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Ignoring disabled people and carers could cost parties thousands of votes

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The parties seem to be misreading the signs. Philip Toscano/PA

There are 11m disabled adults eligible to vote in the UK. So given that the Conservatives only won 2.1m more votes than Labour in 2010, but ended up as the party of government, it's curious to see the main parties failing to reach out to this group. If either of the main parties attracted disabled voters with the right promises, it could take them a long way to gaining an overall majority.

It may be that other than the Greens, none of the main UK parties sees it in their interests to appeal to disabled voters or carers. And indeed, there is a distinct lack of policy designed to appeal to this portion of the electorate.

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The coalition's austerity policies have had a particularly devastating effect on the benefits and services received by disabled people and carers. We know that welfare sanctions, changes to housing benefits and disability allowances and cuts to social care have a **cumulative impact** on the most vulnerable disabled people.

But crucially, none of the three main Westminster parties has pledged to increase funding, end welfare sanctions or protect the **Independent Living Fund**, even though they appear to have little or no effect on **employment rates**.

The **Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat** manifestos all focus on continuing austerity measures, while protecting the NHS, rather than social care.

All three parties favour increased health and social care integration, which benefits those with complex health and social care needs. But the greatest benefits are arguably for the professional staff (who experience better information sharing through joined up working) rather than the service users (who rarely see better services or outcomes).

Integrating health and social care while ringfencing or increasing funding for the NHS is likely to divert funding away from social care and preventative services towards acute and community based services – which will be largely for older, rather than younger disabled people.

And when it comes to welfare, the failure to address key issues for disabled voters is even more telling. All three parties propose cuts or caps to welfare spending. The Conservatives plan to make **£12bn** in welfare savings, including taxing carers' allowances. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats propose a decidedly modest **£250 annual bonus** for carers.

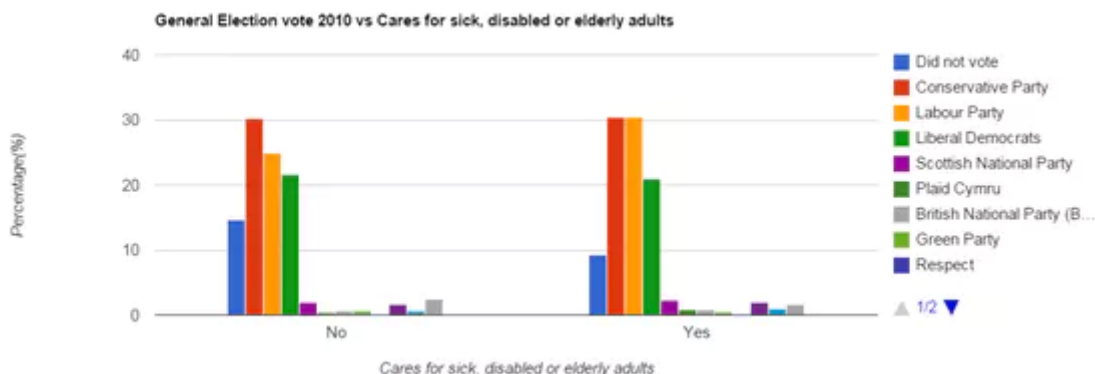
Of the smaller UK-wide parties, again only the Greens commit on this issue, with pledges on basic income, social housing, accessible transport, free social care, increased carers allowances and delivering on international human rights commitments for disabled people.

Disabled voters in Scotland should probably note constitutional commitments by the SNP, Labour and the Liberal Democrats to further **devolve powers** on disability and carer benefits to the Scottish Parliament.

If they took a lead from the Greens and focused on basic income, transport, housing and social care, they could offer significant improvements in disabled people's independence, health and social inclusion.

Who gets the vote?

We don't know much about the voting tendencies of disabled people as a group but the 2010 British Election survey found that carers were more likely than non-carers to vote for the Labour Party.



The average cost of austerity. Centre for Welfare Reform

This probably reflects the fact that Labour has traditionally been seen as the protector of public services, backed by strong support from public sector unions. However, disabled people and family carers do not command union support, and it is telling that in 2015 the Labour party have sought to reposition themselves as the party supporting “working” people.

Labour could have encouraged a social justice approach towards equality and social inclusion of those excluded from the labour market due to illness, incapacity or caring commitments. It could have pledged to reform welfare sanctions, make it easier to combine work and care, and committed itself to supporting independent living. This would have given disabled voters a clear indication that Labour wanted their votes.

And beyond the promises made by the parties, there is the question of getting to the polling booth on May 7. The Electoral Reform Society, Disability Alliance and other charities have criticised the current voting system as not being accessible enough for disabled voters. They say election manifestos, polling booths and voter registration processes all act as significant barriers.

The fact that the needs of 17m people in the UK appear to be going unheard raises significant questions about democracy. And when you consider that this is more than the number of people who voted for any one party in the 2010, it also looks like significant electoral own goal.

 [Disability](#) [Carers](#) [UK General Election 2015](#) [Disability discrimination](#)

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