

# *Symbolic and Substantive Relevance of Politicians with Disabilities: A British Columbia Case Study*

Little is known in Canada about the political participation of persons with disabilities and their effects on public policy. The authors draw upon the 2013 British Columbia election which saw three persons with disabilities elected to examine their symbolic and substantive relevance. Symbolically, the potential exists for increased legitimacy in governments and diversity in thinking while substantively, an important role exists in shaping the agenda yet actual policy advancements fall prey to party politics.

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## **Introduction**

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While many minority groups including women and ethnic minorities have made (albeit sometimes limited) progress towards more equal representation in government over the past few decades across Canada, persons with disabilities have largely lagged behind. Few have been elected to office federally - less than a handful with visible disabilities in recent elections.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, studies show that less than one per cent of candidates across all parties in recent provincial elections were persons with disabilities, further revealing blockages to their electoral participation.<sup>2</sup> The situation in British Columbia (BC) is somewhat different: three Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) with visible disabilities were elected in the May 2013 provincial election. Is their election significant? The BC results offer a unique opportunity to examine how the election of these individuals with disabilities has affected the representation of persons with disabilities in the province. What factors led to their successful election? How were issues related to

their disability addressed? More broadly, does their election matter? Will politicians with disabilities advance issues and concerns raised by the disability community? Answers to such questions are not only important for encouraging the greater representation of persons with disabilities in politics but also contributes to our understanding of changes in disability policy.

In this article we argue that there are symbolic and potentially substantive benefits to persons with disabilities seeking and in being elected to political office. The first section notes parallels to the experiences of other minority groups seeking political representation. Although there are some factors unique to the disability community that need to be considered, we find that little is known about this subject, especially in the Canadian context. We then explore the experiences of three disabled individuals who recently sought political office in BC. Our analysis leads us to some tentative answers to our questions and allows us to offer some explanations as to why this breakthrough is occurring in BC. We also find that political parties play an important role in this process determining the candidates who run and shaping the policies that their party members must support.

## **Literature**

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*The importance of minority representation*

Debate on the substantive nature of minority representation in politics often centres on the degree

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to which minority politicians represent and argue for the interests of minority group members in policy decisions. Some scholars argue that having minority representatives (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) in decision making roles may lead to their greater consideration in policy discussions and thus lead to better public policy.<sup>3</sup> This may be related to the fact that, at the individual level, minority representatives ask more poignant questions relating to minority populations than non-minority representatives. Yet, given that elected officials are typically "... [sensitive] to the demographic composition of their constituencies,"<sup>4</sup> there are questions about the extent of this substantive representation. Furthermore, party interests may be privileged over this minority representation.<sup>5</sup> Strongly partisan political systems, such as those found in Canada (including BC), thus act as a brake on substantive representation and thereby emphasize symbolic benefits.

Given minority populations can more readily identify with their representatives, it is this symbolic representation – seeing people who have similar characteristics to oneself – that may generate greater confidence in governments. For example, persons with disabilities "do not necessarily have common interests, but because of common experiences they may have interests that are opposed to those that the majority of non-disabled people may hold."<sup>6</sup> Perceptions matter and are directly linked to feelings of political efficacy. For example, a study of minority representation in the United States found that having a minority representative may create positive views of their quality of representation; however, this did not necessarily translate to overall satisfaction with representation in the government as a whole.<sup>7</sup> As such, these feelings translate to civic participation rates. It is important that minority groups feel they have access to government either through representation (direct) or other pathways (indirect).

At the heart of these pathways are questions of issue salience and venues. Evidence from the United Kingdom suggests that the period shortly after WWII had the highest issue salience for disability as political parties fought to capture the votes of newly disabled veterans.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, and given a history where prejudice and exclusion of minorities in government was significant, minority populations often worked through interest groups to pursue changes in policy. Due to this legacy, minorities may still be more prone to seek representation in policy through interest groups rather than seek elected representation in government; however, these forms of representation

are shifting. In the current neoliberal era, funding and consultation with interest groups have been cut in favour of direct consultation with citizens.<sup>9</sup> With a renewed individual voice but lacking policy influence and with limited substantive representation, symbolic representation takes on added importance.

In BC, as elsewhere, there are a number of ways in which persons with disabilities have representation in government. Yet, since the province has one of the highest numbers of elected officials with disabilities compared to other provinces, this situation provides a unique opportunity to study the effect of their representation and the factors that have produced it.

#### *Conditions conducive for minority representation*

Navigating the electoral process can be challenging with political parties acting as gatekeepers. They play a fundamental role in candidate identification and selection through control of nomination procedures and funding of candidates. As minority populations have grown, political parties have worked to obtain their support in elections including the nomination of an increasing number of minority candidates. Yet any increase in their election has been marginal at best, and there has been wide variation among minority populations.<sup>10</sup> For example, evidence suggests that some minority groups, particularly those of South Asian ethnicity, have more success in navigating the political system than others due to demographics and mobilization given concentrated populations.<sup>11</sup> This underscores the fact that individual characteristics of minority populations (such as residential patterns) need to be considered when working to overcome blockages to their electoral participation.<sup>12</sup>

Even so, our first-past-the-post electoral system disadvantages minority groups. For example, women candidates fare better under proportional representation systems that deliver more female representatives.<sup>13</sup> This can be seen in Sweden which adopted a proportional representation list system and had 47.3 per cent female representation at the national level in 2007, a figure that dropped slightly to 43.6 per cent in the 2014 election.<sup>14</sup> These results are significantly higher than the 26 per cent of MPs elected in the 2015 Canadian federal election who are women. This under-representation in first-past-the-post systems leads to a heightened awareness of inequity in political representation among minority populations and their preference for other forms of political representation such as multi-member districts and proportional representation list systems.<sup>15</sup>

### *Characteristics of minority candidates*

Looking narrowly at persons with disabilities, much can be learned about the challenges minority candidates face by examining the characteristics of those that have been successfully elected. Must minority candidates conform to the characteristics of the dominant group in order to get elected? On the one hand, minority candidates are often required to match and surpass the qualifying characteristics of the dominant group to achieve success.<sup>16</sup> This includes superior educational attainment and working their way up party ranks.<sup>17</sup> Simply put, “more is required of newcomers with political aspirations because they need to countervail negative stereotyping and serious barriers.”<sup>18</sup> All of this work is done to be seen as “acceptably different,”<sup>19</sup> suggesting that, rhetoric notwithstanding, our political systems are still not very welcoming of diversity.

On the other hand, qualifications and characteristics have varied across time for both men and women.<sup>20</sup> As Tremblay and Trimble state, “female politicians have changed over the years, but so have their male colleagues, and it is not possible to claim that the women have simply brought themselves into line with the men.”<sup>21</sup> It may be hard to generalize about the characteristics of minorities, particularly when you find candidates belonging to more than one minority group. Double minorities, people belonging to two minority groups, may face additional barriers in the political process. For example, while women with disabilities may take a greater interest in how government policies affect them and how they may be able to shape policies through advocacy or political participation,<sup>22</sup> they generally have lower political participation rates. Systemic barriers they face that contribute to lower levels of education and employment could explain the decline in political efficacy. The fact that some minorities may need to adopt characteristics of the dominant group in politics denotes that there are barriers for minority political candidates that persist. For persons with disabilities in BC this is no exception and it is important to understand the standards or expectations to which minority candidates are compared.

How to move forward? While no clear consensus exists, much discussion surrounds the use of quotas and policy design. Over 100 countries have adopted gender quotas and 20 have adopted quotas for ethnic minorities; however, much depends on how

they are applied and enforced in determining their effectiveness. For example, little may be gained if “quotas designed to increase the representation of one marginalized group appear to come ... at the expense of other marginalized groups.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, quotas are highly contested and evoke feelings that some of the people they benefit may not be adequate representatives.<sup>24</sup> Other mechanisms to ensure political participation among people who typically might not engage with politics due to socioeconomic status include policy design. Simply put, programs that are found to be non-paternalistic and promote autonomy generate more engaged citizens. This underscores the importance of factors affecting the political participation of persons with disabilities.

### *Factors affecting persons with disabilities*

Persons with disabilities often face unique barriers and challenges in participating politically. A late history of enfranchisement in Canada (1988)<sup>25</sup> and residual stigma surrounding disability have limited engagement with politics. This has led to psychological barriers as many people have not felt they have a place in politics. Physical (in)accessibility issues, for both candidates and voters with disabilities, present further obstacles that need to be overcome. For example, we note the large protests for greater accessibility of polling stations by individuals with physical disabilities in advance of the 2013 Montreal civic election.<sup>26</sup> While progress has been made, much remains to be done.

On this, the US context is instructive. Here we find a small body of literature, examining the electoral participation of persons with disabilities, indicating that political participation rates are 15-20 per cent lower than those of the non-disabled population.<sup>27</sup> This differs depending on age with younger cohorts more politically active than seniors. Less stigma and segregation now exist which may help explain these differences and greater group involvement may be needed to overcome remaining challenges given it usually increases civic skills, interest in politics and feelings of efficacy.<sup>28</sup> The US has also adopted several pieces of legislation to address barriers such as the 1984 *Voting Accessibility Act* and the 2002 *Help America Vote Act*. These complement and build on the broader requirements for accessibility outlined in the 1990 *Americans with Disabilities Act* (a similar Act is under consideration by the Canadian federal government). Even so, many voters still face barriers such as insensitive elections officials.<sup>29</sup>

Similar issues exist in the Canadian context. While voting is a crucial part of citizenship, for persons with disabilities “[e]lectoralsystemsaresimultaneouslysites of positive inclusion, incongruous marginalization, and outright exclusion.”<sup>30</sup> Being able to vote is often central to individuals’ feelings of political efficacy and is an established right in Canada. The situation is not the same in other countries such as in Australia and New Zealand where people with a diagnosed mental illness may be disqualified from voting.<sup>31</sup> However, there are still areas where Canada can improve, such as training for election officials, reporting of levels of accessibility, voting technology and print and web accessibility, as well as better coordination and standardization of accessibility provisions overall.<sup>32</sup>

Little research exists that examines the experiences and realities of persons with disabilities who pursue careers in elected office, yet their challenges are great. This includes societal attitudes, inadequate access to supports, accessibility issues and a lack of role models.<sup>33</sup> Candidates also often have trouble funding disability-related supports while campaigning. Recent research examining persons with disabilities who had sought provincial office and the barriers that they encountered found great variability between the Canadian provinces with few disability-specific campaign provisions.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, political parties were found to be significant barriers to the political participation for persons with disabilities given most lack disability specific provisions thus contributing to the low participation rates of persons with disabilities as candidates.<sup>35</sup> Few disabled candidates seek political office and even fewer succeed in being elected. Examining their experiences may be helpful to address barriers and to assess whether it substantively matters, disability policy wise.

## Interviews

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Three candidates with disabilities were elected at the 2013 BC provincial election as a part of Premier Christy Clark’s government: Stephanie Cadieux (Surrey-Coverdale), Sam Sullivan (Vancouver-False Creek) and Michelle Stilwell (Parksville-Qualicum). In addition, Ken Kramer was an unsuccessful Liberal candidate for Burnaby-Lougheed. Interviews that took place between May and July 2014 (with three of the four candidates who agreed to participate) were used to provide insight into both the experiences of those who have been successful and unsuccessful in seeking political office in BC. Our questions centered around four main themes: (1) their reasons for pursuing politics; (2) their experiences in the campaign process;

(3) the importance of politicians with disabilities; and, (4) how they advocate for disability issues. A number of perspectives emerged that highlight both the experiences of these individuals in the political system, as well as how they view the representation they provide for British Columbians with disabilities. Their views are then assessed vis-à-vis recent disability policy developments to gauge the impact of symbolic or substantive representation they provided. To protect the identity of those involved, interviewees are referred to as Respondent 1 (R1), Respondent 2 (R2) and Respondent 3 (R3).

### *Reasons for pursuing politics*

While each of these individuals has a unique background there are some notable commonalities. In terms of prior experience, all individuals interviewed had some involvement with disability-focused organizations or advocacy groups; they all expressed a belief that this experience gave them skills that assisted their entry into formal politics. Such experience may be valuable given findings that minorities must often match or surpass the qualifications of others.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, all of the candidates interviewed had interest in politics and were *asked* to run by the BC Liberal Party. Interestingly, all known candidates with disabilities who campaigned in the 2013 provincial election were wheelchair users. Thus, their disabilities were physical in nature and visible to the electorate and their experiences may not be reflective of persons with disabilities with other types of impairments.

Our interviewees had varied interests and reasons for pursuing careers in politics. All found some deficiencies with existing policies leading them to pursue advocacy work and/or municipal politics to address needed changes. When asked to seek provincial office, they accepted given their prior interest in politics, a desire to work within government to seek policy changes and being offered the opportunity to do so. As they stated, “I had a lot of success on the outside engaging government and making change, but what we really needed to do was to get decision makers inside government to understand and comprehend the issues and I thought I might have a better purpose.... Involved internally” (R3).

### *Experiences with the campaign process*

In general, physical barriers were acknowledged in terms of inaccessible facilities for meetings

and debates, as well as limitations for door-to-door campaigning, however, these were not seen as particularly prohibitive. In discussing their experience campaigning, Respondent 1 stated, "I've never really found it particularly hard. I have my own constituency I have built up. I have an approach and mechanisms I use that are effective that most other people don't." Technology and social media may also be seen as creative tools to overcome some of the barriers when campaigning. Respondent 3 used video blogging and twitter to connect with constituents extensively highlighting this as a key strategy, stating that technology "enabled me to perhaps reach more folks I might not reach under traditional routes." Given the long hours required during the campaign process, fatigue was also considered a barrier. Two of the three interviewees (R1, R2) noted that the first time they campaigned, they had to prove their own abilities given their disability to their party and supporters. This prevented them from showcasing their full abilities (R2). It may also denote the residual stigma surrounding the capabilities of persons with disabilities that exists within society.<sup>37</sup> There was also an acknowledgement that persons with other impairments, particularly those affecting written or oral communication skills, may find more barriers in the campaign process.

Having a disability is also seen as an opportunity for political candidates. For those interviewed, the visibility of their disability was generally seen as a positive in the campaign process because it differentiated them from other candidates – perhaps piquing the curiosity of voters and media. As Respondent 1 stated, "you become more identifiable as a candidate and people are intrigued." Our second Respondent went further, stating that they believed that the public perceived their disability as contributing positively to their life experience, that it added value and that it would be beneficial when transitioning into elected office. Using such opportunities to one's advantage and overcoming barriers are important as persons with disabilities may contribute in various ways to the greater representation of persons with disabilities in politics.

#### *The importance of politicians with disabilities*

Our interviewees were also asked whether they saw importance in having persons with disabilities represented in politics. They suggested that having individuals with disabilities in government may

prompt more accountability from others; for example, when presenting policy suggestions relating to accessibility, they may be more cognizant and considerate of persons with disabilities. Our first Respondent was explicit in noting that people "would not come with an inaccessible option, they wouldn't bring it." Further to this, they argued, "... even if it's not discussed or part of the conversation, the fact that the person is a disabled person is a message in and of itself" (R1). In many ways this may act as a natural disability lens in government. Furthermore, while our second Respondent noted the limitation of being able to represent all persons with disabilities or their experiences, they did admit that they possessed a certain understanding that does not exist with someone without a disability. Other benefits were more symbolic in nature. For example, many individuals had contacted Respondent 1 seeking advice when considering careers in politics at all levels of political office. Similarly, Respondent 2 pointed out the symbolic importance of having public figures with disabilities that leads to a "[i]f they can do it I can do it too" mentality. These feelings may also guide how these individuals advocate for disability rights in their roles such as in taking the lead for initiating policy changes.

#### *How they advocate for disability issues*

Politicians with disabilities may approach advocating for disability rights in different ways and, to some extent, this was evident in the interviews. Often, politicians will treat their own minority as they would treat others. As they stated, when it comes to advocating for disability issues, they approached it in the same way as they would for other issues facing their constituents (R2). At times partisan interests may influence how members approach certain topics; for politicians with a background in disability advocacy, this can be challenging. As Respondent 3 noted, "it was really important that I stayed true to who I was and not let the party decide what my platform was going to be." Our interviews suggest that it is important for minority politicians to be able to speak up about issues that are of direct importance to them and their minority community. When it happens, however, it does present challenges for political parties given their efforts to broker interests among their supporters. Such situations are also not exclusive to persons with disabilities; any individual within a party who has strong views on a particular subject faces similar challenges.

Photos: (Below) Legislative Assembly of BC / (Above) Stephanie Raymond



The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia's accessible entrance is named in honour of former MLA Douglas Mowat, the first MLA in the province to use a wheelchair while in office.

### Discussion

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What can we make of these individuals' experiences? Our analysis centres on their significance as representatives, accessibility in the campaign process, needed improvements and policy changes.

#### *The significance of MLAs with disabilities*

Symbolically, a greater presence of persons with disabilities in elected office exposes their capabilities to society, which may work towards dispelling some of the stigma surrounding disability.<sup>38</sup> Our interviewees spoke of having to prove their abilities initially. Over time they have successfully gained the respect of their colleagues and constituents. As Respondent 1 noted, initially people questioned "could I keep up, could I



do the job, did I have the stamina? [...] For me [it] was a ludicrous question. You know the people I deal with who are mostly able-bodied? They can't keep up." These comments suggest that having public figures with disabilities can help change perceptions.

BC is leading the way across Canada in terms of numbers of politicians with disabilities; but it is less clear why this is happening. We surmise that society in BC may have more experience with persons with disabilities in leadership roles as a result of the work of well-known public figures with disabilities such as Rick Hansen and Terry Fox.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, BC also has a unique individualized funding model for home support services, known as Choice in Supports for Independent Living (CSIL). Programs like this may allow persons with disabilities to be more independent and facilitate greater opportunity to participation in society.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, having a history of elected officials with disabilities may also open doors for those interested in pursuing political careers in the future, as was the case with two of our respondents. Our interviews suggest that navigating accessibility challenges was often left to the candidates themselves with candidates and their staff having to typically negotiate accessibility requirements at various events. Future candidates with disabilities may also benefit from the mentorship and experiences of other candidates when it comes to navigating access to supports. Lastly, our results also suggest that simply being asked by the political party to become a candidate may be a factor.

On a substantive basis, when people with lived experience of disability are at the policy-making table, consideration of disability in the policy process can increase in a number of ways. The presence of these MLAs may create a mindset within government that is more attuned to the effects policy can have on persons with disabilities. As Respondent 2 noted, colleagues will also begin to advocate on your behalf so you are not alone in this process. In this sense, having this diversity creates a natural lens on policy which can have beneficial effects. For example, if greater weight is given to consultation with persons with disabilities about issues affecting their lives, it is likely that less paternalistic policies will be proposed or implemented.

A few examples illustrate this point and the results are mixed. First, during the 2013 election, disability was not a dominant campaign issue and the disability file was largely ignored until late in the campaign at which time the four candidates with disabilities

were asked to develop the party's stance on disability (R3). An idea to initiate a white paper consultation process if the BC Liberal party was elected emerged out of these discussions. The public consultation occurred between December 2013 and March 2014 and culminated in the publication of the *Accessibility 2024 Action Plan*, which centres around a 10-year goal to make "B.C. the most progressive jurisdiction in Canada for Persons with Disabilities."<sup>41</sup> Of particular interest is the plan to create an inclusive government by "establishing an accessibility lens on regulation and legislation," and "supporting an accessible electoral process for all British Columbians."<sup>42</sup> However, a detailed action plan for how these goals will be implemented, as well as timelines for when they will be achieved, is missing.

Some steps have been made on a variety of disability issues. For example, in November 2015 changes were made to allow people on provincial disability assistance to receive monetary gifts and inheritances without compromising their eligibility for disability assistance. This change was well received by those in disability-focused advocacy groups. Jane Dyson, the executive director of Disability Alliance BC, called it an "enormous step forward."<sup>43</sup> However, some changes have left those in the disability community feeling shortchanged. In the 2016 Budget the BC government announced it would increase the income assistance benefits for persons with disabilities by \$77 per month, the first notable increase since 2007; at the same time, the province canceled the bus pass and special transportation subsidies for persons with disabilities negating much of the increase in the disability benefit.<sup>44</sup> An additional \$45 annual administrative fee was also added, further negating the effect of the income assistance increase, a fee which was removed in June 2016 under pressure from disability organizations.<sup>45</sup>

Overall, these policy developments show mixed examples of substantive representation provided by the three politicians with disabilities. Since 2013, progressive policies have been introduced under the *Accessibility 2024 Action Plan*, including allowing monetary gifts for those on income assistance. Issue salience on disability policy appears to have increased, which may partly stem from having individuals with disabilities embedded within government. However, instances like those resulting from the changes to the disability benefit in the 2016 budget indicate that substantive representation may often take a back seat to fiscal constraints and the overall interests of the political party in power.

There appears to be tensions between elected officials with disabilities and the disability community at large over whether these representatives are “doing enough” for the disability community. Whereas the disability community continues to have high hopes that the current number of elected officials with disabilities in BC will translate to substantive representation of their interests and policy change, elected representatives may find this difficult as they do not want to be viewed as single issue politicians and may also feel pressure to conform to their party’s interests (R1, R3). Additionally, the disability community is often fragmented on issues by impairment groups and does not generally mobilize as a voting bloc. Respondent 1 was direct in stating that “people with disabilities don’t often see themselves as a part of a cohesive community [though if they would,] the world would change.” This may contribute to low issue salience for disability-related issues and, as a result, the disability community is not often targeted by politicians because “[i]t is not considered a valuable way to use time” (R1).

#### *Accessibility in the campaign process*

Persons with disabilities may face unique challenges and opportunities when pursuing a career in politics. Those successful in the 2013 BC provincial election all have disabilities that are physical in nature. While physical accessibility issues were encountered in the campaign process, these barriers were not seen as directly limiting to campaign efforts given candidates faced similar issues in day-to-day life (R2). Additionally, as previously discussed, BC is one of a few Canadian provinces that allow candidates to claim “reasonable” disability-related expenses as personal expenses during the campaign process. This can be advantageous to candidates as they may face extra costs to address issues of accessibility or in implementing adapted campaign strategies. Respondent 2 believed that a political party would do whatever was necessary for a candidate if they were interested in seeking political office. Having this fact guaranteed in the constitutions of political parties and campaign finance laws would, however, go a long way to encourage others with disabilities to get involved in politics. It was also noted that accessibility issues decreased over time as party officials became more aware of what to expect in terms of their accessibility needs (R2).<sup>46</sup> As representation of persons with disabilities in

government is still very low in comparison to the population’s size, greater symbolic representation of persons with disabilities may lead to substantive representation including changes to accessibility of the political process over time.

#### *Improvements for an inclusive political system*

While there has been progress towards greater inclusion of minorities in politics in BC, improvements are still needed. Political parties play an important role in determining the numbers of minority individuals that seek elected office and “more is needed from political parties to attract persons with disabilities into political life.”<sup>47</sup> Whether recruiting and supporting qualified minority candidates in winnable ridings or guaranteeing such inclusion in the party’s constitution, “[w]hen political parties reach out to people with disabilities, this helps to overcome the disincentive caused by the lack of role models and the limited history of people with disabilities seeking public office.”<sup>48</sup> Notably, all of our interviewees were recruited to run by the BC Liberal Party. To date, only the provincial NDP in Ontario have affirmative action guidelines for candidacy and nomination of minority groups including persons with disabilities.<sup>49</sup> In the BC context, the success of these three MLAs may contribute to a more open and accessible political environment for persons with disabilities in the future.

Changing how society views disability is another factor in creating a more inclusive political system. Redefining disability as the inability of society to accommodate impairments, known as the social model of disability, moves the responsibility for accommodation away from the individual and into the hands of society. Yet there must be recognition that barriers persons with disabilities face may be very different depending on their impairment (e.g., physical accessibility needs or interpreters to participate in public debates). Individualized recognition, while desirable, may be a long-term aspiration as political systems tend to avoid focusing on singular groups. However, as noted previously, programs such as CSIL which provide individualized self-directed funding may allow persons with disabilities greater opportunity to participate in society and politics as support provided assists them in overcoming impairment-specific obstacles of independent living.



## Conclusion

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The election of three MLAs with disabilities in BC offers a unique opportunity to examine the representation of persons with disabilities in the provincial government. Given the history of stigma surrounding disability and physical barriers, there have been very few known politicians with disabilities in Canada.<sup>50</sup> The presence of these individuals in government holds great importance for persons with disabilities, primarily symbolically but also substantively. While their election may not bring about immediate policy gains or government commitments, their election does undoubtedly matter to advancing the status and representation of persons with disabilities. Having such voices at the table contributes to diversity in thinking while also serving as a reminder for other politicians to consider minorities in the policy-making process.<sup>51</sup> Having elected officials with disabilities creates a lens on policy decisions. While substantive benefits do exist, any progress policy-wise is often constrained by the stance of the political party, which may prevent disabled MLAs from being more outspoken on issues of personal importance to them. Such partisan restraint makes it unlikely that the election of politicians with disabilities will lead to dramatic changes for disability issues in the short-term. Regardless, the election of three MLAs with disabilities in BC holds significance for this minority group in achieving representation in government that can be a foundation for future growth.

## Notes

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- 1 This underscores the fact that persons with disabilities typically do not disclose their disability fearing discrimination and stigma.
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- 48 April D'Aubin and Deborah Stienstra, "Access to Electoral Success," p. 12.
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- 51 Lamb, 2013.