

Last In, First Out: Disability Rights as the Earliest Casualty of Democratic Backsliding

A satirical-serious conceptual analysis of normality, administrative convenience, and the authoritarian urge

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Date: 2026-01-18

Author note. This article is written in a deliberately academic register with controlled satire. Any conceptual indices are explicitly illustrative and should not be mistaken for empirical measurement. Unfortunately, the institutional behaviours described are not satirical.

Abstract

This paper proposes and elaborates a 'Last In, First Out' (LIFO) model of disability rights in democratic states. The model predicts that disabled people are typically the last group to receive enforceable rights, and the first to lose meaningful access when democratic norms erode. Integrating disability studies, political theory, and systems science, the paper argues that 'normal' functions less as description and more as governance technology: a fictive baseline used to justify ranking, exclusion, and conditional citizenship. The analysis offers a set of early-warning indicators for democratic backsliding that are observable through disability policy and public accessibility. A contemporary case study is drawn from a U.S. federal court complaint alleging the abrupt removal of in-frame American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation from White House briefings in 2025. The broader conclusion is blunt: where access becomes optional, rights become seasonal; and once a state discovers it can quietly withdraw rights from one group, it will eventually reuse the method on others.

Keywords: disability rights, democracy, authoritarianism, normalisation, accessibility, LIFO model, administrative discretion

1. Introduction

Democracies rarely announce the erosion of rights with a press release titled 'We regret to inform you: pluralism is cancelled.' They prefer procedural language: efficiency, sustainability, burden reduction, compliance, fraud control, and the ever-versatile 'community expectations.' This paper treats disability rights as an instrument panel for democratic health. The thesis is not sentimental. It is operational: disabled people are often the last to be protected by enforceable rights, and the first to experience the practical withdrawal of those rights when democratic safeguards degrade.

The key mechanism is the politics of 'normal'. Normal is frequently invoked as if it were a stable empirical quantity. In practice, it is a regulatory preference: an aesthetic of citizenship. A state can tolerate diversity, or it can demand legibility. When it demands legibility, it will inevitably construct a template citizen and downgrade everyone else. That downgrade begins where public sympathy is most dispensable and where administrative discretion is easiest to hide: disability.

A caution for Australia is included not because Australia is uniquely precarious, but because it is human, institutional, and therefore tempted by the same shortcuts: govern by categories, ration by suspicion, and treat access as a budget line rather than a democratic commitment.

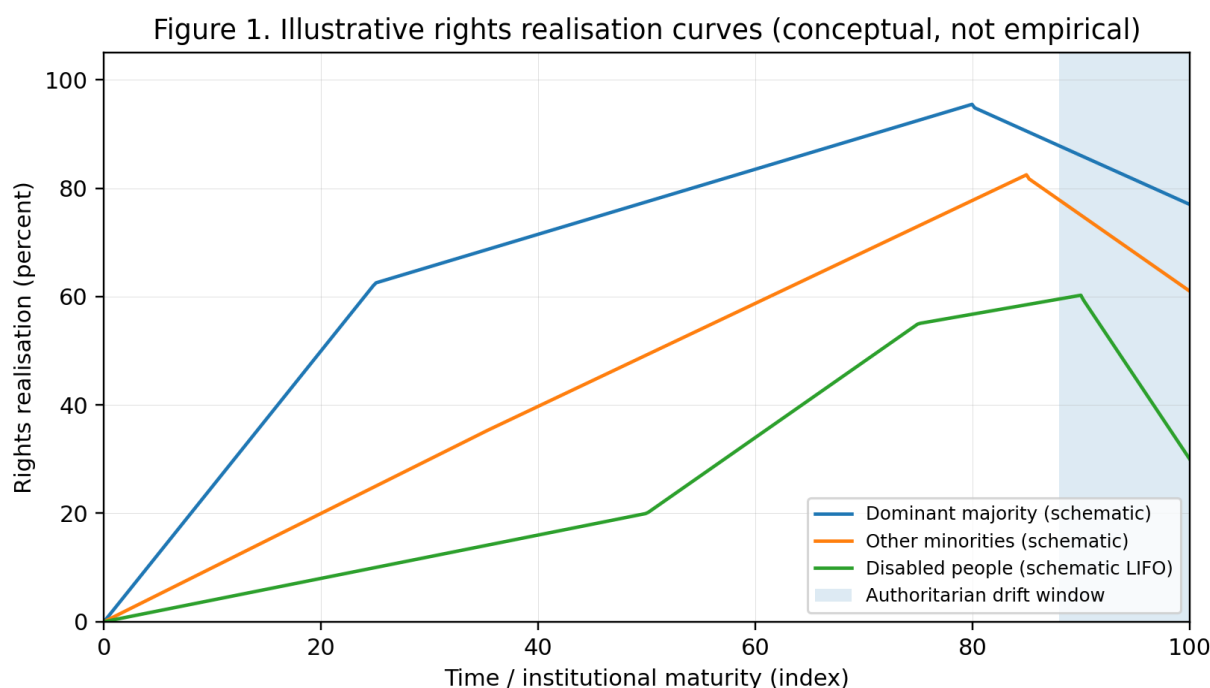


Figure 1. Illustrative rights realisation curves. The curves are schematic and used to visualise the LIFO hypothesis: rights for disabled people tend to arrive later and be withdrawn earlier under authoritarian drift.

2. Background: Normalisation as governance

Normalisation is commonly presented as benevolent alignment: helping people function, participate, and belong. In institutional practice it frequently becomes performance management of personhood. It asks not 'what does this person need to live well?' but 'how can we reduce the visible cost of their difference?' The danger is not trains, dolls, feathers, routines, or intense interests. The danger is the state (and its outsourced contractors) treating harmless difference as defect, defect as risk, and risk as justification for control. An obsession with normal is, therefore, an obsession with ranking humanity.

In the language of systems theory, diversity is not 'noise' but capacity. A society facing complex environments requires internal variety to adapt. When institutions suppress variety for administrative simplicity, they trade resilience for short-term managerial comfort. The bill arrives later as crisis. The invoice is paid first by those already classified as non-standard.

3. Theory: The LIFO model of rights

The proposed LIFO model has two claims:

- **Late inclusion:** disability rights are adopted after other civil rights expansions because they demand structural change (access, accommodation, redistribution) rather than symbolic recognition alone.
- **Early withdrawal:** when democratic norms erode, disability rights are curtailed early because they can be reframed as optional services, 'special treatment', or fiscal indulgence.

This is not a claim about moral worth. It is a claim about incentives. Disability rights require institutions to change their default settings. Authoritarian systems dislike default changes. They prefer default obedience.

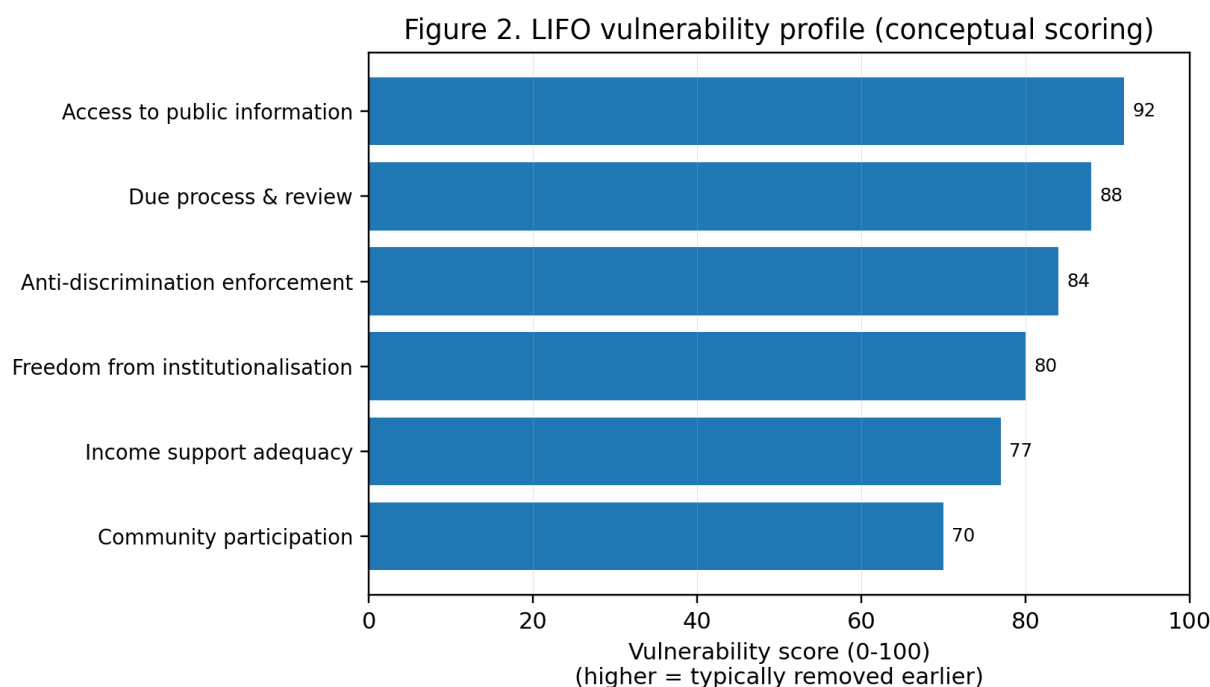


Figure 2. A conceptual vulnerability profile consistent with the LIFO hypothesis. Domains that rely on enforceable access (information, due process, anti-discrimination) are often degraded first during backsliding because the harm is quiet and the constituency is treated as negotiable.

4. Methods

This paper uses conceptual analysis supported by a contemporary accessibility case study. The goal is not to claim a new dataset but to formalise a pattern that is repeatedly observable in how states ration access and redefine citizenship. The analysis proceeds in three stages: (1) define the governance function of 'normal', (2) specify the LIFO mechanism, (3) map early-warning indicators.

A note on tone: satire is used as a precision instrument. It highlights contradictions that conventional policy prose tends to sanitise. If a claim sounds absurd, that is typically because it has been implemented before.

5. Case study: Accessibility as a rights barometer

A practical test of rights is whether a government allows disabled people to access public information in real time, without delays, intermediaries, or 'reasonable alternatives' that are not actually accessible. One contemporary example appears in a complaint filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia in May 2025.

The complaint alleges that the White House provided in-frame ASL interpreters for public briefings for four years beginning January 2021, then stopped using ASL interpreters in January 2025, thereby denying hundreds of thousands of deaf and hard of hearing Americans meaningful access to real-time communications. It further argues that closed captions are not an adequate substitute for many ASL users, and references a 2020 preliminary injunction requiring ASL interpretation for COVID-19 briefings. It notes that an internal accessibility policy memorandum was adopted in April 2021 and implemented through 2024. The alleged 2025 withdrawal, by contrast, occurred despite the existence of established guidelines and prior practice.

In other words: access was technically feasible, previously delivered, and institutionally normalised - and was still removed. This is the LIFO mechanism in miniature: rights that depend on political will can be switched off faster than the lights in a budget meeting.

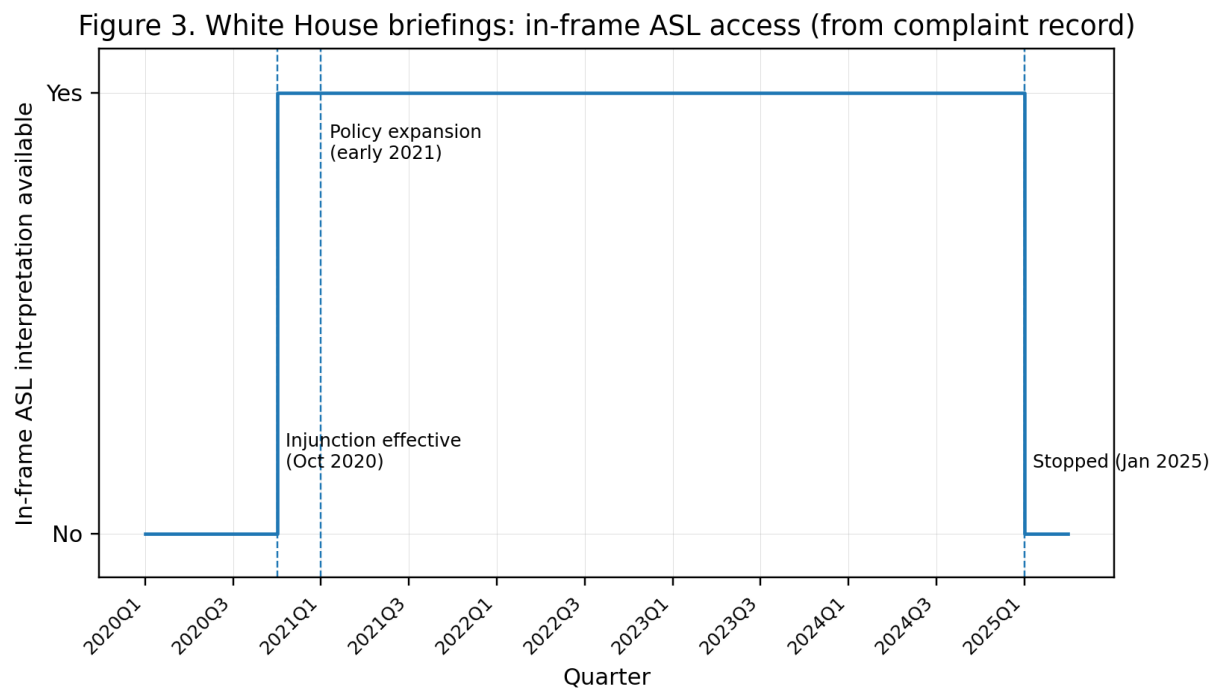


Figure 3. In-frame ASL interpretation availability for White House briefings, summarised from the complaint record (schematic timeline). The key analytic point is the discontinuity: access existed, systems existed, and the withdrawal was a choice.

This case study is not used to adjudicate the legal merits (courts will do court things). It is used to illustrate an indicator: when a state retracts basic accessibility to its own communications, it is rehearsing a broader withdrawal of reciprocal citizenship.

A democracy that cannot be bothered making itself legible to disabled people is not merely being rude. It is reducing the electorate. Quietly. Legally. In high definition.

6. Results: Early-warning indicators

The LIFO model yields a set of observable indicators that can be monitored without waiting for the constitutional collapse to arrive with a marching band.

Indicator	What it looks like
Information access	Removal of interpreters, accessible formats, or live accessibility in government communication channels; replacement with 'alternatives' known to be inadequate.
Procedural degradation	Shortened review timelines, reduced merits review, increased discretionary decision-making, and expanded 'internal guidelines' that are unchallengeable.
Conditional support	Eligibility tied to compliance, 'participation', or behavioural conformity; supports framed as rewards for being palatable.
Cost moralisation	Public narratives that equate disability support with indulgence, fraud, or societal unfairness; frequent use of 'unsustainable' without specifying whose lives are being balanced.
Institutional drift	Expansion of segregated settings, involuntary placements, or coercive practices justified as safety, care, or capacity building.

These indicators share a property: they can be plausibly denied. That deniability is the feature. Backsliding is rarely marketed as backsliding. It is sold as good governance.

A technical definition of the problem can be stated as follows: when rights depend on administrative discretion, the state can withdraw them without debating them. Democracy is not only threatened by coups; it is threatened by spreadsheets.

7. Discussion: Why everyone should care

A common public reaction to disability rights erosion is: 'This is terrible, but it does not affect me.' This reaction is understandable and strategically disastrous. Disabled people are not the endpoint; they are the testing environment. A state learns techniques of limitation on the population least likely to be believed, least likely to be accommodated in protest, and most likely to be framed as a cost.

The move from democracy to authoritarianism is rarely a leap. It is a series of small, reversible, highly professional choices. If you are looking for the moment to be alarmed, start when the state treats access as negotiable. Because once the state has discovered it can remove access from one group with minimal consequences, it becomes irrational (in the cold administrative sense) not to reuse the method.

In Australia, this has specific resonance. Administrative systems that allocate supports, services, and participation opportunities are often built around eligibility tests, evidentiary burdens, and shifting interpretive guidelines. Such systems can do immense good, but they also create a single point of failure: when the institutional mood changes, rights can degrade into 'program settings.' Program settings are famously vulnerable to elections.

Or, stated in the simplest possible terms: if disabled people can be excluded today, you are not safe tomorrow. You are merely currently compliant with the template.

8. Policy recommendations

- Treat accessibility as a democratic baseline, not a service add-on (and certainly not a favour).
- Reduce discretionary withdrawal points by embedding clear duties to provide access and reasons-based decision-making.
- Strengthen independent oversight with real enforcement power and transparency obligations.
- Design eligibility and review processes for real humans, not hypothetical average citizens with infinite paperwork stamina.
- Stop using 'normal' as an outcome measure. Measure wellbeing, autonomy, and participation on the person's terms.

Note: these recommendations are intentionally boring. That is the point. The opposite of authoritarian drift is not inspiration; it is enforceable procedure.

9. Limitations and future research

This paper is conceptual and uses illustrative figures. Future work should test the LIFO model empirically using cross-national policy datasets, accessibility auditing of government communications, and longitudinal tracking of enforcement actions and review outcomes. Additionally, qualitative work should document how normalisation language changes during periods of political polarisation, especially in administrative agencies where rights are implemented through guidelines rather than statute.

10. Conclusion

The LIFO model makes a prediction that democracies ignore at their peril: disability rights are a leading indicator. When a state starts narrowing the definition of acceptable citizenship, disabled people are the first to be reclassified as optional. Once that reclassification becomes routine, it does not remain contained.

If you want to know whether democratic erosion is occurring, do not only watch the speeches. Watch the access. Authoritarianism is often introduced as a minor formatting update.

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Data availability: Figures 1-2 are conceptual schematics generated for this article. Figure 3 is a schematic timeline derived from the cited complaint record.