**Down to the Struts**

Season 3, Episode 2

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Guests: Lisa Schur and Douglas Kruse

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**Introduction**

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui and welcome to another episode of Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability, design and intersectionality. If you're a new listener, welcome, and if you've been listening for a while, welcome back. If you want to support the people, equipment and resources, then make this podcast possible, be sure to visit our Patreon site at www.patreon.com/DowntotheStruts. You can become a supporting patron in our community and have access to exclusive content, cool merch and a quarterly newsletter curated by me. If you're not able to contribute right now, that's fine too. You can listen, subscribe and share the podcast with friends. We're so grateful for your continued support.

Today, we'll listen in on my conversation with Douglas Kruse and Lisa Schur. Douglas Kruse is an economist and a professor at the Rutgers University School of Management and labor relations. Lisa Schur is a political scientist and professor at the Rutgers University School of Management and labor relations. Doug and Lisa virtually sat down with me to talk about the participation of disabled people in a critical aspect of our democracy - voting. According to a study that Doug and Lisa published for the election access commission in 2021, one in nine disabled voters experienced challenges voting in the 2020 election. This is unsurprising considering that, according to a Government Accountability Office report, from 2016 83% of polling places in the United States were found to be inaccessible. Doug, Lisa and I discussed more of the findings from their report, the history of voting access in the United States, and long term strategies for making sure that disabled people can participate meaningfully in the democratic process. Okay, let's get down to it.

Thank you so much, Doug, and Lisa, for joining me on the podcast today. I'm really looking forward to our conversation. Could you start off by telling our listeners a little bit about yourself and what brought you to study disability and access to voting?

Doug Kruse

Yes, Lisa and I are married. And actually, right, the two days before our second anniversary, we were hit by a drunk driver going about 100 miles an hour. And we were visiting my parents in Omaha, that gave me a spinal cord injury and put me in a wheelchair. I was already a professor at Rutgers at that point. But then I returned to Rutgers as a professor in a wheelchair. And that obviously opened our eyes to a lot of disability issues, in a lot of ways as we made as we tried to cope with all the demands that the new found, disability puts on one records was good at accommodating me. At that point. We've opened our eyes to lots of the I'm an economist to lots of the economic issues, but also the political issues. Lisa was just starting her dissertation in political science.

Lisa Schur

I finished my coursework, so I was about to write my dissertation. And I had a whole different topic in mind. But then when we started experiencing what it's like to navigate life, with someone with a disability and the whole discrimination that was going on, and then in July of 1990, the ADA was passed. And I thought, wow, this is an amazing opportunity to look at political activism among people with disabilities. So I changed topics. And that's what I wrote my dissertation on, I interviewed 64 people with spinal cord injuries and looked at their political views and what led them to become activists or what discourage them from political activity. So and since that time, we've done a lot of work on that primarily on disability and employment issues, and disability and political participation, voter turnout, which is what the recent report to the election Assistance Commission is all about.

Qudsiya Naqui

Thank you for sharing that story. And it feels so personal and it's amazing how you've been able to take your personal experience and use it to produce really important academic work that has can shape you know, policy. So, to that end, we're here today to talk about access to voting and as you just mentioned, Doug, you produced a report election access commission, and it focused on the sort of experience of people with disabilities who were voting in the 2020 election. So can you can the two of you talk a little bit about the findings of that report?

Lisa Schur

So we had done an earlier report, also commissioned by the election systems commission in 2012. And at that point, we're asking people what, what it was like to vote, and what kind of difficulties they had. And at that point, 30% of people who voted in a polling place, said that they had experienced difficulties, especially with disabilities. Yeah, I'm sorry, with disabilities. And then in 2020, we were looking at people who voted in polling places and people who voted by mail, and we found that the people with disabilities who voted in polling places the difficulties had dropped to 18%. So that was a significant shift. And we estimate that about half of that drop, the greater ease in voting was actually due to improvements in polling places, and half was due to the fact that more people with disabilities, and people without disabilities, two voted by mail in 2020, during the pandemic, but there's good news there, because yes, polling places have become more accessible. That being said, still one in nine people in a polling place experienced difficulties voting, and 5% of people who voted by mail with disabilities experienced difficulties. So there's still there's still a lot of work to be done.

Qudsiya Naqui

And can you talk a little bit about how you, you know, the sort of methods you use to collect the data, and

Doug Kruse

We had done a previous survey in 2012, that was also sponsored by the election Assistance Commission, where we surveyed 3000 people across the country, two thirds of them, 2000 of them with disabilities, and 1000 without disabilities, and this was a representative sample done by a well established survey firm so we can get some a good sense of what was really going on there in the in the disability population. And then we repeated that survey of the post election survey in 2020, asking a variety of questions about the voting experience, particularly about any difficulties that people had with voting. And that was done by the same survey firm. And it was also a similarly large sample is 2600. This time, instead of 3000, overall, but again, oversample people with disabilities, so that we can be more confident about their, their experiences. And I'll let Lisa describe some of the some of the results.

Lisa Schur

Well, compared to 2020, far fewer people with disabilities said that they experienced difficulties in voting. So in 2012 30%, of people who voted in a polling place said that they experienced difficulties. And then that dropped to 18% of people with disabilities in 2020, but still one in nine people with disabilities so that they had difficulties voting. And that's across both voting and polling places and voting by mail.

Qudsiya Naqui

And could you describe and provide some color to what some of those barriers were that people identified?

Lisa Schur

It was everything from finding or getting to the polling place, getting into the polling place, whether they understood how to vote, whether they could read or see the ballot, whether they could operate voting machinery. So it was a variety of different questions about that.

Doug Kruse

It actually Lisa mentioned the the the improvement in polling place accessibility, the biggest improvement actually was in drops in the number of people who said they had difficulty reading or seeing the ballot and or difficulty understanding how to vote. So that's a real, real sign of progress. Still, people with disabilities are more likely than people without disabilities to experience problems. So that's a that's a big problem.

Qudsiya Naqui

Yeah, and I know as a as a blind person, myself, one of our biggest challenges in the blind community is is the idea of being able to vote independently without having to have someone read the ballot to you. One of the things I experienced voting in the 2016 election in Washington DC was that, you know, I showed up and they had like a machine but I hadn't brought headphones and I had no way of like using the voice technology that was on the machine. And then there was like a whole run around and my ballot got lost and I almost filed a blank ballot and it was just there was like, it was very confusing. And there was very little facility. It was a very, that was the only time I voted in person in DC because obviously in 2020, I chose to vote by mail and even then I had to have my partner complete my ballot.

Doug Kruse

I'm glad you described that we do we based our measure of disability on census questions, six census questions, and we added a seven cleanup question to capture other types of disability. Questions allow us to measure major types of impairments. So we break out the results. And one of the impairments is vision impairment, we do find that the people who had the most difficulty voting, the highest rate of difficulties voting, were those with visual impairments or cognitive impairments. Yeah.

Lisa Schur

And some people say that, well, we're just going to switch to all vote by mail voting, and that'll solve all the problems. Well, no, it clearly is not a solution for a lot of people who have visual impairments, it's important to be able to vote independently and confidentially. And that can be a real problem.

Doug Kruse

We did find that among people with disabilities who voted by mail in general 5%, or one out of 20 said they had difficulties, but among people with visual impairments voted by mail 22%. So you know, almost almost a fourth of people with vision impairments had some type of difficulty in putting by mail.

Qudsiya Naqui

Yeah, and I suspect that's because some states, for example, like Maryland, and I believe the state of Virginia is going to be implementing something like this as well. They allowed you to complete your ballot electronically, using your accessible your accessibility technology. So screen reader or magnifier, or what have you, print it, sign it, mail it, but I don't think that's the practice in most states. So the vote by mail is still a paper ballot, as it was, for example, in Washington, DC when I voted or I think, in DC, I should say you could call their their accessibility office in their elections department and facilitate getting an electronic ballot. But the process was rather cumbersome to do that and time consuming. Well, we asked people what methods they wanted to use to vote in the future. And one of the options was electronic ballot delivery. And about 5% of people said that was the way they prefer to cast their ballot. I think some of that reflects the fact that it's not widely available yet. And probably a lot of people don't know about it. Right, exactly. And how, how have these results sort of compared across time? So for example, what was the state of affairs for accessibility in voting prior to the ADA vs after the ADA? And then, you know, you describe it a little bit the comparison between 2012 and 2020. How is that experience for disabled voters evolved over time?

Doug Kruse

We really don't know much about the voting experience of people with disabilities. Before the ADA, there just really aren't any data, the rent server surveys done on this, there were not explicit protections for people with disabilities in polling places. At that time, the ADA provided some but in a very general way, it wasn't until the 2000 to Help America Vote Act, have that there is explicit requirements that every polling place has to be accessible. Every polling place has to have an accessible voting machine for people with vision impairments in particular. So there's been just a tremendous increase in the legal standards there. However, many polling places are not accessible. In 2016, the the US Government Accountability Office, did a study of polling places, they actually went out to polling places abroad sample and found that 83%, about five out of six of them still had potential impediments to voting by people with disabilities, which is just remarkable. This was what you know, 14 years after, after Hubble was passed on that there is still 83% of them have potential impediments. So there are obviously ongoing problems.

Qudsiya Naqui

I didn't realize that figure that's astounding and quite shocking, I would say, and I mean, layer on top of that, in 2020, the challenges of the pandemic and I'm interested to see how to what extent that came up, I remember reading a story about I believe it was in Alabama, because of social distancing, and what have you, people in wheelchairs who couldn't access the buildings weren't able to do curbside voting and things like that. So yeah, I'm curious about given that state of affairs, what the effects of the pandemic were layered on top of just the basic accessibility issues that you just described.

Doug Kruse

Well, interestingly, we really didn't know what to expect going into our survey, whether the pandemic in 2020 would create all the additional problems for people disabilities. Interestingly, it probably if anything decreased the problems given the great expansion of voting by mail options that, you know, for example, in in New Jersey, everyone received a ballot in the mail, I voted. For the first time since college days I voted by mail and a number a number of states, the expanded vote by mail options, the rate of difficulty is lower for everyone except those with visual impairments. The rate of difficulty is lower and only by mail than voting in a polling place. So if anything, the pandemic probably helped the situation for people with disabilities. We won't know until next month the Census Bureau is going to be releasing. Its big Data data file on voter turnout. And we're going to be, of course, jumping on that and doing an analysis of it, we won't really know until that comes out how the turnout, the relative turnout of people disabilities, compares between 2020. And earlier years in earlier years, the result is a pretty consistent gap of between six and seven percentage points, it may have closed this last year due to the in part to the rate expansion of mail voting options.

Qudsiya Naqui

That will be really interesting to see once that data comes out. So we're recording this now in March. So hopefully, by later in the year, and in a month or so well, we'll be able to see what that looks like. That's really interesting. What are the key things you would want election officials, policymakers, lawmakers to take away from your report from 2020?

Lisa Schur

Well, we're not policymakers. But um, I think the broad takeaway is that the more options, there are, the better for people with disabilities, the fact that there was more early voting in 2020, I'm sorry, and mayline options were easier that combined with greater polling place accessibility, all of that helps. So I would just encourage policymakers to keep those options available for people and to expand them and not to try and retract them.

Qudsiya Naqui

Yeah, that's really interesting. And what we're seeing in some states is, is a pulling back of that variety in terms of options and modes of voting, you know, some of that really has to do with, you know, in summonses, a lot of attempts at sort of voter suppression, particularly for African American voters. So I'm curious what your thoughts are about, like, if you've seen anything in your studies about the intersection between race and disability and access to voting, and how those two things kind of interact, to create barriers for people?

Lisa Schur

We did look at that. That wasn't the main focus of the study. But we did look at that. And we found that black voters with disabilities waited online twice as long as white voters with disabilities. So the average for black voters with disabilities was 45 minutes, which is a long time, I mean, something waiting, standing in line and waiting, which is inconvenient for everybody can really just be impossible for a lot of people who have difficulty standing for long periods of time, for example. So this is a real problem.

Qudsiya Naqui

Yeah. And then if you layer on top of that tactics that are often used to suppress voting for people of color, and then the barriers of disability, I mean, you have a real challenge on your hands, I think from an election administration standpoint. So in your ideal sort of world, what do you want to see for voting for disabled people in the future? What do you imagine in that future?

Doug Kruse

It's a great question after the great expansion of mail in voting was last year. And now we have five states that do all vote by mail. You one might think, well, the future is all vote by mail. You know, we're all going to be voting by mail in the future. One of the questions we asked at the end of the survey was, and we asked this voters and non voters we asked, if you wanted to vote in the next election, how would you prefer to cast your vote, and we gave five options. And interestingly, the top option for both people with and without disabilities was a voting in a polling place. We found 49%. Almost half of people with disabilities said they would prefer to vote in the polling place and the neck postpartum there was a voting by mail was 1/3. So half of people definitely want to vote in a polling place. 60%, or three out of five of people without disabilities said they want to vote in the polling place. And what's really interesting about that, is that even though voting by mail is easier for most people to go people with disabilities with mobility impairments and so forth. Nonetheless, half of them still want to go to a polling place. And we found some interesting confirmation of that in, in some focus groups. We did, do you want to describe?

Lisa Schur

Yeah, so we did a several focus groups before we released the survey, because we wanted to refine our questions and make sure that you know, we weren't missing any important questions. And a number of people in the focus groups, these were people with disabilities who had voted in the primaries, a number of people spontaneously said, it's really important for me to vote in person, and to show up and vote with my fellow citizens and to be visible to be seeing that yes, I'm a person with a disability and I'm voting at a polling place and this is an important part of democracy just like everyone just like everyone else.

Doug Kruse

Yeah, I'm in a wheelchair, myself and not and I understand that I built that as well and kind of proud when I had gone to polling places and and have people see me here in my wheelchair going into vote like everyone else. Now, there is a political scientist called this A demonstrative aspect of voting it's it's not just marking your preference in an isolation on a ballot, it's participating in an act with other members of the community. You know, when you asked about what's the future of voting look like the future of voting, as Lisa said, should include lots of options, but it should voting in a polling place is one of those important options people still want, even after the pandemic.

Qudsiya Naqui

That's really interesting. And I as a, as a blind person, myself, I would agree with that wholeheartedly. I mean, even though my experience of voting in 2016 was a little bit stressful and a little bit challenging, and I experienced barriers, that moment of, you know, submitting my my completed ballot and casting my vote, and being with other people in that act of democracy was really powerful and really important. And I think, yes, I think options are great. I mean, as I was someone who was not comfortable during the pandemic, showing up at my polling place, at that time, and so having the option to mail in my ballot, I'll be it not having been able to complete it independently or confidentially. But being able to do that was really, really important. And I'm sure it is really important for people with, you know, who who has mobility issues, who are disabilities who would prefer to, you know, vote by mail all the time. So because you know, everyone's sort of different in their preferences. But yeah, having options, but also preserving and making sure that that polling place access is really paramount and important is really key. I think,

Doug Kruse

Lisa said that the main advice to policymakers is to keep a lot of options. And that really reflects the variation in the disability population, all kinds of different disabilities, different kinds of challenges and limitations people face. Well, when you've got that tremendous variation, then having a greater number of options maximizes the chance that someone with a particular limitation will be able to find the option that works for them. So he's just kind of basic, basic math as it were the you increase the chance that people will find a workable option, if you have more more options available.

Lisa Schur

Yeah, just want to go back for a second to something you had mentioned, just about the importance of for some people of voting in person to polling place. And I think part of it is that historically, people with disabilities have been invisible. They've been isolated, they've been marginalized. And so it's important to like say, No, I'm visible. I'm here. I'm with you. I'm not other on part of democracy.

Qudsiya Naqui

Yeah, absolutely. Did you notice any states that were doing this particularly well, like if you aggregate analyzed your data by state where there was like a higher rate of satisfaction or access?

Doug Kruse

Actually, no, that's a great question. And several people have asked us about this, our sample is about 2600. And we can't really break it down by state to get meaningful samples within each state. When the Census Bureau data come out next month, they have a sample of 90,000. With those data, we can look at voter turnout, really just at voter turnout, and how people voted, you know, by mail or polling place. They don't have all of our rich data on the voting experience difficulties encountered and all that kind of stuff. But they do have the very large sample with that basic voter turnout data. And then and we'll be using that to do state by state comparisons.

Qudsiya Naqui

Oh, that's so exciting. I'm looking forward to the next round of your analysis. Where do you anticipate that to be released?

Doug Kruse

In 2018, they released the date on April 23, of the following year. So April 23, of this year, is our best guess. And of course, we'll jump on it and produce a report. And in just a few days, I imagine.

Lisa Schur

I mean, one thing we'll be able to do also is to look at states and look at what kind of systems they used or what kind of procedures they use. So like New Jersey, everybody got a mail in ballot and you could use it or not use it as you as you chose. And other states still made it more difficult for people to get them so we might be able to do some comparisons.

Doug Kruse

The most restrictive states states like Texas, they have an excuse required system where you can only get a mail ballot if you have a an excuse such as having a documented disability or some other reason like that. We found in past research, we and others have found that excuse requiring states, the turnout of people disabilities is especially low. And that's important because there's a stigma to still stigma to having disability. People don't want to mark on a on an official government form. Yes, I have a disability. There's a reluctance to do that. I think.

Lisa Schur

Yeah. And the other, the other thing that can really decrease turnout is if you have to fill out this request for every election. So you can't just say I want to vote by mail going forward. You have to you know, for this for the primaries, you have to say that and then you'd have to send something in for the next election and so forth, and that can can limit turnout as well.

Doug Kruse

So there's some states there Yeah. Permanent no excuse ballots.

Lisa Schur

Right? So you just say I want to vote by mail is the best.

Qudsiya Naqui

Ah. So you only have to mark that one time.

Lisa Schur

Right.

Doug Kruse

Yeah.

Qudsiya Naqui

That's so interesting. Well, I'm really looking forward to your analysis of the Census Bureau data. And I'll be sure to share it with our listeners. So they can they can check out your analysis and and what your thoughts are about that. But this has been such a fantastic conversation. Thank you both so much for taking the time to speak with me.

Doug Kruse

That's been great. Thanks. Yes, absolutely. We're very happy to talk. And I just wanted to mention briefly that, you know, obviously, Lisa, and I have a lot of experience with disability in our own lives, we're very concerned about, you know, ensuring that people with disabilities have the right to vote, our research. Our research is very objective. It's very scientific. It's very, you know, we provide numbers that did not reflect our show what the numbers are just the facts, ma'am. But we want to use those results. To help promote the idea that people with disabilities should have full access to voting just like everyone else should have full access to voting. We do very objective research, pretty passionate about this. Ensuring everyone can participate in democracy.

Qudsiya Naqui

Wonderful. Thank you both so much. Well, thanks. Thank you. Thanks for listening to this episode of Down to the Struts. This podcast would not be possible without the energy and creativity of Avery, Anna Paul and Ilana Nevins. If you want to support our work, become a patron by visiting www.patreon.com/DowntotheStruts. Also, be sure to subscribe rate and review the podcast on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you love to listen. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts. And you can also join our Facebook group at Down to the Struts podcast and become part of our growing community. Thanks as always for listening and stay tuned for our next episode coming into your feeds on Tuesday, August 11. So we can get back down to it.