



Unlocking Voices: Why Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities Matters

Ratan Sarkar  

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Prabhat Kumar College, Contai, India.

Abstract

This paper explores the essential importance of facilitating political engagement among individuals who have disabilities. This paper thoroughly examines the profound impact of inclusivity, representation, empowerment, rights, and advocacy in cultivating a society that is not only fairer but also truly democratic. Through their active participation in political processes, individuals with disabilities play a crucial role in shaping policies that directly address their unique needs and challenges. Furthermore, their involvement serves as a powerful force in challenging societal stigmas and promoting the cause of social justice. By amplifying their voices and advocating for their rights, individuals with disabilities make a significant contribution to the establishment of a more inclusive and equitable society for everyone.

Keywords: Persons with Disabilities, Inclusivity, Representation, Empowerment, Rights, Advocacy.



[Reduced Inequalities](#)

Introduction

The participation of individuals with disabilities in the political sphere is not simply a question of their entitlements; rather, it is a fundamental component of a democratic system and societal advancement (Hadi, Sudiatmaka, & Putrajaya, 2023). Throughout history, this particular demographic has encountered marginalization and exclusion when it comes to meaningful involvement in political processes. The main objective of this scholarly article is to shed light on the significance of empowering individuals with disabilities to express their viewpoints and partake in politics, with a particular emphasis on the transformative influence it can have on society. For an extended period of time, individuals with disabilities have been denied equal opportunities to engage in political

Article History: Received: 16 Feb 2024. Revised: 20 Feb 2024. Accepted: 23 Feb 2024. Published: 25 Feb 2024

Copyright: © 2024 by the author/s. License Pine Press, India. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Citation: Sarkar, Ratan. 2024. Unlocking Voices: Why Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities Matters. *Journal of South Asian Exchanges* 1.1

< <https://saexchanges.com/v1n1/v1n108.pdf> >

activities, whether it be due to physical obstacles, prejudiced practices, or societal attitudes. This exclusion not only violates their rights but also deprives society of valuable perspectives and contributions. The empowerment of individuals with disabilities to engage in politics is of paramount importance for several reasons. Firstly, it fosters inclusivity and diversity within the political process, ensuring that the voices of all citizens are not only heard but also taken into consideration. Secondly, it nurtures a more representative government that is better equipped to address the needs and concerns of various populations (Rahahleh et al., 2021). Thirdly, it challenges existing power structures and norms, thereby promoting social justice and equality. Furthermore, the involvement of individuals with disabilities in politics can have a ripple effect, inspiring others and challenging preconceived notions and misconceptions. By dismantling barriers and advocating for their rights, individuals with disabilities pave the way for greater acceptance and inclusion within society (Pratiwi et al., 2023). Therefore, the empowerment of individuals with disabilities to participate in the political arena is not only a matter of justice and equality, but it also serves as a means of enhancing democracy and advancing societal progress. By acknowledging and valuing the perspectives and contributions of all citizens, we can build a more inclusive and equitable society for everyone.

Inclusivity and Representation

At the heart of a democratic society lies the fundamental principle of inclusiveness, wherein all voices are acknowledged and all perspectives are taken into account in the decision-making processes. Nonetheless, individuals with disabilities frequently encounter extensive obstacles to engagement, varying from physical accessibility concerns to preconceived biases. By advocating for inclusivity and striving for increased representation of disabled individuals in political establishments, we not only uphold democratic principles but also enhance public discussion with a variety of viewpoints and experiences. Guaranteeing the complete involvement of disabled individuals in the political realm is crucial for the realization of a genuinely inclusive democracy. When political institutions are accessible and inclusive, disabled individuals can actively participate in civic activities, such as voting, running for office, or engaging in policy deliberations. This not only empowers disabled individuals to exercise their rights but also fortifies the democratic process by ensuring that all citizens have a say in shaping the future of their communities. Furthermore, increased representation of disabled individuals in political establishments brings about a multiplicity of perspectives and lived experiences. These perspectives can challenge prevailing narratives and result in more well-informed and equitable decision-making. By incorporating disabled individuals into political discourse, we can address issues that disproportionately affect this community and devise more inclusive policies that benefit society as a whole (Pilke, & Waliyua, 2022). Additionally, the promotion of inclusivity and representation in politics conveys a potent message regarding the significance of diversity and inclusion in society. It signifies a

dedication to equality and justice for all citizens, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. By dismantling barriers to participation and creating opportunities for disabled individuals to engage in politics, we can construct a more inclusive and representative democracy that epitomizes the complete diversity of our society (Mattila, 2022). Thus, the promotion of inclusivity and representation of disabled individuals in political establishments is indispensable for upholding democratic values and enhancing public discourse. By eliminating barriers to participation and amplifying diverse voices, we can establish a more inclusive and equitable society wherein everyone has the chance to contribute to the political process and shape the future of their communities.

Empowerment Through Participation

Political participation is not simply a privilege but also a potent mechanism for empowerment. When persons with disabilities actively involve themselves in political procedures, they acquire a sense of authority and autonomy, thereby challenging the prevailing narrative of reliance and helplessness often associated with disability (Oktarina, 2022). By engaging in activities such as voting, pursuing political office, or participating in advocacy campaigns, they assert their position in society and demand acknowledgment of their needs and entitlements. Involvement in political proceedings empowers individuals with disabilities in various respects. Primarily, it enables them to exercise their entitlement to self-expression and representation, thereby allowing them to voice their opinions on matters that impact their lives. This sense of authority is vital for nurturing a sense of belonging and self-worth within society. Additionally, political participation empowers individuals with disabilities to advocate for issues that hold significance for them, whether it pertains to accessible infrastructure, inclusive education, or healthcare reform. By raising awareness and mobilizing support, they can bring about positive change and contribute to the promotion of disability rights. Furthermore, engaging in political activities can help challenge preconceived notions and misconceptions about disability. Through active participation in civic life, individuals with disabilities demonstrate their capabilities and potential, thereby breaking down barriers and fostering greater acceptance and inclusion (Peter et al., 2011). In addition to individual empowerment, the political participation of individuals with disabilities enhances the overall strength and vitality of democracy. Their perspectives and experiences enrich public discourse and inform policy-making, leading to more comprehensive and equitable outcomes for all members of society (Bhawal, 2023). So, empowering individuals with disabilities through political participation is crucial for challenging stereotypes, advocating for their rights, and fostering a more inclusive and representative democracy. By recognizing their authority and supporting their active engagement in political processes, we can establish a society wherein everyone, regardless of ability, has the opportunity to fully participate and contribute to the greater good.

Addressing Unique Needs and Challenges

The variegated and multifaceted lived encounters of persons with impairments are extensive, encompassing a broad spectrum of physical, sensory, cognitive, and developmental limitations. Acknowledging this diversity is imperative in formulating policies and legislation that are responsive to the diverse requirements of this community, ensuring fair access to education, employment, healthcare, transportation, and other indispensable services. Through active participation in the political process, individuals with impairments can directly impact the establishment and execution of such policies, advocating for resolutions that augment their quality of life and promote their complete integration into society (Griffiths, 2022). One of the principal obstacles confronted by individuals with impairments is the dearth of accessibility in various aspects of everyday life (Thu, 2016). This encompasses physical hindrances such as inaccessible structures and transportation, as well as communication barriers like restricted access to information and technology. Confronting these barriers necessitates comprehensive policies that prioritize accessibility and integration across all areas of society. Moreover, individuals with impairments frequently face discriminatory practices and stigmatization in education, employment, and social contexts. Policies designed to foster inclusion and combat discrimination are pivotal in ensuring equal opportunities and rights for individuals with impairments. This may encompass measures such as anti-discrimination statutes, reasonable accommodations in work and educational environments, and endeavors to promote awareness and challenge stereotypes about impairments. Furthermore, access to quality healthcare is imperative for individuals with impairments to lead healthy and fulfilling lives (Powell, & Johnson, 2019). This encompasses not only physical healthcare services, but also mental health support, rehabilitative services, and assistive technologies. Policies that prioritize accessible and affordable healthcare for individuals with impairments are indispensable in addressing their distinctive healthcare needs and promoting their overall well-being. Transportation also stands as a critical issue for individuals with impairments, as reliable and accessible transportation is crucial for independence and participation in community life. Policies that guarantee accessible public transportation choices and support for individuals with impairments who may require specialized transportation services are vital in promoting mobility and integration. Through active participation in the political process, individuals with impairments can advocate for policies and legislation that address these unique needs and challenges (Turner, & Blackie, 2022). Their firsthand experiences and perspectives are invaluable in informing decision-making and ensuring that policies are responsive to the realities of living with an impairment. Through advocacy and engagement, individuals with impairments can contribute to the establishment of a more inclusive and equitable society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Challenging Societal Stigmas

Beyond the tangible outcomes of policy change, the political participation of persons with disabilities also serves a symbolic function, challenging entrenched societal stigmas and stereotypes. By openly engaging in political activism and asserting their rights as citizens, individuals with disabilities disrupt prevailing narratives of pity, charity, and paternalism. Instead, they assert their dignity, autonomy, and equality, demanding to be treated as full and equal members of society (Beckett, 2006). Historically, individuals with disabilities have often been marginalized and relegated to the margins of society, seen through the lens of pity or charity. This perception not only diminishes their agency but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes that undermine their autonomy and equality (Beckett, 2006). By actively participating in political activism and advocacy, individuals with disabilities challenge these stigmas and assert their right to self-determination and inclusion. Moreover, political participation provides individuals with disabilities with a platform to voice their concerns, advocate for their rights, and demand accountability from policymakers and society at large. Through campaigns, protests, and lobbying efforts, they bring visibility to issues that affect their lives and mobilize support for change (Kramer, Dibley, & Tsaputra, 2022). Furthermore, the political participation of individuals with disabilities sends a powerful message about their capabilities and contributions to society. By engaging in civic activities and asserting their rights as citizens, they challenge the perception of disability as a barrier to participation and success (Smith, 2006). Instead, they demonstrate their resilience, determination, and capacity to effect positive change. In supposition, the political participation of individuals with disabilities is not only about advocating for policy change but also about challenging societal stigmas and stereotypes. By asserting their dignity, autonomy, and equality, they demand to be treated as full and equal members of society, contributing to the creation of a more inclusive and equitable world for all.

Promoting Social Justice and Equity

At its core, the struggle for disability rights is intricately linked to broader movements for social justice and equity (Sherlaw, & Hudebine, 2015). By advocating for policies that promote accessibility, non-discrimination, and equal opportunity, individuals with disabilities contribute to dismantling structural barriers that perpetuate inequality and exclusion. In doing so, they not only advance their interests but also uphold the principles of justice, fairness, and solidarity that underpin democratic societies (Wagle, 2006). The fight for disability rights intersects with various other struggles for social justice, including those related to race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. Individuals with disabilities often face intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalization, compounding the challenges they experience in accessing education, employment, healthcare, and other essential services. By addressing these intersecting inequalities, advocates for disability rights promote a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

Furthermore, policies that promote accessibility and inclusion benefit not only individuals with disabilities but also other marginalized groups and society as a whole (Puumalainen, 2011). For example, accessible public transportation benefits not only individuals with mobility impairments but also older adults, parents with strollers, and tourists. Similarly, inclusive education benefits not only students with disabilities but also those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Moreover, the struggle for disability rights challenges the notion of "ableism," which privileges able-bodiedness and marginalizes individuals with disabilities. By advocating for policies that recognize and accommodate diverse abilities, individuals with disabilities challenge ableist assumptions and promote a more inclusive understanding of human diversity (Johnson, & Powell, 2023). Ultimately, promoting social justice and equity requires addressing the root causes of inequality and discrimination, including those that affect individuals with disabilities. By advocating for policies that promote accessibility, non-discrimination, and equal opportunity, individuals with disabilities contribute to building a more just, fair, and inclusive society for all members, regardless of ability or identity. In doing so, they uphold the principles of justice, fairness, and solidarity that are essential for the well-being and flourishing of democratic societies.

Conclusion

The engagement in political affairs by individuals with disabilities should not be regarded as an act of charity or tokenism, but rather as an inherent entitlement and a moral obligation. By allowing them to express their opinions and ensuring their complete integration into political procedures, we not only uphold the principles of democracy and equality but also enhance our collective comprehension of citizenship and affiliation. It is crucial to continue striving for greater inclusiveness, representation, and empowerment for individuals with disabilities in the future. This necessitates advocating for policies and practices that eliminate barriers to participation, promote accessibility, and address systemic disparities. It also entails challenging societal prejudices and preconceptions, while acknowledging the valuable contributions of individuals with disabilities to our communities and societies. By embracing diversity and fostering a culture of inclusiveness, we can create a more fair, impartial, and comprehensive society for all. The political involvement of individuals with disabilities not only serves as a means of advancing their rights but also paves the way for a more dynamic and democratic society where every voice is acknowledged and every person is valued. Therefore, let us persevere in our efforts to shape a future where individuals with disabilities are fully empowered to engage in political processes, influencing decisions that impact their lives and contributing to the progress of a more fair, impartial, and comprehensive society for all.

References

- Hadi, I. G. A. A., Sudiarmaka, K., & Putrajaya, I. K. (2023). Socialization and Assistance Disabilities Voters for Participation and Registration of Simultaneous Elections 2024 In Buleleng Regency, Bali. *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Law, Social Sciences, and Education, ICLSSE 2022, 28 October 2022, Singaraja, Bali, Indonesia*. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.28-10-2022.2326348>
- Rahahleh, Z. J., Hyassat, M. A., Alramamneh, A. K., Sabayleh, O. A., Al-Awamleh, R. A. K., & Alrahamneh, A. A. (2021, March 26). Participation of Individuals with Disabilities in Political Activities: Voices from Jordan. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 29*(1). <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.29.1.19>
- Pratiwi, W., Fitri, S. N., Fernando, Z. J., & Barkhuizen, J. (2023, June 27). Evaluation of the Fulfillment of Political Rights for Persons with Disabilities to Welcome the 2024 General Election. *Volksgeist: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum Dan Konstitusi, 19*–32. <https://doi.org/10.24090/volksgeist.v6i1.7886>
- Peter, Gibilisco., Eric, Paul, Tudzi. (2011). Politics, Disability, and Social Inclusion: People with different abilities in the 21st Century.
- Beckett, A. E. (2006, November). Understanding Social Movements: Theorising the Disability Movement in Conditions of Late Modernity. *The Sociological Review, 54*(4), 734–752. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954x.2006.00669.x>
- Smith, A. (2006, December). Access, Participation, and Progress in the General Education Curriculum in the Least Restrictive Environment for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities. *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities, 31*(4), 331–337. <https://doi.org/10.1177/154079690603100407>
- Wagle, U. R. (2006, December). Political Participation in Kathmandu: Who Participates and Why It Matters. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 29*(3), 369–393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856400601031971>
- Puumalainen, J. (2011, December). Participation in community and political life of persons with severe disabilities. *International Journal of Rehabilitation Research, 34*(4), 274–281. <https://doi.org/10.1097/mrr.0b013e32834a8fc1>
- Sherlaw, W., & Hudebine, H. (2015, January). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of persons with disabilities: Opportunities and tensions within the social inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities. *Alter, 9*(1), 9–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alter.2014.08.001>
- Thujo, L. (2016, August 1). Implementation of Political Participation Standards for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities in Kenya. *Strathmore Law Journal, 2*(1), 97–131. <https://doi.org/10.52907/slj.v2i1.17>
- Powell, S., & Johnson, A. A. (2019, February 15). Patterns and Mechanisms of Political Participation among People with Disabilities. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law, 44*(3), 381–422. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03616878-7367000>
- Turner, D. M., & Blackie, D. (2022, April 3). Disability and political activism in industrializing Britain, c. 1830–1850. *Social History, 47*(2), 117–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2022.2044202>
- Kramer, E., Dibley, T., & Tsaputra, A. (2022, May 4). Choosing from the citizens' toolbox: disability activists as political candidates in Indonesia's 2019 general elections. *Disability & Society, 39*(1), 85–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2060800>

- Griffiths, M. (2022, June 4). Disabled youth participation within activism and social movement bases: An empirical investigation of the UK Disabled People's Movement. *Current Sociology*, 72(1), 83–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921221100579>
- Pilke, R., & Waliyua, W. (2022, July 7). Persons with disabilities: Participation and politics - the case of Zambia. *Development in Practice*, 33(4), 387–399. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2022.2092595>
- Mattila, M. (2022, August 30). Health and Disability Gaps in Political Engagement: A Short Review. *Wellbeing: Alternative Policy Perspectives*, 167–184. <https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepress.well.i>
- Oktarina, S. (2022, November 25). Dipilih dan memilih, kesetaran politik bagi kelompok penyandang disabilitas pada pemilu demokrasi di sumatera barat. *Pepatudzu: Media Pendidikan Dan Sosial Kemasyarakatan*, 18(2), 80. <https://doi.org/10.35329/fkip.v18i2.3739>
- Bhawal, D. (2023, February 26). Politics and Differently Abled Persons in India in the 21st Century. *The Indian Journal of Research in Anthropology*, 8(2), 107–111. <https://doi.org/10.21088/ijra.2454.9118.8222.6>
- Johnson, A. A., & Powell, S. (2023, June 18). An untapped coalition: Partisanship and political participation among people with disabilities. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2023.2224758>

Dr. Ratan Sarkar currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Education at the Department of Teachers' Training (B.Ed.) and Head of the Department of Education, Prabhat Kumar College (affiliated to Vidyasagar University) West Bengal. He has also obtained a Ph.D. in Education from Pondicherry University. Dr. Sarkar has authored numerous books, research papers, and articles, and has completed one research project funded by the MHRD, Govt. of India. Dr. Sarkar is currently pursuing an M.A. in EdTech from CETE-TISS, Mumbai. His areas of expertise encompass disability, inclusive education, teacher education, EdTech, and educational policies for PwDs.
