

Study finds Americans with disabilities more liberal than norm

June 27, 2000 -- A new political-attitude survey of people with disabilities has found them to be more liberal than the general population, as might be expected in a group that often accepts government services, but also reveals a strong streak of skepticism about government, says study author [John Gastil](#), a University of Washington assistant professor of speech communication.

The findings were based on telephone surveys of 302 disabled and 1,485 non-disabled people ages 18-64 in New Mexico, a state whose party affiliations and election results closely mirror the nation's as a whole.

In the surveys, 52 percent of those with disabilities identified themselves as Democrats and 23 percent as Republicans, compared with the general state population surveyed of 43 percent Democrats and 39 percent Republicans.

Social exclusion and acceptance of aid, Gastil said, may push people with disabilities toward liberal and egalitarian views and make them less inclined than the general populace to believe that rugged individualism can guarantee success. When questioned about specific issues, people with disabilities voiced more concern than other New Mexicans about health care. However, the group with disabilities also shared interests with the rest of the populace in issues such as education, crime and drug abuse.

"It overturns the stereotype that people with disabilities would be overwhelmingly focused on health care to the exclusion of other things," Gastil said.

For the survey, disabilities were defined as physical or mental impairments that substantially limit major life activities such as work, education, mobility, personal care or social interaction. Despite the diversity of experience and types of impairment -- from birth, or as a result of disease or accident -- a political group portrait emerged.

"A constituency group isn't effective in the long term," Gastil said, "unless it is understood."

Hampering the clout of the disabled, however, is an attitude that was also commonly found among the survey group: that they feel they have little power to bring about political change and that involvement will do little good. The survey found that people with disabilities were, in fact, less likely to be involved in political activities than New Mexicans as a whole.

This attitude could mean there's room for political growth, Gastil said. If Democrats offer an effective message about rights and services, they could garner stronger support from the millions of Americans with

disabilities who follow politics but are uninvolved, he said. Republicans, meanwhile, might mine the vein of dissatisfaction with government ineffectiveness and red tape revealed in the survey, and offer plans that stress efficiency and accountability. George W. Bush's "New Freedom" plan announced in June follows a decade of legislative victories by people with disabilities, especially the landmark 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, said Gastil, but that no substantial study had ever before gauged political opinions of the disabled as a group until political questions were inserted into 1995 surveys by the University of New Mexico's Institute for Public Policy and state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. "A significant increase in the political involvement of people with disabilities," Gastil writes, "could tip the scales of public opinion and partisan elections." Contact Gastil at his office, (206) 543-4655; his home, (206) 525-9766, or at jgastil@u.washington.edu .