

Voters perceive political candidates with a disability as qualified for elected office

January 28 2021



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Worldwide, over [one billion people](#) live with a disability. Historically, they have been discriminated against and stigmatized by society. To improve their rights, they should be included in political decision-

making, yet there is a lack of political representatives who are known to have a disability. This under-representation may be due to several factors, including how voters perceive a political candidate with a disability. However, a new study published in *Frontiers in Political Science*, found for the first time that voters do not apply negative stereotypes when evaluating candidates with a disability. Rather, voters tend to perceive candidates with a disability as capable, honest, and caring.

Stereotypes as information short-cuts

To form an impression of others, and with a lack of motivation and resources to dig past the surface, we tend to use stereotypes of social groups as a basis of information. We do this in a political context as well. "Stereotypes can serve as 'information shortcuts'," says Dr. Stefanie Reher (University of Strathclyde, United Kingdom). "Being aware of how stereotypes and assumptions might affect one's beliefs might help voters make more deliberate decisions". She describes two types of stereotypes that might influence voters' perceptions of candidates with a disability: trait stereotypes, and stereotypes about competence and political beliefs of candidates. Trait stereotypes operate if voters perceive candidates with a disability as weaker or more vulnerable, but also as courageous or inspiring. Competence and beliefs stereotypes are at work if voters might perceive candidates with disabilities as more concerned with healthcare and minority rights, and less concerned with (for instance) defense.

The research

To study voters' perception of candidates with a disability, Reher surveyed 1,500 British participants. In the [online survey](#), participants were presented with descriptions of two fictional candidates and were

asked to assess them on several dimensions. The descriptions gave background information about the candidates: gender, age, ethnic background, profession, years of political activity, and previous experience of elected office. They either did not mention any disability or included one of three selected [disabilities](#): paralysis below the waist, blindness, or deafness.

Overall, voters do not appear to apply negative trait stereotypes, such as incompetence and weakness, when assessing candidates with a disability. Particularly, voters perceive them as more caring, with a difference between 4% to 6% from non-disabled candidates, and more honest, with a difference between 3% to 5%. The findings also indicate that effects of competence and beliefs stereotypes are larger than trait stereotypes. Specifically, voters perceive candidates with a disability as more concerned with minority rights, healthcare, and social welfare, with a difference between 4% to 12%. Interestingly, candidates with a disability were perceived to be more left-wing, with a difference between 3% to 5%. "The study suggests that voters consider disabled people as very capable of fulfilling the tasks of elected office," says Reher. "In fact, it appears that the experience of being disabled is even seen as an asset in some policy domains, including social security and healthcare."

Implications of the study

These findings have implications for governments and [political parties](#). Reher continues, "the finding that voters do not perceive disabled candidates as less competent than non-disabled candidates is very informative for governments and political parties, as well as aspiring disabled politicians themselves." The problem of under-representation in politics may not lay with voters. Instead, increasing different types of support for candidates with a disability is key. "If voters do not support candidates less because they are disabled, this suggests that there are

other factors preventing disabled people from reaching positions of political power", Reher adds, "including a lack of accessibility and financial support for reasonable adjustments, and potentially a hesitancy within parties to nominate disabled people as candidates."

More information: *Frontiers in Political Science*, DOI: [10.3389/fpos.2020.634432](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2020.634432) , www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2020.634432/abstract

Provided by Frontiers

Citation: Voters perceive political candidates with a disability as qualified for elected office (2021, January 28) retrieved 25 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-01-voters-political-candidates-disability-elected.html>

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