

Disability Studies in 1998: Missing Pieces

Kay Schriner

My comments for this meeting are deliberately narrow in that I will focus exclusively on one aspect of disability studies, the study of the politics of disability. This focus is intended to call attention to what I believe is an area of research that is underrepresented in disability studies, and to ask this group to join me in encouraging the study of political phenomena in a way that will lead to the improvement of conditions for people with disabilities.

As a social scientist, my allegiance is to developing a theoretical basis for understanding what disability means to us socially, economically, and politically and from those theories, how the lives of people with disabilities can be improved. Recently, though, I have become aware of just how little we know about the political aspects of disability, and have come to appreciate how much this lack of knowledge may hurt us in the long run.

With my colleagues at the University of Arkansas, I have been conducting research on the politics of disability. By politics, I mean voting, running as candidates for elected office, shaping the messages of campaigns, contributing time and money to political parties and campaigns, pursuing a disability agenda with campaigns and parties; in short, all those aspects of the electoral process that political scientists routinely study for every minority group except people with disabilities.

Our research concerns the political participation of people with disabilities. We have found that people with disabilities are much less likely to register and vote than are nondisabled individuals, and that they face a number of legal obstacles to voting. In discussions with my political science colleague about the importance of these findings, I have been struck by their implications, which are very serious. To put it bluntly, we stand to lose the policy advances of recent decades if people with disabilities do not become more active participants in American politics.

As Bobby Silverstein, one of the most knowledgeable people in the country about disability policy, has said, disability policy has joined the big leagues. By that he means that disability policy now has the potential of being as contentious as welfare policy, economic policy, foreign policy, and any other policy area that is marked by strong ideological battles. The bipartisan consensus on disability policy is no longer taken for granted, and example after example (e.g., the backlash against the Americans with Disabilities Act, attacks on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, attempts to water down the National Voter Registration Act) indicates that laws affecting people with disabilities are much more likely to engender hard-fought and sometimes bitter debate now than in the past. And some observers argue that these recent experiences are more permanent than temporary. Justin Dart, for example, calls this the era of "the new politics of disability."

The politics of disability

To the extent that disability scholars have focused on things that are political, we have focused on such issues as identity as a disabled person, the disability rights movement, and disability policy. The knowledge base we have been developing around these issues is substantial and useful.

What we do not know much about are the electoral aspects of politics: who votes, how they vote, who they vote for, why, and what candidates and parties do about it. And I submit that this lack of knowledge is of interest for more than scholarly reasons. For, if we do not begin to understand the connection between electoral politics and what happens to people with disabilities, people with disabilities may lose out by not having the electoral strength to force the political system to be responsive. This lack of electoral strength is particularly problematical when budgetary and ideological constraints begin to constrain policymakers and force them to look for ways to save money and be more conservative.

Thus far the disability rights movement has been much more focused on the specific legislative and regulatory activities of elected and unelected policymakers in Washington than was either the civil rights or women's movements during the time they were becoming political forces to be reck-

oned with. Disability rights activists have relied on the support of elected officials from both parties, and have not focused to the same extent on electing supportive candidates. This 'insider strategy' has been very effective over the past few decades.

Unlike the civil rights movement or the women's rights movement that fought to obtain voting rights (and widespread political support) and then obtained legislative and legal protections to support the group, the disability movement first obtained legislative support and is now searching for mass support to protect its stake. Unfortunately, there is the potential that the disability movement does not have the political support to defend itself. The disability movement has not created or sought public support, as it has had a 'stealth' approach to obtaining desired legislation (Shapiro, 1993).

Also, the disability movement does not have a strong voting block ready to reward or punish incumbents. People with disabilities are much less likely to register and vote than are nondisabled individuals (Shields, Schriener, & Schriener, in press; Schriener, Shields, & Schriener, in press). Further, some people with cognitive and emotional impairments are explicitly disenfranchised by many states (Schriener, Ochs, & Shields, 1997). If people with disabilities are to effectively voice their concerns to elected officials, or at minimum fight to preserve the advances they have already made, then political participation becomes imperative. It is both an irony and tragedy that the largest minority group in the United States is not only badly represented but does not exert its potentially massive political power. Only through an extensive understanding of the individual level determinants of political participation of people with disabilities will such potential ever be realized.

What this means for disability studies

Disability studies is beginning to take hold in America's academic settings, both as a legitimate field of study and as an influence on the traditional medical-model fields of special education, vocational rehabilitation, and the health-related areas. There are now several fledgling programs in disability studies, many new publications, and deepening recognition of the importance of a disability studies perspective. It is appropriate that we celebrate our successes and plan future achievements in this meeting on the status of disability studies and the Society for Disability Studies.

However, disability studies is incomplete without a branch that addresses how people with disabilities participate in the electoral system, and how the electoral system responds to people with disabilities and disability issues. We do not know, for example, whether people with different kinds of disabilities have different voting patterns; nor do we know whether people with disabilities would vote in greater numbers if every state provided for early voting or had flexible absentee voting laws. We are only beginning to understand how the voting process can be made accessible for people with visual and cognitive impairments. And we have almost no information about how disability agencies are responding to Motor Voter requirements that they offer registration services to their consumers.

This is not the only aspect of traditional political inquiry that potentially has great pay-offs for people with disabilities. Studies of the disability community and its representation of disability issues in the political and policymaking systems would also help us understand how people with disabilities can be better represented in politics. How do disability organizations frame their messages to elected officials? How do officials react to them? Have these patterns of communication and support changed in recent years? How do these organizations coordinate their activities around common agenda items, and when agendas are not shared, how do they resolve differences of opinion? What is the decision making process like in these organizations? What is their relationship to their members? How are their activities supported? These questions and many others offer fruitful areas for future research.

These missing pieces in disability studies present opportunities and challenges to the research community. Good empirical information is required information that can be used by the disability rights movement and its supporters, policymakers, and others to encourage the participation of people with disabilities in the electoral process and improved representation of their interests in public policymaking. These efforts must be a part of the effort to awaken this 'sleeping giant' of American politics (Zola, 1993).

References

Schriner, K., Ochs, L., & Shields, T. (1997). The last suffrage movement: Voting rights for people with cognitive and emotional disabilities. *Publius*, 27 (3), 75-96.

Schriner, K., Shields, T.G., & Schriner, K. (in press). Disability in American politics: The effect of gender and race on the political participation of people with disabilities. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*.

Shapiro, J.P. (1993). Disability policy and the media: A stealth civil rights movement bypasses the press and defies conventional wisdom. *Policy Studies Journal*, 22 (1), 123-132.

Shields, T.G., Schriner, K., & Schriner, K. (in press). The disability voice in American politics: Political participation of people with disabilities in the 1994 election. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*.

Zola, I.K. (1993). The sleeping giant in our midst: Redefining 'persons with disabilities.' In L.O. Gostin & H.A. Beyer (Eds.), *Implementing the Americans with Disabilities Act*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Beginning in August 1999, Kay Schriner, Ph.D. will be a research professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Arkansas.