

Disability in Political Science

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Keywords

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Abstract

Despite increasing interest in recent years, disability remains a neglected area of study within mainstream political science. Beginning with a brief overview of the ways that disability studies scholars have defined disability, I address the issues that have arisen in trying to measure disability as well as the limits and possibilities that follow from thinking of people with disabilities as a minority group with defined political beliefs and interests. To the extent that much of the work on disability in political science looks to the research on gender, race, ethnicity, and class as a touchstone, I consider the lessons that might be drawn from this work both as it relates to disability as a social category and regarding efforts to conceive of disability and ability in more structural and ideological terms. Turning to the literature on disability in political theory, I examine the ways that disability has been deployed to reveal the ableist assumptions that pervade canonical and more contemporary texts. I conclude by highlighting avenues for future research, including whether it is possible—or, indeed, desirable—to move beyond the civil rights and identity-based frameworks that have so defined disability politics and organizing.

INTRODUCTION

The right to live in the world is something more than the right to remain in it.

—tenBroek (1966)

Published in 1966, Jacobus tenBroek's "The Right to Live in the World: The Disabled in the Law of Torts" is hailed by legal scholars for "[l]aying] the groundwork for the disability rights laws we have today" (Bagenstos 2016, p. 13). And yet, the self-evident nature of tenBroek's claim—that disabled people have a right to live in the world—belies the profound economic, social, and political changes that securing such a right would entail. tenBroek is not ignorant of this fact; indeed, "The Right to Live in the World" is, in part, a rumination on the distance between the entitlement to rights and their enjoyment. Emphasizing the attitudes and beliefs that sustained (and, indeed, continue to sustain) disabled people's confinement and segregation, tenBroek understood the right to live in the world as a starting point for thinking about the conditions necessary to facilitate robust social and political participation. From the standpoint of the present, he invites us to reflect upon the continued exclusion of people with disabilities, as well as on the social, political, and structural changes required to achieve their equality and integration.¹

A professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1942 until his death in 1968, tenBroek is perhaps best known for his scholarship on the Fourteenth Amendment (Bagenstos 2016). An outlier in a discipline that, until recently, has had relatively little to say about disability, tenBroek provides a useful vantage point from which to survey existing scholarship while also pointing toward avenues for further inquiry. tenBroek's pathbreaking work notwithstanding, political science has largely "fallen behind other disciplines in analyzing disability in our society" (Arneil & Hirschmann 2016a, p. 1). Without overstating the progress of other disciplines—in general, the social sciences have been slower than the humanities to turn their attention toward disability—the relative absence of work in political science is striking. A survey of prominent disciplinary journals yields only a handful of articles in which disability occupies a central category of analysis. While subfield journals fare slightly better, much of the work on disability by political scientists is found either in interdisciplinary journals or in journals with an explicit focus on disability, such as *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Disability & Society*, or the *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*. This is not to discount the early work of scholars like Stone (1984) and Hahn (1985a, 1993), or the pioneering research on disability and political participation conducted by Schur and colleagues (Schur 1998; Schur & Adya 2013; Schur et al. 2013, 2017). Nor is it to disregard the small but growing body of work on disability in political theory (see, e.g., Afsahi 2020, Arneil 2009, Arneil & Hirschmann 2016b, Bumiller 2008, Clifford Simpican 2015, Heffernan 2020, Hirschmann 2020, Knight 2015, McKinney 2019). But more than 30 years after Hahn (1993, p. 748) called upon his colleagues to "bring disability politics and policy into the mainstream of research in political science," its continued marginalization remains deeply troubling.

Based on prevalence alone, one would expect disability to be of greater interest to the discipline. While estimates vary, between 13% (Paul et al. 2023, p. 17, citing data from the 2021 American Community Survey) and 27.2% (Cent. Dis. Control Prev. 2023, citing data from the

¹The American Political Science Association Style Manual recommends using person-first language ("person with a disability") when writing about disability. However, many disabled people, including myself, prefer identity-first language ("disabled person"). Acknowledging the diversity of preferences within the disabled community, this review uses both person- and identity-first language. For more on disability and terminology, see Kirchner & Ben-Moshe (2009).

2021 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System) of Americans are living with at least one disability. Worldwide, the disabled population amounts to roughly 1.3 billion people, or 16% of the global population (World Health Organ. 2023). Apart from its demographic significance, however, disability also intersects with a number of issues that are (or, rather, should be) relevant to political scientists. Consider the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (commonly known as the ACA), which, in addition to expanding access to health insurance for millions of Americans, has had striking implications for recipients' health as well as for the ways that they perceive and interact with the state (Mettler et al. 2023, Michener 2018). This is especially true in the case of Medicaid expansion. Rendered optional in 2012 following the US Supreme Court decision in *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*, the uneven implementation of expansion highlights the shifting role of geographic location, income, and disability in mediating access to medical care (Michener 2018).

If Medicaid serves as a crucial source of medical as well as home- and community-based services for disabled Americans, then the *category* of disability is also significant for understanding how federal and state governments allocate public resources (Stone 1984). More broadly, the growth of disability benefits programs like Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) suggests that disability has become an underappreciated “distributional device” in the context of broader welfare state retrenchment (Tani 2022, p. 1688; see also Erkulwater 2006, Konnoth 2020). Once seen as the paradigm case of the deserving poor, disabled recipients of SSDI and SSI are now viewed with much the same suspicion that previously surrounded recipients of Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) and its successor, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). As Erkulwater (2006, p. 2) observes, “Politicians who once worried about deserving individuals being turned away now fret that too many people who enter the rolls are not really disabled at all” (see also Dorfman 2019). Most apparent in attempts to attach work requirements to Medicaid reciprocity, efforts to distinguish between the “truly disabled” and the merely desperate express broader anxieties about the limits of government assistance and the shifting rights and obligations of citizenship (Pokempner & Roberts 2001).

Finally, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—and in particular, the long-term effects of COVID infection (so-called long COVID)—has shed new light on the indeterminacy of disability as a medical, legal, and administrative category. And while the US Department of Health and Human Services has determined that long COVID can be considered a disability under federal law, the ambiguity and variability of the condition's symptoms—including fatigue, difficulty concentrating, joint pain, and mood changes—have made securing necessary supports and accommodations exceedingly difficult (Rowland 2022).

In calling attention to these examples, I mean to illustrate the relevance of disability to ongoing debates in political science as well as to push against the tendency to conceive of disability almost exclusively as an identity or label that attaches to individuals. This is not to deny the importance of scholarship that focuses on people with disabilities as political actors or that examines the effects of policy or legislation on their lives. Indeed, as we shall see in the following section, the question of who counts as disabled (and in which contexts) has enormous consequences, not only for the distribution of federal benefits and accommodations but also for whether we can meaningfully speak of disability as a political identity and disabled people as a discrete minority group.

Insofar as political science has been slow to consider disability, this is due at least in part, I contend, to the way disability has been understood within the discipline. Taking my cue from recent work in disability studies, I propose an alternative framework that conceives of disability as a concept that informs—and is even central to—the way we think about citizenship and belonging, as well as other concepts that constitute our disciplinary lexicon, such as justice,

equality, freedom, and independence. Mindful of Minich's (2016) warning that disability studies not abandon its responsibility to disabled people, this approach nevertheless presents new possibilities for political scientists who might not otherwise recognize the significance of disability for their research.

I begin by providing a brief overview of the ways that disability studies scholars have defined disability, paying particular attention to how they have attempted to navigate its conceptual ambiguity and instability. Offering a lens onto the complexity of studying disabled people as a social and political group, the debates that raged in disability studies and activism in the 1990s and early 2000s over the meaning and definition of disability are instructive for efforts by political scientists and others to "examin[e] the economic, political, and social status" of this population (Schur et al. 2013, p. 26). Canvassing this literature, the following section explores the limits and possibilities that follow from thinking of people with disabilities as a minority group with defined political beliefs and interests. I then review what we know about people with disabilities as political actors and about attitudes toward disabled candidates for public office, literatures most developed in the field of American political behavior. Offering detailed accounts of the structures and beliefs that facilitate political participation, this scholarship hints at—but does not fully explore—the significance of disability as a constitutive feature of social and political life. Partly a reflection of the nascency of the field, the tendency to conceptualize disability either as an individual-level characteristic or as the object of government policies and programs has left us with a limited appreciation of the ways that disability figures in everything from the structure of our institutions to our categories of political analysis. To the extent that much of the work on disability in political science looks to the research on gender, race, ethnicity, and class as a touchstone, I briefly address the lessons that might be drawn from this work, both as it relates to disability as a social category and regarding efforts to conceive of disability and ability in more structural and ideological terms. Turning, finally, to the literature on disability in political theory, I conclude by considering directions for future research, including whether it is possible—or desirable—to move beyond the civil rights framework that has so defined disability politics and organizing.

Highlighting research published in the past two decades—a period that roughly corresponds with a rising interest in disability within political science—this review draws liberally from work in disability studies in an effort to strengthen the lines of communication between the two disciplines, as well as to insist on the value of disability studies scholarship for political science (and vice versa). Because of the paucity of scholarship on disability in comparative politics and international relations, I focus predominantly on work in political theory and American and European politics. As such, this article is intended to serve both as a review of the available literature and as a demand for further research.

CONCEPTUALIZING DISABILITY

First employed in legal proceedings, use of the term "disability" to describe "a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities" dates to the mid-sixteenth century (*Oxford English Dictionary*, quoted by Adams et al. 2015, p. 31). Nevertheless, who is identified—and who *identifies*—as disabled has undergone significant transformation in the years since. As Blackie & Moncrieff (2022, p. 800) note, "before the late modern era," conditions that we might now classify as disabilities "were often subsumed under categories such as 'infirmity' or 'weakness.'" The association between disability and deviance or abnormality, which many scholars link to the rise of industrialization and a growing preoccupation with population-level norms and the maintenance of a "competent citizenry" (Nielsen 2012, p. 75), is of more recent provenance (Carey 2009, ch. 3; Davis 1995, ch. 2; Trent 2017, ch. 3). Coinciding with efforts to manage

an increasingly urban and economically mobile—as well as ethnically and racially diverse—population, the nineteenth-century obsession with non-normative bodies and minds cannot be considered apart from its role in “defin[ing] who deserved, and who was deservedly excluded from, citizenship” (Baynton 2001, p. 33; see also Garland-Thomson 1997, ch. 3; Welke 2010).

Indeed, recent scholarship (Baynton 2001, 2016; Dolmage 2018; Molina 2006; Samuels 2014; Tyler 2022) reveals the ways that attributions of disability and incapacity were used—particularly in the United States—to naturalize ethnic and racial difference and justify the exclusion of an ever-growing range of people judged unfit for full citizenship, including the enslaved, destitute poor, sexually deviant, and criminal. In each case, “difference[s]. . . [were] identified and mobilized to figure specific groups discursively as outside the bounds of social membership” (Molina 2006, pp. 23–24). While it is beyond the scope of this review to consider this history in greater depth, I recall it here to highlight the range of meanings—both medical and social—that have been attributed to disability, as well as the necessity of discussing disability alongside and in conjunction with other axes of inequality.

Assumed to be “a clearly defined category,” disability, as Nielsen (2012, p. xiv) observes, “is often elusive and changing.” Garland-Thomson (1997, p. 24) agrees: “The concept of disability unites a highly marked, heterogeneous group whose only commonality is being considered abnormal.” And yet, we continue to treat disability as if it “can somehow [be] objectively determine[d]” at the individual level—typically by clinical or diagnostic means (Stone 1984, p. 85). This idea of disability as a biological fact about the body that requires medical intervention and cure—referred to by disability activists and scholars as the “medical” or “individual” model of disability—is often opposed to the “social” or “minority” model, in which the limitations associated with disability are located instead in the interaction between particular bodies and discriminatory social beliefs and institutions (for a more detailed review of these models, see Thomas 2002; on the minority model, see Hahn 1993). Although the social model was crucial to the emergence of the disability rights and independent living movements of the 1970s and 1980s (see, e.g., Bagenstos 2009, ch. 2; DeJong 1979; Fleischer & Zames 2011; Oliver 1990), and a powerful tool for reframing the “problem” of disability, it has received significant criticism in recent years (Crow 1996, Shakespeare 2006, Wendell 2001). Overlooking what British disability activist Liz Crow (1996, p. 209) refers to as the more “difficult aspects of impairment,” the social model likewise struggles to account for disabilities that are invisible, painful, or more “transitory and unpredictable” in nature, particularly those that straddle the boundary between disability and chronic illness (Wendell 2001, p. 24).² More critically, scholars such as Puar (2017), McRuer (2018), Mitchell & Snyder (2015), and Titchkosky (2011) show how the privileging of certain disabilities by the social model often fails to address the limiting “terms of social recognition” by which only the most capable disabled people are granted inclusion (Mitchell & Snyder 2015, p. 2).

Expanding upon these critiques, some disability studies scholars, such as Kafer (2013), have forged an alternative path, challenging the “assumption that ‘disabled’ and ‘nondisabled’ are discrete, self-evident categories” (p. 10). “Choosing instead to explore the creation of such categories and the moments in which they fail to hold,” this approach—which Kafer refers to as the “political/relational model”—“sees disability as a site of questions rather than firm definitions” (p. 11; see

²There is considerable disagreement among disability studies scholars and activists regarding the distinction between disability and chronic illness. For some, efforts to trouble or do away with this distinction are a necessary precondition for a more expansive and intersectional approach to disability scholarship and activism (see, e.g., Crow 1996, Puar 2017, Schalk & Kim 2020, Shildrick 2015, Wendell 2001). For others—particularly those who subscribe to a strong version of the social model—chronic illness remains too wedded to a medicalized approach in which disabled people are seen as sick or diseased (see, e.g., Oliver 1990).

also Puar 2017, Taylor 2024). In a similar vein, Minich (2016), Pickens (2019), and Schalk & Kim (2020) interrogate the tendency on the part of disability studies scholars to dismiss “approaches to disability, illness, and health. . .[that] do not. . .align with the language, approaches, and perspectives within mainstream disability studies and disability rights activism” (Schalk & Kim 2020, p. 32; see also Erevelles 2011, Schalk 2022). What would it mean, they ask, to adopt a more expansive understanding of what counts as work on and about disability? Might we see “protests against racialized disparities in health, education, and policing” or “struggles for environmental justice and reproductive freedom” as part of a “disability studies archive” (Minich 2016)? What are the “unexpected points of affinity” and “alternate lines of collectivity” that might emerge from these experiments (Schalk & Kim 2020, pp. 38, 39)? These questions—and the coalitional possibilities they invite—are particularly pressing as we confront not only the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic but also the debilitating effects of climate change (Belser 2020) and worsening wealth inequality (Achenbach et al. 2023).

Somewhat far afield from the question of how we, as political scientists, ought to measure disability, this detour through recent debates in disability studies and activism highlights the impossibility of arriving at a clearly defined or universally accepted understanding of disability with which to resolve these contradictions. Still, accurate estimates of disability remain critically important, not least for program planning and administration. “The very act of defining a disability category,” as Stone (1984, p. 4) reminds us, “determines what is expected of the nondisabled—what injuries, diseases, incapacities, and problems they will be expected to tolerate in their normal working lives.” This presents something of a dilemma for researchers, who must navigate between the need for a workable definition of disability, on the one hand, and an awareness of the difficulty of such an undertaking, on the other.

PROBLEMS OF MEASUREMENT

“Attempt[ing] to make *fixed* and *dichotomous* something which is better conceptualized as *fluid* and *continuous*” (Zola 1993, p. 18, emphasis in original), survey researchers have struggled to capture the nuances and complexities of disability and disabled identity. As a result, estimates of disability prevalence vary considerably, both within and between countries (Altman & Gulley 2009; Groce 2006; Pettinicchio & Maroto 2021; Schur et al. 2013, pp. 14–26). And while classification systems like the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health have attempted to provide a universal framework that addresses the “biological, psychological, social, and environmental” dimensions of disability, they are often less readily translatable into census-level surveys (Kostanjsek 2011, p. 1). What is more, “how the issue of disability is conceptualized and framed in a given society will influence both the questions asked and the responses collected” (Groce 2006, p. 45). Altman (2001, p. 97) puts it bluntly: “a global definition of disability that fits all circumstances, though very desirable, is in reality nearly impossible.”

Even within-country prevalence estimates show significant variability. Consider, for example, the Survey of Income and Political Participation (SIPP) disability estimates. SIPP is one of three nationally representative surveys that provide key data on disability prevalence, the others being the American Community Survey (ACS) and the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). SIPP estimates of disability among US adults (aged 15+) have “risen sharply in recent years—from 14.9% in 2011 (95% CI: 14.49–15.23%) to 19.6% in 2014 (95% CI: 19.28–20%)”—even though the six-question set used by all three surveys, known as the Washington Group Short Set on Functioning (WGSS), remained unchanged during this period (Jackson et al. 2021, pp. 1–2). Why did the 2014 “SIPP data present a starkly different picture of adult disability in the U.S.” than the ACS or the NHIS, neither of which showed comparably sharp increases in disability prevalence

(p. 2)?³ Examining the influence of “data processing, context effects, and sampling” on prevalence estimates, Jackson et al. (2021, p. 6) were unable to arrive at a conclusive answer. To complicate matters further, the adoption of the WGSS was itself an attempt to standardize measurement across national surveys. Moving away from the use of work-activity limitation as the primary measure of disability, the WGSS looks to the interaction between impairments, functional limitations, and environmental factors (Altman 2014). Nevertheless, an analysis of the 2010 Current Population Survey (Burkhauser et al. 2014, p. 196) found that the absence of a work-activity limitation question failed to “capture a substantial portion of the population with disabilities relevant to key U.S. disability policies and programs.”

Commenting on the “cacophony of national estimates” of disability, Altman & Gulley (2009, pp. 543, 544) provide a useful overview of the many factors that drive differences in prevalence estimates, including “the definition of disability, the operationalization of concepts, the language used in questions and answers, and the survey methodology.” Looking to respondents themselves, a growing body of research focuses on the influence of sociodemographic variables such as age, income, gender, race, and ethnicity on disability self-identification (Altman & Gulley 2009, Bogart et al. 2017). While findings are mixed, some notable patterns have emerged. In a study of 710 non-institutionalized adults, for example, Bogart et al. (2017, p. 558) find that impairment severity is a “strong predictor of disabled identification.” This on its own is not surprising. What severity means, however, is less clear. For older individuals in particular, the line between disability and age-related mobility limitations is difficult to locate, with respondents tending to view even significant functional limitations as the natural and expected consequence of aging (that is, not as disabilities) (Kelley-Moore et al. 2006, Leahy 2023). Less likely than younger generations to have been exposed to positive representations of disability, older respondents often “resist use of the word ‘disabled,’” viewing it as an “unwelcome categorization” rather than an empowered identity (Leahy 2023). Indeed, asking respondents directly if they have a disability or asking about diagnosed conditions—rather than asking a series of questions about functional limitations and activities of daily living—is also likely to result in underestimation (Mitra et al. 2022).

Finally, comparisons between countries with similar health profiles—between the United States and the Netherlands, for example—have shown that perceptions of what constitutes a disability vary significantly based on the availability, leniency, and generosity of government-provided benefits. In the Netherlands, where a higher percentage of the population receives disability insurance, respondents were found to “have a lower response threshold in claiming disability” than their American counterparts—this despite reporting similar levels of functional impairment (Kapteyn et al. 2007, p. 472). Whereas rising rates of disability aid reciprocity in the United States typically provoke allegations of fraud (see, e.g., Dorfman 2019), this comparison instead highlights “how policy programs affect social norms,” attitudes, and beliefs (Van Soest et al. 2012, p. 258).

These issues illustrate what survey researchers have long recognized: that “despite a great deal of progress in measurement, defining and operationalizing disability remains a persistent challenge” (Pettinicchio & Maroto 2021, p. 258). At the same time, “accurate counts of disability populations,” as Pettinicchio & Maroto (2021, p. 258) note, “are integral for...evaluating and improving policy mandates and programs, assessing benefits enrollment and...understanding disability’s relationship to aging and other characteristics that compound disadvantage like gender, class, and race.”

What, then, does this mean for efforts to study disabled people as political actors?

³As Jackson et al. (2021, p. 2) note, “while SIPP disability estimates have generally fallen in-between ACS and NHIS estimates in magnitude, they exceeded both ACS and NHIS estimates in 2014.”

DISABILITY AS A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IDENTITY

“The category of ‘disability,’ while politically useful, . . . is not without problems,” cautions Davis (1995, p. 3). Highlighting the importance of disability as a political category, Davis likewise reminds us of the porousness of this designation and the impossibility of clearly identifying its contours. The “multifarious, complicated, and even contradictory” (Longmore 2005, p. 502) nature of disability was perhaps most apparent in the 2016 presidential election. Pitting former First Lady, New York State Senator, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton against Donald Trump, the election marked a turning point in candidates’ treatment of disability.

The Clinton campaign not only pledged to end the legal exemption that permits the payment of subminimum wages to disabled workers (Ne’eman 2016) but also was the only campaign to release a “disability plan”—a wide-ranging policy proposal that has since become almost de rigueur for Democratic presidential hopefuls (see, e.g., Astor 2020). Clinton’s focus on disability—evident at the 2016 Democratic National Convention—did not go unnoticed by the press. Featuring remarks by disability rights activist Anastasia Somoza and former US Senator (and ADA cosponsor) Tom Harkin, the Convention for the most part avoided the patronizing tone that so often characterizes politicians’ engagements with disability issues (see, e.g., Hahn 1993, Longmore 2005). Remarking that disabled people “don’t typically get much attention during elections,” Wagner & Phillip (2016) at *The Washington Post* saw Clinton’s “unusual push. . . to win over disabled people and their families” as part of a broader effort “to generate enthusiasm within the Democratic base.” Flegenheimer & Chozick (2016) at the *New York Times* agreed, seeing her “focus on. . . [the] often-overlooked constituency” as of a piece with broader efforts “to make a more affirmative case for her own candidacy.”

But is the disabled community, as Ne’eman (2016) suggests, “a minority group on par with black and Latino voters, Jews and Muslims, and the LGBTQ community?” On this, researchers and activists alike are divided. Even referring to the “disabled community” is a fraught endeavor, not least because disability is such a “labile and pliable category” (Bérubé 1998, p. vii), encompassing everything from learning disabilities and emotional problems to heart conditions and postviral syndromes. “Nam[ing] thousands of human conditions and varieties of impairment, . . . [i]t is a category,” remarks Bérubé (1998, p. vii), “whose constituency is contingency itself.” Indeed, the most common causes of disability in the United States are arthritis and rheumatism (19.2%), followed closely by back or spine problems (18.6%) (Theis et al. 2019, p. 415, using data from the 2010 SIPP)—in part a reflection of the fact that roughly half of all disabled people are over age 65 (Bur. Labor Stat. 2023). And while Nario-Redmond et al. (2013, p. 474) have found that disability self-identification is correlated with higher personal and collective self-esteem, 18% and 7% of their two study samples, respectively, identified as either “nondisabled” or “able-bodied,” despite reporting significant functional limitations. As Chandler (2010) observes, “being diagnosed with a disability. . . and identifying as disabled do not necessarily occur in the same temporal moment.”

It is perhaps tempting, then, to conclude that there “is almost no commonality of experience, or feelings of solidarity, between people with diverse disabilities” (Bickenbach et al. 1999, p. 1181). But even if we are more inclined to believe that “people experiencing disability often feel affinity, or even solidarity, with others who also experience disability” (Putnam 2005, p. 188), barriers to political participation and collective action remain significant. In the United States, the unemployment rate among working-age adults with disabilities (7.6%) remains more than double that of adults without a disability (3.5%). Of those who are employed, 30% work part-time (versus 16% of working-age adults without a disability) (Bur. Labor Stat. 2023), often in “occupations with lower wages, fewer requirements, and lower skill levels” (Maroto & Pettinicchio 2014, p. 89; see also Schur et al. 2013, ch. 2–3). Less likely to have completed high school or earned a bachelor’s degree than their nondisabled peers (Bur. Labor Stat. 2023), disabled Americans are more than

two and a half times as likely to be living in poverty (Creamer et al. 2022). Estimates of disability prevalence in federal and state prisons suggest that 66% of incarcerated people are disabled (Bixby et al. 2022, p. 1462). Finally, a recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 40% of adults with a disability or chronic illness reported feelings of loneliness and social isolation, as compared with 22% among the general adult population (DiJulio et al. 2018).

If these data paint a sobering portrait of disabled people's progress toward equality and integration, they also make minority group formation of the kind that Ne'eman (2016) envisions more difficult. Disabled people living "in the community" (that is, not in institutions), as Scotch (1988, p. 161) notes, are likely to "spend nearly all of [their]. . . time in the company of nondisabled individuals." To the extent that disabled people are able to form a disabled identity, then, they often must do so "around a particular impairment or difference that their families, immediate circles and communities likely do not share" (Forber-Pratt et al. 2017, p. 204). Further, "even where circumstances lead to interaction with other individuals with disabilities, the physical or mental impairments involved may be so disparate as to discourage mutual recognition of a shared social status" (Scotch 1988, p. 161). For those of us in the so-called "ADA Generation" (Shapiro 2020), who were born with disabilities but were mainstreamed into "normal" classrooms and educational settings, the prospect of finding community with other disabled people is by turns liberating and daunting. The "necessity of developing a positive sense of identity" notwithstanding, it is difficult, as Hahn (1985b, p. 310) admits, to "develop a sense of identity with an attribute" one has "been taught to 'overcome.'"

This is not to discount the role of the disability rights movement in the fight for disability equality and liberation.⁴ Most recently, the protest actions of the militant disability activist group ADAPT (American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today) were instrumental in blocking attempts to repeal and replace the ACA, with participants staging highly publicized "die-ins" outside Republican lawmakers' offices including, memorably, the office of then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (for representative coverage of these actions, see Diaz & Grieve 2017). Likewise, the rise of social media—and in particular the widespread use of platforms like X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram—has provided a "vital means of being, feeling, and taking part in society as well as a valuable source of information for people with disabilities" (Baumgartner et al. 2023, p. 74). As Sarkar and her colleagues argue, "online social movements have the capacity to reframe social justice conversations in an unprecedented way, giving voice to those historically marginalized, including those with disabilities" (Sarkar et al. 2021, p. 300). "For disabled people who may not be able to access embodied protest" (Mann 2018, p. 616), online spaces have been critical to developing a sense of disability community and political identity, with hashtags like #CripTheVote helping to raise awareness of disabled people as an "untapped" (Johnson & Powell 2023), and even "sidelined" (Schur & Adya 2013), political force.

DISABILITY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Perhaps the most salient "barrier for people with disabilities," observe Schur and colleagues (2013, p. 87), "has been the assumption that they cannot or should not participate in civic life." This assumption plays out not only in legal statutes (for instance, in laws that restrict the voting rights of

⁴Because other scholars have so skillfully addressed the history and evolution of the disability rights movement, I will not do so here. While there are a number of country-specific accounts of the movement, the most developed literature concerns the United States (Bagenstos 2009, Barnartt & Scotch 2001, DeJong 1979, Fleischer & Zames 2011), and to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom (Oliver 1990, Shakespeare 2006). For a general overview of the movement from an international perspective, see Sabatello (2014).

people with mental and cognitive impairments) but also in the “arrangement of public space”—including, crucially, polling place accessibility (p. 87). Indeed, research has consistently shown that “people with disabilities are one of the groups most likely to face voting difficulties” in the United States (Schur et al. 2017, p. 1374). Schur and her coauthors (2023, p. 9) found that in the 2022 midterm election, “among those voting in person, the rate of difficulties was over three times higher among people with disabilities (20% compared to 6% among voters without disabilities).” And while polling place accessibility has improved in recent years (see, e.g., Schur & Kruse 2021, p. 5), a Government Accountability Office assessment of 167 polling places used in the 2016 election found that only 17% were “free of any potential impediments” (Gov. Account. Off. 2017, p. 15).

Although the increased availability of absentee voting addresses some of these issues, the recent spate of legislation aimed at restricting the practice is deeply concerning (Corasaniti & Berzon 2023). Many of the accessibility measures put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic are now being rolled back, often in response to erroneous allegations of voter fraud. Brian Dimmick, an attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union, offers a concise assessment of this about-face: “Instead of embracing the more accessible forms of voting that sparked record turnout, states have doubled down on new and more restrictive voter-suppression laws” (quoted in Bohra 2022). Understood by voting rights groups as thinly-veiled attempts at voter suppression, the negative consequences of these laws are likely to fall disproportionately on communities of color, students, and older and disabled voters. Not only are disabled voters more likely to vote by mail but “about two-fifths (42%) . . . used a mail ballot in 2022, compared to one-third (35%) of voters without disabilities” (Schur et al. 2023, p. 8). In contrast to the 20% of disabled voters who experienced difficulties when voting in person in the 2022 election, only 6.1% of those who voted by mail experienced similar difficulties (p. 9).

It is not surprising, then, that research has shown a persistent voting gap between Americans with disabilities and their nondisabled peers (see, e.g., Miller & Powell 2016; Schur et al. 2017, 2023; Schur & Kruse 2021). The most recent data from the 2022 midterm election, for example, show a 10-percentage-point gap when corrected for age (Schur et al. 2023, p. 24). And while much of the literature on voting behavior focuses on Americans with disabilities, similar voting gaps have been found in the European Union, ranging between five (Mattila & Papageorgiou 2017) and eight percentage points (Priestley et al. 2016) depending on the data source.

A number of explanations have been offered for these findings. According to Schur & Adya (2013, p. 812), “the factors affecting political participation can be divided into three categories: resources (‘Are you able to participate?’), psychology (‘Do you want to participate?’), and recruitment (‘Did anyone ask you to participate?’).” Adapted from the literature on political participation in the general population (see, e.g., Verba et al. 1995), this approach is especially useful for teasing apart the factors driving lower disability turnout. As we saw in the previous section, people with disabilities are both poorer and less well educated than those without disabilities. But resources, as Schur & Adya (2013, p. 812) note, can also be interpreted to include an individual’s mobility and stamina (see also Schur et al. 2013, pp. 28–31, 146–55). Similarly, the physical and social isolation experienced by many people with disabilities—as well as the psychological effects of stigma and discrimination—may, they argue, “decrease feelings of personal efficacy and control, and lead some people to withdraw from society and reduce their political participation” (Schur & Adya 2013, p. 813).

Of course, voter turnout is not the only measure of political participation. People with disabilities have been found less likely to engage in other political activities, including contacting political officials and representatives, attending meetings or rallies, or contributing to campaigns (Johnson & Powell 2023, Schur et al. 2013). More worrying still, they are also less confident in their ability to

participate in the political process (what researchers refer to as internal political efficacy) and less likely to feel that the government is responsive to their interests (external political efficacy) (Schur & Adya 2013). Hypothesizing that at least some of these gaps might be addressed by greater descriptive representation, research by Evans & Reher (2022) in the United Kingdom is significant for what it reveals about the obstacles faced by disabled candidates for elected office. In addition to significant physical barriers, “participants with all kinds of impairments encountered doubts about their capabilities voiced by parties, opponents, and—to a less degree—voters” (Evans & Reher 2022, p. 708). Even if we agree with Young (1997, p. 354) that “having...a relation of identity or similarity with constituents says nothing about what the representative does,” how a candidate is perceived and treated sends important signals about the inclusiveness of the political process.

Less is known about whether disabled voters have a distinct political or ideological profile. While a 2016 Pew Research Center survey found that “Americans with disabilities look similar to those without disabilities both in terms of party affiliation and their distribution across the ideological spectrum” (Igielnik 2016; see also Schur & Adya 2013), this research predates both the Trump administration (and its efforts to undermine the Affordable Care Act) and the COVID-19 pandemic. These events notwithstanding, Johnson & Powell (2023) find “no statistical differences between the partisan affiliations and ideological leanings of individuals with and without disabilities” as identified in the 2020 American National Election Study (ANES). Limited by its reliance on employment status as a gauge of disability, Johnson and Powell’s study nevertheless gestures toward possible connections with recent analyses of support for the ACA in the wake of Republican efforts to substantially weaken or repeal the law (see, e.g., Mettler et al. 2023).

SHIFTING THE LENS: LOOKING BEYOND IDENTITY

The challenges of defining disability and assessing disabled people as political actors mirror, in many respects, the challenges presented by a number of social classifications and identities. Indeed, disability scholars have often looked to the literature on gender, race, and sexuality as a touchstone, particularly when grappling with the indeterminacy and mutability of disability and disabled identity. Although there are significant differences between disability and these other identity categories, it is worth asking what lessons might be drawn from this literature for the study of disability in political science.

Work on disability in political science has tended to conceive of disability either as an individual-level trait or as category within the welfare state. While providing much-needed information on the status of disabled people and their political beliefs, this work has not, for the most part, engaged with disability as an analytic tool or concept that operates independent of lived experience. How does disability figure in our thinking about citizenship, freedom, equality, and other concepts with which political scientists are regularly engaged? How might we account for the higher prevalence of disability among certain racial and ethnic groups (see, e.g., Goyat et al. 2016)? In what ways are attributions of ability and disability deployed to reinforce existing racial hierarchies and systems of oppression?

In raising these questions, I am inspired by recent scholarship in disability studies that engages disability as a method and analytic category that illuminates key features of our social and political world (see, e.g., Baynton 2001, Erevles 2011, Minich 2016, Mitchell & Snyder 2015, Schalk & Kim 2020). But I also have in mind the work of political and social scientists who emphasize the significance of race and gender, not only as identities and classificatory systems but also as political processes (Hawkesworth 2003, Omi & Winant 2014), social structures (Bonilla-Silva 1997, Risman 2004), institutional orders (King & Smith 2005), and axes of social control (Soss & Weaver 2017). Together, these approaches offer new inroads for political scientists who might not otherwise recognize the salience of disability for their research.

DISABILITY AND POLITICAL THEORY

Recent work in political theory, while not uninterested in people with disabilities as political actors, has given more attention to disability as an analytic category. This burgeoning and eclectic field of study within the subdiscipline can be sorted, for the purposes of this review, into two broad approaches. The first looks to the function of disability in the canon of political thought with a view toward uncovering the exclusionary assumptions that undergird central theoretical concepts. The second unearths the unlikely resources within these and other theoretical texts for efforts to address the continued marginalization and subordination of disabled people.

Calling attention to the “negative images” of disability that populate canonical texts, Arneil (2009) and Hirschmann (2013, 2020) together challenge “key assumptions of both liberal and republican theory” (Arneil 2009, p. 221). Thinkers like Immanuel Kant and John Locke “do not simply passively exclude people with disabilities from their key concepts”—rather, they “use them to constitute the boundaries of these same concepts” (Arneil & Hirschmann 2016b, p. 24). When Kant refers to reason as a defining feature of personhood and “the ground for human dignity” (Carlson & Kittay 2009, p. 308), or when Locke uses the irrationality of “lunatics” and “ideots” to mark the distinction between freedom and subjection (Arneil 2009, p. 222), they are not merely conforming to then-conventional beliefs about physical and mental incapacity (see, e.g., Clifford Simplican 2015, ch. 2, Hirschmann 2013). As Pinheiro (2016, p. 46) argues in his analysis of Kant’s empirical work, contract theorists like Kant and Locke do not neglect disability; rather, they “explicitly single out disability by constructing the disabled as embodied antagonists of their political theories.” Uncovering what he refers to as an “ableist contract,” Pinheiro (2016, p. 45) shows how the exclusion and marginalization—indeed, the “targeted subjection”—of people with disabilities are in fact crucial to maintaining “the social contract’s claim to universality.”

Similarly influenced by Pateman’s (1988) and Mills’s (1997) critiques of social contract theory, Clifford Simplican (2015) offers an alternative formulation of this argument. Like Pinheiro, she is interested in the ways disability is called upon to “naturalize”—often by way of its exclusion—“a fictional account of compulsory capacity that none of us can achieve” (p. 4). But Clifford Simplican (2015, p. 27) also makes the case for a “more emancipatory side of the capacity contract,” even as she remains critical of efforts to incorporate disability back into contemporary contract theory (see, e.g., Silvers & Francis 2005). Looking to Locke’s *Second Treatise*, she shows how the impetus for the social contract—the desire for safety and protection—reveals both an awareness of and an attentiveness to human vulnerability. Indeed, it is this vulnerability, she argues, that “prompts men to form a solidarity capacity contract, ensuring that all men can appeal to justice” (Clifford Simplican 2015, p. 41).

Vulnerability is not disability, however, and conflating the two conditions risks losing sight of the specificity and particularity of disability and the disabled experience. At the same time, the universality of vulnerability offers, for some theorists, an alternative ground upon which to found political community, clarifying our obligations to—and interdependence with—distant and dissimilar others. “Appeal[ing] to a shared human vulnerability,” writes Knight, can help to “deconstruct the able/disabled binary that continues to exist in the case of disability” (2014, p. 16). “Dedicated to dismantling structural inequality,” this appeal forges an alternative path for disability rights that does not depend on disability identity (p. 24). It remains to be seen, however, whether vulnerability—universal or otherwise—is sufficient to effect political change.

Like Clifford Simplican’s (2015, p. 27) efforts to recover a “more emancipatory side of the social contract,” Knight’s attention to vulnerability points toward a second approach to disability in political theory. Engaging a range of canonical and contemporary thinkers—including Diderot (Hirschmann 2020), Habermas (Afsahi 2020, Clifford 2012, Knight 2015), and Wollstonecraft

(Hunt Botting 2016)—this approach maintains a critical stance toward the canon while also uncovering unlikely theoretical resources within its depths. Looking to deliberative democratic theory, Afsahi (2020), Clifford (2012), and Knight (2015) have each grappled with the tension between “deliberative theorists’ promise of inclusion” (Clifford 2012, p. 211) and their emphasis on communicative reason. Especially problematic for those who are unable to “comply with certain expressive norms” (Knight 2015, p. 104), deliberative democratic theory has so far failed, Knight argues, to account for “disabled peoples’ distinctive way of participating and communicating” (pp. 107–8). Rather than abandon this approach, however, these theorists explore the resources available within deliberative theory for efforts to achieve disability equality.

REVISITING “THE RIGHT TO LIVE IN THE WORLD”

In an October 2021 opinion piece for the *New York Times*, disability activist and scholar Ari Ne’eman reflected on the unique challenges facing the contemporary disability rights movement. Put simply, how does a movement defined by its celebration of disabled identity represent the interests of a constituency who may not see themselves as disabled? This is an especially pressing question as we confront not only the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the combined effects of a rapidly aging population and a looming ecological and climate crisis. Faced with a growing, but ill-defined, disabled population, Ne’eman (2021) asks: “What if disability rights were for everyone?”

This may seem an unlikely proposal in light of what many legal scholars and disability activists regard as the failure of the ADA to address the social structures and systems that drive disability inequality (see, e.g., Bagenstos 2009, Pettinicchio 2019). The “product of a bygone era of congressional bipartisanship” (Pettinicchio 2019, p. 142), the ADA—and in particular the concessions made to conservative efforts to shrink the welfare state—is faulted by some scholars for postponing more challenging conversations about the political, social, and economic changes necessary to achieve equality and inclusion on behalf of people with disabilities (see, e.g., Bagenstos 2003, Ben-Moshe 2020). Meanwhile, critical legal theorists and disability justice activists have sought to move beyond an earlier emphasis on rights-based approaches, highlighting, with Ben-Moshe (2020, p. 13), “the pitfall[s] of disability rights as a liberal apparatus that is connected with neoliberal governance” (see also Minich 2016, Schalk & Kim 2020). Thinking alongside as well as against Ne’eman’s proposal, I conclude by briefly reflecting on areas of further development in disability and political science.

Precipitated by recent uses of the ADA “to challenge immigration restrictions, police brutality, mass incarceration and many other broad social problems,” Ne’eman’s (2021) effort to universalize disability rights is also valuable for what it reveals about the many ways that disability operates in our lives, as well as its deep imbrication with other axes of inequality and subordination. What would it mean to decenter disability identity as the focus of our investigations? Or, to pose this question in a different way, what possibilities are afforded by using disability as a conceptual and analytic lens on pressing problems and debates within the discipline? One potential model is provided by McKinney’s (2019) analysis of the way that potential disability is deployed to maintain the moral status of the woman seeking an abortion (even by those who support reproductive justice). Or consider Minich’s (2016) proposal that we think of disability studies as a method that “involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations.” Adopting this approach does not mean abandoning the study of disability as an identity or legal category, but it may offer new inroads and points of connection for those who might not otherwise see disability as relevant to their work.

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