

Protest Politics and the Disabled



Keywords

Disabilities. Impairments. Disability Rights Movement. Accessibility. Equality. Social movements. Protest. Political violence. Civil disobedience.

Description

People with physical and mental impairments have earned increasing recognition as a coherent force in American politics during the last few decades, due largely to their effective use of political protest tactics. This issue brief outlines the progression of these tactics, describes the changing boundaries of the “disabled” community, and discusses the rights that various subgroups within this community have fought for.

Key Points

- According to the U.S. Census, there are over 54 million people with disabilities in the United States.
- The collective efforts of disability rights advocates are referred to as the “Disability Rights Movement,” the “Disabled Person’s Movement,” and the “Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement.”
- Successful protest tactics employed by disability rights activists have included sit-ins, marches, student demonstrations, and transit blockades.
- Long-term goals of this group include greater accessibility to and safety in public areas, equality in education and employment, and the right to live an independent life free of institutionalization.
- Important legislation passed as a result of this movement include the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the “Section 504” regulations of 1977, and the American with Disabilities Act of 1990.
- Notable disability rights activists include Edward Roberts, Judith Heumann, Alan Reich, and John Tyler.

Issue Brief

Often compared to the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Rights Movement, the mobilization of Americans with disabilities in the 1970s has brought about a slew of political victories for the disabled community throughout the last four decades. Much of this can be attributed to the movement’s effective use of awareness-raising protest tactics, specifically in the form of demonstrational civil disobedience.

Often misconstrued to mean “physically handicapped,” the term “disabled” actually covers a broad spectrum of impairments, many of which are seemingly underrepresented, even in the disabled community. Similar to a hegemonic ethnicity within a larger race, the deaf population is recognized as a driving force behind the Disability Rights Movement due in part to their size, unity, and sense of pride. However, in addition to the hearing impaired, Americans dealing with autism, blindness, Down’s Syndrome, and schizophrenia, to name a few, are also categorized as “disabled.”

The **World Health Organization** defines “disability” as follows: *"Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Thus disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives."*

The American Community Survey definition of disability is based on six questions. A person is coded as having a disability if he or she or a proxy respondent answers affirmatively for one or more of these six categories:
HEARING DISABILITY (asked of all ages): Is this person deaf or does he/she have serious difficulty hearing?
VISUAL DISABILITY (asked of all ages): Is this person blind or does he/she have serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses?
COGNITIVE DISABILITY (asked of persons ages 5 or older): Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, does this person have serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions?
AMBULATORY DISABILITY (asked of persons ages 5 or older): Does this person have serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs?
SELF-CARE DISABILITY (asked of persons ages 5 or older): Does this person have difficulty dressing or bathing?
INDEPENDENT LIVING DISABILITY (asked of persons ages 15 or older): Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, does this person have difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor’s office or shopping?

The sit-ins of 1977 that targeted Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) buildings in every region of the nation were among the most widely publicized demonstrations involving disability rights. Activists began occupying the federal office buildings in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Denver, Boston, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco on April 5, 1977 to protest HEW Secretary Joseph Califano’s hesitation - due primarily to monetary concerns - in signing the regulations for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act passed four years earlier. Section 504, a provision that aims to equalize living conditions for the disabled and the first major law of its kind, states that “no qualified individual with a disability in the United States shall be excluded from, denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination" under any program or activity that receives federal funding.

Side by side, disabled and non-disabled protesters marched into HEW buildings and occupied offices across the country, demanding enforcement of these regulations. Most demonstrations ended in frustration and failure hours later, but the San Francisco sit-in, led by Judith Heumann, was an unparalleled success in disability rights activism, lasting 25 days and involving 120 protesters. The sit-in concluded on April 28, 1977, when Secretary Califano finally signed Section 504 into law.

The following year, another successful protest was organized by disability rights activists in Denver, Colorado. Led by the Atlantis Community, later re-named the ADAPT (American Disabled for Accessible Public Transport), hundreds of activists staged a blockade of the Denver Regional Transit Authority buses to protest the system's inaccessibility for the physically disabled. A series of organized demonstrations continued for a year, ending only when the Denver Transit Authority added wheelchair lifts to their buses in 1979.

A second large-scale protest against inequality in public transportation occurred in 1983, also in Denver. Targeted primarily at the American Public Transport Association (APTA), the ADAPT-sponsored campaign lasted a total of seven years and is partially sustained to this day through regular protests at APTA conventions.

The Disability Rights Movement has also been fueled by student demonstrations, the most notable of which occurred at Gallaudet University, a liberal arts school for the hearing impaired established by an act of Congress. Upon hearing that the Gallaudet Board of Trustees had appointed a new, non-hearing impaired President over two deaf candidates, over 2,000 students and disability rights activists began an 8-day occupation and lock-out on school grounds on March 6, 1988. Protesters felt that a university dedicated to providing an equal education for the hearing-impaired could not be effectively headed by a hearing president unacquainted with the daily struggles and societal discrimination of deaf students.

The demonstration escalated over the course of several days, leading to *ABC Nightline* coverage, and subsequently, national attention, on day four. Heavy-duty locks were fastened on all campus gates, and hot-wired school buses with flat tires were moved in front of them. This continued for weeks, with the protest eventually spilling out onto Capitol Hill, until President Zinser met with students and agreed to their four demands – her resignation in favor of a deaf president, the resignation of Board of Trustees Chair, Jane Spilman, the reconstitution of the Board to have a majority of deaf members, and the agreement that no students or staff members involved in the protest be subject to disciplinary action of any kind.

These select incidences of disability rights protest represent merely a fraction of this movement's success in swaying politics and societal perception. Disabled Americans have mobilized from isolation and disenfranchisement to a full-scale community inclusive of countless physical, mental, and developmental impairments. Together, deaf, blind, handicapped, and autistic Americans have joined forces and become a formidable voice in politics, overcoming their own inter-group barriers in a way that transcends the achievements of earlier models that supposedly cast the mold for the Disability Rights Movement. The successes of this community can be seen everywhere, everyday – wheelchair lifts on buses, automatic doors in public buildings, special education programs in schools; the list goes on and on.



"I can't even get to the back of the bus"

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