

## Electoral Insight – Persons with Disabilities and Elections

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### **Access to Electoral Success Challenges and Opportunities for Candidates with Disabilities in Canada**

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People with disabilities are largely invisible in Canada's electoral processes. Among those who participate as candidates in municipal, provincial and federal elections, there continues to be a significant under-representation of people with disabilities, particularly people with disabilities that require accommodations such as sign language interpreters, alternative media and other types of supports. There is no collected history or analysis of the presence or absence of people with disabilities in Canadian politics. As well, there are candidates and elected officials with disabilities who remain hidden, passing as non-disabled people. This under-representation stems in part from negative public attitudes about people with disabilities, lack of knowledge about the costs and potential contributions of disabled people, and lack of resources for candidates with disabilities, including appropriate disability supports, money, and access to political opportunities. This article shares some of the experiences of election candidates with disabilities to reveal both the barriers that make it more difficult for persons with disabilities to attain public office and the remedies required to equalize opportunities in Canada's electoral processes for such persons.

A number of barriers prevent the full and equal participation of people with disabilities in Canadian politics. As a group, people with disabilities are poor and have limited access to disability supports (goods or services used to overcome barriers related to disability). Many physical barriers still exist in Canadian society: inaccessible public spaces are common. The availability of Braille and other types of alternative media, and of sign language interpretation for deaf people, is limited. Stereotypical attitudes about the capabilities of persons with disabilities persist. The history of people with disabilities as elected officials has been neglected. In the case of disabled American President Franklin D. Roosevelt, some of this history is beginning to be reclaimed.<sup>[Footnote 1](#)</sup> Consequently, there are not many well-known role models of people with disabilities who have attained high elected office.

In Canada, people with disabilities who are running for office, along with the self-representational organizations of people with disabilities that are promoting active citizenship, are reducing the invisibility of people with disabilities in Canada's electoral process.

## Confronting the barriers to participation in the electoral process



Franklin Delano Roosevelt served as President of the United States despite a major disability. After being stricken with polio, he became Governor of New York and President from 1933 to 1945. His deliberate effort to conceal the paralysis of his legs, for political reasons, led to an understanding with the press. This is one of only two known photographs of him in a wheelchair.

### Attitudes

Despite the potential for personal hardship and the systemic barriers to their participation in the electoral process, people with disabilities in Canada, like their colleagues in other countries, have been running for office. In January 2004, the Liberal Party of Canada removed a systemic barrier to people with disabilities – questioning potential Liberal candidates, on a personal information form, about any experience with mental illness. Prime Minister Paul Martin ordered the practice stopped and apologized to the Canadian Mental Health Association.<sup>[Footnote 2](#)</sup>

For some, it has taken repeated attempts to win an election. Edmonton wheelchair user Percy Wickman was introduced to politics at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, where he successfully ran for vice-president of the student council, using the slogan "Wheel ahead with Wickman." After three unsuccessful runs for Edmonton City Council, Wickman was elected in 1977.<sup>[Footnote 3](#)</sup> He served until 1986.

As Wickman noted in his autobiography, *Wheels in the Fast Lane*, discriminatory attitudes contributed to lost votes.

"It was becoming evident that this could be the big one as I was being picked by many to finally win a seat. Then the whispers started. 'Why elect a disabled person, when there are so many healthy ones running?' 'If successful, he will only represent the handicapped.' Certainly some sympathy votes were picked up, particularly from those who sensed my determination and hunger for the job. But many, many votes were lost because of the unfounded fear that I could not do a proper job if elected."<sup>[Footnote 4](#)</sup>

According to Wickman, by his third winning campaign, job performance, and not his disability, was the electorate's main concern.

"In my third and last successful bid for another term, my wheelchair did not have even a marginal influence on the outcome. The electorate judged me totally on my record and beliefs. Those who disagreed with me had no hesitation in telling me the way it was. Those who may have been previously swayed, one way or the other, by my set of wheels were now looking at Wickman, the alderman, and voting for the person just like any other candidate. I had proven that despite my disability, I could hold my own with the best of them. In a rather complacent campaign, I topped the polls in my home ward and narrowly missed the overall first spot in my final bid."<sup>[Footnote 5](#)</sup>

Following his stint in city politics, Wickman ran for and won a seat in the Alberta legislature as a Liberal in 1989.

Despite many years of law reform and awareness-raising on disability issues, the negative attitudes experienced by Wickman continue to affect candidates with disabilities. Ross Eadie candidly describes the discrimination he faced while running for Winnipeg City Council in 1998.

"My disability led to a few problems with voters and promoters. It first started off with a pamphlet, which only showed my face with sunglasses on. A fairly large number of people called in to ask who does this Ross Eadie guy think he is?

"My campaign manager (now a good friend) explained to those who called that I was blind. We will never know if this sunglass issue cost us votes ...

A woman called into the office saying she was not going to vote for me if it was going to cost her more tax dollars. I explained I used a computer with voice output to do most of my work and would require some assistance in getting to meetings outside of City Hall given a tight schedule. She said that was it, she wasn't going to vote for me because of paying for a computer. I explained to her that every City councillor received a computer to carry out their jobs, and I would use my already-purchased voice synthesizer. She still said she would not vote for me because of the transportation. I did not bother to explain how past mayor (Susan Thompson) used city-paid transportation. I think she was determined not to vote for me.

"Another fellow didn't even listen to me at the door. He just went in the house and came out with money for the blind guy. I told him I could use the money for the campaign, but I really wanted his vote ...."[Footnote 6](#)

It is not only citizens who display discriminatory attitudes towards candidates with disabilities. Community leaders have also been influenced by stereotypes about disability. Some Manitoba election-night coverage served to reinforce stereotypes about the capabilities of persons with visual impairments. Eadie comments:

"In the end, I lost by a vote of 46% to 54%. At one point, I was ahead in the polls, and the former mayor of Winnipeg (Bill Norrie) was commenting on CBC television, saying I was an intelligent young man. But he said he did not know how I was going to keep up with all the reading. On the radio after the election I explained how the clerks department was very good at getting things onto computer disk."[Footnote 7](#)

Eadie is now an elected school trustee in Winnipeg.

Due to the prevalence of disability stereotyping, candidates with disabilities need to address the impact of disability on their lives in order to confront biases. Sam Savona, a New Democratic Party (NDP) candidate in the 1997 federal election, made the following comments at an all-candidates meeting:

"I was born with cerebral palsy, which is a neurological disorder. As you can hear, I have a speech impairment and, as you can see, I'm a wheelchair user. I also have restricted use of my hands. Cerebral palsy does not affect my intellectual ability. These days, when my friends learn of my political plans, they do wonder about my mental health."[Footnote 8](#)

For disabled people, just as for the non-disabled, a sense of humour and a willingness to be self-deprecating while on the hustings can go a long way toward building links with the electorate. Many electors reacted positively to Savona's candidacy. While Savona lost the election, he did come in ahead of the Reform Party of Canada candidate.

### **Inadequate access to disability supports**

Disability supports are essential if people with disabilities are to pursue the activities that contribute to effective citizenship: going to school, working, having a family, enjoying recreation, and giving back to the community by volunteering and holding public office. Deaf people use the services of sign language interpreters. For others, specialized equipment or attendants support independent living.

The experience of Sam Sullivan, a Vancouver city councillor, illustrates what a difference disability supports can make to a candidate.

"Sam Sullivan, who became a quadriplegic after a skiing accident as a young man, required twice-daily visits by a home attendant after his rehabilitation. The cost to the health care system at the time ranged from \$50 to \$75 per visit. Sullivan thought that he could do much more for himself if he only he had the tools. He recruited a retired engineer who volunteered to help him design some simple devices to assist



Sam Sullivan, now in his fourth term, is the longest serving current member of Vancouver's City Council. him around the house. Soon he needed his attendant only once per week and Tetra [an organization that develops assistive technology] was born. In Sullivan's case, which is typical, the direct savings to government, calculated at a modest estimate of \$50 per visit, have totalled \$33,800 per year (almost a half a million dollars over the years). Once homebound, frustrated and sometimes even distraught, Sam Sullivan is today a busy city councillor in Vancouver, who, in his free time, camps and sails and travels the world over – all without an attendant."[Footnote 9](#)

Not everyone can replace the supports provided by other people with equipment that requires a single capital investment.

Some people with disabilities who have chosen public life as a career have encountered difficulties in obtaining payment for their disability supports needs. Steven Fletcher, a quadriplegic, plans to run in the next federal election in the Manitoba riding of Charleswood–St. James. Fletcher, who had an automobile accident, began his career in public life when he was elected as President of the University of Manitoba Students' Union (UMSU). During his term as president, the Manitoba Public Insurance (MPI) paid for Fletcher's disability supports when he had to travel on UMSU business. In November 2001, Fletcher ran successfully for President of the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party of Manitoba, a position that also required him to travel. In 2002, MPI decided it would no longer cover the costs of Fletcher's attendant care expenses for travel outside Winnipeg associated with his PC Party responsibilities. Fletcher unsuccessfully challenged the MPI ruling at the Automobile Injury Compensation Appeal Commission (AICAC) and at the Manitoba Court of Appeal.

Just as some employees with disabilities require disability supports, some candidates with disabilities need access to disability supports that assist them to function independently in the campaign environment. For example, Ross Eadie needed to hire a guide and driver to assist him in campaigning door-to-door in his bid to become a member of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. According to Eadie, the Manitoba government paid 100% of his election expenses related to disability.[Footnote 10](#) *The Elections Finances Act* of Manitoba allows claims for disability supports. Candidates are reimbursed for the full amount of reasonable expenses they incur related to their disabilities to enable them to campaign during the election period.[Footnote 11](#)

The federal and British Columbia election laws allow accommodation costs for people with disabilities to be claimed as "permitted personal expenses" of candidates in a campaign budget. The *Canada Elections Act* [ss. 409(1)(c) and (d)] includes accommodation provisions for both candidates with disabilities and candidates who are caregivers to persons with disabilities, allowing both caregiving expenses and disability-related expenses to be included as personal expenses of a candidate. In Ontario, accessibility costs are excluded from the spending limits for candidates. To assist candidates with disabilities, Elections Canada could support additional research to encourage further legislative action across Canada to help ensure that similar provisions are in place at every level of the electoral process.

Difficulties such as these faced by Sam Sullivan and Steven Fletcher illustrate the additional barriers faced by people who use disability supports. It is more difficult for these Canadians to follow their chosen path to elected office. A very practical problem remains: how does someone who uses disability supports negotiate campaigning in the face of costly support needs? It is an issue that non-disabled campaigners do not face. The cost of disability supports can be a significant disincentive to running for public office for many people with disabilities.

The Canadian disability community has been promoting the concept of a national disability supports plan, which would provide supports across the life span of an individual. Such a plan would involve commitments by federal, provincial and territorial governments, ensuring comparable services across Canada and

thereby ensuring mobility rights. [Footnote 12](#) Should such a plan be implemented, it would allow disabled candidates access to the necessary supports during an election campaign.

## Access to Voting



Advance voting at federal elections takes place on the 10th, 9th and 7th days before election day. *Statistics from the 2000 federal election illustrate Canadians' use of the available services.*

- Almost **13 million** Canadians cast ballots in the general election of November 27, 2000.
- Almost **192,000** electors used the special ballot to vote by mail or in person at the office of their returning officer.
- Level access was available at **99.5%** of the **17,340** polling sites used on election day. Transfer certificates allowed electors with disabilities to use other polling stations with level access, if their own did not have level access.
- By having ramps built, returning officers modified **239** facilities to provide level access to more than **1,100** advance and election day polls. All advance polls had level access.
- More than **63,000** electors registered or updated their information on the lists of electors at the advance polls.
- Mobile polling stations were provided for elderly or disabled persons residing in more than **2,500** institutions.
- Almost **6,500** hospitalized electors registered and voted.
- Elections Canada answered more than **1,100** calls received by TTY (teletypewriter) from persons who were deaf or hard of hearing.

## Lack of role models

People with disabilities who contemplate running for public office have few role models to inspire them. Even elected officials, such as former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and former Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard, both of whom live with an impairment, may not identify themselves as disabled persons. This is particularly true for people with disabilities who are not part of the organized disability rights movement. People with disabilities unaffiliated with disabled people's groups may have more limited access to the newsletters and autobiographies that tell the stories of politicians with disabilities. Sam Savona was inspired by the success of his deaf friend Gary Malkowski, who sat in the Ontario legislature as an NDP member from 1990–1995. Savona's involvement in the 1997 federal election campaign encouraged a student with cerebral palsy to let her name stand for the presidency of her student council. [Footnote 13](#)

When 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. Sam Savona began to think about running for office when an NDP federal party worker approached the NDP Disability Caucus to see who was interested in running in the upcoming election. Following that overture, Savona relentlessly pursued candidacy.

Deaf activist Gary Malkowski was able to find a helpful person inside a political party who was willing to mentor him. He describes his experiences in the following manner:



Former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and former Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard at a 1998 meeting on Parliament Hill.

"Prior to being an elected member of the Ontario provincial parliament (and then a defeated candidate in the next election) I had no experience in any parties .... I was able to make a friend with a member of the provincial parliament who provided me with support in making connections with the provincial party office and the riding association which supported me, a disabled/deaf candidate to run for a provincial seat. I ran as a candidate for the provincial York East NDP riding ...."[Footnote 14](#)

Having a disability caucus within a political party can help to raise the profile of disability issues and possibly encourage candidates. Parties may also want to create special funds to promote candidacy by persons with disabilities, or create broader diversity funds to assist with a range of under-represented groups, modelled after the special funds for women candidates in several parties.

### **Inaccessible places and spaces**

The built environment continues to present barriers to people with disabilities. Candidates with various disabilities find that many buildings do not conform to universal design standards; thus they must develop innovative strategies for getting their message out to the public. Sam Savona concentrated his efforts in large apartment buildings that had elevator service and at subway stations. While this may be a workable approach in Toronto or another large metropolitan area, candidates with disabilities in rural areas would have to develop other tactics. One First Nations woman with a visual impairment who ran for chief of her band council was assisted by family and supporters to travel in her community while campaigning.

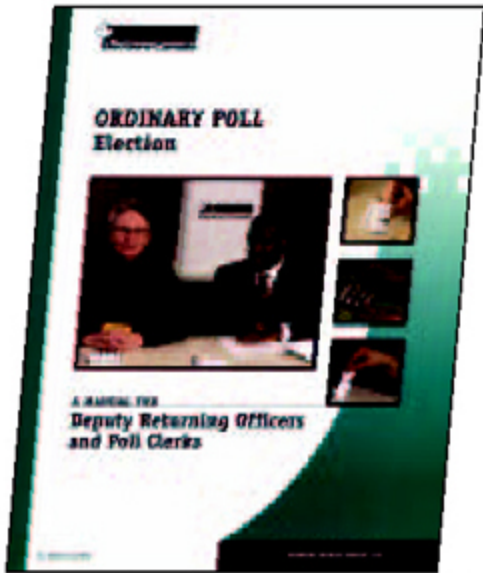
### **The self-representational organizations of persons with disabilities: A voice of our own**

People with disabilities have created self-representational organizations to give themselves a voice in Canada's public policy debates at the local, provincial and national levels. This requires vigilance in ensuring disabled people their electoral rights, as well as encouragement and support for those who wish to participate as candidates.

These organizations have challenged candidates running for office to make commitments on disability issues. They have also shared information with the public about how to participate in all-candidates meetings and how to interact with candidates when they campaign door-to-door, to make them aware of disability issues. At the local and provincial levels, disability groups organize town hall meetings and provide the opportunity for candidates to address disability issues in a public forum. Disability organizations have also laid human rights complaints to remedy the discrimination caused by polling stations located in inaccessible buildings. Organized people with disabilities have participated in law reform and litigation to eliminate discrimination in the legislation governing Canadian electoral processes.

Despite efforts to ensure that people with disabilities do not experience discrimination at the polls, people with disabilities continue to encounter problems. When problems occur, the organizations help make the issue known and, if requested, assist people with disabilities to lodge complaints about the discrimination

experienced. In 2000, the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD) recommended: "[S]ince a federal election never goes by without us, at CCD, hearing about returning officers who don't quite get it right when dealing with voters with disabilities, perhaps an investment in a few officer trainers from our community wouldn't be such a bad idea for Elections Canada either. Blind voters have told us that they were so mad at having their companions spoken to, instead of them, by returning officials that they almost forgot who they came to vote for."[Footnote 15](#)



Elections Canada's training manuals teach the staff of polling stations how to respectfully assist electors with disabilities.

Since 2000, Elections Canada has improved its sensitivity training for returning officers and other election officials. Its revamped training program includes more information about how to provide services to electors with disabilities. The training manuals for returning officers and poll officials contain specific sections about how to meet the special needs of some electors, and an information video provides details about the accessibility of the federal electoral system. CCD advocates that qualified trainers with disabilities provide such awareness training.

The organizations of people with disabilities have also been encouraging grassroots people to run for public office by sharing information about the experiences of elected officials with disabilities in newsletters and through international information networks like Disabled Peoples' International (DPI). Ross Eadie suggests that disabled peoples' organizations provided him with encouragement to become more actively involved in the electoral process.

"At Independence 92 in Vancouver, people with disabilities from all over the world congregated in one place. [A DPI World Congress was held during Independence 92, an international conference.] Our leaders called for people with disabilities to become politicians and part of the government. As described in detail, our leaders said we have lobbied, marched, and educated the public on the ability of those with disabilities, and we still have a long way to go to change society. They said we still haven't enough people in government to make a real change. They said we could not make changes without someone who lives the life of disability being right at the heart of decision-making. I was fired up to help make further changes, to play my part ... Politicians said they understood, but they would not take the bold steps needed to make change. I decided the only way was to get in there and push."[Footnote 16](#)

## Conclusion

At least one in eight Canadians reports experiencing a disability and many others provide support to family or friends with disabilities. This is a significant proportion of the Canadian population. Although some political parties do limited outreach to people with disabilities and there has been minimal recognition of the need to accommodate candidates with disabilities, much remains to be done. There needs to be more public and party discourse about candidates with disabilities and how their involvement will benefit Canadian public policy development by making it more responsive to the actual characteristics of the Canadian population. Such discussion will help more people with disabilities to see the need for their involvement in the electoral process and their involvement will, in turn, change public attitudes about candidates with disabilities. To level the playing field for candidates with disabilities, more jurisdictions need to reimburse candidates for the disability-related costs they incur while campaigning. With adequate disability supports, more visible role models and supportive party and electoral structures, people with

disabilities will change the attitudes that say disabled people cannot contribute to electoral politics. More than that, with their presence as elected officials, they will change the landscape and language of politics in Canada.

## NOTES

[Footnote 1](#) Hugh Gregory Gallagher, *FDR's Splendid Deception: The moving story of Roosevelt's massive disability – and the intense effort to conceal it from the public* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1985).

[Footnote 2](#) Jane Taber, "Mercer puts Copps on the spot," *The Globe and Mail*, January 24, 2004, p. A9.

[Footnote 3](#) Percy Wickman, *Wheels in the Fast Lane ... a blessing in disguise* (Edmonton: Triwicky Enterprises, 1987), pp. 68–70.

[Footnote 4](#) Wickman, *Wheels*, p. 71

[Footnote 5](#) Wickman, *Wheels*, pp. 72–73.

[Footnote 6](#) Ross Eadie, "A Politician Wanna Be," *The Canadian Blind Monitor* (Summer 2000), p. 27 ([www.nfbae.ca/publications/cbm\\_old/cbm\\_12.txt](http://www.nfbae.ca/publications/cbm_old/cbm_12.txt)).

[Footnote 7](#) Eadie, "A Politician Wanna Be," p. 28.

[Footnote 8](#) John Feld, "Sam Savona What a Candidate! What a Campaign," *Abilities* (Fall 1997), p. 14.

[Footnote 9](#) Loraine Taneja, "Reducing Barriers to Customized Assistive Technology," Center on Disabilities Technology and Persons with Disabilities Conference 2002 Proceedings, available at <http://www.csun.edu/cod/conf/2002/proceedings/143.htm>.

[Footnote 10](#) Eadie, "A Politician Wanna Be," p. 29.

[Footnote 11](#) The *Elections Finances Act*, Office Consolidation (February 9, 2003), chapter E32, paragraph 72(3)(a).

[Footnote 12](#) Council of Canadians with Disabilities, *A Framework for a National Disability Supports Plan* (February 2003).

[Footnote 13](#) Feld, "Sam Savona," p. 14.

[Footnote 14](#) Gary Malkowski, "Running in the Federal Election," *CCD Election Monitor* Vol. 1, No. 2 (April 25, 1997).

[Footnote 15](#) *CCD Horror Gazette* Vol. 4, No. 5 (December 13, 2000).

[Footnote 16](#) Eadie, "A Politician Wanna Be," p. 26.

**Note:** The opinions expressed are those of the authors; they do not necessarily reflect those of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada.