
Including People with Disabilities in Your Political Campaign: A Guide for Campaign Staff

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Introduction: The Importance of Disability Inclusion in Political Campaigns

In any political campaign, it is important to identify different interest groups who may be interested in voting for your candidate and to ensure that they are engaged with your campaign. Women, people of color, business and labor groups, and many other interest groups are often appealed to by campaigns for their votes and supports, and more recently, the political sphere has begun to recognize the power and breadth of an interest group that previously had not received much attention: people with disabilities.

In the United States, people with disabilities are in fact a very large voting bloc. They are considered the largest minority in the country, encompassing nearly 20 percent of the population. In the 2012 presidential election, an estimated 15.6 million voters with disabilities cast their ballots, a number comparable to African American voters (17.8 million). In fact, the disability demographic cross-cuts with many other demographics, including people of color, women, the LGBT+ community, immigrants, and the aging. Any person can become disabled at any age. In addition to its size, the disability community's political interests also extend to friends, family, and supporters of people with disabilities, making it a truly significant demographic, and a potential powerhouse of voters.

Although the disability demographic is significant in size, there are unfortunately a number of barriers to civic engagement for people with disabilities. Although voting is required by law to be accessible, many people with disabilities encounter inaccessibility in the voting process anywhere from registering to vote to casting their ballot on election day. Unfortunately, their civic engagement can be further suppressed when they aren't recognized by and included in political campaigns. If campaign staff do not understand the importance of accessibility and work with disabled volunteers to find a role for them to play in the campaign, not only are disabled volunteers discouraged from engaging with the campaign, but campaign staff are unable to tap the creativity and resourcefulness of disabled volunteers.

This is truly unfortunate, as people with disabilities want to be engaged politically. A poll by the Pew Research Center found that people with disabilities were slightly more likely to be engaged in the 2016 election. Furthermore, it found that people with disabilities are ideologically mixed, and so they have the potential to support any candidate or party—that is, if their vote is courted.

If this is not enough motivation for including disabled volunteers and appealing to this voting group, then there is another reason: it's the law. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) set the standard in this country nearly three decades ago for striking down barriers to inclusion for people with disabilities. The ADA prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of disability, and also requires that employers make reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities, so long as it doesn't cause undue burden on the employer, so they can hold a position. While this is more relevant to campaign staff than volunteers, it is good form to follow the recommendations of the ADA in all of your recruiting practices, to ensure that you have inclusive policies and a diverse staff.

With this in mind, this guide has been created to help campaign staff understand why and how to include people with disabilities in their staff and volunteer positions. The knowledge in this guide

comes from many interviews with persons with disabilities, including political candidates with disabilities, who have had to work around barriers in the campaign process by engineering creative and engaging ideas. The ingenuity of people with disabilities is a resource that should not be underestimated, something you will learn for yourself if you include them in your campaign.

Happy campaigning!

Understanding the Disability Demographic in a Political Context

Like any political interest group or voting bloc, it is important to understand the historical and political context of people with disabilities and why it is important not only to see them as potential voters, but to include them in your campaign in every way possible. As mentioned before, there are millions of voters with disabilities in the United States, and approximately 20 percent of the population has a disability. But who are these people, what is their history, and what do they care about?

Who: Disability is prevalent across ages, genders, ethnicities, and many other demographic factors. It includes children and young people as well as the aging, people of color, men and women, the poor, the middle class, and the wealthy. Because of ongoing discrimination and barriers to access in areas including physical access, employment, transportation, healthcare, and many other areas, they are considered to be a disenfranchised group. Disability is in fact higher in certain populations, including black communities, the aging, and the poor. Because of the intersection of multiple identities, such as race and disability or sex and disability, many people within the disability community are affected by various types of inaccessibility and inequality.

Why: People with disabilities have been fighting for their rights for a significant amount of time and are still doing so. The Americans with Disabilities Act was a landmark piece of legislation passed in the early 1990s that prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in aspects of public life, including voting. There are a number of other laws that affect and improve the right to vote for people with disabilities, including the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) which improves voter registration numbers of disabled people, and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), which requires at least one accessible voting machine in each polling place. However, disabled people still have difficulty exercising their right to vote. Some laws, such as conservatorship laws, may strip voting rights from those with mental health conditions and developmental disabilities. Furthermore, inaccessibility of polling places still causes difficulties, with nearly 30 percent of people with disabilities surveyed in a 2012 poll following the election experiencing at least one difficulty in casting their ballot (compared to only 8 percent of non-disabled voters).

What: So what do disabled people care about in a political context? Well, as many things as any other voting bloc! Disabled people care about healthcare and access to services and supports; improving job opportunities and receiving fair wages for their work; accessible transportation and housing; improving social services and access to education, and many other things. It is important for your campaign to talk with people with disabilities to find out what your potential voters care about and how you can appeal to them in your platform. While disabled people are a voting bloc, the disability community is not a monolith, and you will find differences in party preferences, opinion, interests, and beliefs.

Disabilities and Accommodations

A disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. There are many categories of disabilities and many ways to accommodate those who have disabilities. Although this is far from an exhaustive list, below are some common categories of disabilities and some common accommodations for those with these disabilities.

- **Mobility-related disabilities:** When people think of the word "disability," someone with a mobility impairment frequently comes to mind, as many use mobility aids such as wheelchairs, canes, or walkers that have become symbols of the disability community. Mobility impairments cover a wide range of that can impact fine and gross motor skills, which means that it includes people who may have difficulty using their hands and fingers to people who are paralyzed. People with mobility-related disabilities may be manual or electric wheelchair users full-time, or may have limited ability to walk using a combination of mobility aids. Others may have pain-related disabilities such as fibromyalgia or arthritis and may not use mobility aids, but they may still need accommodations and creative solutions to participate. [Read more about the different types of mobility-related disabilities.](#)
 - Accessibility considerations:
 - Access to "ADA" or a designated seating area at events that is close to the stage so that wheelchair users can see, and so that those who need access to chairs are able to sit down.
 - Ensuring that you choose a building that is accessible either at street level or via a ramp, and has elevator access if the event is being held on another floor. **Even if there's "just one step," that is not an accessible venue.**
- **Cognitive disabilities:** Cognitive disabilities impact cognitive functioning for people who have it. They can range from learning disabilities to Down Syndrome, dementia, traumatic brain injuries, and more. The diversity of disabilities under this label means that their disabilities impact them in different ways: cognitive disabilities can impact memory, attention span, language comprehension, visual comprehension, and problem-solving ability. [Read more about the different types of cognitive disabilities.](#)
 - Accessibility considerations:
 - Plain language, or language that is easy to understand, well organized, and free of confusing jargon.
 - Websites and materials should be streamlined, clutter free, and have decent contrast.

- **Deaf / Hard of Hearing (HoH):** People who are Deaf / HoH range from those who have reduced hearing to those who are profoundly deaf. Some people in this category may identify as culturally Deaf, which means that they consider their deafness part of their cultural identity, and they were most likely brought up within a Deaf community. Some people who are deaf / Deaf (the uppercase "Deaf" denotes someone who identifies as culturally deaf) or Hard of Hearing may use hearing aids or cochlear implants, and others may use American Sign Language (ASL), but it is important to identify what accommodations an individual may need by asking them.
 - Accessibility considerations:
 - Closed captioning for campaign videos.
 - Assistive listening devices
 - ASL Interpreters
 - Communication Access Realtime Translation, otherwise known as CART captioning. CART captioning is real-time captioning of speakers at an event projected onto a large screen at the front of the room. This can also be done for online events such as webinars.

- **Autistic individuals:** The autism spectrum includes a wide variety of individuals who may have different access or support needs, including sensory needs, accommodations for working in groups or for gatherings, and accessible language and information. The [Autistic Self-Advocacy Network has created an excellent brief](#) on what some of these accommodations may include at a more comprehensive level.
 - Accessibility considerations:
 - Provide agendas and materials in advance and try to stick closely to those agendas.
 - Some autistic people may have sensory processing issues and loud environments can be overstimulating. When in working groups, try to reduce background noises. Consider assigning a quiet room as a sensory retreat for those who have been overstimulated.
 - Some individuals may experience overstimulation from scents. Try to maintain a scent-free environment by discouraging use of perfumes or strongly scented personal products, and consider adopting a scent-free policy (a policy that is also helpful for those with allergies, asthma, and other conditions that are negatively affected by scents)
 - By having a campaign staffer work with a prospective autistic volunteer, it is very possible to accommodate that volunteer's individual needs and preferences. These could include ensuring that the volunteer is only assigned to work in small

groups, being assigned to tasks that involve less person-to-person interaction if the volunteer needs to restrict interaction, or making sure that fellow staff and volunteers know how to meet the autistic volunteer's access needs.

- **Blind / Low vision:** People who have low vision or are blind range from those who have more limited vision to those who are completely blind.
 - Accessibility considerations:
 - Some supporters who are blind or low vision may prefer large print materials or materials in electronic formats.
 - Many blind people navigate websites with a screen reader, a type of technology that reads a webpage out loud. There are a number of easy things that your website designer can do to make your website screen reader navigable. We will explore this issue more in the next section.
- **People who are unable to come to campaign headquarters due to disability or illness:** some people with disabilities or illnesses may not leave the home or may have limited time and energy outside of the house due to their medical condition. This can range from people who have a more difficult time accessing transportation due to their disability, to a person with a chronic illness who would like to contribute to your campaign but cannot make it into your headquarters or participate in energy-consuming tasks like canvassing.
 - Accessibility considerations:
 - Keep your website up to date with the latest information so that those who may not visit your headquarters can be informed on your campaign.
 - By having a campaign staffer or volunteer coordinator work with the prospective volunteer, there are a number of ways to help those who are homebound or who have limited energy to contribute to the campaign. From participating in social media to at-home phone banking, creative solutions can make these volunteers a vital part of the team! We will discuss this more in a later section.

As mentioned above, this is not an exhaustive list of types of disabilities, and you may encounter people who fall outside these categories and accommodation requests not listed above. It is important to try to implement a reasonable accommodation, an accommodation that does not cause *undue* burden on the campaign, to ensure that people with disabilities are welcome and encouraged to support you. When in doubt about what to offer, defer to the person with the disability, as they will be the most knowledgeable about their accessibility needs. It is important to include people with disabilities without condescending to them and by treating them with respect, as you would treat any other prospective supporter.

Engineering an Accessible Campaign to Attract Disabled Supporters

Now that you've learned why it's important to appeal to supporters with disabilities, who they are, and what some of their common accessibility considerations may be, it's critical to learn how to put this information into practice and make your campaign accessible to people with any type of disability. If making your campaign accessible seems overwhelming now, this section aims to break it down and make it easier to understand and to incorporate into your campaign plan. By considering accessibility from as early in your campaign as possible and including people with disabilities as you would any other voter group, you will avoid last-minute challenges and barriers and ensure that accessibility is integrated into your campaign from the start.

Accessible Campaign Websites

When a potential supporter is interested in your campaign and wants to learn more about your platform, the first thing they may do is pull up your campaign website. With information on your beliefs, issue stances, and how to get in touch with your staff to donate or volunteer, the campaign website is the first stop for obtaining information about your campaign. However, if it is not accessible to those with disabilities, you risk frustrating and alienating a significant number of people who may be deaf or hard of hearing, blind or low vision, who have mobility disabilities, or who have cognitive disabilities. This probably seems like a large number of disabilities to you, and perhaps like an overwhelming number of considerations. However, you most likely aren't creating your own campaign website and are hiring someone with technology experience to create the site for you. In that case, there are a number of things that you can do.

1. When looking to hire somebody to design your campaign website, ask if they are familiar with making websites accessible to people with disabilities, and whether they adhere to the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.0](#).
2. There are several free tools available to evaluate the accessibility of your website and show you what areas may need to be fixed. These tools include the [WAVE Accessibility Tool](#) and the [Functional Accessibility Evaluator 2.0](#).
3. If you already have an existing website and have it in your budget, you can hire an accessibility consultant to analyze your website's accessibility, identify problems, and fix them. [Access a list of such consultants](#).

If you have someone on your team with the technical know-how to check and fix website inaccessibility, here is a checklist of the problems to check.

1. Skip navigation: Webpages usually have a significant amount of links, menus, and submenus at the top of the page before the actual content begins. For sighted users who can easily use a mouse, it is easy to skip those links and begin to read the actual content. However, for those who navigate with a screen reader or who use alternative methods, such as keyboard navigation, to get around a page, it is burdensome to have to go through those links. By providing a "skip navigation link," these users can easily skip to the content of your page

instead of having to navigate through all of the links and menus at the top of the page.

2. **Alternative text:** Screen readers can't "read" an image to its user. However, by applying alternative text, or "alt text," in the HTML code of the page, you can convey the message of the image to screen readers through a description of the image. It is particularly important to include alt text if your image is an infographic or contains words or important facts about the candidates. To ensure that users of screen readers can consume this information, include alt text that clearly describes what is happening in the image.
3. **Use descriptive words for your links:** how often do you see the words "click here" hyperlinked? While this may work for users who can clearly see what this link is referencing, many screen reader users who are searching for a link will search by the first letter of the link to find it. Instead of saying to click here, hyperlink words that describe the hyperlinked page.
4. **Ability to increase / decrease size of font:** The ability to increase and decrease font size is one of those accessibility considerations that benefit both disabled and non-disabled users, as font size can be a preference that makes reading a page easier. However, for those who have low vision, the ability to increase the font size is necessary for them to read the content on a page.
5. **Plain language:** the concept of plain language is simple but extremely beneficial: write your content in a style that easy for readers to understand when reading the first time through. This especially benefits people with cognitive disabilities. Try to keep your content free of political jargon. [According to Harvard, here are a few other tips on plain language:](#)
 - a. Put information in logical order, with important details first
 - b. Use an active, instead of a passive, voice in your writing
 - c. Use familiar language, and provide definitions for words that may be unfamiliar to your audience
6. **Organize pages using headings:** returning to the issue of the page's HTML code, your web designer should make sure to organize content using headings. Screen readers users use headings to understand the organization of the content. By nesting the headings for their rank, and ensuring that headings and their levels are not skipped or passed up in the code, it is much easier for screen reader users to understand the content on the page.
7. **Color contrast:** Having sufficient color contrast between the text and the background of the webpage will ensure that the text can be read by those who have difficulty reading text. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 has specific contrast ratios considered necessary for an accessible webpage. There is a [free tool by WebAIM](#) that will evaluate your page's contrast ratio and it will let you know whether it's sufficient or it needs to be fixed.
8. **Label form fields:** chances are that your website will have a way for visitors to fill out information. Whether it's to sign up for email alerts or to donate to your campaign, your website will probably have form fields. If your form fields aren't labeled, screen reader users won't know what information goes in each field and they won't be able to fill it out. Make sure that your

form fields are appropriately and explicitly labeled so that all users know the purpose of the forms.

9. Caption your videos: this is another aspect of accessibility that benefits everybody, disabled and nondisabled. Closed captioning is essential for those who are deaf or hard of hearing to be able to watch your videos, whether it's a campaign advertisement or an online town hall playback. It's also useful for those who must listen at a low volume or are in a place where they can't listen to the video without bothering others, such as on public transportation. Search on a search engine to find many captioning services that offer competitive prices and fast turnaround time (usually around 24 hours), or purchase your own software to have a staff member or volunteer to caption the videos. If your videos are on YouTube, you have the [option of creating captions both automatically and manually](#). If you create them automatically, make sure to proofread the captions to ensure that they are accurate.
10. De-clutter your design: keep your page design simple and free of clutter. Not only will this benefit those with cognitive disabilities or those who have disabilities that cause sensory overload, but all of your visitors will benefit from a clean, streamlined design.

Printed Materials

In terms of your printed materials, such as your campaign literature, brochures, and mailers, there are fewer considerations for accessibility than there are for your webpage, and much of it is actually similar to what has been discussed for your webpage:

1. Having large-print versions of campaign materials on-hand, per your budget's allowance, is extremely beneficial for voters with disabilities. These large-print versions would be printed in smaller quantities and could be sent out at the request of the voter (with information on requesting large-print materials in your other voter information or on your website) and at events or when talking to voters in person. You may not need to make a large-print version of every piece of printed literature you have, but instead for your major campaign literature that you have in a printed format.
2. Even in your regular campaign materials, especially mailers and advertisements, try to stick to larger and less cluttered text. Not only does this make it easier for people to read especially if they have low vision, but it keeps your literature clear and concise. It's better to appeal to your voters with a few hard-hitting facts or statements than overwhelming them with information.
3. Just like on your website, ensure that there is a good color contrast between the words in your literature and the background.
4. Just like on your website, try to use plain language that is clear of political jargon and easy for everybody to understand.
5. If you are uploading your campaign materials to your website, try to offer them in a screen reader accessible format. If you simply scan in campaign materials on a printer, for example, that would not be accessible for a screen reader, as it would essentially be like trying to read

an image. Instead, or in addition, offer the literature in a format such as a PDF that was created in Adobe and is [an accessible PDF](#), a Word document, or an HTML plain text version of the literature.

Disability Language

Like with any group of potential voters, you should be cognizant of how the community prefers to be talked about. This is an area where there may be differences of opinion, and you might not please everybody. However, there are some words that are considered out of date or offensive, while others are commonly accepted.

DON'T USE	DO USE
Wheelchair-bound Confined to a wheelchair	Wheelchair user
Midget (these are offensive slurs) Dwarf	Little person
Mute Dumb Hearing impaired	Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing
Handicapped Handicap parking / restroom	Disabled / person with a disability Accessible parking / restroom
Suffers from / crippled by	Has (condition / disability)
Retard / retarded (this is an offensive slur)	Person with an intellectual disability
Differently abled Handicapable	Disabled / person with a disability

Like all communities, there are some differences in language. Some, like the words above in the "don't column," are words that you need to eliminate from your vocabulary about disabled people. However, there are some differences that you shouldn't sweat. Some people prefer person-first language, like "person with a disability." Others, including many disabled people who believe in disability pride and empowerment, prefer identity-first language, like "disabled person." Neither of these are wrong or offensive, they are just preferences, and it's up to you to decide which you would like to use, even if someone may disagree with you.

Campaign Events

The physical accessibility of campaign events is absolutely crucial. However, many event planners and campaign staff don't know about accessibility and how to make events accessible for people with many different types of disabilities, and so these potential voters are excluded from events. Ideally, thinking about accessibility and including disabled voters should be thought of from the very beginning of planning your events all the way through the culmination of the event. While this might seem like a lot to think about, it's actually very easy if you incorporate it as a consideration just as you

would consider the safety and inclusion of any other potential supporter. In this section we will discuss what considerations you need to make when picking an event site, when setting up, and while the event is happening. In Appendix A, this information will be condensed into a checklist that you can print and use when planning your event.

Considerations When Choosing a Site

When vetting a site, the main question to ask yourself is whether or not a site is physically accessible. You will also want to know if there is enough flexibility to be able to configure the site to your needs and the needs of your supporters. Here's what you need to look for:

- Is the venue accessible? This includes:
 - An accessible entrance either at street level or via a wheelchair-accessible ramp or lift.
 - Note: "just one step" **is not accessible**. While some with limited mobility may be able to navigate that step, wheelchair users will be unable to do so, and therefore the site is not accessible.
 - There are no steps obstructing the path to the room, and if the room is not on the ground level, there is a working elevator and access to the room.
- Is there room for ADA seating at the front?
 - There should be a way to designate a separate section near the front of the room for people who need ADA seating, including those who are deaf / HoH and may need CART or an interpreter; people who are blind or low vision who need to be close to the stage to see and hear; people with mobility devices who need room for those devices or chairs, and who could be blocked by people who stand; people with service dogs; and people with medical conditions that make it difficult to stand for long periods of time.
- Are the doorways wide enough for wheelchairs?
 - Most wheelchairs are 24 to 27 inches wide, so a doorway must be at least 32 inches to fit a wheelchair through.
 - Make sure that walkways in auditoriums or rooms are wide enough for wheelchairs.
- Are there accessible bathrooms for all genders?
 - There must be bathrooms with a marked accessible stall for all genders, and the doorways to the bathroom must be wide enough to fit a wheelchair through.
 - The bathroom is ideally located on the same floor as the event, but if not, it must be possible for people to access it via elevator.

Setting Up for the Event

- Did you designate a point of contact on your team to handle accessibility concerns?
 - Whether it's your campaign manager, a volunteer, or a staff manager, designate one person as a point of contact on accessibility concerns. This person should educate themselves on accessibility to understand what they may be handling, and they should be the campaign "expert" on accessibility. Provide their contact information to disabled supporters interested in attending events, or on your website for those who may have special requests.

- If there was registration for the event, did you make it possible for people to request accommodations?
 - If you have a registration form or contact information about the event, make it clear that people can request accommodations such as an interpreter or CART captioning. You can provide an area in the registration form to make requests, or include the email address of a staff contact that will handle these requests.

- Do you have a clearly marked ADA seating section?
 - The ADA seating should be at the front of the room near the stage so that participants can see.
 - The ADA seating should be located close to an emergency exit so that disabled participants can easily exit in case of an emergency.
 - The ADA seating should be clearly designated and possibly separated so that the rest of the crowd knows that it is reserved for people with disabilities.
 - The ADA seating section should have room for wheelchairs and mobility devices, but it (and the venue in general) should also have ample seating for those who may need to sit and who do not have wheelchairs.

- Do you have accommodations for those who are deaf or hard of hearing?
 - Make it possible and known for people who are deaf / HoH to request accommodations on your website or from your office so that they can participate in events.
 - If requested, hire an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, and place them either on the stage with the candidate or in the ADA section, with clear sight lines to the deaf / HoH person sitting in the ADA section. If you need help finding an interpreter, visit the [Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf](#) or ask your local center for independent living for recommendations.
 - If requested and within your budget and scope of your campaign, provide Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) services for those who are deaf or

hard of hearing. Not all people who are deaf / HoH use and understand ASL, so they will not be able to understand interpreters.

- Do you have a scent-free policy for your events?
 - Many people with disabilities, illnesses, or allergies may have trouble with scents such as hairsprays, perfumes, or strong deodorants. These scents can trigger allergies, respiratory problems, or migraines, so consider publicizing that your events are scent-free (and why) so that your potential supporters know about the policy.
- Do you have a microphone and speaker setup for the event day?
- If you are going to be offering food or refreshments, how will you accommodate people with dietary restrictions?
 - If the event is something like a sit-down dinner for donors, have the registration form ask guests to provide their dietary restrictions so that the venue can offer alternatives, such as gluten free or vegetarian meals.
 - If you are having beverages and light refreshments, consider providing gluten free, nut free, dairy free, or vegetarian options among the variety.
 - Be aware of any options that may have serious allergens such as gluten or nuts.

On Event Day

- Have a designated accessibility contact (staffer or volunteer) on hand.
 - If possible, have the person who's been handling your event accessibility be on hand to address any last-minute questions or needs, and to direct people to the ADA section.
 - If necessary, train up a volunteer on the event's accessibility so that they can direct people to ADA seating, handle minor requests, and know who to tell when someone has a request out of their scope.
 - Have a special shirt or sign so that your "accessibility person" can stand out to those looking for them.
- Have all people, including the audience, use microphones.
 - Make sure that the candidate and anybody speaking onstage has a functioning microphone turned up to an adequate level so that everybody can hear.
 - If you have a question and answer period or discussion with the audience, have a volunteer act as a microphone runner so that all can hear the audience input.

- ❑ Ensure that the venue is free of obstacles or barriers that could present difficulty to disabled participants or prevent them from entering the building or room.
 - Make sure that walkways are kept clear of any obstructions.
 - Ensure that accessible entrances are unlocked and elevators are functioning properly.
- ❑ If you are offering food or refreshments, make sure that any offerings with allergens are marked with clear, large wording.
 - Take special note of food with peanuts or tree nuts, gluten, shellfish, and other serious allergens.
 - If you have any foods that are specifically gluten free, vegetarian, dairy free, or vegan, mark those clearly as well so that those with dietary restrictions may enjoy!

Integrating Disability into Your Policy Platform

The first step to making your campaign appeal to voters with disabilities is to make it accessible to them. After all, how can they find out what you or your candidate is about, what beliefs and interests they share, and what policy positions they hold, if they can't access the website, attend candidate events, or read the campaign literature? However, making a campaign truly *inclusive* of people with disabilities goes beyond just making it possible for them to read about or engage with the candidate. As with any voting bloc, it is important to engage with supporters with disabilities, learn about their problems and interests, and show them that you will address those policies in your platform. However, while you want to engage with people with disabilities, it is very important to avoid exploiting them for "political brownie points," something that happens far too often with politically underrepresented groups. In this section, we will discuss the differences between inclusion and exploitation and learn about how you can engage people with disabilities through your campaign.

Exploitation versus Inclusion

While including people with disabilities in your campaign is very important, it is important to avoid doing it in a way that suggests, both to potential supporters with disabilities and to the public and media, that you are only doing so for optics. Why is this so important? Sadly, the disability community, like many other marginalized voices, has a long history of being exploited so that a business, campaign, or other organization can *seem* like it's diverse, but without being truly inclusive. For the disability community, this is still a sore spot because the media often portrays people with disabilities as one of two things: people to be pitied or people who inspire. Instead of being treated like normal people, many people in the disability community end up being used to tug at the heartstrings of others.

This is why it is important to avoid exploiting people with disabilities, and in fact any underrepresented group. It is important to be *truly* inclusive. But what's the difference, and how do you do it? To help

you understand the problem, below are a few hypothetical stories to help you visualize an exploitative scenario, explain why it is wrong, and show how it can be turned into an inclusive scenario.

Exploitation	Why Is It Wrong?	Inclusion
An advertisement where the candidate stands with a disabled person, telling a sad story about his situation, and how your campaign is going to improve it.	The disabled person is essentially an object in the advertisement, and the candidate is speaking for him. The tone is pitying and condescending.	An advertisement where a disabled person tells their story, their way, and explains why they support your candidate.
Relying on one or two supporters with disabilities to understand disability policy interests and to show that your campaign is inclusive.	By relying on only a few supporters, especially the first few you can find, you not only tokenize their voices to be "the" disability voice of your campaign, but you are not working to find other disabled supporters and their opinions.	Seeking out disabled supporters and / or local disability activists who are politically interested, and asking for, and <i>really listening</i> to their feedback about your campaign.

When it comes to avoiding exploitation, it can be broken down to some basic ground rules that can apply to almost any group with whom your campaign will interact. After all, what being inclusive instead of exploitative boils down to is showing respect for your potential supporters. Here are some pointers to keep in mind:

- **Don't be condescending.** While this may seem like an obvious one, it is very easy to unconsciously slip into a different tone when you're trying to explain your campaign goals and beliefs to those who may not be familiar with them. Disabled adults in particular are sometimes treated like children by those who don't understand that people with disabilities are just as independent and capable as the rest of us. Just like you would with any other group, don't talk down to people with disabilities. Treat them as your equals.
- **Don't tokenize.** This goes back to our second example above. When you're crafting a campaign, it is easy to rely on one or two voices from an interest group, especially when those voices are eager to be involved with your campaign. While it is perfectly fine to include them, make sure that you don't base all of your interactions with the disability community off just a few people, or think that including just those few people is enough. Whenever possible, try to engage with and recruit people with disabilities to your campaign. If it's in the scope of your campaign, meet with groups of disability activists or advisors to get feedback about what you're doing right and what you can do better. Engage with people who have different disabilities but also who have different backgrounds and upbringing, and who are of different races and genders. Being inclusive also means being diverse, so don't just include a few selected voices.
- **Include politically active disabled people.** Connecting to the last point, when seeking out people to give feedback on your campaign, make sure you are looking for politically active people with disabilities. Just like in any underrepresented group, there may be people in that

group who aren't interested in or familiar with politics. While you should still try to engage with them, make sure you seek out people who are politically knowledgeable and involved when forming policies on disability issues or seeking feedback on your policies.

- **Listen to the voices of actual disabled people.** Listening is essential. Don't speak over the voices and experiences of those with disabilities, as they are the ones who know the most about their lives and their needs. When it comes to incorporating disability into your campaign, have disabled people speak for themselves whenever possible. In advertisements or when trying to attract supporters, have people with disabilities use their own voices to explain why they support you, instead of just having them be present with you while you discuss disability policies. Engage them in conversation, and listen to what they have to say, whether it is positive or negative.

Identifying Disability Policy Issues

It is important to identify what issues people with disabilities in your community, your future constituency, care about. If the campaign is at a Federal government level, this may seem wider in scope than if the campaign is at a state or local level, but in fact, there are many issues on the local level as well that affect people with disabilities. There are a number of ways that you can become familiar with disability-related policy issues in general, and in your community. One of those ways is to engage potential supporters with disabilities through one-on-one conversations, messaging, advisory groups, and meetings, which we will discuss in the next section. First, let's talk about how you can get a general familiarity with disability issues.

Across the country and at the local level, there are many disability rights organizations that work on disability policy advocacy. Their work is a great place to gauge what issues are affecting the disability community. From accessible transportation to healthcare, civil rights to employment, many of these organizations are non-partisan and have statements on various policy issues affecting people with disabilities. While some are at the national level, they also include some grassroots organizations that have local chapters throughout the country. These local chapters or organizations would be good places to connect with your local disability community.

- **[American Association of People with Disabilities](#):** AAPD works to increase the political and economic power of people with disabilities. AAPD advocates on the national level for a variety of policy issues affecting people with disabilities. AAPD also runs the [REV UP](#) (Register, Educate, Vote! Use your Power) campaign, a non-partisan campaign that encourages people with disabilities to use their political power while educating politicians and the media on disability issues.
- **[Arc](#):** The Arc promotes the full inclusion and human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It is a national organization with local grassroots chapters, and it does national-level policy advocacy for its members.
- **[Autistic Self Advocacy Network](#):** ASAN is an advocacy organization created by and for autistic people. It works to advance the interests of autistic people in the disability rights

movement, and does national-level policy advocacy for people with disabilities.

- Blindness organizations: there are several blindness organizations around the country that advocate for the rights and interests of blind and low-vision people. These organizations have members or affiliates around the country:
 - [American Council of the Blind](#)
 - [American Foundation for the Blind](#)
 - [National Federation of the Blind](#)
- Developmental Disability Council: There are 56 Developmental Disabilities (DD) Councils around the country that receive federal funding to support programs that promote self-determination, integration, and inclusion for people with developmental disabilities. You can find your local DD Council through the [National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities](#).
- **[National Association of the Deaf](#)**: NAD is the leading civil rights organization run by and for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing individuals.
- **[National Council on Independent Living](#)**: NCIL is the longest-running national cross-disability, grassroots organization which advocates for independent living for people with disabilities. It is the membership organization for hundreds of local Centers for Independent Living (CILs) across the country, which provide non-residential services to help people with disabilities live independently in their homes and communities. NCIL promotes the work of CILs with its national advocacy agenda.
 - To find your local Center for Independent Living (CIL), visit the [ILRU Directory of Centers for Independent Living](#)
- **[National Disability Rights Network](#)**: NDRN is the nonprofit membership organization for Protection and Advocacy (P&A) Systems and Client Assistance Programs (CAP) for people with disabilities. These federally mandated agencies constitute the largest provider of legally based advocacy services to people with disabilities in the United States, and they also advocate for basic rights for people with disabilities. They have a [listing of Protection and Advocacy agencies](#) by state.
- **[Paralyzed Veterans of America](#)**: PVA is a congressionally-chartered veterans service organization that advocates for veterans' issues, including health care, research and education on spinal cord injury and dysfunction, benefits from military service, and civil rights for the organization's members.
- **[United Spinal Association](#)**: United Spinal Association is an advocacy organization "dedicated to enhancing the quality of life all people living with a spinal cord injury or disease (SCI / D)." They have local chapters across the country, and participate in advocacy and public policy for their membership.

Forming Your Own Disability Policy Platform

While it is important to learn about disability policy issues at large, it is even more important to determine what issues affect your potential supporters, and which ones you would have the power to influence if your campaign is successful. By connecting with politically active people with disabilities in your community, you can learn about what issues are of the greatest importance to them, what possible positions you could take, and what solutions are available for these problems. By forming an advisory group of politically active, diverse people with disabilities, you can become informed on disability policy issues and adopt an educated and engaging platform on these policy issues.

Engage with local-level disability organizations, such as Centers for Independent Living or local chapters and advocacy groups, to find people who may be willing to provide input on your campaign. You should try to have as diverse a group as possible, including different genders, ethnicities, religions, ages, types of disabilities, and backgrounds. The disability community is not a monolith, so trying to assemble a diverse group will help to ensure that you don't have too many similar people who may share similar experiences and positions. It is also important to ensure that you are engaging with politically active people with disabilities. Just like any other demographic, not all people with disabilities are interested in or informed about politics, and may not be interested in engaging with your campaign. By seeking out people who have knowledge of policy and informed opinions, your campaign can get more substantive feedback on its own policy positions.

Incorporating Disabled Volunteers into Your Campaign

Now that you're familiar with why people with disabilities should be courted for their votes, how to make your campaign accessible, and how to include them in your campaign platform, what else can be done to engage people with disabilities as supporters? The answer: having people with disabilities work as volunteers in your campaign. Volunteering on a campaign is a two-way, beneficial relationship for both the candidate and staff, and the volunteers. Volunteers can provide the manpower necessary to get your campaign's message out to the people, and get people interested in and motivated for voting. For the volunteer, participating in a campaign can be valuable and enjoyable civic engagement. For many people, it may be the first time they get to experience a campaign firsthand, and it may inspire them to become even more involved politically in their community after the election. For some, it may even inspire them to run for office.

However, if campaign staff don't understand accessibility and how to incorporate volunteers with disabilities into the campaign, it may be uncomfortable for both campaigns and potential volunteers. Campaign staff may not know how to make tasks accessible to disabled volunteers or how to properly match up volunteers with tasks at which they can excel. People with disabilities may feel like asking for accommodations so that they can participate would be a burden or a hassle, and so they decide not to inquire about volunteering at all. It is important for people to know that not only are accommodations acceptable, but there are creative and easy ways for campaign staff to encourage people with all types of disabilities to volunteer in their campaign. A good campaign should be inclusive in its policies and its operations.

Canvassing

Canvassing is considered one of the most crucial ways for campaigns to connect with voters, allowing for in-depth, face to face conversations with potential supporters. For people with mobility-related disabilities, canvassing may seem completely inaccessible because it involves going from door to door to engage with voters. Most houses are not designed with wheelchair accessibility in mind, so barriers to canvassing can include stairways up to doorways, uneven pavement or walkways, and steep streets.

The solutions: Many people with disabilities have run for office themselves, and they understand the importance of canvassing for one-on-one voter engagement. Because they cannot lose this important facetime with the voter, there are a number of unique solutions that can be applied equally to volunteers with disabilities. Here's what to consider:

1. **Smart planning:** when choosing where you're canvassing, it may be possible to choose neighborhoods with fewer barriers in house design and infrastructure. Choose well-paved, relatively flat streets. Look for neighborhoods where houses have few or no steps to the front door, or where the front door may be near the driveway so that people with wheelchairs or mobility devices can get near the front door.
2. **Work in teams:** put together canvassing teams of people with and without mobility disabilities. If you choose neighborhoods where people with disabilities can get close to the front door, you can have the non-disabled volunteer go up to the door and engage the potential voter, and then ask them to take a few steps outside to talk with them and their wheelchair-using partner.
3. **Choose more accessible alternatives:** another option is to station canvassers with disabilities at more accessible alternatives. If you're planning on doing voter engagement in an assisted living home or nursing home, chances are that that facility will be accessible. If you're going to have a team canvas in a condo or apartment complex, so long as the complex has elevators, canvassing becomes a very easy task for volunteers with disabilities. This is also a good option for those who may have more limited energy or heat- or cold-related sensitivities, as these indoor options will be climate controlled.
4. **Work at booths or stationary events:** if your team is planning to do voter engagement at a local event, for example a farmers' market, this is a prime opportunity to have teams of volunteers with and without disabilities collaborate. Your volunteers can work in the booth or roam out in front of it to engage people walking by to come and speak with them.
5. **On election day,** have volunteers with disabilities stationed at the polls to provide last-minute information to voters on the way in to vote, as this voter engagement is fairly stationary, and your volunteers generally will have to stay in an area a certain distance from the building in which polling is conducted.

Phone Banking

Phone banking is another critical area of one-on-one voter engagement that allows the candidate and their staff to learn what potential supporters care about and allow them to talk about the candidate's platform and values. Closer to the election, phone banking is essential for trying to encourage people to turn up at the polls. Phone banking can be an excellent task for certain people with disabilities, especially those who may not be able to show up at campaign headquarters but still want to volunteer from home. Particularly during Get Out The Vote (GOTV), it is important to have volunteers to call voters and encourage them to go to the polls, so including volunteers with disabilities can help meet the capacity of volunteers necessary right before and on election day.

The solutions: Phone banking can be an excellent form of volunteering for many people with disabilities who want to be involved in voter engagement, including those who are not able to come into campaign headquarters but still want to volunteer. Here's what to consider:

1. Phone banking can be accessible to people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, or who have speech disabilities, through a relay service or through text message phone banking. Relay services work different ways based on preferences and disabilities, but they facilitate calls between someone who is deaf, hard of hearing, or who has a speech impediment through a communications assistant. [The National Association of the Deaf](#) has more information on how these services work. Campaigns have also started to reach out to voters through text messaging. If your campaign is engaged in SMS/text message phone banking, this may be a great option for people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.
2. Phone banking is an excellent task for volunteers who are unable to come to campaign headquarters to volunteer, such as those who have limited energy or few transportation options. Provide these volunteers with a spreadsheet of names and phone numbers, along with a script to follow, to call from home, and ask them to report back with the amount of people they called or whatever data you wish to collect from your phone bank calls. This can easily be facilitated via email, phone, or in person and allows those who wish to connect with and work for the campaign to do so even if they are unable to volunteer in person.
3. Ensure that the phone script is accessible for your volunteers. Use plain language and print out the script in larger fonts for those with disabilities.

Campaign Events

Campaign events can involve a lot of volunteer manpower to pull off, and volunteers with disabilities should be included in campaign events. The main concern for volunteers with disabilities at campaign events is the accessibility of the event, and ensuring that there are no physical barriers to their participation.

The solutions: If you have read the rest of this guide, the solutions to making campaign events accessible should be somewhat familiar.

1. Follow the guidelines for accessibility we discussed in the "Campaign Events" section of this guide. Just as your campaign events should be accessible for potential supporters with disabilities, they should also be accessible for your volunteers.

Administrative / Office Tasks

From stuffing envelopes to data entry, there are a lot of administrative tasks that are necessary to keep the campaign running smoothly. These tasks can actually be a great opportunity for many volunteers with disabilities. If you practice appropriate task matching, or matching a person with certain skills or preferences to the job that suits them, you will find many dedicated volunteers with disabilities may enjoy or want to participate in administrative tasks.

1. Administrative tasks are excellent ways to volunteer for people with disabilities who may not be comfortable with or interested in direct voter interaction. Some people with social anxiety, autism, speech disorders, or intellectual disabilities may not be as comfortable with interacting with voters, so they may be more comfortable and efficient if matched with tasks that keep the office running smoothly. Organizing the office, stuffing envelopes and preparing campaign literature, performing data entry, and other administrative tasks are excellent for any person, disabled or non-disabled, who would prefer not to perform voter engagement activities.
2. When possible, find unique roles for volunteers who have particular skills or experiences that would benefit the campaign, and which they are comfortable using for the campaign. For example, have a tech-savvy volunteer caption videos and photos on your Facebook page, have volunteers who are passionate about writing draft op-eds or proofread your literature, have someone with a tech background upkeep your website, or have volunteers who enjoy being organized perform data entry.
3. Social media is also an excellent way to engage supporters and volunteers who want to engage from home or amplify the candidate's message, but don't want to do phone banking or canvassing. Have staff design social media toolkits for supporters to share on certain policy issues, around events such as debates or forums. Include sample Tweets and Facebook statuses for volunteers to amplify. This allows volunteers and supporters alike to engage other supporters or potential voters on social media and to share the candidate's platform and message.

APPENDIX A: CHECKLIST FOR CAMPAIGN EVENT ACCESSIBILITY

Y / N	WHEN	ACCESSIBILITY CONCERN
	Vetting	Accessible entrance level with street and with no stairs to or at door OR Wheelchair-accessible ramp or elevator lift to access door
	Vetting	Room for event is accessible, either on entrance-level floor with no steps to the room OR Accessible via a working elevator
	Vetting	There is room for a separate ADA seating area near the stage / front of the event that can be specially demarcated, and with ample room for mobility devices, interpreters (if necessary), and service animals
	Vetting	Doorways and aisles are at least 32 inches wide for wheelchairs
	Vetting	Bathrooms for all genders have an accessible bathroom stall in working order
	Vetting	Bathrooms are on the same floor as the event space OR Bathrooms are accessible via a working elevator
	Setup	Campaign has designated staff or volunteer point of contact (POC) for accessibility whose contact information is available on campaign website or event promotional material as POC for any accommodations requests
	Setup	Any registration forms for event either have a field for an accommodation request or have information for the campaign's designated accessibility POC
	Setup	The ADA seating area is located near the front of the event space so that wheelchair users or people with low vision can see
	Setup	The ADA seating area is accessible to an emergency exit
	Setup	The ADA seating area is clearly marked and / or separated from the rest of the crowd
	Setup	The ADA seating area has ample room for mobility devices and chairs for those with disabilities who need to sit
	Setup	It is possible for people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing to request accommodations from your website, office, or accessibility POC
	Setup	If an ASL interpreter is hired, they are stationed either onstage or in the ADA section with clear sight lines to deaf or hard of hearing participants
	Setup	The campaign has considered Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) services to caption the event for deaf or hard of hearing participants

Setup	The campaign has advertised a scent-free policy for the event
Setup	The campaign has a microphone and speaker setup for event day
Setup	If the event is going to be a sit-down dinner, guests have the ability upon registration to provide their dietary restrictions for catering to take into consideration
Setup	If the event is going to have refreshments, the campaign is considering offering options for those with dietary restrictions (gluten free, vegetarian, etc.)
Event Day	The campaign's designated accessibility POC is in attendance
Event Day	Volunteers or event staff are trained on minor accessibility issues (directing people to the ADA section, etc) and know who the accessibility POC is for more complex concerns
Event Day	ADA seating and the accessibility POC are clearly communicated to guests through signs and nametags
Event Day	Make sure that the speaker and microphone systems are functioning
Event Day	If there will be audience participation, have volunteer microphone runners or mics stationed in the audience so that all participants are picked up on the speaker system
Event Day	Ensure that walkways are free of obstacles or barriers, elevators are functioning, and accessible entrances are unlocked
Event Day	If food or refreshments are offered, ensure that food with any serious allergens (gluten, nuts, dairy) is clearly marked and identified
Event Day	If food or refreshments are offered and you have any special options for people with dietary restrictions, make sure that these options are clearly marked