

The US Election: What Next?

The torture is over, the US Presidential Election which has lasted for an eternity it seems, has ended. Donald Trump has unexpectedly won the Presidential Election. Now that the campaign and all the rhetoric that has come along with have come to a close, we'll look at what it might mean for disabled people in the US.

It's important to reflect how different the main candidates' political experience is. Hillary Clinton has been involved in political campaigning and politics for over 50 years. She has been; First Lady of Arkansas [1979-1981 and 1983-1992] when Bill Clinton was Governor, and First Lady of the United States between 1993 and 2001. She was twice elected to the US Senate and served from 2001 and 2009. She ran for presidential nomination in 2008 losing to Barack Obama. Obama made her Secretary of State [Foreign Minister] for 4 years. By contrast, Donald Trump has never held any political office and his only experience has been this campaign itself. He has however donated money to politicians, including, funnily enough, to Hillary Clinton!

Hillary Clinton's decades in politics have given her the opportunity to influence and improve legislation for disabled people. Whilst she was First Lady she supported the creation of the Office of Disability Policy within the Department of Labor. In 2003 whilst she was Senator she supported increasing the provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], and in 2008 she supported amendments to the Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA], which is the equivalent of the former Disability Discrimination Act in Britain. In 2010 when she was Secretary of State she appointed Judith Hermann, herself disabled, as a Special Advisor for International Disability Rights and helped support the signing of the UN Convention on The Rights of Disabled People. She initiated the Expanding the Promise for Individuals with Autism Act [EPIAA] in 2007, but couldn't garner enough support from Congress to make it law. It is important to acknowledge that all of these gains for disabled people have been driven mainly by disabled people, but on the face of it she seems to have been a supporter. During this current campaign Hillary Clinton pledged to make colleges more accessible, ban sub-minimum wages for disabled people and improve hiring practices. She also proposed an 'Autism Initiative'.

Donald Trump, has never been in office, so must be judged by what he's said during the campaign. With regards disability, he and his policy advisors have come up grand number of.... zero policies for disabled people. Not one single policy. In fact, when the head of RespectAbility, a disabled rights organisation, visited with a questionnaire about disability issues he twice refused to fill it out. This is in contrast to Hillary Clinton who did sign. Trump also stirred controversy when he mocked a disabled reporter in public.

His seeming lack of interest and controversies with disabled people doesn't end there, in 2005 a quadriplegic man sued Trump Productions, the company that produces the Apprentice in America and that stars Donald Trump, after they refused his application to appear on his show because he wasn't in 'excellent physical and mental health'. In 2007 the Justice Department found his Taj Mahal Hotel to be in violation of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

So what happens now that Donald Trump is US president?

Trump and his team don't seem likely to initiate improvements in disability policy. There is a question over to what degree they will stifle the efforts of disabled people to achieve independence and equality. Trumps apparent plans to change Medicaid could also have a big impact on disabled people in the US – although to be fair his reported views on this are quite varied, so who knows what is really planned.

However, it may come as a surprise to many that he may in fact be a slightly moderating influence on the more right wing Republicans in Congress. Trump, for most of his life has actually been a supporter of the Democratic Party. Although it's unlikely that he or the Congress will propose legislation intended to specifically improve disabled people's lives, it might not be as bad as one would imagine. This will probably provide little comfort to most, but one has to try and look for hope somewhere.

All Civil Rights groups, including ones for disabled people, have to, in the end, work with the political reality that they've been dealt with and continue with the fight in spite of it.

Written by a Merton CIL member and volunteer