

Participation of Adults with Learning Disabilities in the 2015 United Kingdom General Election

Abstract

Purpose

People with learning disabilities may experience discrimination which prevents them from exercising choice and control over their right to participate in democratic processes.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Taking data collected by social workers during a campaign from the 2015 UK General Election, this paper analyses the variables associated with higher rates of democratic participation by people with learning disabilities.

Findings

The present authors undertook secondary analysis on data collected by social workers supporting adults with learning disabilities who were living in community housing units. 1,019 people with learning disabilities who were living in 124 community housing units in one English county gave consent to participate. 84% were registered to vote and 26% cast a vote on polling day. People were significantly more likely to cast a vote if they lived in a housing unit where they **understood their rights** (Wald $\chi^2=4.896$, $p=0.027$).

Practical Implications

Our analyses are consistent with the hypothesis that supporting people with learning disabilities to understand their right to participate in elections increases the likelihood they will cast a vote on a polling day. There are practical implications from this finding for commissioning practices, support planning, and education of health and social care practitioners.

Originality Value

This is the first study of this size which examines data from people with learning disabilities on their experience of democratic participation and the role of social work.

Introduction

Signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006) are required to guarantee disabled citizens the same rights as non-disabled citizens. The ambition for the Convention was that it signalled a paradigm shift (Mittler, 2015) from the continued dominance of medical and welfare models towards a social and rights based model of disability (Kayess and French, 2008, Stainton and Clare, 2012, Mittler, 2015). As laudable as this may be as an ambition, it will only succeed if health and social care practitioners who are charged with implementation into practice of policy aims have a strong understanding of the social model of disability and hold values consistent with their role in upholding human rights (Oliver *et al.*, 2012, Morgan, 2012). Over 30 years since the social model of disability was first proposed by Oliver, adults with learning disabilities still do not experience the full range of their rights as citizens.

Article 29 of the UN CRPD states that disabled people have the same right to participate in political and public life as non-disabled citizens. As a signatory to the Convention the United Kingdom government, in election of the UK Parliament every 5 years, is required to uphold Article 29. The determination of who can and cannot vote in UK law, in keeping with the positive obligations of a signatory to the Convention, is defined by the Representation of the People Acts 1983 and 2000 (Ministry of Justice, 1983 and 2000) These state that to qualify to register in UK parliamentary elections a person must be a Commonwealth or Republic of Ireland citizen, who is of voting age and is resident in the constituency. In keeping with Article 29 of the CRPD there is no further requirement, including any test of a person's mental capacity. The Mental Capacity Act (Ministry of Justice, 2005) defines 'Mental incapacity' as being unable to make a specific decision due to an impairment or a disturbance in the functioning of the mind or brain. Section 73 of the Electoral Administration Act (Ministry of Justice, 2006) abolished mental incapacity as grounds to prevent a person being able to register to vote or cast their vote. People with learning disabilities, however, continue to experience endemic low expectations and disenfranchisement from the voting

process (Beckman, 2007, Redley *et al.*, 2012, Agran and Hughes, 2013, Political and Constitutional Reform Committee 2014, James, 2016). Less than a third of people with learning disabilities voted in the 2001 UK General Election (Emerson and Hatton, 2008) compared with 59.4% of the general population (UK Political Info, 2016). A study of the 2005 UK General Election found 16.5% of people with learning disabilities voted (Keeley *et al.*, 2008) compared with 61.4% of the general population (UK Political Info, 2016). The discriminatory impact of democratic exclusion was argued by Lord *et al.*, (2014) as being a fundamental breach of people's human rights.

Internationally, Kjellberg and Hemmingsson (2013), in their qualitative study of voting patterns of adults with learning disabilities in Sweden, found that the extent to which social policy emphasised a social model of disability had an influencing effect on people's beliefs in their rights and sense of citizenship. These beliefs were ultimately found to impact on voting behaviours on polling day in Sweden. Hood's (2016) evaluation of the factors which influenced participation of adults with learning disabilities in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum found that the attitudes and assumptions of the social care support staff were significant barriers to participation. Staff were reported to have exercised powerful influence over people with learning disabilities, ultimately determining the likelihood that people participated in the referendum. Attempts to increase participation on the part of people with learning disabilities were observed during the 2015 UK General Election. These included social care staff providing support to transport people to polling stations and documents providing information about the election being transcribed into easy read formats (Holland, 2016).

The UK Government Parliamentary Outreach Commission worked with an English Local Authority, Hertfordshire Council, to gather data on participation of adults with learning disabilities **during the 2015 UK General Election**. Social workers in the Hertfordshire learning disability social work service ran a campaign which they called *Promote the Vote* which aimed to educate people about their right to participate and provide practical support to enable access to polling stations on the day of the election. The campaign invited people

with learning disabilities who were living in the community in supported living or residential care units to attend information and training sessions that covered their democratic rights as citizens, how to register to vote and participate in the UK general election process and how to access practical support to cast their vote. Drawing on the research literature, the social workers also worked with staff in supported living settings to find out whether they had a policy on voting rights, whether they were provided with training on voting rights and whether they understood that people do not have to prove they have mental capacity to be able to cast a vote (Holland, 2016, James, 2016). Employing data collected by social workers during this campaign, this paper analyses the variables associated with higher rates of democratic participation by people with learning disabilities. **In particular, the data were used** to test the hypothesis that social care practice which is framed by the social model of disability and the upholding of human rights increases the likelihood that people will vote.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Design

The work carried out meets the definition of a **service evaluation** as defined by the Economic and Social Research Council Ethics guidelines (ESRC, 2015) and as such did not require Research Ethics Council approval. The service evaluation was designed and implemented within the framework of the Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee code of practice for research ethical and moral guidance (JUC, 2016). In keeping with both sets of guidance, the present authors undertook secondary analysis of data collected by social workers supporting 1,019 people with learning disabilities over the age of 18 who were living in 124 community housing units. All community housing units which the Local Authority arranged support for adults with learning disabilities were included in the study. The range of community housing settings included supported independent tenancy housing settings, supported living housing units and CQC registered residential care homes for adults with learning disabilities.

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Procedure

Participation in the Promote the Vote campaign was voluntary. Social Workers who had completed further post qualifying awards as Best Interest Assessors were involved in the design process. Best Interest Assessors assess whether a person lacks the mental capacity to make a specific decision due to being of unsound mind as within the meaning of Article 51(e) of the European Convention of Human Rights. **The Best Interest Assessors assured the processes for compliance with the Mental Capacity Act.** All participant protocols and information literature were produced in easy read format. Data were collected at two points in time. The first data collection point was before the UK General Election 2015 to gather information about people's voter registration status, understanding of their rights and whether the staff supporting them had been trained on voting rights. Social workers visited each community house and completed a questionnaire with the residents capturing their understanding of the voting process, the right to vote and their planned voting intentions. The second data collection point was the day after polling day to confirm whether people had cast a vote. Social workers visited each community house and completed a follow up questionnaire capturing whether people actually cast a vote. Where people had voted, data were collected on what support they had been provided to enable them to access the polling station. Where the person hadn't voted, data were collected on reasons why people had not participated. Data were also collected from staff in the 124 units on: whether the setting had a policy on voting; staff understanding of people's voting rights; staff understanding of there being no mental capacity test to enable access to democratic participation; and whether staff had been provided with training on voting rights.

Analysis

Secondary analysis of the data was performed using SPSS 20. The unit of analysis was the living unit within which people lived. Raw numbers collected by the social workers were converted into percentages to normalise the data.

Non-parametric (Spearman's Rho) correlations and Mann-Whitney U Tests were performed in SPSS to analyse which variables were associated with higher rates of democratic participation. Binary logistic regression was performed in SPSS to consider the likelihood of the 124 housing units having someone in them who participated. The decision to cast a vote or not was used as the dependent/outcome variable and all the variables statistically significantly associated with the percentage of people in each housing unit voting were used as the independent/predictor variables.

Findings

1,019 people with learning disabilities, aged 18 and over participated in the Promote the Vote campaign. 854 (84%) were registered to vote in the 2015 UK General Election in England. 649 (64%) received information from social workers about their right to participate in democratic processes and reported to social workers that they understood their rights. On the date of the 2015 UK General Election 267 (26%) voted, 345 (34%) made an active choice to abstain from casting a vote and 407 (40%) did not cast a vote, but did not report that this had been an active choice they had made for themselves. **The proportion of people who voted was found to be lower than the population estimates from the 2001 General Election (Emerson and Hatton, 2008). The observed level was, however, greater than the 16.5% of people with learning disabilities who voted in the 2005 UK General Election (Keeley *et al.*, 2008). If a similar percentage of people with learning disabilities had voted nationally, drawing on Public Health England estimates of prevalence of learning disabilities (Hatton *et al.*, 2016) this would have represented an additional 133,000 adults with learning disabilities compared with the 2005 General Election findings.**

The participants lived in 124 community housing units. The size of the units ranged from 2 residents to 47, the mean average was 8 and the mode was 6 people living in each setting. Sixteen (13%) of the community housing units reported that they had a policy on voting, 102 (82%) that they did not. Support staff working in 7 (43%) of the housing units that had a policy on voting also reported having completed training on voting rights. Staff in a further 9

housing units (with no policy on voting) also reported that they had completed training.

Mann-Whitney U Tests were undertaken to analyse associations between the likelihood of someone casting a vote and whether people lived in a setting where the provider had a policy on voting or had trained their staff on voting rights.

No significant difference ($p > 0.05$) was found between the percentages of people voting from community housing units that had or did not have a policy on voting. People living in units that had such a policy were significantly more likely to report knowing about their rights to democratic participation ($p < 0.05$). Higher percentages of people voted in units where staff had been trained on voting rights ($p < 0.05$). Higher percentages of people living in such units reported knowing about their rights to democratic participation ($p < 0.05$).

Further analysis was undertaken to identify which factors were associated with a greater proportion of people in a housing unit casting a vote on polling day. Eighty-nine percent of those who voted, reported on how they cast their vote. Across all housing units, 197 people (83%) attended a polling station and 41 people (17%) used the postal voting system. No one reported using a proxy to cast their vote for them. Various types of support were provided to assist people who had chosen to attend the polling station to cast a vote in person including: support to access transport to and from the polling station (15%); support from staff in the polling station (10%); and support with both transport and inside the polling station (12%). Strong associations were detected between a greater percentage of people in a housing unit who voted and:

- A greater percentage of people who were provided with assistance to access and participate in voting at the polling station ($\rho = 0.66$, $p < 0.01$)
- A greater percentage of people who reported that they understood their right to vote ($\rho = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$)
- A greater percentage of people who voted by attending the polling station ($\rho = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$)

- A smaller percentage of people who had been deemed by staff to lack capacity to participate in voting ($\rho=-0.52$, $p<0.01$)

Statistically significant associations were also detected between a greater percentage of people in a housing unit who voted and:

- A greater percentage of people who only had travel support to vote ($\rho=0.36$, $p<0.01$)
- A larger unit in terms of the number of people living there ($\rho=0.26$, $p<0.05$).

Analysis was also undertaken of the reasons given by the staff working in the housing units as to why they understood people whom they were supporting did not participate in the election and cast a vote. Staff reported that people with learning disabilities living in the community homes had either made an active personal choice not to vote (31%) or that the person did not have the mental capacity to participate (28%).

Spearman's correlations between the percentage of people in each house who made an active choice to abstain from casting a vote on polling day and other factors were analysed. Statistically significant associations were observed between houses with a higher percentage of people who abstained from voting and:

- A lower percentage of people deemed by staff in the housing units not to have the mental capacity to vote ($\rho=-0.495$, $p<0.001$)
- A higher percentage of people aware of their right to vote ($\rho=0.436$, $p<0.001$)
- A higher percentage of people attending the polling station ($\rho=0.222$, $p<0.05$)
- A lower percentage of people not registered to vote ($\rho=-0.180$, $p<0.05$)

The percentage of people who abstained from voting within a house was not associated with whether houses had a voting policy or not (Mann-Whitney $U=995.5$, $p>0.05$) or whether or not houses had staff trained about voting (Mann-Whitney $U=1089.0$, $p>0.05$). Overall, the findings indicate that people who abstained from voting and who were living in a house where people were supported to know and understand their voting rights were likely to be making active choices.

The voting data from the 124 units was converted into binary variables to investigate which factors were most strongly associated with whether anyone in each housing unit had voted in the 2015 UK General Election or not. Binary logistic regression was undertaken using voting/not voting as the dependent variable and all the variables statistically significantly associated with percentage of people voting as the independent/predictor variables:

- number of people living in the unit
- % of people who were supported to attend the polling station by a support worker
- % of people who attended polling station
- % of people whom support staff in the housing unit reported lacking the mental capacity to participate
- % of people who were aware of their right to vote
- Whether the housing unit had staff who had been trained in voting rights.

Putting these variables into the regression equation, it was possible to accurately predict whether 96% of community housing units would have someone living in them who voted or not. The percentage of people who were aware of their rights was a significant predictor of whether anyone voted in a unit voted ($Waldx^2=4.896$, $p=0.027$).

Discussion

Our analyses are consistent with the hypothesis that support for people with learning disabilities which is framed by the social model of disability and focuses on upholding human rights increases the likelihood that people **participate in an election**. The findings indicate that people with a learning disability who participated in the Promote the Vote project were more likely to experience democratic inclusion in keeping with their Article 29 CRPD rights if they were supported by workers who were trained in voting rights and who provided them with practical assistance on voting day; and where social workers had supported them to know and understand their right to democratic participation. The findings add to the existing body of knowledge about the role and purpose of social work and social work education in three ways:

Firstly, commissioning practices that encourage providers of community housing units to do more than just maintain a policy on voting on a shelf, but which invest in staff training on voting rights and provide capacity and support to enable people with learning disabilities to access the voting process are associated with increased levels of participation. There are implications here for how commissioners specify the range of support that they expect supported living providers to offer and how they monitor the quality of the support provided. Secondly, this is the first evaluation of this size that analyses the experience of people with learning disabilities during a UK General Election and the variables impacting on their participation, with specific consideration given to the role of social workers as agents in the process. Whilst people were more likely to vote if they had participated in the Promote the Vote intervention, the proportion of people with learning disabilities who cast a vote in the 2015 UK General Election did not exceed the levels observed in the 2001 UK General Election (Emerson and Hatton, 2008). As also observed by Hood (2016), the beliefs and assumptions of support staff about people's mental capacity to participate in elections were associated with the likelihood that someone would vote. These findings have practical implications for both recruitment and continuing professional development of social care workers supporting adults with learning disabilities in the community.

Finally, housing units where people knew and understood their right to democratic participation were significantly more likely to have a person who cast a vote on polling day. More complex social and environmental factors may also be influential. For example, people may have been less likely to participate in sessions aimed at educating people about their rights where staff members reported that, in their view, the person lacked the mental capacity to participate in voting.

Limitations of the study should also be considered. Given the cohort study size, wider implications should not be extrapolated for whole populations from these findings. Whilst the analysis provided insight into understanding of the factors influencing democratic participation, there may have been issues specific to the sample that limit the extent to which findings can be generalised.

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Conclusion

The main finding from this study was that people with learning disabilities living in community housing units were significantly more likely to cast a vote in the 2015 UK general election if they **understood their rights to democratic participation**. There are practical implications from this finding for commissioning practices, support planning, and education of health and social care practitioners. The evaluation contributes to emerging knowledge of the extent to which social work practice and education are framed by human rights.

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