OLLSCOIL NA GAILLIMHE
UNIVERSITY OF GALWAY

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Disability, Diversity and Identity in Ireland's Local and European Elections 2024

NDA
Údarás Náisiúnta Míchumais
National Disability Authority

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Suggested citation

Price A, Rath V, Flynn, E. Disability, Diversity and Identity in Ireland's Local and European Elections 2024. University of Galway/Trinity College Dublin; 2025.

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

Background

Disabled people, who make up 22% of the population, are identified as having extremely low participation in public and political life in Ireland. The potential consequences of this marginalisation are that they do not have the opportunity to contribute to decision-making processes around issues that concern them. Those who identify as holding multiple intersecting identities may find themselves facing greater levels of marginalisation. Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) outlines the importance of protecting disabled people's right "to stand for elections, to effectively hold office and perform all public functions at all levels of government, facilitating the use of assistive and new technologies where appropriate".

This research focuses on the experiences of disabled candidates who identified as holding intersecting identities and stood in the Irish local and European elections (2024). Intersecting identities for the purpose of this research were drawn primarily from those protected under the nine grounds of the Equal Status Acts 2000 - 2018 (gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, membership of the Traveller community). While the Acts do not explicitly include socio-economic status as a protected characteristic the research team included this within the scope of our research. The research aims to understand how Article 29 UNCRPD could be better achieved using an intersectional lens. There is currently no published research in the Irish context on the impact of intersecting identities on the political representation of those within the disabled community.

Methods

To begin, we researched available literature from other countries which focused on disabled election candidates who held other marginalised intersecting identities. Interviews were conducted with two cohorts (1) 7 disabled candidates with intersecting identities, (2) 8 organisations representing migrant, LGBTQ+ and Traveller communities, education and training organisations supporting candidates

for election from marginalised groups, and disabled people's organisations, including one specific to the needs of disabled women as well as a more general DPO, both working at national level.[1]

Main findings

- Many of the candidates were involved in social movements, but not necessarily the disability movement, and not all the movements they were active in were related to their personal identities. The catalyst for entering politics was not always related to disability or other intersecting identities, and in fact, some had entered before becoming disabled. The responsibility to represent others who shared their identities but were not as privileged was present within the findings.

- A number of systemic barriers emerged within this research, including barriers related to inaccessibility of the built environment, information and communication, negative attitudes, fear of violence, insufficient financial resources, balancing of commitments and lack of support, including political party support and lack of support from organisations representing disabled people, and other marginalised communities e.g. LGBTQ+ people, Traveller community, migrants, and women. Canvassing was an issue for many, including the ability to get to people's front doors. Safety whilst out canvassing was also a concern. Participants shared fears that being a disabled woman or disabled LGBTQ+ person could lead to increased harassment or abuse during campaigns. Although violence is not solely an ableist issue, it is of particular significance to disabled people, including those with intersecting identities within this and other research. Several of the participants spoke about needing to bring their car for reasons of accessibility and safety. This created an additional financial burden because of disability and, in some cases, their other identities, for example due to the concerns about safety while canvassing.

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[1] The term 'disabled people's organisations' is widely used in the literature on the global disabled people's movement. See for example, Morgan, Hannah. "Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions." (2013): 411-413.

Being disabled results in additional costs when canvassing, and this was something that the candidates had to fund themselves. The candidates had many commitments, including balancing full-time work and family life with campaigning. The importance of job security for those with a disability may be more pressing than for those without, given the cost of disability and the benefits connected to full-time employment. Access and funding were key and should be made available to all disabled candidates. Funding to cover costs not directly related to disability was also raised; for example, if someone already from a marginalised community has to take time off work or caring responsibilities to canvass and run for election, they should be compensated for the loss of earnings for that period. The importance of specific support from parties and organisations if committed to increasing disabled representation, particularly concerning disabled candidates with intersecting identities, was raised. Stigma towards disability was raised within interviews with organisations but, interestingly, to a lesser extent from candidates themselves.

- Both candidates and organisations identified opportunities for support and enablers which emerged from these shared identities, including connecting with members of the public and members of underrepresented groups in an intersectional way. The LGBTQ+ representative organisation raised an interesting point around solidarity and how the experience of discrimination is common among groups at the intersection and that this can lead to a sense of solidarity among candidates. One candidate spoke extensively about the support she received from party colleagues, including from Ministers and the party leader, who joined her in her local area to campaign for her; this resulted in increased media exposure. The role of advocacy and representative organisations in supporting disabled candidates with intersecting identities was discussed by participants while acknowledging limitations in that sometimes organisations have to be apolitical particularly if they are in receipt of government funding. Disclosure of a disability is a key consideration for disabled people, particularly those with invisible disability,

standing for election. Some people felt forced into disclosing, others chose not to disclose, and for others, it was a natural transition as they had already campaigned on disability issues in the past. While some participants were open to identifying as disabled persons with intersectional identities, not everyone was.

- Representation or the lack of representation of particular communities in politics was of concern to those interviewed. Candidates spoke about how politics should reflect society; and how support and encouragement are required from several actors, including the State, political parties, organisations and the Electoral Commission in responding to this.

Conclusion

In summary, this research represents a starting point in understanding the experiences of disabled election candidates with intersecting identities in Ireland. The limited number of participants in this research is connected to the lack of disabled people standing for election, and the even lower number of candidates with intersecting identities. Despite this limitation, the candidates' perspectives, combined with the reflections of the participating organisations, paints a clear picture of the pathways to political life. While many of the barriers faced could be generalised to and affect disabled candidates without additional intersecting identities, there were factors which had a specific form and resonance for this cohort, for example, the fear of violence. Additionally, both candidates and organisations identified opportunities for support and enablers which emerge from these shared identities, including connecting with others in an intersectional way. Greater support from the state, political parties and civil society organisations is clearly needed to ensure a level playing field for these candidates.

Recommendations

Our recommendations focus on three different categories of actors relating to their roles in increasing diversity among candidates for political office, those being the State, political parties, and civil society. They are summarised below:

State

The State should be responsible for collecting self-reported data on disability and other identities (including gender, LGBTQ+ identities, ethnic and racial minorities including members of the Traveller community and migrants, etc.) from election candidates. This should be published in a disaggregated that does not identify or endanger candidates.

In principle, this work could be carried out by the Government Department with responsibility for elections, local authorities who administer the electoral process or the Electoral Commission. However, meaningful consultation is required with DPOs and organisations representing other marginalised communities, as well as with the relevant State bodies with responsibility for elections, to determine which body is best placed to collect this data and the process by which this collection should occur.

Specific supports, including additional funding, should be made available to disabled people with intersecting identities, given the extra costs associated with standing for election. Other equality measures such as the use of quotas should also be explored to increase the percentage of elected candidates.

Communal postering via billboards and joint debates that host all election candidates, as done in some European Countries, should be considered as a step change to the current status quo in addressing accessibility issues.

This research represents a starting point and clearly demonstrates gaps within the research landscape. Research concerning disability, intersectionality and political representation should be prioritised and funded at a national level.

Political parties

Political parties should dismantle structural barriers to the participation of disabled people with intersecting identities in all aspects of their work. They should develop inclusion guidelines at the branch level, for example, that venues chosen for party meetings and modes of communication with party members are fully accessible and inclusive. Parties should also build intersectionality into existing support structures,

for example, within the role of development officers. Political parties should seriously consider the need for greater diversity when proposing candidates for election and for co-option, including disability and other identities.

Civil society

Civil society organisations should be funded and supported to establish and run regular training and mentoring for disabled people, including those with intersecting identities who want to explore the idea of putting themselves forward for elected office. Civil society organisations representing marginalised communities should consider how they can support members of these communities (including disabled people) to become politically active, including through running for election.

Disabled people's organisations should more seriously consider supporting their members to contest elections. In so doing, they must have regard to the need to promote diversity beyond disability among those supported. Further funding for DPOs is needed to support this work.

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Introduction

In this section, we begin by setting out the background to and funding for this research, including the selection of the topic and the decision to focus on Ireland's local and European elections in 2024. We describe the team composition before outlining the terminology used in the research and explaining the key articles of the UN Convention which frame our approach to this study. Finally, we conclude with an overview of the remaining sections of the report.

Background and funding

The research received funding under the National Disability Authority (NDA) Research Promotion Scheme 2023-24 call under the theme Disability in Marginalised Groups and Communities. The National Disability Authority (NDA) is an independent statutory body that was established to provide evidence-based advice to the Government on disability policy and practice and to promote universal design in Ireland.

There is currently no research in the Irish context on the impact of intersecting identities on the political representation of those within the disabled community. Additionally, there has been relatively little attention paid to the political representation of disabled people. Much of the existing literature explores political participation, especially voting, rather than political representation. This prompted the research team to apply for funding in order to carry out the investigation.

This research focuses on the experiences of disabled candidates who stood in the Irish local and European elections (2024) who hold intersecting identities, including those protected under the nine grounds of The Equal Status Acts 2000 - 2018 (gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, and membership of the Traveller community).

The research aimed to understand how Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) could be better achieved using

an intersectional lens. With little to no data currently available within the Irish context and limited international data, this research makes a unique contribution to research at both a national and international level.

We chose to focus on the local and European elections because these were scheduled to take place during the timeframe in which the research had to be completed (January to December 2024). Local elections are also an important stepping stone to higher office for candidates in the future. While a general election also subsequently took place during the study timeframe, we did not include it within this study as this was outside the scope of the project for which we had been funded and granted ethical approval. The general election also occurred towards the end of our study when there would have been insufficient time to carry out the research and analysis required. However, we as a team hope to do more research on this subject in future elections, including on general elections.

Team composition

The research team comprised Dr. Aoife Price, Dr. Vivian Rath, Prof Eilionóir Flynn and included disabled and non-disabled researchers. Dr. Aoife Price and Dr. Vivian Rath, disabled researchers and activists interested in political representation approached Prof Eilionóir Flynn at the Centre for Disability Law and Policy, University of Galway to collaborate on this project. Following a successful application to the National Disability Authority, we formed a team to work on this project. Emma Burns at the Centre for Disability Law and Policy joined the team to create the Easy Read Version of the report, facilitating greater access to the report. Dr. Aoife Price and Prof Eilionóir Flynn were paid for their contributions to this research and both Dr. Vivian Rath[2] and Emma Burns worked on a pro bono basis.

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[2] Dr Vivian Rath is a Director of the NDA and did not benefit financially from this research

Terminology

Disabled person/people

A disabled person is anyone who identifies with an impairment or difference (inclusive of those who do not identify their difference as an impairment, e.g. Deaf people,[3] neurodivergent people) and experiences disability. Impairment is a physical, mental, intellectual or sensory difference in physiological and/or psychological function. Within this research, a broad conceptualisation of disability and impairment includes people with chronic illness and users and survivors of psychiatry. Disability results from negative interactions between a person with or perceived to have an impairment or difference and their social environment, which may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others, which is in line with Article 1 of the UNCRPD.[4] Identity-first language is used throughout this report and is in line with the social model of disability. The social model is rooted in the disabled people's movement and entails a political repurposing of disability. Within this model, disability is a term to describe the socially created disadvantage and marginalisation of people with impairments. This means that disability is not equated with the impairment or difference in the individual's body or mind but is used to describe the societal and environmental barriers people with impairments face, as explained above.[5]

Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs)

Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) are civil society organisations of persons with disabilities as distinct from other disability organisations, disability services, and charities for persons with disability. The UNCRPD emphasises that for an

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[3] This term, with a capital D, is used throughout to identify those who are culturally Deaf and use sign language as their first language.
[4] United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006b).
[5] Lawson, A., & Beckett, A. E. (2021). The social and human rights models of disability: towards a complementarity thesis. *The international journal of human rights, 25*(2), 348-379. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1783533

organisation to qualify as a DPO, it must be an organisation where a majority of the management, staff, members, volunteers and user groups are disabled people.[6]

Intersectionality

Intersectionality describes the various layers of advantages and disadvantages people experience based on societal and structural systems. These systems create a set of disadvantages and privileges based on visible and invisible markers of identity embedded in the hierarchy of power. Coined in 1989 by US lawyer and academic Crenshaw, she used the concept of intersectionality to address gaps in legal and institutional frameworks to acknowledge and address the interplay of multiple layers of oppression.[7] Intersectionality starts from the premise that people live multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, history and the operation of power structures.[8] An intersectional analysis aims to reveal multiple identities, exposing the different types of intersectional and multiple discrimination and disadvantages that occur due to the combination of identities.[9]

Marginalisation

Where the term marginalisation is used within this research, it refers to intersectional and multiple discrimination and disadvantages due to the combination of identities as referenced above, increasing the marginalisation of disabled people with intersecting identities rather than being a characteristic of disabled people. It is something that is imposed on disabled people rather than a recognition of inherent vulnerability created by different identities.[10] Although marginalisation was used in the call for funding and is widely used in the literature, some participants shared that

[6] National Disability Authority. (2021). A review of Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) and their participation in implementing and monitoring the UNCRPD. In: National Disability Authority.
[7] Crenshaw, K. W. (2013). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In *The public nature of private violence* (pp. 93-118). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039
[8] European Institute for Gender Equality. (2024). *Intersectionality*. European Institute for Gender Equality. Retrieved 28/04/2024 from https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1050?language_content_entity=en
[9] Ibid.
[10] National Disability Authority. (2023). *Research Promotion Scheme 'Disability in Marginalised Groups and Communities'*. National Disability Authority. Retrieved 16 December 2024 from https://nda.ie/about/what-we-do/policy-research/funding-schemes

this was not a term that was relatable to them on a personal level. The report mainly uses the term intersectional when focusing on individual identities and marginalisation when referring to communities.

UNCRPD

We chose to focus primarily on UNCRPD for this research, and not on other human rights conventions, such as CEDAW (The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), because disability is the common identity shared by all the election candidates we interviewed for this research. As the most recent human rights treaty it reflects the approach to disability and the intersection of identities closest to the ethos of this research. While the UNCRPD could have gone further and recognised more intersecting identities in its text,[11] the Committee which interprets it is working to address these gaps in a holistic manner[12] and it provides the best framework for holding states to account in supporting disabled election candidates, including those with intersecting identities, of any of the existing UN human rights treaties.

Ireland ratified the UNCRPD in 2018 and, therefore, has a responsibility to adhere to this international instrument. Article 29 on political participation, Article 5 on Equality and non-discrimination, and Article 6 in relation to disabled women are the most relevant articles of the UNCRPD for the purpose of this research. Provisions of the UNCRPD are interconnected and should be read in light of other relevant provisions.

Article 29 – Participation in political and public life

Article 29 of the UNCRPD guarantees the political rights of persons with disabilities. It notes that State Parties should ensure the right of persons with disabilities to

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[11] See for example, Harpur, P., & Stein, M. A. (2018). Indigenous Persons with Disabilities and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: An Identity without a Home? *International Human Rights Law Review*, 7(2), 165-200. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1163/22131035-00702002

[12] See Kirichenko, K. A., & Król, A. (2022). Intersectionality and the CRPD: an analysis of the CRPD committee's discourse and civil society advocacy at the intersections of disability and LGBTI. *Global public health*, 17(11), 3224-3242. https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2022.2040565

"stand for elections, to effectively hold office and perform all public functions at all levels of government, facilitating the use of assistive and new technologies where appropriate." Article 29 also specifies that State Parties actively promote "an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs, without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, and encourage their participation in public affairs," including in "the activities and administration of political parties."[13] The UNCRPD Committee regularly comments on political participation in their concluding observations to States, including in the most recent published observation to Denmark (2024) where it stressed that State Parties must "guarantee the right of all persons with disabilities to vote and to stand for election without exception or exclusion". [14]

Article 5 – Equality and non-discrimination

In addition to Article 29, of relevance to political and public participation is the right to non-discrimination set out in Article 5 of the UNCRPD. This provision places a duty on State Parties to "prohibit all discrimination on the basis of disability and guarantee to persons with disabilities equal and effective legal protection against discrimination on all grounds". The UNCRPD Committee's General Comment No. 6 (2018) addresses intersectional discrimination as well as the intersection of obligations under Articles 5 and 29.[15]

Article 6 – Women with disabilities

Article 6 of the UNCRPD focuses on the rights of women with disabilities. This cross-cutting article prohibits intersectional discrimination against women with disabilities in all spheres of life, including their political participation.[16] There is only one other article in the UNCRPD which focuses on those with intersecting identities (Article 7 – Children with disabilities). Despite this the UNCRPD Committee has

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[13] United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006b).
[14] Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of Denmark* (CRPD/C/DNK/CO/2-3) (2024).
[15] General Comment No. 3 - Article 6: women and girls with disabilities (CRPD/C/GC/3), (2016).

[16] The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol (A/RES/61/106) (2006a).

emphasised intersectionality in its understanding of Article 5 on equality and non-discrimination, mentioned above, and throughout its dialogues with States Parties as a whole. General Comment No. 3 (2016) on Article 6, which explicitly focuses on the situation of disabled women and girls, specifically refers to the multiple and intersectional discrimination that disabled women face.[17]

Outline of the report:

Literature review

The literature review sought out research that reflected the experiences of disabled people with intersectional identities in standing for elected office rather than the experiences of disabled people which did not refer to intersectional identities. Very few studies globally were found to address this phenomenon comprehensively. Fewer studies have included qualitative research on disabled election candidates with intersectional identities.

Irish context

This chapter examines the census data on disability and other identities and outlines the key developments in law, policy and parliamentary reports related to the participation of disabled people (including those with intersectional identities) as electoral candidates.

Methodology

The methodology chapter explains the research procedures followed to answer the research question and produce the report, including the methods used in desk-based and empirical research.

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[17] General Comment No. 3 - Article 6: women and girls with disabilities (CRPD/C/GC/3), (2016).

Findings and analysis

This chapter outlines the main findings and the data analysis process related to the research study. This chapter combines the two cohorts interviewed as part of this study, the disabled candidates with intersectional identities and organisations representing migrant, LGBTQ+ and Traveller communities, education and training organisations supporting candidates for election from marginalised groups, and disabled people's organisations[18], including one specific to the needs of disabled women as well as a more general DPO, both working at national level.

Discussion

The discussion chapter synthesises the findings by analysing and combining them with the existing literature to explore further what the findings mean in the context of the existing literature and the research implications.

Conclusion and recommendations

The conclusion and recommendations reflect on learnings from the study and propose practical and implementable solutions to enhance the participation of disabled people with intersectional identities in public and political life in Ireland.

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[18] The term 'disabled people's organisations' is widely used in the literature on the global disabled people's movement. See for example, Morgan, H. "Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions." (2013): 411-413.

Literature Review

Introduction

In order to contextualise the experiences of disabled people with intersecting identities running for election in Ireland, we undertook a literature review to establish what general trends might exist globally for this group. While conducting the international literature review for this report, we sought out research that reflected the experiences of disabled people with intersecting identities standing for elected office, rather than the experiences of disabled people which did not refer to intersecting identities.

We found very few studies globally which have addressed this phenomenon in a comprehensive manner.[19] Even fewer contained qualitative research with disabled election candidates with intersecting identities. Most of the existing research focused on barriers facing disabled people in general when standing for election,[20] rather than examining intersecting identities in addition to disability which may result in unique and distinct barriers and increased marginalisation. Some research focused on the intersection of disability with one other identity – usually gender, and most of these studies related specifically to disabled women.[21] While a significant body of literature has emerged in the last few decades on the experiences of disabled people (including those with intersecting identities) participating in the political processes more

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[19] Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2023). Gender, disability and political representation: understanding the experiences of disabled women. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1332/251510823X16779382116831

[20] Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2022). Disability and political representation: Analysing the obstacles to elected office in the UK. *International political science review*, *43*(5), 697-712. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120947458 , Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2024). *Disability and Political Representation* Oxford University Press , Langford, B., & Levesque, M. (2017). Symbolic and substantive relevance of politicians with disabilities: a British Columbia case study. *Canadian parliamentary review*, *40*(2), 8.

[21] Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2023). Gender, disability and political representation: understanding the experiences of disabled women. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1332/251510823X16779382116831 , OSCE/ODIHR. (2018). Conference Report - PROMOTING THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES. In: OSCE/ODIHR.https://www.osce.org/odihr/409770

broadly, most existing studies focus on barriers for disabled people exercising their right to vote rather than barriers in running for elected office.[22]

In this section of the report, we review the main studies which address disability and at least one other intersectional identity in the context of running for elected office. The general trends we found in existing research on this subject include the need for diverse representation among disabled candidates for election, recognition of the unique and complex barriers these candidates face, and ways in which addressing those barriers could support the development of a more diverse cohort of election candidates, while improving the structures of the political system as a whole.

The need for diverse representation of the disability community in political life

Globally there is a trend of increasing diversity among candidates for electoral office.[23] Particular strides have been made on increasing the proportion of women and minority genders[24] who are elected representatives, as well as improving the representation of Indigenous and First Nations[25] politicians, racialised and ethnic minority representatives[26] and disabled people.[27] However, much of the literature on this phenomenon of diversity in elected office focuses on a single axis of identity – for example, gender or disability. Where two or more axes of identity are

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[22] Lecerf, M. European Parlament. (2023). Political participation of people with disabilities in the EU. In: European Parlament, Moledo, A., & Uldry, M. (2022). EDF 6th Human Rights Report 2022: political participation of persons with disabilities. In: European Disability Forum, Sackey, E. (2015). Disability and political participation in Ghana: an alternative perspective. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research: SJDR*, *17*(4), 366-381. https://doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2014.941925

[23] Barker, F., & Crawley, S. Selecting Diversity: Ethnicity, Party Strategies and Candidate Selection in New Zealand Elections, 1996–2020. *Political Studies*, *0*(0), 00323217241300028. https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217241300028 , Lublin, D., & Wright, M. (2024). Diversity Matters: The Election of Asian Americans to U.S. State and Federal Legislatures. *American Political Science Review*, *118*(1), 380-400. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000242 ; Shah, P., Scott, J., & Gonzalez Juenke, E. (2019). Women of color candidates: examining emergence and success in state legislative elections. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, *7*(2), 429-443. https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1557057

[24] Fox, R., & Pate, J. (2022). Knowing the Competition: Gender, Qualifications, and Willingness to Run in Elections. *Political Research Quarterly*, *76*(2), 725-740. https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129221113552

[25] McMahon, N., & Alcantara, C. (2021). Running for elected office: Indigenous candidates, ambition and self-government. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, *9*(2), 280-299. https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1584750

[26] Lublin, D., & Bowler, S. (2018). Electoral systems and ethnic minority representation. *The Oxford handbook of electoral systems*, 159-174.

[27] Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2024). *Disability and Political Representation* Oxford University Press

researched among candidates for elected office, disability is rarely among the identities included in these studies. Further, the majority of the research on disabled people's experiences in contesting elections as candidates does not consider the intersectionality of those disabled people's identities and how this might frame their experiences of the electoral process. There are a few notable exceptions to this research trend, with studies which focus specifically on the experiences of disabled women as electoral candidates. We will explore the findings of those studies in more depth in the following section. However, at this point it is important to acknowledge why research on disability and other intersectional identities of election candidates is important.

As many studies show, disabled people are not a homogenous group, and disabled people belong to all global minorities including women and gender minorities, racialised and ethnic minorities, Indigenous and First Nations people, Irish Travellers, LGBTQ+ people, and many others.[28] Existing studies show that increasing the diversity of our elected representatives is not only symbolically important, but has a practical impact on the development of more progressive laws and policies – including those related to disability.[29] Elected disabled politicians (the majority of which were disabled women) who participated in Canadian research noted that their presence in parliament helped to keep government more accountable on disability issues and decreased the likelihood of inaccessible options being tabled in parliamentary discussions.[30]

Interestingly, in most of the other jurisdictions where data exists on disabled electoral candidates who belong to other marginalised groups, a common trend is that people enter politics after they become politicised through the disability

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[28] World Health Organisation and World Bank. (2011). World Report On Disability. In: World Health Organisation and World Bank.

[29] Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2024). *Disability and Political Representation* Oxford University Press

[30] Langford, B., & Levesque, M. (2017). Symbolic and substantive relevance of politicians with disabilities: a British Columbia case study. *Canadian parliamentary review*, *40*(2), 8.

movement.[31] There is even evidence that disabled people's movements make strategic choices about advancing their members as election candidates in order to progress disability policy issues. More research is still needed however to understand how intersecting identities impact upon disabled candidates' entry into political life and their decision to contest elections. The symbolic importance of seeing oneself represented in political spheres is often raised by the wider disability community with respect to the election of disabled candidates in general,[32] and this can become even more significant when candidates hold multiple identities, including disability.

A related issue is the challenge presented when parents and family members of disabled people with intersecting identities are the only - or the more numerous and visible - disability advocates elected as representatives.[33] This is particularly concerning where those family members share neither the disability identity nor the other intersectional identities of their family member (e.g. a straight, cis, non-disabled parent of an LGBTQ+ disabled person winning a seat in parliament). Being adjacent to inequality is not the same as holding these identities personally. This is not to undermine the importance of allyship, especially the allyship of people in positions of privilege with disabled electoral candidates who hold intersecting identities. Rather, allies can and should work to amplify these voices and ensure decision-makers are held accountable for any failures to be genuinely inclusive of these perspectives, without taking the place of or speaking for disabled people who hold these identities.

When we do start to see disabled people successfully elected to political roles, it is often not a particularly diverse cohort of disabled people (at least not at first).[34] This

[31] Kramer, E., Dibley, T., & Tsaputra, A. (2024). Choosing from the citizens' toolbox: disability activists as political candidates in Indonesia's 2019 general elections. *Disability & society*, *39*(1), 85-104. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2060800 , Waltz, M., & Schippers, A. (2021). Politically disabled: barriers and facilitating factors affecting people with disabilities in political life within the European Union. *Disability & society*, *36*(4), 517-540. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1751075

[32] Langford, B., & Levesque, M. (2017). Symbolic and substantive relevance of politicians with disabilities: a British Columbia case study. *Canadian parliamentary review*, *40*(2), 8. .

[33] Campbell, R., & Cowley, P. (2018). The impact of parental status on the visibility and evaluations of politicians. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *20*(3), 753-769. https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148118775032 , Guo, K. (2023). Lawmakers With Disabled Children Find Common Ground in Congress. *The New York Times*.

[34] Waltz, M., & Schippers, A. (2021). Politically disabled: barriers and facilitating factors affecting people with disabilities in political life within the European Union. *Disability & society*, *36*(4), 517-540. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1751075

may be related to the hierarchies which can be reproduced in social movements, including the disability movement. In social movements, as happens elsewhere, those with the most privilege are more likely to advance and be in a position to be considered for and accept new opportunities including standing for election. It may also in part be attributed to the fact that contesting political office requires a significant amount of resources including finances, energy, manpower and time, which are often in short supply for more marginalised disabled people. Public attitudes can also mean that those who are perceived to deviate from the typical political representative - often, white, male, non-disabled, straight, middle-class - will face more barriers in being taken seriously as election candidates.[35] Despite these barriers, the numbers of disabled people globally running for election looks set to increase.[36] In keeping with the principle of 'nothing about us without us' it is particularly important for disabled people with a wide range of identities to continue to contest elections, and for appropriate supports to be put in place to ensure their success.

Complex barriers facing disabled candidates with intersectional identities

Disabled people with intersecting identities face unique barriers in standing for political office. As noted above, the key literature on the impact of intersectionality on disabled candidates seeking political office focuses on disabled women's experiences as election candidates. Studies by Evans and Rehrer on disabled women seeking election in the UK have demonstrated that disabled women felt they were perceived as being 'not up for the job', were othered and rendered hyper-visible meaning that they did not look like bodies that traditionally occupied positions of power and privilege.[37] For some disabled women, the experience of hyper-visibility was seen as a positive in that it enabled them to get their political messages across

[35]Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2024). *Disability and Political Representation* Oxford University Press
[36]Priestley, M., Stickings, M., Loja, E., Grammenos, S., Lawson, A., Waddington, L., & Fridriksdottir, B. (2016). The political participation of disabled people in Europe: Rights, accessibility and activism. *Electoral studies*, *42*, 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2016.01.009
[37] Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2023). Gender, disability and political representation: understanding the experiences of disabled women. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1332/251510823X16779382116831

more clearly to a wider audience of voters, but for the majority of the disabled women candidates in this UK research, the impact of this hyper-visibility was negative.[38] While these themes appear remarkably similar to those in studies of women's experiences as political candidates more generally, Evans and Rehrer's participants "emphasised the intersection between gender and disability (and, in some instances, race and class) in order to show how they were perceived differently to non-disabled women and men, as well as disabled men."[39] In order to counteract these perceptions of not having the required physical stamina for campaigning, several of Evans and Rehrer's participants "ended up pushing themselves to the very limit; one Liberal Democrat local councillor recounted how in her efforts to be taken seriously as a candidate, she had worked such long hours that she had ended up being hospitalised."[40]

The barriers facing disabled candidates with intersectional identities cannot be simply explained by the cumulative impact of disability discrimination on top of discrimination based on other identities such as race, class or gender. Research has shown that different identities such as gender and disability can be perceived positively in candidates for election. For example, research in the US and the UK showed that voters perceive female electoral candidates as being more compassionate and even more competent than their male counterparts. Similarly, research indicates that voters are likely to perceive disabled electoral candidates as more left-wing or progressive in their political ideology, as well as being more competent on issues such as welfare, healthcare and minority rights. However, research on disabled women's experiences of contesting elections shows that their competence and suitability for office is constantly challenged, and they fail to be taken seriously as political candidates. For example, in Evans and Rehrer's research, "one national politician with a visible impairment discussed how nobody believed she was the candidate at her own election count."[41] Further research is clearly needed to

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

understand more about the ways these identities intersect and are perceived by voters as well as by the candidates themselves.

For disabled candidates whose disability and other identities may not be immediately apparent to others, existing research demonstrates that complex choices are being made about when and whether to disclose which identities the candidate may have. Disabled women running for election in the UK have spoken about how disclosure of their disability identity when not apparent sometimes gave them a broader base of support but often led to further barriers in addition to the sexism and misogyny they faced on the campaign trail.[42] One disabled woman politician in the UK discussed how "she did not disclose the fact that she was disabled during her election campaign because she thought it would be "weaponised" by her opponents to undermine her credibility."[43] The same can be true of other identities including for LGBTQ+ disabled people, and further research is needed to understand how the intersection of these identities and the dilemma of disclosure impacts on people's experiences of contesting elections.

Inclusive solutions and supports to ensure greater success of diverse election candidates

Many of the supports which disabled election candidates with intersecting identities have sought according to the existing literature include measures which if more widely adopted would also benefit non-disabled candidates, including those from other marginalised groups.[44] For example, the focus on changing the timing, location or mode of engaging in political debates could work well for many different election candidates - including those with childrearing or other caring responsibilities. In many contexts including Ireland and the UK, the practice of holding campaign events in locations such as pubs are problematic where those venues are physically

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[42]ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Langford, B., & Levesque, M. (2017). Symbolic and substantive relevance of politicians with disabilities: a British Columbia case study. *Canadian parliamentary review*, *40*(2), 8. , Waltz, M., & Schippers, A. (2021). Politically disabled: barriers and facilitating factors affecting people with disabilities in political life within the European Union. *Disability & society*, *36*(4), 517-540. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1751075

inaccessible; these are also not family-friendly locations and can pose problems for people avoiding locations where alcohol is served due to sobriety or religious observance.

Some progress has been made, for example with more supports including support, mentoring and training programmes for women running for election in general or for people from racialised or ethnic minorities or LGBTQ+ people.[45] However, the experience of disabled election candidates with intersecting identities to date demonstrates that unless these initiatives are also disability-inclusive, we risk undermining the development of future candidates who hold these intersecting identities.[46] This is particularly important in light of the hostility and threats of violence which election candidates from all marginalised communities have been reporting in recent years, in order to ensure that election campaigns can be contested in a safe, inclusive, and accessible manner for all.[47]

Conclusion

Overall, this review of the existing literature has demonstrated that while disabled candidates from different marginalised communities face barriers that are perhaps unsurprising, more research is needed to understand the complexity of their experiences. In the Irish context, where there is no published research to date on the experiences of disabled electoral candidates in general, this project is therefore both timely and necessary in seeking to understand how candidates' diverse identities shape their trajectory in political life and impact on their experience of election campaigns. While this research only represents a starting point in a broader conversation about increasing diversity of political representation, it is nonetheless important to continue to centre disability-inclusivity within the literature on diversity in elections – in the international scholarship as well as in the Irish context.

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[45] Women for Election. *Training Programmes - We have trained over 4000 women since 2012.* https://www.womenforelection.ie/home/training/
[46] Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2024). *Disability and Political Representation* Oxford University Press
[47] Tithe an Oireachtais - Houses of the Oireachtas. (2024). Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life: Report as presented to the Ceann Comhairle and the Cathaoirleach. In: Tithe an Oireachtais - Houses of the Oireachtas

Irish Context

Introduction

Before going on to detail the methodology and findings of this research, it is important to set out the main aspects of the Irish context in which these local and European elections took place. We begin with the census data on disability and other identities and go on to outline the key developments in law, policy and parliamentary reports related to the participation of disabled people (including those with intersectional identities) as electoral candidates.

Disability, intersectional identities and population

Based on the most recent release from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) a total of 1,109,557 people reported experiencing at least one disability to any extent in the Census of Population 2022. [48] This accounts for 22% of the population. This is an increase from 13.5% of the population identifying as having a disability in the 2016 Census. However, it should be noted that changes to the questions relating to disability between 2016 and 2022 may account for this rise. Regardless, the rise is notable and constitutes a sizeable population proportion. The data also shows that there are slightly more disabled women (52%) than disabled men in Ireland (48%), reflecting broadly the gender breakdown of the overall population of the country. There were 8,577 Irish Travellers who reported experiencing at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty to any extent, accounting for 26% of the Traveller population. In comparison, 22% of the total population living in the State reported experiencing at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty to any extent. The overall proportion of Irish Travellers experiencing a long-lasting condition or difficulty to any extent was slightly higher for men (27%) than women (25%). Looking at the total

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[48] Central Statistics Office. *Census of Population 2022 - Summary Results*.
https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/healthdisabilitycaringandvolunteering/

population, women (22%) were more likely to experience a long-lasting condition or difficulty to any extent than men (21%).[49]

Within the overall population, 87% of people surveyed were White Irish or other White background.[50] Irish Travellers represent 0.6% of the population and Roma people represent 0.1%. Black or Black Irish people represent 1% of the population, with Asian or Asian Irish people representing 3.2% of the population. The census does not collect information on sexual orientation or gender identity of participants, although there have been calls from LGBTQ+ representative organisations for future census rounds to capture this data.[51] From this available information however, it is clear that while the proportion of disabled people in Ireland is significant, the level of racial and ethnic diversity in the country is little. This should be kept in mind when considering how many disabled people with intersecting identities may be running for elected office.

The Electoral Reform Act 2022 repealed the prohibition on a person of 'unsound mind' from standing for election to Dáil Éireann (and thereby also removing the disqualifications for membership of Seanad Éireann, participation in local elections and for election to the European Parliament).[52] The reference to 'unsound mind' in the original Electoral Act 1992 referred to people who were made Wards of Court (an outdated form of adult guardianship/substituted decision-making). Following the commencement of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act, no new applications for Wardship will be accepted for adults in Ireland.[53]

There are no other rules which would prevent candidates with intersecting identities from contesting the local and European elections. To be eligible, candidates must be over 18 and ordinarily resident in Ireland. There is no requirement to be an Irish

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[50] Central Statistics Office. *Press Statement Census 2022 Results Profile 5 - Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers & Religion.* https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2023pressreleases/pressstatementcensus2022resultsprofile5 -diversitymigrationethnicityirishtravellersreligion/
[51] Lee, N. (2023). *LGBT Ireland calls for 2027 Census to include gender identity and sexual orientation questions.* gen News. https://gcn.ie/lgbt-ireland-2027-census-identity-questions/
[52] Electoral Reform Act 2022, (2022).
[53] Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act (2015), (2023).

citizen. Ireland also does not operate a quota system for any under-represented groups for the local or European elections. While a gender quota is in place for elections to Dáil Éireann (the principal chamber of the national parliament),[54] it has not been extended to other types of elections, despite calls from women's representative organisations to do so.[55] An employment target is in place for disabled people in the public service, but politicians are not considered public service employees and therefore it does not apply to them.[56]

There are certain financial rules for candidates in the local and European elections which can disadvantage disabled people with intersecting identities because disabled people are more likely to live in poverty. All candidates must pay a deposit as part of their nomination for election (€100 for local elections and €1800 for European elections). Candidates in local elections cannot claim back the expenses they incurred in their campaigns (unlike candidates in European or Dáil elections). For European election candidates, they can only claim back certain expenses incurred if their vote tally is over 25% of the quota for the constituency. The reasonable living expenses of candidates and volunteers during the election (including accommodation) are not considered to be election expenses, and neither are additional childcare costs or cost of work replacements.

In Ireland, there are no specific funds provided by the State to offset any costs faced by disabled election candidates, including those with intersecting identities, unlike those provided in other countries, for example, Access to Elected Office UK, which granted disabled candidates access to a fund that covered disability-related costs related to standing for election.[57] In general, disabled people are more at risk of

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[54] The Electoral Amendment (Political Funding) Act 2012 obliges political parties to select at least 30% women candidates and 30% men candidates to contest general elections. The threshold rises to 40% from 2023 onwards. If the quota is not met, political parties will lose 50% of the State funding they receive annually to run their operations.
[55] National Women's Council. (2024). Alliance for Gender Quotas Position Paper In: National Women's Council. https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/FINAL_Formatted_Gender_Quotas_Position_Paper.pdf
[56] Section 47 of the Disability Act 2005, as amended by the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Act 2022, originally set the quota at 3%. It was raised to 4.5% by 2024 and will rise to 6% in 2025.
[57] Government Equalities Office. (2018). Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund 2012 to 2015. In. United Kingdom Government Equalities Office.

poverty due to complex factors, including the cost of disability[58]. Disabled people with caring responsibilities, including childcare, may face additional costs of participating as candidates in these campaigns many of these types of costs cannot be reimbursed by the state. While these costs are not disability specific, when coupled with the additional costs faced by disabled candidates, they are evidence of the intersectional barriers which candidates in this study faced. It is important to have clear rules in place about candidate spending and reimbursement of election expenses to ensure transparency; however, such rules should not further disadvantage disabled candidates with intersecting identities who may face unique costs that are not incurred by other candidates and may not currently be considered allowable election expenses.

Election timeframe

Voting in the local and European elections in Ireland took place on 7 June 2024. The Ministerial order fixing the date of the election was made on 5 April.[59] This gave candidates around 2 weeks to secure their nominations and 6 weeks to conduct their campaigns. While election dates in other jurisdictions may be determined well in advance, Ireland generally has a relatively short window for candidate selection, nomination and campaigning. This can pose challenges for candidates from marginalised communities who may need longer to prepare for campaigns.

Rise of violence and intimidation of candidates in local and European elections

While research has shown that the 2024 local elections in particular saw more candidates from racial and ethnic minorities than ever before contesting elections in Ireland,[60] it should be noted that there were also several incidents of harassment and

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[58] Indecon. (2021). The Cost of Disability in Ireland. In. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1d84e-the-cost-of-disability-in-ireland-research-report/
[59] Department of Housing, L. G. a. H. (2024). *Polling Day Orders made for European, local and Limerick mayoral elections* https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/ebfe6-polling-day-orders-made-for-european-local-and-limerick-mayoral-elections/.
[60] Buczkowska, T. (2024). Strength in Diversity II: Experiences of election candidates of a migrant background in the Irish local elections 2024. In: Immigrant Council of Ireland. https://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/sites/default/files/2024-09/Strength%20in%20Diversity%20II%20Final_0.pdf

violence or threats of violence against candidates and their teams. These attacks primarily targeted candidates and team members from minority groups – especially women and racial minorities.[61] While there were no reported incidents where disabled candidates experienced this kind of violence in these elections, existing research demonstrates that this is an ever-present threat for all minority groups, including disabled people.

A parliamentary Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life convened earlier in 2024 to hear evidence of the negative impacts of abuse on political participation and democracy. Evidence was provided on potential candidates being discouraged due to fear of abuse, existing politicians deciding not to run again, politicians avoiding contentious topics, politicians avoiding community-facing activities and/or candidates avoiding in-person canvassing, which decreases the chances of election.[62] From the evidence, the Task Force concluded that abuse in political life is prevalent, problematic, and targeted disproportionately at women and minority groups (including disabled people and those with intersecting identities).[63] There is a shortage of research on abuse of other under-represented groups in parliament (including politicians who identify as culturally and linguistically diverse, politicians from minority ethnic backgrounds and LGBTQ+ politicians). However, the studies that have been conducted indicate that members of these groups also experience particularly high levels of abuse.[64]

In 2021, a parliamentary forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament, found that threats of political violence and harassment, online and in real life, are a natural barrier to women and people from minority backgrounds entering and remaining in

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[61] Boland, L. (2024). Dozens of incidents of hate and harassment documented against election candidates and canvassers. *thejournal.ie*. https://www.thejournal.ie/dozens-of-incidents-of-hate-and-harassment-documented-against-election-candidates-and-canvassers-6557613-Nov2024/
[62] Tithe an Oireachtais - Houses of the Oireachtas. (2024). Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life: Report as presented to the Ceann Comhairle and the Cathaoirleach. In: Tithe an Oireachtais - Houses of the Oireachtas
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

politics.[65] This forum noted that young women, members of ethnic minority communities and members of the LGBTQ+ community are disproportionately subject to political violence. Politicians who are parents were further concerned for the safety and security of their children. The Forum concluded that political violence is a severe threat to an inclusive and diverse parliament that is reflective of Irish society.[66] The rising prevalence of political violence, particularly concerning those with intersecting identities who may be marginalised, is undoubtedly a deterrent for disabled people with intersecting identities putting themselves forward as candidates and participating in public life.[67] This is an issue which will require targeted attention in future election cycles in order to ensure a more inclusive and diverse cohort of candidates can safely stand for election in Ireland.

Disability and intersectional identity strategies and action plans

In this section, we explore whether any of the main government strategies related to disability, gender, LGBTQ+ equality, migrant integration, anti-racism, and Traveller and Roma inclusion contain explicit measures targeted at supporting members of these communities to run for office.

Ireland's National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2022 contained a commitment to improving access to voting for disabled people but no commitment to supporting disabled people as election candidates.[68] The National Strategy for Women and Girls committed to "work with local authorities, the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) and political parties to promote and assist women candidates" and to "investigate potential supports to promote the participation of women in the 2019 local government elections."[69] Ireland's National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy

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[65] Tithe an Oireachtais - Houses of the Oireachtas. (2021). Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament. In: Tithe an Oireachtais - Houses of the Oireachtas https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/members/office-holders/ceann-comhairle/forum-on-a-family-friendly-and-inclusive-parliament/.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Kassam, A. (2024). Nearly all minority Fine Gael candidates targeted by racist abuse and threats. *The Gaurdian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/06/nearly-all-minority-fine-gael-candidates-targeted-by-racist-abuse-and-threats-europe-elections-ireland
[68] Department of Justice and Equality. (2017a). National Disability Inclusion Strategy (2017-2021). In.p. 17
[69] Department of Justice and Equality. (2017b). National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020: creating a better society for all. In.

contains a vague commitment to "promote inclusion, protect rights and to improve quality of life and wellbeing for LGBTI+ people enabling them to participate fully in Ireland's social, economic, cultural, and political life"[70] but as with the Disability Strategy, no concrete supports or measures are outlined to support candidates to stand for election.

A 2019 report on the Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020 states that "migrants will be encouraged to participate in local and national politics to the extent that these areas are legally open to them."[71] However, the measures related to this action focus again primarily on ensuring accessibility of voting processes rather than supporting migrant candidates to stand for election. By contrast, the National Action Plan Against Racism 2023-2027 includes a commitment to "establish public office mentoring programmes for members of minority ethnic communities and introduce positive measures to support the selection of minority ethnic candidates, based on the model in use to increase the numbers of women in politics."[72] Finally, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028 includes two key actions, to "promote participation by Travellers and Roma within electoral processes"[73] and also specifically to "foster the participation of Traveller and Roma women in political and public life, including decision-making, and in leadership positions."[74] Among the strategies examined for this research, this is the only one which contains a specific commitment to improve the diversity of election candidates across two axes of identity. It is worth noting that the majority of the strategies examined are out of date – some by up to 4 years – with only the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy and National Action Plan Against Racism being currently operational. However, it is encouraging to see the more recent strategies include more concrete commitments to supporting diversity in political candidature and it

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[70] Government of Ireland. (2019b). National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019-2021. In.p. 5.
[71] Government of Ireland. (2019a). The Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020, Progress report to government office for migration integration. In.p. 64
[72] Government of Ireland. (2023). National Action Plan Against Racism. In.p. 25
[73] Department of Children, E., Disability, Integration and Youth, . (2024). National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2024 - 2028 (NTRIS II). In.p. 13.
[74] Ibid. p. 10.

remains to be seen whether such a commitment will also be represented in the new iterations of other strategies, including the next National Disability Inclusion Strategy.

Conclusion

In this section, we have outlined the key elements of the Irish context, including demographic information, electoral regulations, experiences of diverse candidates in standing for election, and strategic commitments to improve the inclusion and representation of marginalised and minority groups as candidates for political office. This information should enable a clearer picture to emerge when we consider the experiences of disabled candidates with intersecting identities in the findings of this research. Prior to introducing those findings however, we will set out the methodology employed by this research in the following chapter.

Methodology

Introduction

The Literature Review highlighted that there has been limited qualitative research on the experiences of disabled election candidates with intersecting identities. It highlighted a clear need to undertake research to better understand the position of this cohort in the Irish context. In this section, we present the methodology utilised to answer our research question. The section sets out the philosophical perspective of the research that guides the research design, an overview of the research design, the recruitment process, sampling strategy, instruments used, including the qualitative methodologies employed during data collection and an outline of the data analysis.

The research aimed to address the following research question:

- What are the barriers and opportunities facing disabled people with intersecting identities engaging in political candidature in the local and EU elections in Ireland?

Research Design

Following an initial review of the literature it was decided by the research team that a two-phase approach which combined desk-based research and literature review with qualitative empirical research would be the most appropriate design to answer the research question.

Qualitative research refers, in the broadest sense, to research that produces descriptive data.[75] It gives voice to the experiences of the participants - in this case, disabled people with intersecting identities, and organisations from the disability and other marginalised communities.[76] Qualitative research enables the researcher to

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[75] Taylor, S. J., Bogdan, R., & DeVault, M. (2015). *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource* (4th ed.). Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
[76] Fuller, M., Bradley, A., & Healey, M. (2004). Incorporating disabled students within an inclusive higher education environment. *Disability & Society*, *19*(5), 455-468.

explore and describe a concept, phenomenon or process as it happens in its natural setting and kindles and understanding on a human level.[77]

The overarching methodological framework that guided this research is the human rights-based disability research methodology.[78] The methodology builds on emancipatory, participatory, and inclusive methodologies. The research followed the three key principles for this method which are:

1. Research initiated and led by voices from the disabled community
2. Research responding to a rights concern in the disabled community.
3. Outputs that directly address the rights and concerns and are returned to the community.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Galway. A Data Protection Impact Assessment was undertaken by the team and approved by the Data Protection Officer at the University of Galway. This research took place in collaboration with Trinity College Dublin.

Phase 1: Desk-based research – literature review

Phase 1 involved a literature review as part of the desk-based research. It consisted of developing several search strategies for the literature in academic databases, including:

- SocINDEX,
- SCOPUS,
- HeinOnLine, and
- PubMED.

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[77] Carpenter, C., & Suto, M. (2008). *Qualitative Research for Occupational and Physical Therapists: A Practical Guide.* Wiley-Blackwell.
[78] Arstein-Kerslake, A., Maker, Y., Flynn, E., Ward, O., Bell, R., & Degener, T. (2020). Introducing a Human Rights-based Disability Research Methodology. *Human rights law review, 20*(3), 412-432. https://doi.org/10.1093/hrlr/ngaa021

The literature was examined, focusing on disabled people with intersecting identities as election candidates. Searches were conducted using specific terms, and combinations of the following terms, including "intersectionality", "disability", "candidature", and "marginalisation". Grey literature, including reports from organisations, was examined to fill the gaps identified in the academic literature.

Phase 2: Empirical data collection – semi-structured interviews

Phase 2 of the research focused on the collection of qualitative empirical data and was divided into two parts:

Part 1 investigated the experiences of disabled candidates with intersecting identities, and

Part 2 explored relevant organisations' perspectives on the barriers and enablers for disabled individuals from multiply marginalised communities running for electoral office.

Qualitative data in part one and two was collected through semi-structured interviews either online or in-person. The research team chose semi-structured interviews for their flexibility and potential to allow participants to give a more in-depth account of their own personal views and experiences without interruption.[79] A series of semi-structured questions were developed based on identified themes within the literature.

Sample size & recruitment of participants

The research sample included:

1. Disabled election candidates, local and EU, with intersecting identities, and
2. Organisations of minority groups and those that deliver educational programmes to under-represented groups in politics.

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[79] Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. SAGE Publications. https://books.google.ie/books?id=PViMtOnJ1LcC

Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and were used throughout to ensure data anonymity.

Part 1: Disabled elections candidates, local and EU, with intersecting identities

Identifying the requisite sample size can be challenging where theoretical considerations guide selection.[80] In the case of this research, identifying the sample was even more challenging in a context where very few disabled people run for elected office and those who do often do not disclose their disabled identity. This was compounded by the need for candidates to identify as having intersecting identities. The adequacy of the data is not purely based upon quantity but rather upon the richness of the data and the nature of the aspect of life being investigated.

A combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used as a pragmatic approach to recruiting participants in part 1 of the study.[81] This took the form of a dynamic national promotional campaign through social media. This occurred in parallel to a rigorous desk-based research approach to identify potential participants, to confirm their candidature background and the intersectional nature of their identity. This involved, searching online for 'disabled candidates', reviewing political party websites for information, contacting political party representatives and organisations to seek introductions, researching local council and EU databases of confirmed candidates and engaging with local media sources. Candidates who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate. Those who participated then introduced the team to other potential participants (snowballing).

Inclusion criteria: Participants must identify as being a disabled person; be over 18 years of age and be a candidate in the local or EU elections in Ireland in 2024; and identify as having a minimum of one other intersecting identity.[82]

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[80] Becker, S., Bryman, A., & Ferguson, H. (2012). *Understanding research for social policy and social work: Themes, methods and approaches.* Policy Press.

[81] Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling methodology where participants are selected for inclusion in the sample because they are accessible to the researcher.

[82] In this research disabled people with intersecting identities includes, those protected under the nine grounds of the Equal Status Act 2000-2018 (e.g. disabled women, disabled migrants, disabled travellers, disabled LGBTQ+ candidates).

- Local election participants: Eleven participants who were approached or came forward met the inclusion criteria, four withdrew, and seven participated in the research. Five of these identified as disabled women and two as disabled men from the LGBTQ+ community.[83]
- EU election participants: No EU candidates responded to the promotional campaign or were identified by the research team as potential participants for this research.

Part 2: Organisations of minority groups and those that deliver educational programmes to under-represented groups in politics.

Part 2 of the empirical research focused on organisations. In response to the low number of candidates and the clear gaps in the representative experiences of those with intersecting identities among the participants, the research team recruited organisations of minority groups and those that deliver political education programmes to people under-represented in political candidature. This took place following a thorough desk-based examination of minority and political education programmes in Ireland that identified potential participants using a convenience and purposive sampling approach.[84] Participants from these organisations engaged in semi-structured interviews about their organisations' perspectives on the barriers and enablers for disabled individuals with intersecting identities running for electoral office.

- A total of nine people participated in the interviews representing eight organisations.[85] Following phase two, 16 individual participants had participated in the research.

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[83] See Findings for candidate details.
[84] This is a non-probability type of sampling, based on the fundamental principle that participants should be selected according to their ability to contribute to the research.
[85] See Findings for details of the organisations included in the research.

Data analysis

The narrative data collected during phase two of the research was analysed by thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found across a data set. The research team chose Braun and Clarkes' six stage thematic analysis to analyse and to extract meaning from data gathered.[86] The six stages are: 1) transcription and familiarisation with data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining themes and finally, 6) writing the report.[87] Coding in this research was carried out by one individual. In order to ensure the reliability of the process, texts were read and re-read. The researcher also undertook a validity and inter-coder reliability check of the coding process. Inter-coder reliability checking is the degree to which two individuals agree about the coding of an item.[88] The themes and sub-themes identified through the thematic analysis are presented in the Findings of this report.[89]

Conclusion

This section presented an outline of how this research was undertaken. It described the recruitment of participants, the data generation and collection procedure and the thematic analysis undertaken. The next section, the Findings, will present the findings from the data analysis.

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[86] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

[87] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology* (Vol. 2). American Psychological Association.

[88] Becker, S., Bryman, A., & Ferguson, H. (2012). *Understanding research for social policy and social work: Themes, methods and approaches.* Policy Press.

[89] Findings p.41.

Findings and Analysis

Introduction

This chapter outlines the main findings and analysis related to the research study. First, it sets out participant information of the two cohorts, the disabled candidates with intersecting identities and information related to the organisations that participated in the research. The chapter then explores the themes raised by participants including pathways into political life and privilege before examining campaigning experiences and intersecting identities, analysing systemic barriers, supports and enablers, and overarching issues.

Candidate Participant Information

Table 1 : Candidate Participant Information

Participant	Pseudonym	Intersecting identity with disability	Election contested	Elected or not	Political affiliation (e.g. Party A, B, C, independent)
1.	Aine	Woman	Local	Not elected	Party A
2.	Caoimhe	Woman	Local	Not elected	Party B
3.	Jane	Woman	Local	Elected	Independent
4.	Sarah	Woman	Local	Not elected	Party C
5.	Maeve	Woman	Local	Not elected	Party D
6.	Patrick	LGBTQ+	Local	Not elected	Party A
7.	Mark	LGBTQ+	Local	Elected	Party B

Table 1 displays the candidate information of the seven participants in this research. All candidates stood in local elections, which were held in Ireland on the 7th of June 2024. The majority of candidates identified as disabled women, with two identifying as LGBTQ+ men. It is important to note that only two intersecting identities are explored within the findings. This is telling in itself and is a limitation of the research which also relates to the limited number of disabled candidates identifying as having intersecting identities. Two of the seven candidates were elected, including an independent candidate. Also of note is that although there are seven candidates, they represent only four parties, with two groups of two candidates running for the same party.

Organisation Participant Information

Table 2 : Organisation Participant Information

Participant	Organisational type represented
1.	Representative organisation A1 – women
2.	Representative organisation A2 – women
3.	Representative organisation B – migrants
4.	Representative organisation C – LGBTQ+ people
5.	Representative organisation D – Traveller women
6.	Political education and training organisation E – women
7.	Political education and training organisation F – women
8.	Disabled Persons Organisation G – general
9.	Disabled Persons Organisation H – women

Table 2 displays the organisations' participant information. It shows the different types of organisations we sought information from, including representative organisations for specific identity groups, political education and training organisations and disabled people's organisations. The first organisation represents women. Participants A1 and A2 are from the same organisation and were

interviewed together. Women's representative organisations, as well as representatives of migrants, LGBTQ+ people, and Traveller women, were interviewed. Two political education and training organisations were also interviewed. Both of these organisations support women standing for election. Finally, we spoke to disabled people's organisations (DPOs) to gain their perspectives. Two DPOs were interviewed in this research - one whose work focuses on disabled women and the other whose membership is more general.

Deciding to stand for election

Pathways into political life

Those interviewed tended to be involved in political life from a young age. Mark spoke about engaging in politics from the age of 12 through student councils. He continued to be involved in student politics through school and university and became involved in party politics in his early 20s. Maeve talks about having "a lifelong interest in current affairs and politics" and joined the youth branch of a political party while at university. For Jane, the disability movement was a catalyst for her activism. She "started a disability action group at about fifteen, twenty years ago. I felt that I was becoming politically minded, but I felt that we needed to be, people with disabilities in our community had no voice in the sense."

The catalyst for entering into politics was not always related to disability or other intersecting identities, and in fact, some entered before becoming disabled. For example:

> "I first got involved in politics in… when I was very young, when I was 18, I wasn't actually disabled at the time. That came kind of three years later, and so my principles have kind of always been what they are in terms of equality, in terms of trying to improve life for the most vulnerable in society, you know?" (Caoimhe)

Many of the candidates were involved in social movements, but not necessarily the disability movement, and not all the movements they joined were related to their intersecting identities, such as climate justice.

The limited pathways into politics for disabled people when compared to non-disabled people was raised by several organisations, including the women's and LGBTQ+ organisations, the two DPOs, and the two educational and training organisations focused on women.

Related to this, DPOs, are a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland and, therefore, are not as well-resourced as more established civil society organisations. This further limits their ability to mobilise and put forward candidates.

Privilege

Some candidates felt they were in a position of privilege when compared to many disabled people when it came to running for election.

> "I think one thing… my biggest privilege by far is my class. Like I am… like I grew up in a pretty like well off… not very well off, but kind of closer to middle class, I guess… The biggest privilege I've had is just knowing that no matter what happens, if I am really in a rut I can get support from my parents, right? They don't give it easily, but you know, but [if] I am really put out, I know that I'll have that safety net, and that's like such a massive privilege." (Patrick)

In fact, in some cases, candidates felt that they had an "onus" to stand for election:

> "One of the reasons why I decided to run and to make disability a part of the debate, is because I acknowledge that I do have that background. I have the ability and the education and the funding behind me to be able to do something, so I felt like there was an onus on me to be a voice for people with disability." (Aine)

This raises interesting questions concerning the research topic, and how those who stood for election, although they have intersecting identities, can come from places of privilege. The responsibility to represent others who shared their identities but were not as privileged was also present.

Campaigning and intersectional identity

Systemic barriers

Patrick addresses intersectionality and how systemic barriers can layer on one another and cause additional challenges:

> "I completely agree with it in general that like, you know, if you're bi you face some systemic barriers, if you have a disability, you face some systemic barriers, if you're bi and you have a disability you face those systemic barriers, but also… like together, but then also some additional ones that comes from the intersection of them". (Patrick)

A number of systemic barriers emerged within this research, including inaccessibility, attitudinal barriers, financial barriers and balancing of commitments and lack of support, including party support and support from representative organisations, which will be discussed below.

Inaccessibility

Postering

Erecting election posters was an area that caused much annoyance and participants raised questions about their necessity. As Sarah said:

> "I mean I physically can't climb ladders. you're utterly dependent on others to do it, or again you're looking for funding for doing it, and it's not something… I think people take for granted, you know if… you're there kind of waiting and everybody else has posters up and you don't, and you're just reminded again about how your lack of visibility metaphorically and actually, you know?" (Sarah)

Áine paid someone to put posters up but didn't have a budget to pay someone to take them down. She spoke about having a team around her but recognised that this is not the case for many disabled people. In Europe, billboards often advertise all election candidates, which was seen as a preference for candidates including Sarah,

Maeve and Caoimhe. Sarah believed such a billboard should only be for "new candidates" because incumbents have had five years behind them to build their profile. It is particularly pressing for disabled candidates with intersecting identities to have a visible presence, and postering continues to play a vital role in this.

Debating

Speaking and having your voice heard is critical during an election. Two participants, including Áine, spoke about their difficulties in these situations. Áine spoke about the challenges she experienced including dysphasia, an impairment in the production of speech, which puts her at a further disadvantage:

> "There is also the challenge actually of the female voice. Now I know we talked a little bit about the dysphasia, but I don't always have that, so even on days when I wasn't impacted by that, the male voice still drowns you out. They get picked up first. And I found it more so online, on online domains, so Zoom and Teams." (Áine)

She further makes the point that during a campaign, you are expected to debate in a way that is not required while in office. "But in office you don't have to have that kind of really quick debate that you do need during campaigning". Additionally, debate performance can be perceived differently depending on gender and cultural background and these places added pressure on disabled candidates who have intersecting identities.

Canvassing

Canvassing was an issue for many, including the ability to get to people's front doors. Caoimhe pointed out, "I use a mobility scooter, so trying to get in and out to doors on that could obviously be very tricky, and there was some that it just wasn't possible." Caoimhe also spoke about the difficulties in canvassing after a day of working and how she believes this impacted her campaign: "I couldn't necessarily go out that evening, because I just didn't have the physical capacity to do that."

Sarah described how many of her friends and supporters were also disabled and could find canvassing difficult: "When you're campaigning on a disability platform a lot of the people that support you also can't come out and canvass with you, you know?" As Jane, the only incumbent councillor interviewed for this research, made clear, personal assistance was essential for her in fulfilling her duties as a local representative "There's just one thing I would say, without my personal… not my personal, without my services of PAs, … I couldn't do the job I am."

Safety whilst out canvassing was also a concern. Participants shared fears that being a disabled woman or disabled LGBTQ+ person could lead to increased harassment or abuse during campaigns. Sarah avoided canvassing for the most part due to safety concerns:

> "I did have people that were very aggressive and when you physically can't remove yourself from that quickly because of your mobility, that's also a very different kettle of fish, you know, because normally you can just say 'Oh well, okay, thanks for your time' and walk on, but when you can't, you have to endure that tirade of abuse." (Sarah)

Although violence is not solely an ableist issue, it is of particular significance to disabled people, including those with intersecting identities within this and other research. The LGBTQ+ organisation's representative described how intersectionality, in this case, being disabled and queer, can put people at heightened risk of abuse:

> "We've seen generally is a rise in hate crimes, rise in assaults on people because of their identities, and that does create a fear for people. And people may be targeted because they've got a disability, or they may be targeted because they're queer. But then there's an additional fear of, particularly if you've got a mobility issue of not being able to get away from a situation that might turn violent or might be aggressive." (Representative organisation C – LGBTQ+)

Media

Given the abovementioned challenges, utilising other media forms to communicate and reach voters becomes even more important. However, in Sarah's constituency, the local radio station decided not to allow airtime to any candidate as a result of one candidate's overtly racist views, putting her at a more significant disadvantage. Patrick and Sarah both spoke about the importance of social media and technology in conveying their messages to disabled people, including those with intersecting identities.

Attitudinal barriers

It is interesting to note candidates' reflections on the perceptions and assumptions of voters. For instance, Caoimhe felt that people were keener to engage with her when she was standing upright than when she was sitting in her mobility scooter: "People don't expect to answer the door and see somebody with a mobility difficulty there, and they don't expect them to be a political candidate." She went on to say that she felt people were more polite to her because of her disability.

Sarah worried about being viewed with sympathy and being siloed as a single-issue candidate because of her intersecting identities as a disabled woman. She spoke about how this came to pass when she was canvassing:

> "You know, I would talk with other candidates, and they would say they were asked about migrants and housing and this, that and the other. I used to get the 'Oh God, what happened to you?' and you know, 'Are you okay?' and 'God, you must be wrecked' and 'Do you need a rest?' and 'Sure aren't you great altogether?" (Sarah)

Sarah also speaks about an incident at a hustings event hosted by a disability service and attended by disabled people where another candidate remarked to her: Ah, well, sure, these are all your votes anyway.' She was understandably offended by this assumption that all disabled people would vote for her on the basis of her identities alone rather than having carefully considered the various candidates' policy positions.

Áine experienced people questioning her ability to run, but she was thankful to people who defended her:

> "Another side of it was a difficulty with [a] social media backlash, so being told that I couldn't run for office because I have a [medical condition] and that affects my brain, and you can't do the job. Which is completely farcical, like I already have a high-level public-sector job… But I was pleasantly surprised actually at the amount of people who came to defend me online." (Áine)

The Traveller organisation's representative spoke to the exclusion Travellers face in their day-to-day life and how this is a further deterrent in standing for election:

> "I know a lot of Travellers who have said things like 'Well how can I go canvassing on my street? How can I run for local election when I can't even get served in my local pub?' you know, if you know that you're so vilified in your own community and you're so excluded from your local community, how am I supposed to be going door-to-door asking for a vote? … On an intersectional level if you're a disabled woman or if you're a Traveller woman or whatever, it's harder again." (Representative organisation D – Traveller women)

Stigma towards disability was raised within interviews with organisations but, interestingly, to a lesser extent, from candidates themselves. The migrant representative spoke about the stigma around disability, leading people to decide not to disclose disability (in the case of an invisible disability).

> "I think it is also partly too, maybe, a stigma because people don't want to disclose disability. There is a stigma around those issues and also what is disability… So, if somebody doesn't believe that you're a good candidate, they will not support you, they will not become part of your election team. So, if somebody has a disability, then that might have additional problems, even including [recruiting] members for the campaign teams." (Representative organisation B – migrants)

The second part of this quote is significant as it suggests that disability could lower the size and impact a candidate's election team. She goes on to speak about the

importance of role models and how the cycle needs to be broken for people to break the "stigma":

> "So, if we had role models of people of a migrant background also talking about running as a person with disability, then again, other people might feel encouraged to do that, and also that might break stigma. So, it is kind of like a vicious circle, we don't have candidates, so we don't have role models, and we don't have role models, so we don't have candidates." (Representative organisation B – migrants)

Financial barriers

Being disabled results in additional costs when canvassing, and this was something that the candidates had to fund themselves:

> "The cost of being disabled was all personal… I kind of bore those myself… I would be canvassing, and I'd need the odd taxi back to my car or, you know, I have to get special food, for example. So that's always an additional cost." (Maeve)

Along with Maeve, several of the participants spoke about needing to bring their car for reasons of accessibility and safety. This created an additional financial burden because of disability and, in some cases, their other identities, for example due to the concerns about safety while canvassing as mentioned above.

Áine speaks to the need for funding at a national level in order to level the playing field and support disabled candidates, particularly those with marginal intersecting identities, to campaign on an equal basis with others:

> "I suppose in the same way as there's a national support in Litir um Thoghcháin, so that free postage of election material for certain elections, there's free postage is paid for by the state. I think there could well be a funding pot that isn't linked to any party or any individual, that candidates running for any election who meet the criteria can apply to bolster, to cover that gap, between them and other candidates, financially. I really do think it would balance the playing field for people." (Áine)

It is interesting to note that Jane chose to run independently as she did not want to be affiliated with a party where she could not fully participate, given that many meetings were held upstairs. However, given the financial implications, she points out that running independently may not be an option for everyone.

It is worth noting that candidates may require other types of accommodations not mentioned by candidates interviewed for this research, including for example Irish Sign Language (ISL).

Balancing commitments

The candidates had many commitments, including balancing full-time work and family life with campaigning. The importance of job security for those with a disability may be more pressing than for those without, given the cost of disability and the benefits connected to full-time employment:

> "I worked full time and really had to protect my job because I have all my benefits through that. I had to protect my job in a way that other people don't have to." (Aine)

For Áine, being a single mother meant that she needed to save her leave allocation for when schools were closed, and there always needed to be someone available to babysit when canvassing. This was a further disadvantage related to disability and gender because of the increased cost of disability added to the cost of single parenthood:

> "Many people could take leave [to campaign], I couldn't take leave because all my annual leave is used up to cover the children's school closures, so it is all already used…If I'm on a canvas, I need babysitters… And I always felt a bit of a tug of war on that, the expectation that I would just be available, whereas I actually had an awful lot to set up to ensure the children were taken care of for me to go out and I also, as a mother, need to balance it. I couldn't just be out every night, not with my children, I needed to balance all that as well. So, the childhood element was tough." (Áine)

While in this study, commitments of care were raised only by the female disabled candidates, this can be an issue for all, regardless of gender.

The issue of care was also raised by the women's organisation, which spoke about care as an additional expense that cannot be expensed:

> "So, not just someone to care for your children but what other care and support needs you might have as a councillor that that should be an eligible expense. There was always the line about you could bring in somebody to milk your cows and get that cost covered but you couldn't, it wasn't an eligible expense to cover other costs for you to be able to do your council business." (Representative organisation A1 – women)

Lack of support

Party Support

Many participants spoke about the lack of support from their political party directed to disabled candidates. Most spoke of no specific disability support when compared to gender, for example:

> "My party had a special kind of Officer in place for female candidates... a special group …always somebody else you could reach out to along with the other staff in head office… for just general kind of questions…, but there were no specific disability supports." (Caoimhe)

Caoimhe spoke about the importance of specific support if parties are serious and committed to increasing disabled representation, particularly concerning disabled candidates with intersecting identities. She believed they should actively liaise with representative groups and seek party members from these groups to run as candidates in elections:

> "I think that for parties, if they do really want to increase the representation of disabled people, it should be something that they kind of specifically consider, you

know? They should consider maybe taking on somebody to help identify…
disabled people who might like to be candidates, or to help identify maybe what
supports they might need, even if it's not a specific member of staff, somebody
who has that as part of their role, you know? I think those would be good things."
(Caoimhe)

The messaging from political parties can be ableist and deter disabled people,
particularly those with intersecting identities, from entering politics. This was
something raised by one of the women's organisation representatives:

"Even recently I saw something online - and I just thought it was just so damaging
really – [a party was] announcing their newly elected local councillors and they
had this post kind of saying, working for you day and night. And when I look at
that I'm going, I don't want to work for anyone day and night, like I want to have a
balance and I want to live a life, but they're celebrating that, like we are working
for you 24 hours a day. And I mean if I was a disabled woman I would think - well,
how can I work, well or lots of different people how could I do that, work for
someone day and night, so even the parties, the messages that they're sending out
are so off-putting." (Representative organisation A1 – women)

Regarding seeking advice and learning about disability, a representative from a
Disabled Persons Organisation and an LGBTQ+ representative said that it is the
responsibility of the political parties to seek advice from them and not the other way
around.

"I think the responsibility needs to lie on the political party to come to us and ask
how they can make things accessible. We are chronically underfunded. We don't
have the resources to constantly be reaching out without the expectation that
something is going to be done, and not in a chauvinistic way." (Disabled Persons
Organisation H - women)

Support from representative organisations

Patrick spoke about being open about his sexual identity and disability but how even at this he did not receive support from groups that could elevate his message and platform:

> "I mentioned pretty publicly that I had [medical conditions] to do with that, and I mentioned really openly that I was bisexual. I was kind of half hoping that there would be like some kind of like, do you know, support for LBGT plus people groups or support for people with disabilities that would basically give me an extra platform to counteract the kind of disadvantages I've been at by not being able to do as much public speaking and stuff, but I didn't really get any of that." (Patrick)

Sarah also spoke about talking openly about her disability, particularly at a hustings event held by [a disability service], but nobody reached out to her following this. However, in doing so she made an important point: organisations are often restrained from supporting candidates given their funding agreements and must be seen as apolitical.

Support and enablers

Attitudes and Connection

Patrick spoke about being more open-minded because of his intersecting identities, how this shaped his campaign, and how he interacted with others. He described how he was able to connect with people on the campaign in a way that perhaps a non-disabled bisexual may not have been. Additionally, Mark reflected on how his different identities provided him with an additional lens to see things in a way that perhaps others may not have, and that intersectionality can be a benefit in political campaigns.

Maeve spoke about how she felt people could better relate to her. She spoke about how this helped her connect with others:

"I think the more I talked to families, the more I talked to, you know, parents or siblings of disabled people, that it, you know… I think that that allowed me to have a connection with those people and I think that those people perceive me as being in their corner, so I think that that was a very positive thing." (Maeve)

The LGBTQ+ representative organisation raised an interesting point around solidarity and how the experience of discrimination is common among groups at the intersection and that this can lead to a sense of solidarity among candidates:

"For me anyway, personally, when you become more attuned to the discrimination that you experience because of your identity, you become more aware of the discrimination and barriers that other people face because of their identities. So, I think there is some more solidarity and more support to people from other minority communities because people are more attuned to it or awake to it. I think that leads sometimes to a greater level of understanding and more support sometimes. So, I think there is certainly a positive - there is a solidarity element between different minority communities that exists." (Representative organisation C – LGBTQ+).

Funding

While acknowledging the lack of financial support provided to her by the party and the lack of understanding of the needs of a single mother, Áine did receive practical support from party colleagues. She went on to say that she did learn lessons from the campaign and highlighted the issue of finances for disabled candidates to her political party. Access and funding were key and should be made available to all disabled candidates. Funding to cover costs not directly related to disability was also raised; for example, if someone already from a marginalised community has to take time off work or caring responsibilities to canvass and run for election, they should be compensated for the loss of earnings for that period (Representative organisation A1 – women).

Funding was not only seen as a priority for candidates but also an investment in disabled people's organisations, especially those with an explicitly intersectional focus, to develop capacity to put forward candidates:

> "There needs to be more investment for disabled persons organisations. Again, where disabled women can be involved, it's that mentoring, it's those opportunities for leadership, opportunities to develop their own analysis, their own skills. So, that's missing really because there are some emerging organisations and there are some resources there for disabled persons organisations, but it's really, I suppose at an early stage." (Representative organisation A1 – women)

Support from others

Party Support

Maeve spoke extensively about the support she received from party colleagues, including from Ministers and the party leader, who joined her in her local area to campaign for her; this resulted in increased media exposure. She went on to highlight how some of the support was focused on her being a disabled candidate, whereas other times it was not, and as such she appeared to have "two models of support".

> "I think the support… The support coming from, like, you know, the ministers. Like, with [minister 1], it was different. He was kind of more focused on getting me known locally, and it wasn't about being a disabled woman. Whereas with [minister 2], it was… It was very much here's our candidate, she's a disability advocate, go support her. And I think that's kind of where… You know, I kind of had two different models of support." (Maeve)

Support from Representative organisations

The role of advocacy and representative organisations in supporting disabled candidates with intersecting identities was discussed by participants. Áine speaks about the support she got from a local women's collective but also the limitations of

support from a national disability advocacy organisation, given that they cannot be seen to be political:

> "So, I did get some support – [a women's organisation] - they, a lady from there actually came on to my campaign team, and they were very supportive in sharing information, they tried to do a press release about all the women running in the campaign. It wasn't successful but they tried to approach it and things like that, so they really were putting in effort. [An impairment-specific organisation], I was in contact with them now, that's a tricky situation in that they can't be seen as political so they couldn't support me individually but they did share lots of documentation with me, they shared stuff with me pre-embargo, but they would have done it for any of the candidates, but I suppose we had that relationship, so they indirectly supported me I suppose, but not me over and above any others." (Áine)

Overarching issues

Disclosure

Disclosure of a disability is a key consideration for disabled people, particularly those with invisible disability, standing for election. Some people felt forced into disclosing, others chose not to disclose, and for others, it was a natural transition as they had already campaigned on disability issues in the past. Sarah felt the need to disclose her identity publicly on social media as she was getting criticism for not disclosing:

> "So, I put a Facebook post up with x-rays of my leg and, you know, pins and plates and everything else, and just went 'I can't get around to everybody that I want to, I keep getting asked about it, so there you go, this is it, this is the way I'm going to be. I'm on canes and sticks, and when it gets really bad a wheelchair, and that's about it." (Sarah)

For many it is not just disclosing your identity as disabled person but also feeling compelled to share personal medical information as Áine noted:

"You're not just exposing yourself, which anybody who stands for election is, but you're actually exposing medical details about yourself. Now I came to terms with it before I ran, and decided that I would… I was already advocating for disability rights, and I would use my experience to advocate for that…, so it was, it wasn't much of an adjustment for me, being exposed in that way." (Áine)

Identity

While some participants were open to identifying as disabled persons with intersectional identities, not everyone was. Patrick spoke about hesitating to identify this way while campaigning because of the stigma. He went on to explain how he is more comfortable identifying as bisexual, but even at that, he prefers to focus on the issues instead of his identity as a candidate. Mark also spoke about his focus on issues as opposed to his identity but did suggest that his active involvement in LGBTQ+ campaigning for many years benefited him in terms of community and campaigning for elected office.

Also of note, is that Patrick acknowledged that his intersecting identities are both invisible and that this is something he is conscious of, and which could be seen as a privilege of sorts:

"I think a big thing is I, both in terms of [disability] and then also in terms of like my bisexuality as well, they're both very invisible… so it's important for me to be open about my identity in these ways, but I also am very, very, very conscious and aware of the fact that they are invisible, so I don't really face the same impacts as so many people do." (Patrick)

Jane highlighted an issue that is directly relevant to the focus of this research. She said that she did not identify as marginalised despite identifying as a disabled woman: "But I have never felt marginalised and maybe that's because I've lived in a very safe world." She was hesitant about using the term marginalised or marginalisation as she did not see herself this way.

Importance of representations

Representation or the lack of representation of particular communities in politics was of concern to those interviewed. Mark spoke about how politics should reflect society; however, support and encouragement are required from several actors, including the State, political parties, organisations and the Electoral Commission to increase diversity:

> "Like, I think politics, the makeup of our parliament, of our local councils should reflect the society that we live in. And if we're saying that one in seven people have a disability, then one in seven of our politicians should have a disability – and the makeup should reflect that. And that also goes through gender - women make up more than 50% of our population, should make up more than 50% of our parliaments and our councils. And if we're saying… we don't know about LGBT because we don't measure these things. If we're saying 10% as a minimum, well then about 10% of politicians should be queer as well. But to get there, those people need support and encouragement." (Mark)

Caoimhe reflected on how the Disability Allowance payment leaves disabled people below the poverty line and that there is an apparent disconnect between those leading and the lived reality for many. She felt this was due to the lack of disabled people running for election, resulting in 'very few people with any real…experience of disability in politics and who are elected representatives."

Sarah shared her frustration at a non-disabled person leading disability developments in her area:

> "We have an able-bodied Councillor whose daughter is an adult now and she has autism, and she's like 'Oh well I'm the disability expert' and I'm like 'I can't get my wheelchair up the street because the cobbles are upside down and it keeps buckling the wheels.' and she's running on a disability ticket, and it is infuriating." (Sarah)

This was also of concern for representative organisation. One of the women's organisation representatives highlighted what is lost due to a lack of representation of disability in political life:

> "And why do we need people with disabilities in those chambers. And not just to that community but to the community in general, because I think we're missing so much by not having that diversity in the local authorities". (Representative organisation A1 – women)

Merely having a presence is seen as making a difference. The representative from the Traveller organisation spoke about the importance of having a Traveller woman as a senator within the parliament and how things have changed for the better just by her presence there. (Representative organisation D – Traveller women)

Conclusion

The limited number of participants in this research is connected to the lack of disabled people standing for election, and the even lower number of candidates with intersecting identities. Despite this limitation, the candidates' perspectives, combined with the reflections of the participating organisations, paints a clear picture of the pathways to political life. The findings outline the systemic barriers and the support and enablers that these candidates faced within the Irish context. While many of the barriers faced could be generalised to and affect disabled candidates without additional intersecting identities, there were factors which had a specific form and resonance for this cohort, for example, the fear of violence. Additionally, both candidates and organisations identified opportunities for support and enablers which emerge from these shared identities, including connecting with others in an intersectional way.

Discussion

Introduction

The findings of this research show have shown multiple points of consensus and disagreement on the issues facing disabled candidates with intersecting identities. This chapter will examine the key trends emerging from the findings of our research in light of the global literature discussed at the beginning of this report. In doing so it will seek to understand the ways in which our participants' experience mirrors those in other countries and ways in which their experiences are unique to the Irish context.

Practical support to increase diversity of election candidates

Both candidates and organisations interviewed for this research agreed that more support is needed. This includes practical support measures including financial support, logistical support, candidate training and media support. Such support would ensure that the Irish electoral system progresses given to the need for a more diverse pool of candidates standing for election. For example, the representative of the migrant organisation remarked, "I've noticed like there is a lot of goodwill within political parties and interest, but there is not enough maybe knowledge, skills and capacity."[90] The need to introduce concrete measures and to move beyond lip service was also highlighted by the disabled women running for election who participated in Evans and Rehrer's UK research.[91]

Specific financial supports provided by government for disabled electoral candidates are available in other countries. The Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund and the EnAble Fund were available in the UK, for example and research demonstrated that candidates found these funds very beneficial.[92] However, these

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[90] Representative organisation B – migrants. Interviewed (online) 18 October 2024.
[91] Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2023). Gender, disability and political representation: understanding the experiences of disabled women. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1332/251510823X16779382116831
[92] Reher, S., & Evans, E. (2024). No Level Playing Field: Barriers to Disability Representation in Politics. *The Political quarterly (London. 1930)*, *95*(4), 679-683. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13463

funds were closed by the Conservative Government in 2020 and despite calls for their reinstatement, have not been reopened at the time of writing.[93] While those funds only met disability-specific costs of candidates; broader financial supports are also needed, to offset the additional costs of childcare for disabled candidates who are parents, for example.

Any new supports introduced must progress beyond the single axis of identity in order to ensure they are meaningful. This includes the use of quotas or other initiatives designed to increase the proportion of under-represented communities in political life. When implemented effectively, quotas can accomplish their purpose, which is to increase diversity in political parties and parliaments. However, quotas must be carefully designed to avoid other inequalities. For example, international research demonstrates that the use of quotas can defeat their purpose if only men with disabilities are added to candidate lists or if ethnically under-represented groups are not included.[94] Addressing only one dimension of inequality at a time may reinforce within-group inequalities.[95]

While current initiatives to increase representation of minority candidates can be valuable, such as the appointment of women's liaison officers for candidates within political parties, participants including Caoimhe felt that such efforts were not sufficiently disability-inclusive, nor did they account for other identities beyond the candidate's gender.[96] There was a broad consensus among candidates and organisations that the State needed to take greater responsibility and provide resources for the development of the practical support that disabled candidates required. A representative from the women's organisation asserted, "So, first of all, for me, it's like a total recognition, a willingness to give extra support from the state,

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[93] Disability Rights UK. (2023). *Reinstate the Access to Elected Office Fund!* Disability Rights UK,. https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/reinstate-access-elected-office-fund.

[94] OSCE/ODIHR. (2019). Guidelines on Promoting the Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities. In: OSCE/ODIHR.

[95] Hughes, M. M. (2011). Intersectionality, Quotas, and Minority Women's Political Representation Worldwide. *The American political science review, 105*(3), 604-620. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055411000293

[96] Caoimhe, disabled woman who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 19 July 2024.

to give extra support to candidates that have self - how do you say - acknowledged that they have a disability."[97]

This is broadly consistent with findings in international literature that supports provided to candidates on the basis of a single-axis of identity (e.g. as women, LGBTQ+ people, members of racialised or ethnic minorities) fail to generate diversity within those groups in terms of the candidates who are ultimately successful in contesting elections.[98] Globally, more support appears to currently be available for women running for election than for any other marginalised group, and yet research shows that while this may increase the numbers of women elected to public office it often does not increase the diversity of women elected (e.g. queer women, Indigenous and First Nations women, and women from racial and ethnic minority groups).[99] Ireland, among many other countries, does not yet have a structure of disability liaison officers for candidates within its political system, nor does it have such a structure for LGBTQ+ candidates, Traveller candidates, or other racial or ethnic minority candidates. While reports emphasise on how the 2024 local elections had much more racial diversity than previous elections in Ireland,[100] it is worth noting that no disabled candidate from a racialised minority could be identified for this research. In developing more support structures and improving the inclusivity and intersectionality of existing support structures, we must learn from the communities most impacted to understand what practical supports they require.

Responsibility for change – roles of State actors, political parties and civil society

While there was a broad consensus on the need for more support for candidates, participants in our research had different perspectives on who should be responsible

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[97] Representative organisation A1 – women. Interviewed (online) 25 October 2024.
[98] Bejarano, C., Brown, N. E., Gershon, S. A., & Montoya, C. (2020). Shared Identities: Intersectionality, Linked Fate, and Perceptions of Political Candidates. *Political Research Quarterly*, *74*(4), 970-985. https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920951640
[99] Cullen, P., & Gough, S. (2022). Different Paths, Shared Experiences; Ethnic Minority Women and Local Politics in Ireland In: National Traveller Women's Forum, AkiDwA.
[100] Buczkowska, T. (2024). Strength in Diversity II: Experiences of election candidates of a migrant background in the Irish local elections 2024. In: Immigrant Council of Ireland.

for developing and providing the required support infrastructure. There was more or less a consensus around the need for the State to take on greater responsibility in providing support for individual candidates – to ensure that candidates would not be at the mercy of their political party or further disadvantaged when contesting elections as independents. Áine suggested:

> "I think there could well be a funding pot that isn't linked to any party or any individual, that candidates running for any election who meet the criteria can apply to bolster, to cover that gap, between them and other candidates, financially. I really do think it would balance the playing field for people." (Áine)

However, some candidates felt that responsibility should be shared more widely between state bodies (e.g. Electoral Commission, Department for Local Government) and political parties. Some expressed concern that locating the majority of responsibility on State bodies would enable political parties to divest themselves of obligations to address inequality and inaccessibility within their party processes and structures. The following two quotes highlight the differing views on this:

> "I actually think there should be a communal fund and I think parties should contribute there, depending on the amount of TDs they get, there should be a percentage that is ring-fenced every year, every year, for disabled candidates, and it should be a communal pool not for this party's candidate or that party, if there's ten in it's split ten ways, if there's one in, it's one way, and if it's not used then we used it to go out and identify why people aren't running and how we can get more people to run." (Áine)

> I think it needs to be a centralised fund - because if it's based on party resources or what people have drawn down based on electoral vote, it will preclude the involvement of disabled people who want to run an independent campaign. I'm not going to give an exact metric on it because it should be based on identified needs - and it should be based on an ability to run a campaign. (Sarah)

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Another key divergence here related to the role to be played by civil society organisations including disabled people's organisations and organisations representing other identities. Some candidates felt that civil society organisations should take on more of a role in supporting individual candidates – especially groups representing minority interests beyond single axis disability. For example, Patrick says:

> "I mentioned pretty publicly that I had [medical conditions], and I mentioned really openly that I was bisexual. I was kind of half hoping that there would be like some kind of like, do you know, support for LBGT plus people groups or support for people with disabilities that would basically give me an extra platform to counteract the kind of disadvantages I've been at by not being able to do as much public speaking and stuff, but I didn't really get any of that."(Patrick)

By contrast, the organisations who participated in this research felt that supporting individual candidates or assisting their members to consider running for political office, was beyond their remit. They often cited the over-stretched nature of their organisations as a reason that they did not currently have any programmes in place to support people from that community to consider contesting elections or becoming more involved in public and political life. One representative from a political education and training organisation spoke about a fund for accessibility measures such as Irish Sign Language but also, "We could definitely do with a fund to make sure that we're able to provide childcare, transport, all of those additional things that we would love to be able to provide for candidates."[101]

The recent Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life in Ireland (2024) suggested that political parties should look to develop party candidate selection processes outside the usual networks, such as within civil society groups.[102] Civil society has a role in training and creating a pipeline of potential candidates. Organisations within civil society are often much nearer to those with intersecting

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[101] Political education and training organisation F – women. Interviewed (online) 30 October 2024.
[102] Tithe an Oireachtais - Houses of the Oireachtas. (2024). Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life: Report as presented to the Ceann Comhairle and the Cathaoirleach. In: Tithe an Oireachtais - Houses of the Oireachtas

identities and could therefore, in our view as researchers, be utilised more in training and development, including establishing mentorship and leadership programmes, with additional state funding to support this where required.

Divergent views – disability and the impact of 'stigma' on candidature

An area where there was a noted difference between organisations and candidates was in relation to the role or prevalence of 'stigma' associated with disability as a barrier to contesting political office. Representative organisations raised it a number of times as an area of concern; whereas disabled candidates did not generally raise it as an issue they faced. This reinforces the need for organisations – particularly those focused on other identities beyond disability – to engage more with disabled people's organisations and disabled candidates with intersecting identities in planning any support structures they may want to build to increase diversity among those contesting elections.

While candidates did describe hostile and ableist attitudes they experienced, they did not seem to perceive these attitudes to be a product of 'stigma' on account of their disability or other identities. Their experience of attitudinal barriers was also more nuanced, with some candidates experiencing a swell of support from their communities in response to online harassment. For example, Áine spoke about being "pleasantly surprised actually at the amount of people who came to defend it, to defend me, online."[103] This is broadly consistent with the international literature in this arena, including Evans and Rehrer's research in the UK. In that study they found that despite the ableism present within political party culture and political recruitment and campaigning processes, very few electoral candidates reported feeling as though the voters had negative perceptions of them because of their disability.[104]

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[103] Áine, disabled woman who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 19 July 2024.
[104] Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2023). Gender, disability and political representation: understanding the experiences of disabled women. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1-18.
https://doi.org/10.1332/251510823X16779382116831

Candidates in our research tended to focus on inaccessibility, ableism, misogyny, homophobia and other types of barriers rather than stigma. The only area in which some candidates acknowledged that stigma may have played a role in their choices related to the disclosure of their disability or other identities. One candidate explained how they had made a choice between their invisible disability and their LGBTQ+ identity, choosing to identify more openly with the latter because of the greater potential for stigma associated with disability.[105] Candidates may also have been unwilling to reinforce stereotypical views by talking about stigma as an issue they faced. Stigma is much more personal than access. Stigma can act as both a motivator or demotivator causing some to withdraw and not engage and for others it may act as a catalyst to become politically active and to engage in their communities to bring about change. Finally, as the candidates we spoke to had all chosen to contest the election, any stigma they faced had clearly not deterred them from seeking political office, so they may not have considered it a relevant factor to discuss.

Political awakenings from beyond the disability movement – the Irish context

Unlike in other countries, the majority of disabled candidates with intersecting identities interviewed for this research did not choose to enter politics primarily because of their experiences in the disability movement. Those interviewed had become politicised in different ways, including through their involvement in student politics,[106] youth branches of political parties,[107] their families,[108] founding trade unions[109] and forming political parties.[110] They described issues such as climate

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[105] Patrick, disabled LGBTQ+ male who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 03 September 2024.
[106] Mark, disabled LGBTQ+ male who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 21 October 2024.
[107] Maeve, disabled woman who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 18 July 2024.
[108] Áine, disabled woman who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 19 July 2024.
[109] Patrick, disabled LGBTQ+ male who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 03 September 2024.
[110] Mark, disabled LGBTQ+ male who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 21 October 2024.

justice,[111] reproductive justice,[112] and equality[113] as issues that framed their political ideology and for several candidates these issues may have been more prominent than disability in their campaigns. Only one candidate clearly identified the link between her political life and her long-standing involvement in the disability movement.[114]

While our sample in this research is small and we are careful not to generalise from this data, it does point to a slightly different trend than what we see in international research on this subject. Evans and Rehrer's research into the increasing proportion of disabled people, including those with intersecting identities such as disabled women and ethnic minorities, shows that at least in the US and UK, there appears to be a concerted effort on the part of the disability movement to encourage and support disabled activists to contest political office.[115] Similarly, the candidates elected to office in Langford and Levesque's research in Canada were all well-connected with disabled people's movements.[116] Research into the 2019 elections in Indonesia showed that DPOs had developed a deliberate strategy of supporting members for election in local, district and national governments – as part of the tools they used to generate social and legal change.[117] While Indonesian DPOs continued to put pressure on the national government to fully implement legislation on disability rights, they simultaneously put forward a diverse range of disabled candidates for election to ensure there would be support within different levels of government for their demands.[118]

[111] Patrick, disabled LGBTQ+ male who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 03 September 2024.
[112] Sarah, disabled woman who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 18 July 2024.
[113] Caoimhe, disabled woman who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 19 July 2024.
[114] Jane, disabled woman who ran in local election. Interviewed (online) 31 July 2024.
[115] Evans, E., & Reher, S. (2023). Gender, disability and political representation: understanding the experiences of disabled women. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1332/251510823X16779382116831
[116] Langford, B., & Levesque, M. (2017). Symbolic and substantive relevance of politicians with disabilities: a British Columbia case study. *Canadian parliamentary review*, *40*(2), 8.
[117] Kramer, E., Dibley, T., & Tsaputra, A. (2024). Choosing from the citizens' toolbox: disability activists as political candidates in Indonesia's 2019 general elections. *Disability & society*, *39*(1), 85-104. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2060800
[118] Ibid.

In the Irish context however, there are relatively few DPOs,[119] and fewer DPOs with an explicitly intersectional focus in their membership.[120] As a result, it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of disabled candidates interviewed for this research are not becoming politicised through their engagement with the disability community; and their entry into public and political life came from a broader range of campaign issues. Nevertheless, this reinforces our earlier reflection about the need for greater cross-civil society engagement and collaboration, and consideration of developing candidates for election as part of broader political strategies to bring about change alongside strategic litigation, legislative reform and other measures.

Conclusion

While the research findings discussed in the previous chapter are drawn from a very small sample, there are nonetheless some interesting similarities and differences in the Irish electoral context when compared with international literature. The role of DPOs in the formation of political candidates elsewhere sits in contrast with the experiences of participants in this research. This is despite the many similarities in barriers facing these candidates globally and the need for more meaningful and practical supports to enable them to campaign on an equal basis with others. Given the limited types of intersecting identities of the disabled candidates interviewed for this research (women and LGBTQ+ people) more research is clearly needed to understand the complex and nuanced barriers and opportunities facing these candidates, as well as research into those with other identities intersecting with disability who were not able to be identified for this research both in Ireland, and beyond. The lessons learned from this research and the tentative recommendations emerging from our findings will be explored further in the following chapter.

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[119] DPO Network. (2023). The Role of Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) in Ireland. Position Paper No. 1. In.

[120] Notable exceptions include Disabled Women Ireland and Full Spectrum Ireland (for disabled LGBTQ+ people).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

Having set out our findings and discussed these in light of the international literature, we will conclude this report with the lessons learned from this research and our recommendations for three different categories of actors regarding their roles in increasing diversity among candidates for political office.

What we have learned from doing this research

Several lessons were learned in the course of this research. These included difficulties identifying participants, the limited types of intersectional identities studied, and the nature of the barriers encountered which will be discussed below.

It was difficult for the research team to identify people who met the study's criteria. This was an issue which related to both the disclosure of disability and the identification of intersecting identities, which could be invisible. Currently, data on disability or the intersecting identities of election candidates is not collected centrally, a factor which complicates the issue further.

The only identities intersecting with disability among the candidates who agreed to take part in this research were women and LGBTQ+ people. This raises significant questions and concerns about the extent of diversity in Irish politics.

Many of the experiences shared by candidates and organisations highlighted primarily the disability-specific barriers including inaccessible venues, debate formats or media events (which would have been faced by all disabled candidates even if they did not have another intersecting identity) rather than identifying specific and unique intersectional barriers. However, there were some additional barriers raised by participants (e.g., the experience or fear of violence). Participants also shared the positive aspects to intersecting identities in terms of connecting with the electorate based on shared experiences and a sense of understanding the issues faced by others in their communities.

Many of the representative organisations interviewed for this research admitted to disability being missing from their current programmes and advocacy. This was not intentional, and participation in this research enabled organisations to reflect on what they could do differently to support candidates in future elections.

The abovementioned learnings reflect several limitations of the study, including the difficulties sourcing participants, the limited number of intersecting identities studied, and as a result, the limited intersectional barriers identified. However, they also exposed some interesting findings that future research and practice should explore including the unique pathways into political life for those interviewed, and the desire to develop more of an intersectional disability focus among representative organisations in their work on political participation and in supporting candidates for election.

Recommendations

The recommendations are divided across three categories of actors regarding their roles in increasing diversity among candidates for political office: the State, political parties, and civil society. Although the research had a small sample size of participants, our findings were broadly consistent across candidates and organisations, and therefore, these recommendations are made following reflection on interviews with both cohorts.

State

The State should be responsible for collecting self-reported data from election candidates on all aspects of intersectionality, and this should be published in a disaggregated way that does not identify or endanger candidates. Collecting disaggregated data on disability is already a State obligation under the UNCRPD, and collecting intersectional data is necessary to track Ireland's progress in developing a more diverse cohort of elected representatives. In principle, this work could be carried out by the Government Department with responsibility for elections, local authorities who administer the electoral process or the Electoral Commission.

However, meaningful consultation is required with DPOs and organisations representing other marginalised communities, as well as with the relevant State bodies with responsibility for elections, to determine which body is best placed to collect this data and the process by which this collection should occur.

Specific supports, including additional funding, should be made available to disabled people with intersecting identities given the extra costs associated with standing for election. Other equality measures such as the use of quotas should also be explored to increase the percentage of elected candidates.

Communal postering via billboards and joint debates that host all election candidates, as done in some European Countries, should be considered as a step change to the current status quo in addressing accessibility issues.

Civil society should be funded to support disabled people with intersecting identities to consider putting themselves forward for election. For example, funding to LGBTQ+ organisations to support election candidates must ensure that it is inclusive of disabled LGBTQ+ candidates and recognises the additional supports these potential candidates might need. Funding to DPOs to support development of potential future election candidates should be allocated to a wide range of potential candidates, including those with different impairments and disabled people with intersecting identities. These organisations have an essential role to play in terms of identifying and supporting potential candidates.

This research represents a starting point and clearly demonstrates gaps within the research landscape. Research concerning disability, intersectionality and political representation should be prioritised and funded at a national level.

Political parties

Political parties should dismantle structural barriers to the participation of disabled people with intersecting identities in their parties. They should develop inclusion guidelines at the branch level, for example, that venues chosen for party meetings and modes of communication with party members are fully accessible and inclusive.

Parties should also build intersectionality into existing support structures, for example, within the role of development officers. If parties are unsure how to do this or do not have current structures set up, they should consult with civil society organisations, including with disabled people's organisations (DPOs) and other representative organisations such as those supporting migrants, racial and ethnic minorities, Travellers and LGBTQ+ people. This includes supporting people at a local level who could potentially become candidates.

The advantage incumbents hold in terms of re-election is significant. This should be seriously considered when it comes to the coopting of candidates into vacant seats within local government. Political parties should seriously consider the need for greater diversity when proposing candidates for co-option, including disability and other identities.

Civil Society

Education and training organisations

Civil society organisations should be funded and supported to establish and run regular training and mentoring sessions for disabled people, including those with intersecting identities who want to explore the idea of running for elected office.

Disabled people's organisations

Of the seven candidates interviewed for this research, only one cited involvement in the disabled people's movement as the primary route to her politicisation. This is an important difference when comparing Ireland to other countries where data on disabled election candidates, including those with intersectional identities, exists. Disabled people's organisations should more seriously consider supporting their members to contest elections. In so doing, they must have regard to the need to promote diversity beyond disability. Further funding for DPOs is needed to support this work.

Wider civil society

Civil society organisations representing marginalised communities should consider how they can support members of these communities (including disabled people) to become politically active, including through running for election. Most of the current initiatives focus primarily on supporting people to exercise their right to vote. While this is important, potential election candidates can develop critical leadership skills through working in civil society and this can be a strength when running for political office. Therefore, these groups should develop a strategy for candidate development and ensure this is disability-inclusive, intersectional and done in a culturally sensitive way.

Overall conclusion

This research focused on the experiences of disabled candidates who stood in the Irish local elections (2024) who hold intersecting identities, including those protected under the nine grounds of The Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 (e.g. disabled women, disabled migrants, disabled Travellers, disabled LGBTQ+ candidates). The research also included the perspectives of several organisations, including representative, political education and training organisations, and disabled people's organisations. Combined with the candidates' perspectives, these paint a picture of the current political landscape for disabled people with intersecting identities. The research has led to a deeper understanding of Article 29 of the UNCRPD within the Irish context using an intersectional lens. With little to no published data currently available within the Irish context and limited international data, this research makes an important contribution to scholarship at a national and international level.

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