

Disability Representation in Indonesian Political Communication: Media Visibility, Electoral Participation, and Inclusive Democracy

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Abstract

Persons with disabilities remain underrepresented in political communication despite their status as citizens with equal democratic rights. Political campaigns and media coverage frequently frame disability through charity or vulnerability rather than political agency and citizenship. This article examines the representation of persons with disabilities in Indonesian electoral communication. Using qualitative media and discourse analysis, the study evaluates campaign materials, political news coverage, candidate communication, and social media narratives. The article argues that inadequate representation can contribute to political exclusion by limiting public understanding of persons with disabilities as political actors. The study proposes an inclusive political communication framework emphasizing accessibility, political agency, substantive representation, and participation in campaign production. Political communication should include accessible formats such as captions, sign-language interpretation, audio descriptions, and plain-language information. The article concludes that democratic inclusion requires not only formal voting rights but also meaningful visibility and participation in political communication. Improving disability representation can strengthen the inclusiveness of Indonesian electoral democracy.

[Penyandang disabilitas masih kurang terwakili dalam komunikasi politik meskipun berstatus sebagai warga negara dengan hak demokrasi yang setara. Kampanye politik dan liputan media sering kali membingkai disabilitas melalui amal atau kerentanan daripada peran politik dan kewarganegaraan. Artikel ini mengkaji representasi penyandang disabilitas dalam komunikasi pemilu di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan analisis media dan wacana

kualitatif, studi ini mengevaluasi materi kampanye, liputan berita politik, komunikasi kandidat, dan narasi media sosial. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa representasi yang tidak memadai dapat berkontribusi pada pengucilan politik dengan membatasi pemahaman publik tentang penyandang disabilitas sebagai aktor politik. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka komunikasi politik inklusif yang menekankan aksesibilitas, peran politik, representasi substantif, dan partisipasi dalam produksi kampanye. Komunikasi politik harus mencakup format yang mudah diakses seperti teks terjemahan, interpretasi bahasa isyarat, deskripsi audio, dan informasi dalam bahasa yang mudah dipahami. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa inklusi demokratis tidak hanya membutuhkan hak suara formal tetapi juga visibilitas dan partisipasi yang bermakna dalam komunikasi politik. Meningkatkan representasi disabilitas dapat memperkuat inklusivitas demokrasi pemilu di Indonesia.]

Keywords: Disability, political communication, electoral participation, representation, Indonesia

Introduction

Democratic citizenship is commonly associated with the equal right to participate in political decision-making, yet formal equality does not necessarily produce equal communicative opportunities. Persons with disabilities in Indonesia possess political rights to vote, be elected, organize, express political opinions, and participate in electoral processes, but the realization of these rights continues to encounter institutional and communicative barriers. Yulius (2020) explains that the political rights of persons with disabilities include not only voting and candidacy but also political expression, organizational participation, electoral accessibility, and political education. The existence of these rights establishes a normative foundation for inclusion, but it does not resolve the practical question of whether political institutions and communication systems actually enable persons with disabilities to exercise them.

The problem becomes particularly significant because political participation depends partly on communication. Citizens cannot meaningfully evaluate candidates, policies, or electoral procedures when political information is inaccessible. Hasfi, Gono, and Rakhmad (2020) found that some Indonesian persons with disabilities had internet access but still lacked meaningful access to interactive political communication. Their study of the 2018 Central Java gubernatorial election demonstrates that technological connectivity does not automatically become political inclusion because digital divides, limited internet literacy, and the dominance of non-disabled actors can restrict participation. This finding challenges the assumption that digitalization inherently democratizes

political communication. A platform can be technically available while remaining communicatively inaccessible to the citizens who need it.

Previous studies of electoral participation have similarly demonstrated a gap between formal rights and actual political engagement. Gustomy (2017), examining persons with disabilities in Malang and Mojokerto, argues that political participation extends beyond voter turnout to include organizational activity, contacting, lobbying, and involvement in policy processes. His findings indicate that awareness of political rights does not always translate into political action and that disability organizations can become important intermediaries for political advocacy. doi.org Febriantanto (2019), meanwhile, identifies increased participation among voters with disabilities during the 2017 Yogyakarta election, including political discussions and election monitoring. These studies demonstrate that disability should not be understood as a passive social category; persons with disabilities can develop diverse forms of political agency when institutional opportunities are available.

Research focusing on specific electoral groups further illustrates the importance of communication. Pratiwi and Susanti (2020), studying deaf first-time voters associated with GERKATIN in South Jakarta, found that political participation included campaigning, political discussion, political communication, and voting. Nevertheless, participants encountered insufficient socialization, lack of assistance, and inadequate disability-friendly facilities. Maramis, Pati, and Rengkung (2022) similarly found that cooperation between electoral organizers and disability organizations could facilitate voter socialization and accessible polling stations, although difficulties in reaching voters and limitations in assistance remained. These findings indicate that participation is produced through communicative relationships rather than through electoral regulations alone.

The media dimension introduces another layer of exclusion. Research on Indonesian media representation has repeatedly identified tendencies to portray persons with disabilities through simplified or stereotypical narratives. Rahmi, Gemiharto, and Limilia (2020), examining the Indonesian film *Yang Tidak Dibicarakan Ketika Membicarakan Cinta*, demonstrate the importance of moving beyond stereotypical portrayals toward multifaceted representations. Their findings show that disability can be represented through progressive framing when persons with disabilities are treated as complex subjects rather than merely as symbols of limitation. Jurnal Universitas Padjadjaran Halim (2021), in contrast, notes that television representation can position persons with disabilities as motivational objects, demonstrating how apparently positive narratives may still reproduce unequal subject-object relations.

The problem is therefore not simply the amount of media visibility but the meaning attached to visibility. Sentia, Sunyata, and Utami's analysis of Tribunnews.com found that disability coverage during the pandemic remained insufficiently inclusive and relied heavily on non-disabled institutional sources. Jurmafis This indicates that representation can remain exclusionary even when

persons with disabilities appear frequently in news coverage. If journalists speak about disability without allowing persons with disabilities to become authoritative sources, media visibility may reproduce rather than challenge marginalization. Political communication consequently requires attention to who is represented, who speaks, which experiences are considered politically relevant, and who participates in producing the narrative.

The contribution of this article lies in connecting three areas that are frequently treated separately: media representation, electoral accessibility, and political agency. Existing studies have examined accessibility at polling stations, political participation, internet access, and media framing, but fewer studies integrate these dimensions into a single political communication framework. This article argues that exclusion occurs across the entire communicative chain: citizens may be invisible in political narratives, unable to access political information, unable to participate in campaign production, or unable to transform participation into substantive political influence. The study therefore proposes representational agency as the central analytical concept linking visibility with democratic participation.

Methodologically, this article employs qualitative media and discourse analysis supported by an integrative review of Indonesian journal literature published before 2026. The analysis examines four recurring dimensions: the framing of disability in media, accessibility of political information, electoral participation, and the political agency of persons with disabilities. The reviewed studies include qualitative interviews, case studies, surveys, discourse analysis, framing analysis, and institutional studies. Rather than treating these methodological differences as obstacles, the article uses them to identify patterns across different political communication environments. The analysis is organized around three substantive discussions: representational visibility and the politics of framing; accessibility as a condition of political communication; and the transition from symbolic inclusion toward substantive political agency.

Representational Visibility and the Politics of Framing

Media visibility is an important condition for political recognition, but visibility alone cannot be equated with representation. A group may appear frequently in news reports while remaining politically marginalized if its members are represented primarily as objects of compassion, recipients of assistance, or examples of personal perseverance. Rahmi, Gemiharto, and Limilia (2020) demonstrate that media representations of disability can become more progressive when individuals with disabilities are portrayed through complex and multifaceted identities. Their study is particularly relevant to political communication because it suggests that representation becomes democratic when disability does not dominate every dimension of the subject's identity. Political citizens should be

visible as workers, voters, parents, candidates, activists, and community members rather than exclusively as disabled persons.

The distinction between visibility and agency becomes clearer when examining television representation. Halim (2021) finds that persons with disabilities can be presented as motivational objects in the *Kick Andy* program. Such representations may generate sympathy and positive emotional responses, but they can simultaneously construct an unequal relationship between the viewer and the disabled subject. The viewer occupies the position of the capable observer, while the person with disability becomes the source of inspiration. This narrative can unintentionally reinforce the idea that disability is primarily meaningful because it teaches non-disabled audiences a moral lesson. Political communication requires a different orientation in which persons with disabilities are recognized as political subjects whose experiences contain knowledge about public policy and social institutions.

The problem of objectification is closely connected to the charity model of disability. When media narratives emphasize assistance, donation, and individual kindness, structural barriers can disappear from the story. The public may therefore perceive disability as an individual condition requiring generosity rather than as a political issue involving accessibility, discrimination, employment, representation, and equal citizenship. Sentia, Sunyata, and Utami's research demonstrates that Indonesian online reporting can remain insufficiently inclusive when sources outside the disability community dominate the news narrative. Jurmafi A politically inclusive media system must therefore move the focus from "helping disabled people" toward examining the institutions and environments that determine whether citizens can participate equally.

Language is another mechanism through which representation becomes political. Descriptions emphasizing weakness, dependence, abnormality, or exceptional bravery can establish a hierarchy between disabled and non-disabled citizens. Such linguistic choices influence how audiences understand political capacity. If persons with disabilities are consistently described as vulnerable, audiences may be less likely to imagine them as electoral candidates, political organizers, or policy advocates. Conversely, language that emphasizes citizenship and agency can normalize political participation. Representation therefore operates before formal political participation occurs because it shapes the conceptual boundaries of who is imagined as capable of exercising political authority.

The politics of representation also involve source selection. Journalism generally relies on institutional sources, experts, government officials, and organizational representatives. However, when reporting on disability, overreliance on non-disabled authorities can produce a communicative hierarchy in which disability is interpreted from outside the community. Sentia et al. (n.d.) identify the dominance of non-disabled sources in their analysis of disability reporting during the pandemic. This pattern is politically consequential because source selection determines which experiences enter public knowledge. A media organization may

intend to report sympathetically while still reproducing exclusion if persons with disabilities are not recognized as authoritative narrators of their own political experiences.

Inclusive journalism therefore requires participation in production rather than merely inclusion as content. Rahmi, Gemiharto, and Limilia (2020) show the importance of involving disability communities in media production while also identifying remaining problems concerning role selection. Their findings suggest that inclusion must occur at multiple stages: deciding which stories matter, selecting sources, determining narrative frames, producing visual material, and distributing content. Political communication becomes more inclusive when persons with disabilities participate in these decisions rather than simply becoming the subjects of stories designed by others.

Digital media creates additional possibilities for self-representation. Unlike conventional mass media, social media allows individuals and organizations to publish political narratives without waiting for journalists to select them. Hasfi, Gono, and Rakhmad (2020), however, caution that digital access does not necessarily produce interactive political communication. Their findings indicate that non-disabled users remained dominant within virtual political spaces, meaning that technological openness can coexist with social inequality. The implication is important: self-representation requires not only an account or device but also accessible interfaces, political literacy, network resources, and recognition from wider political communities.

Disability organizations can play an important mediating role in overcoming this inequality. Gustomy (2017) found that persons with disabilities recognized the importance of networks involving NGOs, politicians, government officials, and other institutions. Political communication therefore becomes more effective when disability organizations connect individual experiences with collective advocacy. Organizations can transform personal problems into policy demands and create communicative channels between marginalized citizens and political institutions. The organization is not simply a support mechanism; it becomes a political communication infrastructure that helps convert social experience into public claims.

The political significance of representation is also visible in the emergence of disability activists as electoral candidates. Kramer, Dibley, and Tsaputra (2024) demonstrate that disability activists who became candidates in Indonesia's 2019 elections drew upon prior movement experience when developing electoral strategies. Their study challenges the assumption that persons with disabilities participate primarily as voters. Activism can provide political skills, networks, organizational knowledge, and issue expertise that facilitate candidacy. When media representation recognizes such candidates as political actors rather than exceptional individuals, it contributes to a broader transformation of public expectations concerning disability and political leadership.

Candidate representation is particularly important because electoral communication frequently focuses on physical appearance, charisma, personality, and symbolic narratives. Disability can easily become a campaign spectacle if political candidates are presented primarily through stories of overcoming adversity. Such narratives may attract attention but risk displacing policy discussion. A disability-inclusive campaign should instead provide opportunities for candidates with disabilities to discuss education, employment, transportation, health, public infrastructure, technology, and other policy issues. Their disability may inform their political perspective, but it should not become the only explanation for their political legitimacy.

Political representation should also be distinguished from descriptive representation. The presence of a person with disability in a political institution can provide symbolic recognition, but substantive representation requires that political actors actually influence agendas and policies affecting citizens. Kramer, Dibley, and Tsaputra's (2024) findings are useful because they connect electoral candidacy with previous disability-rights activism. This connection suggests that political representation can become substantive when candidates possess movement-based knowledge and networks. Representation becomes democratic not merely because "someone from the group is present," but because the person's political experience contributes to institutional decision-making.

The same principle applies to media representation. A news story featuring a person with disability does not necessarily represent disability interests. A politician visiting a disability community does not necessarily produce disability-inclusive policy. The analytical question must therefore move from presence to influence. Who determines the agenda? Who frames the problem? Who has the authority to define appropriate solutions? Who is invited to evaluate government policy? These questions allow researchers to distinguish symbolic inclusion from substantive inclusion. In political communication, the quality of representation depends partly on the distribution of communicative authority.

Research on women with disabilities further demonstrates the complexity of representation. Studies of media experiences among women with disabilities in Yogyakarta have identified tendencies toward superficial and stereotypical portrayals, including depictions of women with disabilities as dependent or socially isolated. Such representations can produce intersectional exclusion because gender and disability interact in determining how political agency is perceived. The problem is particularly relevant to electoral communication because women with disabilities may face simultaneous assumptions concerning gender roles and disability. Inclusive communication must therefore avoid treating "persons with disabilities" as a homogeneous category.

The broader implication is that media representation should be evaluated through a citizenship lens. A citizenship-oriented narrative asks whether persons with disabilities are represented as equal members of political society who possess rights, responsibilities, opinions, and institutional interests. This differs

fundamentally from narratives centered on pity or inspiration. The citizenship frame changes the political question from “How can society help disabled people?” to “How are political institutions organized so that all citizens can participate?” Such a transformation provides the conceptual foundation for the second part of the framework: communication must be accessible if representation is to become participation.

Communication Accessibility as a Condition of Electoral Participation

Political communication cannot be considered inclusive when information exists but cannot be accessed by all citizens. Accessibility should therefore be understood as a democratic communication principle rather than merely a technical accommodation. Fitriyah and Herawati (2021) found that although Indonesian electoral regulations had improved, voters with disabilities continued to face discrimination and practical barriers during the 2019 election. The existence of accessible polling stations did not automatically meet the diverse needs of voters because disability categories involve different communication and physical requirements. The finding establishes that inclusion requires individualized and multidimensional accessibility rather than a single standardized solution.

Accessibility begins before voters reach the polling station. Citizens need information about registration, candidates, voting procedures, locations, schedules, and electoral rules. If these messages are not available in accessible formats, political exclusion begins during the information stage. Averoes and Rianto (2022), studying Bawaslu's PPID service, demonstrate that public information services can incorporate physical and electronic accessibility, including websites, email, WhatsApp, SMS, telephone, and assistance mechanisms. Their findings also show that some accessibility features remained in development, demonstrating that institutional commitment must be accompanied by continuous technical improvement.

Digital accessibility is particularly significant because electoral institutions increasingly use websites and social media to communicate with citizens. Lestari, Hafiar, and Priyatna (2024) demonstrate that government website accessibility remains an important issue in Indonesian e-government because persons with disabilities may experience difficulty accessing information through conventional web design. Political communication is consequently affected by interface design. A website without appropriate navigation, alternative text, screen-reader compatibility, or clear information architecture can exclude citizens even when the information itself is formally public. Accessibility is therefore embedded in technological design rather than added after communication has been produced.

The same principle applies to audiovisual political communication. Deaf voters may require sign-language interpretation or accurate captions, while blind voters may require audio descriptions or screen-reader-compatible textual

information. Persons with intellectual disabilities may benefit from plain-language explanations and simplified procedural information. The diversity of disability means that “one accessible format” is insufficient. Pratiwi and Susanti (2020) found that deaf first-time voters experienced limited socialization, lack of assistance, and inadequate facilities. These barriers demonstrate that political communication must be designed around the actual communicative needs of citizens rather than around the assumption that everyone receives political messages in the same way.

Accessibility also affects the interpretation of political information. Communication can technically reach a citizen while remaining difficult to understand. Complex legal terminology, dense policy documents, rapid audiovisual content, or campaign messages without contextual explanation can produce informational inequality. Inclusive political communication therefore requires clarity as well as availability. Plain language should not be regarded as a reduction in political sophistication. Instead, it can increase democratic capacity by allowing citizens with different educational and cognitive backgrounds to understand political choices. Accessibility consequently overlaps with political literacy: citizens need information that they can actually process and use.

The digital divide complicates this issue further. Hasfi, Gono, and Rakhmad (2020) found that internet access among persons with disabilities did not automatically provide access to interactive political communication. Their study points to digital inequality, skepticism toward internet use, and limited internet literacy as important constraints. This finding demonstrates why digitalization alone cannot be treated as an inclusive policy. A political institution may publish accessible content online, but citizens who lack affordable connectivity, appropriate assistive technology, or digital confidence may still remain excluded. Digital inclusion must therefore combine infrastructure, skills, accessibility, and meaningful opportunities for interaction.

The relationship between internet use and political participation is nonetheless potentially transformative. Lukitoaji and Noormiyanto (2020) demonstrate a relationship between political internet use and political participation among deaf persons in Yogyakarta. The study indicates that internet-based political engagement can create opportunities for political communication that are difficult to obtain through conventional channels. This suggests that digital platforms can function as political assistive environments when accessibility is adequately developed. The critical issue is not whether technology should replace traditional communication but whether digital and physical channels can complement each other to reduce exclusion.

Election organizers are consequently important communication actors. Kolondam, Niode, and Egeten (2023) found that the Manado KPU undertook voter registration, political education, socialization, and provision of supporting facilities for voters with disabilities. However, funding remained a constraint. This finding demonstrates that inclusive communication requires institutional resources. Accessibility is not simply a matter of goodwill from individual officials. It must be

incorporated into election planning, budgeting, training, procurement, and evaluation. Without institutionalization, accessibility initiatives can remain temporary and uneven across electoral cycles.

Local collaboration can improve this institutional process. Maramis, Pati, and Rengkung (2022) found that cooperation between electoral organizers and disability organizations contributed to voter socialization and accessible polling arrangements in South Tondano. At the same time, difficulties in gathering voters and inadequate assistance remained. The lesson is that institutional communication is more effective when it is developed collaboratively with the communities that will use it. Disability organizations possess experiential knowledge that electoral institutions may not have. Their involvement can improve the relevance of political messages, communication formats, and logistical arrangements.

The physical accessibility of elections should also be connected to communicative accessibility. Wicaksana, Makhasin, and Sobandi (2023) found that disability-friendly public facilities had a statistically significant relationship with political participation in Banyumas, although the correlation and explanatory contribution were relatively low. This result is important because it prevents an overly simple explanation of political exclusion. Physical accessibility matters, but it does not explain participation by itself. Political knowledge, social networks, institutional trust, organizational involvement, political motivation, and communication accessibility may be equally or more influential.

Electoral accessibility must therefore be conceptualized as a chain rather than a single facility. The chain begins with accessible political information, continues through registration and political education, extends to campaign communication, and culminates in accessible voting procedures. A weakness at any stage can reduce participation. A citizen who cannot access candidate information may technically be able to vote but may not be able to make an informed political choice. Conversely, a citizen who receives accessible information but encounters an inaccessible polling station experiences a different form of exclusion. Democratic accessibility requires continuity across the entire electoral process.

This perspective also changes the meaning of campaign communication. Campaigns often use highly visual materials, short slogans, videos, public rallies, and social media content. Such formats may reach large audiences but can exclude citizens who require alternative communication modes. Inclusive campaign production should therefore integrate captions, sign-language interpretation, audio descriptions, readable typography, high-contrast design, alternative text, and plain-language explanations. More importantly, persons with disabilities should be involved in testing these materials before publication. Accessibility cannot be guaranteed through technical assumptions alone because users experience communication differently depending on their disability and assistive technologies.

Accessible communication also contributes to electoral autonomy. When citizens depend entirely on relatives, assistants, or political intermediaries to obtain political information, their formal political rights may remain intact while their

substantive autonomy is reduced. Fitriyah and Herawati (2021) demonstrate the continuing difficulties faced by voters with disabilities despite regulatory improvements. The objective of inclusive communication should therefore be to maximize independent access wherever possible. Assistance remains important, but assistance should supplement accessibility rather than compensate for institutional inaccessibility.

Political education is a further component of this autonomy. Disability-inclusive political education should explain not only how to vote but also how political institutions operate, how candidates develop policy positions, how citizens can monitor representatives, and how disability rights can be advocated after elections. Gustomy's (2017) broader conception of participation demonstrates why this is necessary: political participation includes lobbying, organizational activity, contacting, and policy advocacy. doi.org If political education is limited to voter turnout, democratic inclusion remains procedural rather than substantive.

The final implication is that accessibility should be treated as a form of political equality. It is not a special benefit granted to a minority group but an institutional mechanism through which equal citizenship becomes practical. When political institutions design communication for diverse citizens from the beginning, accessibility becomes embedded within democratic infrastructure. This leads directly to the third dimension of the framework: once persons with disabilities can access political communication, the next question is whether they can use that communication to exercise meaningful political agency.

From Symbolic Inclusion to Substantive Political Agency

Political inclusion reaches its strongest form when persons with disabilities move from being recipients of political communication to becoming producers, interpreters, and decision-makers within political communication. Gustomy (2017) provides a useful starting point by showing that disability participation extends beyond voting to organization, lobbying, contacting, and other forms of policy engagement. doi.org This broader conception challenges electoral systems that measure inclusion primarily through turnout. A citizen may vote but remain excluded from agenda-setting, policy formulation, political organizations, and public debate. Substantive democracy therefore requires opportunities for political influence beyond the ballot box.

The experience of disability activists who became candidates illustrates this transition. Kramer, Dibley, and Tsaputra (2024) found that candidates with disabilities in the 2019 election drew upon their previous activism when entering electoral politics. Their political participation was therefore not an isolated electoral behavior but part of a longer trajectory connecting social movements with formal institutions. This finding is significant because it demonstrates how marginalized communities can convert collective experience into electoral resources. Political

agency grows when activists acquire networks, organizational skills, issue expertise, and public legitimacy through sustained participation.

The relationship between activism and candidacy also changes the meaning of political representation. A candidate with a disability can provide descriptive representation, but the deeper democratic contribution occurs when candidacy allows disability-related issues to enter policy debate. Political candidates can challenge assumptions about competence, introduce alternative policy priorities, and create institutional relationships with disability organizations. Their presence may also change the expectations of voters with disabilities, particularly younger citizens who rarely see people like themselves occupying political roles. Representation can therefore have a generative effect: visibility encourages participation, and participation creates new forms of visibility.

Disability organizations are central to this process because they provide collective infrastructure. Gustomy (2017) found that respondents recognized the importance of cooperation with NGOs, politicians, government officials, and other institutions. doi.org Such networks allow disability organizations to move beyond internal community support and enter broader policy arenas. Political communication becomes more influential when organizations can translate individual experiences into policy demands, establish relationships with decision-makers, and maintain sustained advocacy. The organization thus becomes an intermediary between lived experience and institutional decision-making.

Political agency also requires the capacity to communicate directly with political institutions. Averoes and Rianto (2022) demonstrate the importance of accessible public-information mechanisms within Bawaslu. Accessible information services can facilitate more than passive information consumption. They can enable citizens to ask questions, submit complaints, request documents, and monitor institutions. When accessibility includes two-way communication, public institutions become more responsive to persons with disabilities. The democratic significance of accessibility therefore lies partly in its ability to transform citizens from audiences into institutional interlocutors.

The digital environment can support this transition. Hasfi, Gono, and Rakhmad (2020) show that online political communication has potential as an assistive environment, even though substantial barriers remain. doi.org Digital platforms can reduce geographic barriers, enable asynchronous participation, support community formation, and provide alternative channels for political expression. For persons with mobility impairments, online participation may reduce some physical constraints. For deaf users, text-based communication can provide an alternative to audio-centered political events. For blind users, accessible digital content can support independent information consumption. The democratic potential of digital media therefore depends heavily on inclusive design.

However, digital self-representation does not automatically eliminate power inequalities. Non-disabled actors may continue to dominate political conversations, determine trending narratives, or control institutional accounts.

Hasfi et al. (2020) specifically identify the continued dominance of non-disabled groups in virtual political space. doi.org This means that digital participation must be evaluated according to influence, not simply activity. A person may post political content frequently while remaining politically marginalized if institutional actors, journalists, and larger audiences do not recognize the content as legitimate political discourse.

Political communication should therefore provide mechanisms for agenda-setting. Persons with disabilities should be able to influence which issues become publicly discussed. This involves more than responding to existing policy agendas. Disability organizations and political actors should have opportunities to propose legislation, identify emerging problems, challenge government programs, and participate in consultations. The importance of this approach is supported by Gustomy's (2017) finding that political participation includes lobbying and direct contact with public officials. Political agency exists when citizens can influence the policy process, not merely when institutions invite them to receive information.

Electoral institutions can strengthen this agency through structured consultation. Instead of treating disability communities primarily as target audiences for voter education, KPU and Bawaslu can involve them in designing communication strategies, testing campaign information, evaluating accessibility, and developing electoral regulations. Kolondam et al. (2023) demonstrate that electoral institutions already undertake several disability-related participation initiatives, including political education and accessibility measures. The next institutional step is to move from consultation about disability toward co-production with disability communities.

Co-production is important because accessibility problems are often context-specific. A solution that works for wheelchair users may not address the needs of blind, deaf, intellectually disabled, or psychosocially disabled citizens. Fitriyah and Herawati (2021) demonstrate that standardized "accessible polling stations" may still fail to accommodate different disability requirements. Involving users in the design process allows institutions to identify barriers that may be invisible to non-disabled policymakers. Political communication should therefore be designed through iterative consultation rather than through assumptions about disability.

Substantive political agency also requires political parties to change their internal practices. Disability inclusion cannot depend entirely on candidates who independently overcome institutional barriers. Political parties can create accessible recruitment, training, campaigning, and leadership pathways for persons with disabilities. Liah and Setiawan (2025) argue for stronger political-party mechanisms to increase the political participation of persons with disabilities, including discussion of minimum representation within party structures. Such proposals address an important institutional bottleneck because electoral inclusion cannot become sustainable if persons with disabilities remain absent from party organizations and candidate recruitment.

Political parties should also reconsider how disability is used in campaign communication. A candidate may use disability-related narratives to demonstrate empathy, but excessive reliance on charity imagery can reproduce stereotypes. Campaigns should instead present disability as a policy domain and persons with disabilities as political constituencies with diverse preferences. This requires candidates to discuss accessible education, employment, transportation, social protection, digital technology, healthcare, and public infrastructure. The objective is to shift disability from an emotional campaign symbol toward a legitimate policy agenda.

The legal framework provides a foundation for this transformation. Indonesian law recognizes political rights for persons with disabilities, including the right to vote and be elected, participate in political organizations, access electoral processes, and receive political education. Yulius (2020) emphasizes the breadth of these rights. Rahmasari and Amalia (2024) similarly show that legal guarantees of voting rights need to be accompanied by practical accessibility and collaboration with disability communities. The central policy challenge is therefore not simply creating additional rights but translating existing rights into institutional practices.

The question of mental and intellectual disability further demonstrates why substantive inclusion requires careful attention to assumptions about political competence. Mailoor, Siar, and Roeroe (2025) argue that persons with intellectual disabilities possess political rights under Indonesian law and should receive appropriate electoral accessibility. Such findings challenge the assumption that disability automatically diminishes political capacity. Democratic institutions should assess citizens through rights-based principles rather than generalized assumptions about competence. Communication accessibility and appropriate support can enable political decision-making without replacing the individual's autonomy.

The same principle applies to psychosocial disabilities. Londa (2023) argues that persons with mental disabilities possess political rights, while also identifying problems concerning the communication and implementation of those rights. Political inclusion therefore requires differentiated communication strategies rather than categorical exclusion. Institutions must ensure that information about voting, candidacy, and political participation is communicated in ways that are understandable and usable by different citizens. This approach recognizes diversity within the disability community rather than treating disability as a single political identity.

The democratic significance of substantive agency can also be seen through the relationship between accessibility and political trust. Citizens are more likely to view political institutions as legitimate when those institutions recognize their experiences and respond to their needs. Conversely, repeated communicative exclusion can generate distrust. When election information is inaccessible, complaints are difficult to submit, campaign communication ignores disability, or institutions consult disability groups only symbolically, citizens receive a message

about their political importance. Inclusion therefore has a communicative dimension: institutions demonstrate equality not only through laws but through everyday interactions with citizens.

Substantive agency also requires continuity after elections. Political inclusion should not disappear when voting ends. Persons with disabilities should have opportunities to monitor elected representatives, participate in public consultations, submit policy proposals, join political organizations, and evaluate government performance. Gustomy's (2017) broad understanding of political participation provides a foundation for this post-electoral perspective. [doi.org](https://doi.org/10.2196/doi.org) Democracy becomes more inclusive when citizens can influence political processes between elections rather than being recognized only at the moment of voting.

The combined evidence supports an inclusive political communication framework consisting of four interconnected principles: representational agency, accessible communication, participatory production, and institutional accountability. Representational agency requires persons with disabilities to appear as political subjects rather than objects. Accessible communication ensures that political information can be received and understood. Participatory production involves persons with disabilities in creating political messages and institutional communication. Institutional accountability ensures that inclusion becomes measurable through policies, budgets, monitoring, and mechanisms for complaint and correction. The four principles reinforce one another because representation without accessibility remains symbolic, accessibility without agency remains paternalistic, participation without institutional accountability remains fragile, and accountability without representation can become bureaucratic.

This framework also suggests that inclusive democracy should be evaluated through the entire political communication cycle. The cycle begins when political issues are identified, continues through media representation and campaign communication, extends to voter education and electoral participation, and persists through policy advocacy and government accountability. Exclusion at any stage can weaken democratic participation. A citizen may be formally registered but excluded from campaign information; may vote but have no influence on policy; or may appear in media coverage but lack the authority to define the meaning of disability. Inclusive democracy therefore requires consistency across communicative stages.

The central analytical shift is consequently from visibility to influence. Increasing the number of stories about disability is not enough. Increasing the number of accessible websites is not enough. Increasing voter turnout is not enough. These indicators are important but incomplete. The stronger democratic question is whether persons with disabilities can shape political narratives, access information independently, participate in political discussion, influence candidates, enter political organizations, contest elections, and affect policy decisions. Such an approach places political agency at the center of disability representation.

The Indonesian experience demonstrates that meaningful inclusion is achievable when electoral institutions, disability organizations, political actors, media organizations, and digital platforms interact collaboratively. The existing literature contains evidence of such collaboration, including cooperation between KPU and disability organizations, accessible information services, digital political communication, disability activism, and disability candidacy. Yet the persistence of barriers indicates that these practices remain uneven. The future of inclusive political communication therefore depends on transforming individual initiatives into institutional standards.

Conclusion

Disability representation in Indonesian political communication remains constrained by a gap between formal democratic rights and substantive communicative inclusion. Existing research demonstrates that persons with disabilities possess political rights and participate in elections, organizations, advocacy, and digital communication, but their participation is frequently limited by inaccessible information, insufficient political socialization, inadequate facilities, and media narratives that emphasize vulnerability or inspiration rather than citizenship. The central problem is therefore not simply the absence of persons with disabilities from political communication but the limited political authority attached to their presence. Inclusive democracy requires a shift from visibility as an endpoint toward visibility as a pathway to political agency.

The analysis demonstrates that inclusive political communication requires four mutually reinforcing conditions: representational agency, accessible communication, participatory production, and institutional accountability. Media organizations need to recognize persons with disabilities as authoritative political sources and producers of political narratives. Electoral institutions must provide accessible information across physical and digital channels and involve disability organizations in communication design. Political parties need to open recruitment and candidacy pathways, while digital platforms should incorporate accessibility into political communication. Most importantly, persons with disabilities should participate in producing the political messages that concern them. These changes can transform disability representation from symbolic inclusion into substantive democratic participation.

Future research should examine disability representation across different electoral cycles and media platforms, including television, online news, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and political party communication. Comparative studies should investigate differences among physical, sensory, intellectual, and psychosocial disabilities because communication barriers are not uniform. Researchers should also examine whether accessible campaign materials actually influence political knowledge, voter autonomy, and electoral choices. Longitudinal research could investigate whether the emergence of candidates and political

leaders with disabilities changes media framing and public perceptions over time. Finally, future studies should develop measurable indicators of inclusive political communication that combine accessibility, source diversity, representational agency, participation in media production, and policy influence. Such research would strengthen the empirical foundation for an Indonesian democratic system in which persons with disabilities are not merely included as voters but recognized as full political actors.

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