

Social Movement and the Creation of the American Disabilities Act

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Introduction

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) states that people with disabilities do and should have the right to fully participate in all aspects of society, while recognizing that they are historically and systematically excluded from participation by barriers including the discriminatory effects of architectural and failures to make modifications to existing facilities (Whaley et al., 2024). The ADA was created due to public advocacy from demonstrations like the Capitol Crawl, sit-ins, and the participation from grassroots organizations like Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT). Before the creation of the ADA disabled individuals were underrepresented under the law in all avenues of life, including transportation, the workforce, education, and more. The Disability Rights Movement created and sustained public pressure that led to the federal government's passage of the ADA through demonstrations, sit-ins, and grassroots organizing.

Literature Review

The Disability Rights Movement gained traction in ways that align with larger theories of social movements. Through public pressure, the movement was able to create institutional change with the creation of the American Disability Act of 1990. Richard Scott writes that college campuses were a starting point of social change for the Disability Rights Movement, as students with disabilities, both cognitive and mobile, were often put in one category of the student body and approached as a uniform group (Scotch, 1989). In the 1960s, the model of social movements were the Civil Rights and Feminist movement. Additionally, during the Vietnam War, there was an increase in college activism, which came in the form of widespread protests and speaking out about government action, or inaction. Because of these time period

factors, Scotch argues that, “a disability rights movement was much more likely to occur at a historical moment when protests were legitimate, widespread, and focused not only along lines of established economic conflicts but also around issues of identity and social roles” (Scotch, 1989). During this time, the relationship between the federal government and the public was seemingly symbiotic, meaning that public advocacy largely shaped policy outcomes. If enough people were willing to demonstrate their support for something, the likeness of the government to take action was significantly higher. In the United States, the history of largely impactful social movements directly affects the approach that other social movements take to promoting the social change that they seek.

Evidence and Analysis

The Capitol Crawl occurred over thirty-six years ago on March 12, 1990 where approximately 1,000 people marched from the White House to the US Capitol demanding the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (Little, 2020). The physical demonstration of over sixty disabled Americans attempting to climb the steps to the US Capitol drew a lot of attention to the movement, highlighting the inaccessibility of architecture. The demonstration was televised, which contributed to the effectiveness of the action. The emotional impact that the Capitol Crawl had on Americans sparked lawmakers to advocate for the passage of the ADA, which was signed into law on July 26, 1990 by President George H.W. Bush (Little, 2020). The youngest participant in the Capitol Crawl was Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins, who said, “I really want to crawl up the steps because I want to make sure that not only am I going to do this for myself, but I want to do it for others. I want to do it for all the other kids that aren’t here. I want to be able to speak up for them and speak up for future generations” (Museum of the Courageous,

2023). Her motivation to climb eighty-four steps at age eight was rooted in the social change that she knew would come with the public attention from the demonstration.

Another crucial piece of the social movement was the utilization of sit-ins. One of the most famous examples of this was during the Section 504 protests of 1977. Here, activists across the country occupied federal buildings, which disrupted normal government operations and showed that stereotypes of disabled individuals being passive or incapable were wrong (Osorio, 2022). Section 504 was promised, “the inclusion of disabled people in civic practices and buildings, and thus, a long-awaited entrance into citizenship” (Osorio, 2022). With the federal government’s refusal to enforce Section 504, activists took the opportunity to show their outrage. In San Francisco, the most notable of these sit-in demonstrations, approximately 150 disabled individuals and their counterparts entered the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) building and did not leave for twenty-eight days. This was the longest nonviolent occupation of federal property in US history, with this physical act showing that bold, nonviolent action can have a large impact on policy.

The use of grassroot organizations to gather groups of Americans with the same goals has been utilized throughout US history to create policy change at the federal level. For the Disability Rights Movement, one of the largest groups that played a role was Americans Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT). Historically before the passage of the ADA, government policies had systematically excluded disabled individuals from employment and public life. One of the most prominent of these discriminations was the limitation of accessible public transit options (Lewyn, 2001). There was a clear gap in public transportation as Lewyn (2001) notes, “in Greater Boston, just 32% of entry-level employers are within one-quarter mile of transit, 43% are within one-half mile, and 58% are within one mile. Only 14% of entry-level

jobs can be reached by transit within an hour from Boston's poorer neighborhoods” (Lewyn, 2001). This gap in accessibility to public transit across the United States led to the formation of ADAPT. This organization led Americans in demonstrations and highlighted the persisting barriers that disabled individuals faced on a daily basis. Their adamancy and consistency created long-term pressure on lawmakers.

The combination of factors that historically gained a social movement traction, including demonstrations, sit-ins, and grassroots activism, gave the Disability Rights Movement consistent traction for policy change. Memorable, televised demonstrations, such as the Capitol Crawl, created an investment from all Americans, sparking an attitude that answered the question of “why should I care?”. In pulling on emotion, the movement capitalized on a large social interest in the movement. Additionally, with sit-in demonstrations, the ability to protest in a peaceful way without causing harm, showed that disabled individuals were determined to be seen and heard, and they were willing to do what it took to get the federal government to listen to them. Finally, grassroots activism ensured that the movement was sustained, meaning that there would be a combination of highlighted moments while there was also a continuous pressure on the federal government to make sure that change was happening, whether in the public eye or not. Overall, the tactics utilized by the Disability Rights Movement created the ADA and paved the way for other social movements that followed.

Conclusion

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was passed through the sustained pressure of the public on government officials using social movement tactics like sit-ins, demonstrations, and grassroots activism. The peaceful forms of protest against government inaction sparked an interest in Americans due to the emotional impact of the Disability Rights Movement. Sit-ins

like that in San Francisco demonstrated that disabled Americans were willing to do whatever it took to advocate for themselves. Demonstrations like the Capitol Crawl televised to all Americans how important accessibility was for everyone, pointing out the current injustices. Finally, grassroots activism, like ADAPT held government officials accountable for their actions, sustaining momentum and pressure that led to the passage of the ADA. The success of the ADA is something that can be attributed to the brave Americans that worked together to fight for a more equal system under federal law.

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