

Introduction

Federal policy has profoundly shaped the lives of disabled people, shaping access to employment, education, and healthcare. Presidents are uniquely positioned to shape both the substance of disability policy and the ideological frameworks that inform it. But how do they conceptualize disability? To identify presidential understandings of disability, this project applies descriptive statistical and discourse analysis to 132 disability-related Presidential speeches between 1934 and 2023. Preliminary findings from descriptive analysis show that disability constitutes a minority of presidential speech, has declined over time, increases with personal connections to disability, and varies by party affiliation. Ongoing discourse analysis will trace whether presidential conceptualizations vary by party affiliation, have shifted over time, align with medical or social models, and constitute a distinct political model. This study extends discussions of disability in political speech and furthers a perspective of disability as politically-constructed.

Literature Review

Existing literature demonstrates that the form of disability policy reflects the conceptual underpinnings of the theoretical model of disability that it draws from (Scotch and Schriener, 1997). For instance, Lunt and Thornton's (1994) discourse analysis argues that disability employment policies are informed by either the medical or social model of disability. This theoretical orientation affects whether policy addresses disabled employment through the lens of individual deficit, such as financial incentives for employers, or through the lens of transforming work environments, such as requiring accessible workplaces. More recently, scholars have identified this same dynamic in other policy domains, such as approaches to inclusive education (Knight et al. 2023). Examining how key political actors conceptualize disability illuminates the

ideological foundations from which disability policy emerges and uncovers how disability is constructed within political institutions beyond what is legible in formal policy outcomes.

Compared to analyses of policy arrangements, the role of disability within political discourse is relatively undertheorized. Studies mainly examine how disabled politicians, primarily FDR, discussed their own disability. These studies conclude that FDR's polio was a political issue that had to be hidden from the public through coordinated efforts (Gallagher, 1999). Further, FDR worked to project an image of rehabilitation and strength while repurposing disability as rhetorical tool to characterize an ailing nation and deficient political opponents (Houck and Kiewe, 2003). The present study extends this literature by shifting analytical focus from presidents' management of their own disability to how presidents construct disability as a social and political category within their speeches.

Data and Methods

Presidential speeches were gathered through the University of California, Santa Barbara's *American Presidency Project* (APP), which contains published collections of presidential documents. Using Python, the authors scraped APP's digital database to gather a corpus of 20,588 speeches given from President Franklin D. Roosevelt through Joe Biden. We then identified speeches concerning disability from this corpus. To include meaningful discussions of disability and exclude passing or metaphorical mentions, we retained speeches with at least three paragraphs containing a mention of a disability-related keyword (e.g. disability, handicap, wheelchair). Further, to capture sustained discussions of disability, we required those three paragraphs to occur within a five-paragraph window. After applying these inclusion criteria, the final corpus comprised of 132 Presidential speeches (approximately 1,000 pages of text).

Descriptive analysis of Presidential speeches reveals how frequently Presidents mention disability, whether those mentions constitute sustained engagements or fleeting references, and how prominently disability figures in their overall political speech. Meanwhile, discourse analysis (Ruiz, 2009) will enable analysis of how Presidents understand disability. Speech text will first be analyzed at the contextual level to situate disability discourse within its historical and political conditions, including presidential party affiliation and historical period. Second, speech text will be analyzed at the interpretive level to categorize Presidential disability discourse by ideology. Specifically, we will classify Presidential disability discourse according to its theoretical underpinnings. A priori theoretical categories will consist of the medical and social models of disability (Oliver, 1990), and additional categories will be created as necessary if they emerge from the data. By connecting contextual and interpretive levels of discourse analysis, we will address the following four questions: 1) Do presidents' conceptualizations of disability vary by party affiliation? 2) Has presidential conceptualization of disability changed over time? 3) Do presidents' conceptualizations of disability align with the medical or social model of disability? 4) Are presidents' conceptualizations of disability theoretically unique?

Preliminary Findings

Here, we present preliminary findings from our descriptive analysis. Speeches containing a disability-related keyword constituted a small minority of all Presidential speeches. Out of 20,588 speeches, 2,474 (1.2%) contained a disability keyword. The infrequency with which disability was discussed suggests that disability commands relatively little political attention. The majority of speeches mentioning disability contained fleeting references, with 1,865 (75.38%) doing so in only one paragraph. Thus, disability in presidential speech is more often invoked fleetingly or as metaphor rather than engaged with substantively as a policy area. The 132

speeches meeting our inclusion criteria for meaningful discussion of disability constituted an even smaller minority of total disability mentions (5.34%) and total speeches (0.64%).

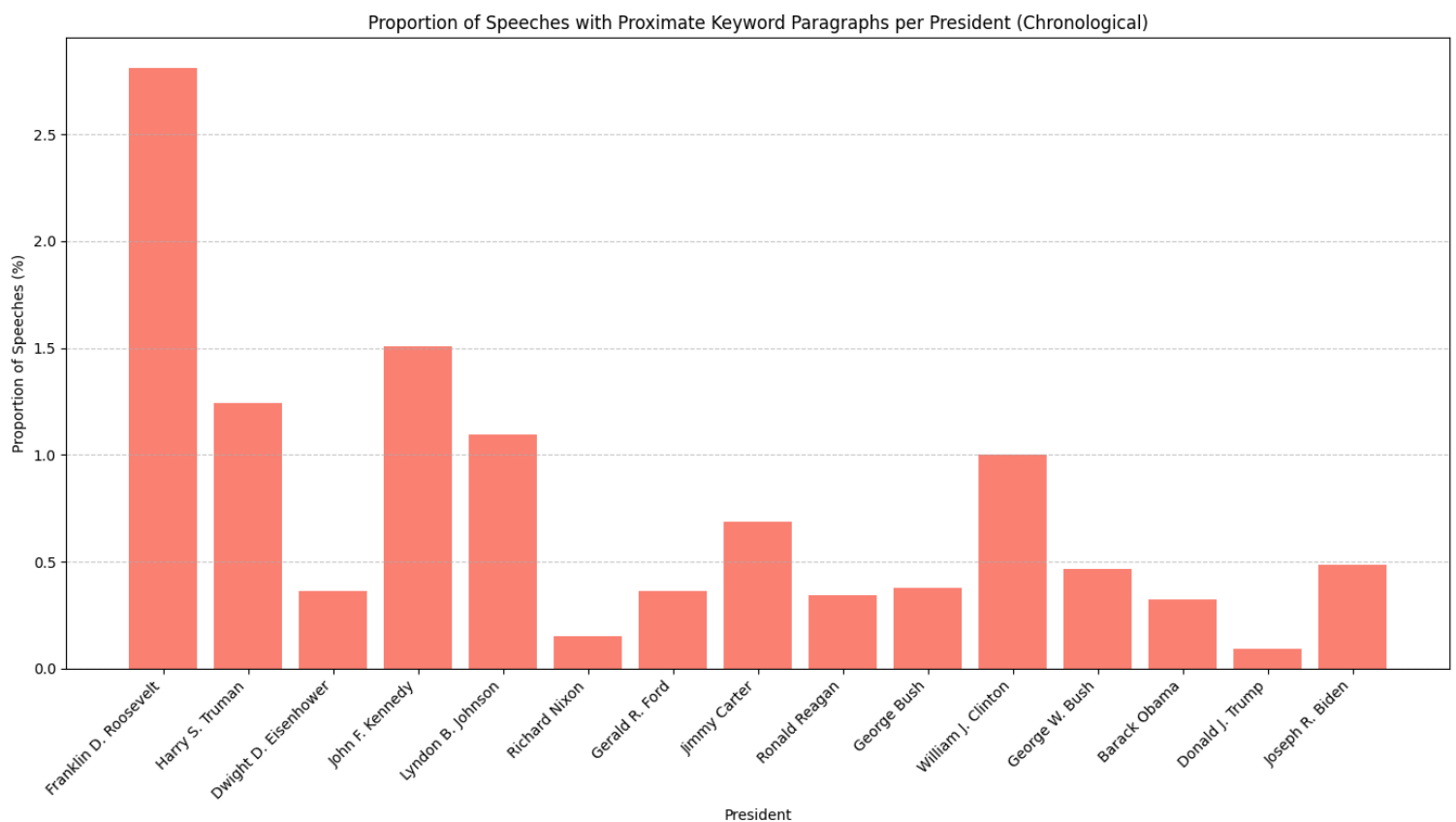
Table 1 displays each President's proportion of speeches containing meaningful discussions of disability. Overall, the Table depicts a general decline in meaningful discussions of disability over time. This historical decline in presidential disability speech may reflect broader sociopolitical shifts, including the rise of neoliberalism and the retrenchment of the welfare state. Roosevelt, who himself had polio (Davis and Kiewe, 2003), had by far the highest proportion of speeches containing meaningful discussions of disability at 2.81%. Kennedy, whose sister was intellectually disabled (O'Brien, 2004), discussed disability the second most (1.5%). This suggests that a personal connection to the experience of disability may be associated with greater attention to disability in political speech. Conversely, Trump discussed disability the least (0.09%). Surprisingly, Presidents who signed key pieces of disability legislation were among those who discussed disability least frequently in their speeches. This includes Nixon (Rehabilitation Act, 0.15%) and George H.W. Bush (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Americans with Disabilities Act, 0.38%). Democratic Presidents had a higher median proportion of meaningful disability speeches than Republicans (1.05% vs 0.36%). This difference indicates a possible association between party affiliation and political disability speech.

Discussion and Next Steps

Though presidents address disability infrequently, their disability rhetoric may nonetheless be consequential in establishing the ideological terms of disability policy. Preliminary descriptive analysis suggests that the occurrence of political disability speech is shaped by historical period, personal life, and party affiliation.

Proceeding analysis will continue with discourse analysis (Ruiz, 2009) of the final corpus. Qualitative coding of speech text will be conducted using Atlas.ti. Codes will reflect three analytical categories: party affiliation (Democrat or Republican), historical period (Great Society, Rehabilitation Act, and Americans with Disabilities Act), and theoretical orientation (medical model, social model, or other). Discourse analysis will be completed by June 2026.

Table 1



References

Gallagher, Hugh Gregory. 1999. *FDR's Splendid Deception*. St. Petersburg: Vandamere Press.

Houck, Davis W and Amos Kiewe. 2003. *FDR's Body Politics: The Rhetoric of Disability*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.

Knight, Cathryn, Carmel Conn, Tom Crick, and Sian Brooks. 2022. "Divergences in the framing of inclusive education across the UK: a four nations critical policy analysis." *Educational Review* 77(2):495-511.

Lunt, Neil and Patricia Thornton. 1994. "Disability and employment: towards an understanding of discourse and policy." *Disability & Society* 9(2):223-238.

O'Brien, Gerald. 2004. "Rosemary Kennedy: the Importance of a Historical Footnote." *Journal of Family History* 29(3):225-236.

Oliver, Michael. 1990. *The Politics of Disablement*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Ruiz, Jorge Ruiz. 2009. "Sociological Discourse Analysis: Methods and Logic." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 10(2).

Scotch, Richard K and Kay Schriener. 1997. "Disability as Human Variation: Implications for Policy." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 549(1):148-159.