they had to 'overcome' their disability to demonstrate to the electorate that they wouldn't be a 'risky' candidate because they were disabled (P9). One Conservative former parliamentary candidate with a visual impairment was asked about being disabled and how he would manage to canvass during his selection meeting, but the Chair of the selection panel disqualified the question (P5).

Amongst the Liberal Democrats, several reported feeling that others in the party were patronising or had an overly paternalistic approach to them because they were disabled. One recalled that during his selection process 'a small minority of older people felt that I'd been coerced into it' and that they did not really think he understood what he was doing (P21). Another issue with which many disabled people are regularly faced are people asking intrusive questions and challenging the nature and severity of their impairments. One interviewee from the SNP recalled that party members were asking candidates 'what their disability is' during the online hustings (P72), which was in response to the party's decision to ensure that disabled and BAME candidates topped a number of regional lists. Similarly, another recalled being asked personal questions about her impairments during her selection process (P71). These accounts demonstrate that despite efforts to increase disabled representation that we observed across parties, the reality is that disabled aspirant candidates still frequently experienced ableist, hostile, and discriminatory attitudes and behaviour during the selection process, which may deter people from putting themselves forward, or prevent them from being selected.

7. Dimension 3: Co-production with disabled people

The role of the parties' disability groups in promoting accessibility and inclusiveness and in developing and providing support for disabled people considering putting themselves forward for selection is notable across the parties. The Conservative Disability Group (CDG) developed a Disability Toolkit, described as "a 'two-in-one' guide aimed at both potential candidates and associations."¹⁶ The guide is designed to dispel the myths surrounding the roles of elected politicians and the process of putting oneself forward for election, while at the same time informing local associations about what they can do to help support disabled aspirant candidates. Disability Labour have published the Disabled Activists' Guide to becoming a Councillor, although they have not produced an equivalent for candidate selection for Westminster elections. The Liberal Democrat Health and Care Association and the Liberal Democrat Disability Association jointly developed a 'Process for Supporting Disabled Candidates' document.¹⁷

Innovations and support for disabled candidates in the Conservative party have been developed not by the central party but by CDG, who have produced a range of resources and put in place several support structures for aspiring disabled candidates. Interviews with those

involved with CDG revealed that it was during COVID-19 that the group underwent something of a renewal with many more people attending virtual meetings and events. This illustrates not only that online meetings can remove some of the barriers to participation in party meetings for (some) disabled people, but also suggests that it was reflective of a moment in which many people were thinking about health and disability in a way that generated demand for these types of groups. It is surely not a coincidence that the toolkit emerged when disabled party members were able to participate more fully, as virtual meetings are generally much more accessible for disabled people and allow people from different places to come together. Activists involved with developing the Disability Toolkit described why it was necessary:

it's basically a guide of saying to our associations, 'This is how you should behave,' and, 'This is how things should be done.' Because I think, quite often, in this sort of woke culture that we live in, a lot of people are so terrified of saying the wrong thing that they say nothing. (P65)

The motivation for developing the toolkit was to enable and encourage disabled people to consider putting themselves forward for elected office. However, and as the above quotation indicates, there was also a recognition that local associations may not be doing or saying anything to help disabled people get selected. This example reflects the Conservative's approach to accessibility whereby responsibility for enabling disabled people to run for office is assumed by disabled activists within the party, rather than constituting part of a formalised and centralised strategy. CDG self-describes as an 'independent organization', one which is supported, but crucially not funded, by the central party. Compared to the CDG, the focus of Disability Labour, who are affiliated with the Labour Party but an independent organisation, appears to be on policy, especially disability policy, and advocating for disabled members within the party – for example, raising awareness of the lack of accessibility at party conference¹⁸ – rather than on political recruitment.

8. Observations across the political parties

Parties use a variety of methods to encourage the selection of disabled candidates, making it difficult to identify which party is 'ahead' when it comes to accessible selection processes. While some have relied on disabled activists in their party to develop resources for supporting aspirant disabled candidates (Conservatives), others have introduced formal mechanisms to enable local parties to guarantee the selection of disabled candidates through the use of shortlists (Liberal Democrats), while yet others have formally stated a commitment to increasing the number of disabled politicians but have yet to develop any explicit strategies (Labour). It is interesting to note that Labour, the party which pioneered all-women shortlists, have yet to develop a clear and targeted set of rules or approaches on this issue, despite having historically adopted the most detailed set of disability policies as part of their election manifestos (Evans, 2023) and currently having the highest number of disabled MPs. Moreover, the centralised selection process adopted by the Labour party means that disability activists are less easily able to intervene to help provide support and/or shape the selection process on the ground, something disabled party activists are more able to do within the decentralised Conservative selection process.

We also observe some variation in interviewees' perceptions across the parties. These may not necessarily reflect absolute differences in inaccessibility, effort, and prejudice, but rather appear to be linked to differences in expectations. Our interviews with Conservative party members yielded several positive accounts in which local associations had been flexible and made reasonable adjustments to ensure that the

¹⁶ <https://www.conservativedisabilitygroup.com/ability2win-disability-toolkit> [accessed 12th June 2024].

¹⁷ <https://www.disabilitylibdems.org.uk/news/article/process-for-supporting-disabled-candidates>.

¹⁸ See Disability Labour statement <https://disabilitylabour.org.uk/blog/posts/press-release/> [accessed 29th January 2024].

selection process was accessible. Various Conservative interviewees described how the party had been receptive to their requests for adjustments to be made. Conservative interviewees who had sought selection at both the local and national levels described how they had received positive support from local party associations, although most did qualify that this support was not *because* they were disabled. At the same time, we also heard several instances of barriers and discrimination, as explained above. However, the overall rather positive tenor may to some degree be bolstered by generally lower expectations about the party's willingness to provide adjustments etc., considering that equality is not as engrained in the party's ideology as compared to parties on the Left. Moreover, the Conservative party have not made the kinds of salient pledges towards inclusivity that some other parties have made, such as Labour.

Debates concerning identity and social group representation constitute a much larger focus of Labour ideology. Accordingly, amongst the disabled Labour party members we interviewed we found a greater number who viewed being disabled as a salient part of their identity, leading them to consider their experiences as part of a collective problem rather than as individual or isolated occurrences. There was a general agreement amongst our Labour interviewees that the party had not made sufficient progress on making the selection process accessible. One participant noted that pledges made in the Labour manifesto regarding the accessibility of selection processes had not been delivered (P36).

The Liberal Democrats have developed a relatively clear approach to increasing the number of disabled candidates – although no data is available on how many all-disabled shortlists have been used, bar one used to select the candidate for the Eastbourne Parliamentary seat in which the sitting (disabled) MP was re-selected (Evans and Reher, 2024). Indeed, when asked about all-disabled shortlist, one interviewee expressed surprise as he hadn't heard anything about it (P1). Amongst our Liberal Democrat participants, we found varied experiences, and on the whole there was a reluctance to criticise the central party. This is unsurprising as active Liberal Democrats may feel quite defensive given the party has fewer resources to tackle these kinds of issues in the same way as the larger parties. Some interviewees were very comfortable asking for the party to make adjustments on their behalf: 'I'm very, very assertive in what my needs are because I used to be a disability consultant, I was a trustee for the RNID I advised so, I worked with John Major's government to get the DDA passed.'¹⁹ (P42).

Of all the parties, we conducted the fewest number of interviews with SNP activists. Although we supplemented this by interviewing several disability activists based in Scotland who appeared to be quite closely aligned with the party, we must be very cautious about any conclusions drawn. What we found during our interviews was a mixed set of experiences, although all our interviewees drew attention to some instances which they perceived to be discriminatory or disadvantageous during their selection processes.

While some patterns and differences between parties did emerge in our interviews, we refrain from concluding that any one party is more or less accessible or supportive of selecting disabled candidates. Similar examples of barriers and prejudicial behaviour exist across the parties, and we do not have sufficient data to draw robust conclusions about the severity and frequency of negative experiences. This scarcity of data is one major obstacle in the study of disability and candidate selection, and politics more broadly, and we discuss it in more detail below.

9. Discussion and conclusions

Disabled people are under-represented in elected office, but we do not yet fully understand the causes and the roles that different factors

play in it. Political parties are important gatekeepers, especially in single-member district electoral systems where they decide which candidates stand in which constituencies. The selection process in which candidates are nominated is thus crucial, and a potential stage at which disabled people have a higher probability of dropping off the recruitment ladder – both because of the barriers they experience during it and because, in anticipation of them, some might not stand for selection in the first place.

Analysing candidate selection through the lens of Ableist Institutions helps us uncover the ways in which political institutions and processes are inaccessible for disabled people. Since disabled people have historically not been considered capable of, or entitled to, accessing political office in the same ways as non-disabled people, political processes were never designed with their reality and needs in mind. Consequently, making the recruitment process accessible requires intentional actions and changes to the status-quo. Using and delineating the Ableist Institutions framework, we developed three dimensions based on which candidate selection processes can be analysed, compared, and evaluated.

Some issues that disabled people face in the recruitment process are similar to those experienced by people from other minoritized groups, most importantly prejudice and negative attitudes. Some issues like financial constraints and time commitments are also relevant for working-class aspirant candidates or people with caring responsibilities, who are most often women. At the same time, many of the barriers are unique in the sense that disabled people's ability to put themselves forward for selection is often dependent on very specific decisions about accessibility and adjustments. For example, if party meetings, and especially selection events, are not held in accessible venues, some disabled people will be categorically excluded and therefore prevented from putting themselves forward.

We found that all major parties in Britain are aware that disabled people are currently under-represented among their candidates and elected representatives and have taken various steps to address this issue. In other words, it is not so much a question of *whether* they are doing anything to tackle the barriers to elected office for disabled people, but *what* they are doing. Disabled people are receiving more attention as potential candidates and representatives by political parties in Britain compared to many other countries. A crucial role is being played by the parties' disability groups; they often place disability and accessibility on the agenda and support parties by developing materials and guidance, reflecting the principle of co-production. British parties stand out internationally by having these groups, although there is variation between the parties in how active and influential they are. This, in turn, seems to be one of the causes of differences between the parties' efforts to make the selection process more accessible and inclusive.

Although all the parties we examine have been taking steps to make the process more accessible, as required by the Equality Act 2010, the disabled people we interviewed who had stood for selection – sometimes successfully and sometimes not – could all tell of instances where they faced barriers. These are often linked to inaccessible spaces or activities, parties' unwillingness to make changes to allow them to take part, and in several cases prejudicial and hostile behaviour. We did not detect obvious differences in these barriers between parties – rather, candidates from the different parties often evaluated their experiences differently depending on their expectations. For example, the smaller parties were not expected to be able to spend as many resources as the larger parties, and left-wing parties with explicit pledges to be more inclusive and diverse were evaluated more critically. At the same time, many of our interviewees also recounted positive experiences of support, flexibility, and encouragement.

To enable us to more fully understand the causes and mechanisms that explain the under-representation of disabled people in politics, and particularly the role of selection processes therein, it is crucial that we collect more and better data. Political institutions and researchers alike

¹⁹ The Disability Discrimination Act, 1995 for full details of the Act see <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1995/50/contents>.

tend to either not have disability on their radar as a relevant demographic, or they are hesitant to ask as it is perceived to be sensitive and stigmatising information. This, in turn, makes it difficult to identify the stages at which under-representation originates. For example, are disabled people already under-represented among the party memberships, meaning there are fewer in the supply pool? Or are they less likely to be selected as candidates despite being equally engaged in parties? Are they less likely to stand for election in winnable seats? We must start collecting this information. Based on our experience of interviewing disabled (aspirant) candidates, they are frequently keen to talk about their experiences, recognising that this may ultimately help make politics more accessible.

Drawing on the lived experience of disability of our interviewees we conclude this article with a list of potential recommendations relating to our three dimensions for making candidate selection processes more accessible. Parties should hold all meetings in accessible venues with accessible facilities and ensure that candidate approval and selection days are fully accessible. Each branch or association should appoint a local or regional disability officer. Furthermore, they should run internal campaigns to raise awareness of disability and accessibility among party members and undertake internal reviews involving disabled members to identify instances and patterns of disability discrimination. These actions and processes will help normalize accessibility, as well as signalling to disabled people that they will be welcomed and included.

To encourage disabled party members to put themselves forward, parties should run regular targeted training sessions. It is also imperative for parties to review traditional expectations for party members and ensure that there are a variety of activities that can be undertaken by people with a range of different impairments, e.g. online canvassing

rather than door-knocking, and to ensure adequate support is provided for disabled people who want to undertake particular forms of activity such as door-knocking. Extra support should be provided for disabled candidates depending on their needs and requirements—this could e.g. include extra resources targeted at seats in which disabled candidates are selected. To promote a better understanding of why disabled people are under-represented in politics parties need to collect and publish data on the number disabled members and candidates. Further steps could include considering disability targets for numbers and/or percentages of disabled candidates and exploring the idea of introducing disability quotas, by surveying disabled party members to identify levels of demand for this.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Elizabeth Evans: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Stefanie Reher:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Elizabeth Evans reports was provided by University of Southampton. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix

Table A1
Characteristics of interviewees

<i>Office:</i>	
MPs, MSPs, MS	9
Former MPs	2
Councillors	24
Election candidates (national, devolved, local)	27
Disability organisations/activists	20
<i>Party:</i>	
Conservative	12
Green	5
Labour	29
Liberal Democrat	13
Scottish National Party (SNP)	3
Independent	5
Other	2
None/did not say	13
<i>Sex:</i>	
Female	46
Male	36
<i>Race:</i>	
Ethnic minority	7
-women	5
White	75
-women	41
Total number of interviews	82

Table A2
Distribution of impairment types

Disability	Number
Mobility impairment	24
Visual impairment/blind	14
Neurodiverse	9
[Dyslexia]	4]
[Dyspraxia]	3]
[Autism spectrum]	2]
Chronic pain	7
Mental health problems	7
Deaf/hearing impairment	5
Organ functioning problems	5
Speech impairment	2
Chronic fatigue	1
Down's syndrome	1
Epilepsy	1

Note: many interviewees reported multiple impairments.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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