



# **Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest US Minority Its Rights**

*Lennard Davis*

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**The first significant book on the history and impact of the ADA—the “eyes on the prize” moment for disability rights**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is the widest-ranging and most comprehensive piece of civil rights legislation ever passed in the United States, and it has become the model for disability-based laws around the world. Yet the surprising story behind how the bill came to be is little known.

In this riveting account, acclaimed disability scholar Lennard J. Davis delivers the first behind-the-scenes and on-the-ground narrative of how a band of leftist Berkeley hippies managed to make an alliance with upper-crust, conservative Republicans to bring about a truly bipartisan bill. Based on extensive interviews with all the major players involved including legislators and activists, Davis recreates the dramatic tension of a story that is anything but a dry account of bills and speeches. Rather, it's filled with one indefatigable character after another, culminating in explosive moments when the hidden army of the disability community stages scenes like the iconic “Capitol Crawl” or an event some describe as “deaf Selma,” when students stormed Gallaudet University demanding a “Deaf President Now!”

From inside the offices of newly formed disability groups to secret breakfast meetings surreptitiously held outside the White House grounds, here we meet countless unsung characters, including political heavyweights and disability advocates on the front lines. “You want to fight?” an angered Ted Kennedy would shout in an upstairs room at the Capitol while negotiating the final details of the ADA. Congressman Tony Coelho, whose parents once thought him to be possessed by the devil because of his epilepsy, later became the bill's primary sponsor. There's Justin Dart, adorned in disability power buttons and his signature cowboy hat, who took to the road canvassing fifty states, and people like Patrisha Wright, also known as “The General,” Arlene Myerson or “the brains,” “architect” Bob Funk, and visionary Mary Lou Breslin, who left the hippie highlands of the West to pursue equal rights in the marble halls of DC.

Published for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ADA, *Enabling Acts* promises to ignite readers in a discussion of disability rights by documenting this “eyes on the prize” moment for tens of millions of American citizens.

## **Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest US Minority Its Rights Details**

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## **From Reader Review Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest US Minority Its Rights for online ebook**

### **victor harris says**

Although a step forward, the Civil Rights Act and other legislation of the 1960s did not adequately address the needs of millions with disabilities. Building on that legislation, various segments of that population aligned to become a more potent lobbying effort and exert their influence in the political arena. They managed to recruit support from both Democrats and Republicans who were sympathetic to their cause. It would take until 1990 during the Bush I administration until their efforts were rewarded with an updated and more comprehensive Disability Act.

Be forewarned, there is heavy focus on the legislative process as the propositions and revisions moved snake-like through that process over the course of decades. If you do not have an appetite for that type of political infighting or hair-splitting you might want to just browse for the highlights, which in themselves are important to know.

In order to achieve the goal of passing such a bill there were a number of roadblocks and the anticipated legal challenges. Among them was defining disabled. Who qualified? Other than the obvious wheelchair bound people who experienced pronounced discrimination in employment seeking and navigating buildings and transportation, the lines became blurred. Were mentally ill people eligible? Those hampered by disease? The AIDS outbreak occurred as the legislation was being drafted, were people with that virus to be included? Then there was the issue of remedies. What would be the limitations on legal action for discrimination? How should facilities be adapted? What size businesses - big, small had to comply?

With handicapped parking spots and more handicapped-friendly facilities in the modern era, we tend to take such things for granted. But it wasn't always so, and it required a herculean effort from many contributors to achieve such a level of accommodation. It is a work that shows how well-focused and persistent lobbying can have the desired outcome. One wonders if in the current polarized climate whether such a noble endeavor could be achieved.

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### **Matt Dean says**

#### **Excellent**

Many sections of this book read like an episode of The West Wing. It is a pleasant read and a solid introduction to the ADA. The extensive notes allow for further research.

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### **Morris says**

"Enabling Acts" is thorough history of the ADA from it's conception to its passage. Many don't realize how much was changed for those with physical and cognitive disabilities with the passage of the act, nor do they realize just how difficult it was to get passed. This book is well-researched and includes many facts. It can be a difficult read and meander some at times, so I would not recommend it for those looking for a light or easy read.

This unbiased review is based on a book was won through the Goodreads First Reads program.

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### **Krista says**

Incredibly in-depth and well-researched, this book shows the incredibly long journey it took to get the Americans with Disabilities Act created and passed. It gives great insight to the inner workings of the government and a peek into the lives of the politicians who helped create and pass this act.

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### **Meredith says**

This was a great eye opening look into how the ADA was conceived and passed in 1990 with a final chapter on how ableism continues 25+ years later. I loved learning how the group of unlikely collaborators worked together to make this impressive piece of civil rights legislation happen. Very impressive. And it was upsetting to realize just how few legal rights people with disabilities had before 1990. Only lost one star because it was hard for me to keep track of all the names and their stories sometimes.

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### **Nancy Kennedy says**

This book is an exhaustive treatment of how the Americans with Disabilities Act came to be proposed and passed in 1990. On the whole, there was far more detail than interested me, a person with no political leanings. But the author often focuses on the personalities involved, and that's when the narrative really engaged me. (It's why I like reading The Wall Street Journal... the focus is always on the people rather than say, the convertible subordinated debentures.)

The author delves into the families and friends of the main players to show how knowing people with disabilities and the obstacles they face powered the effort to pass this piece of civil rights legislation. I especially liked the last part of the book where the author shows how the legislation has impacted the lives of people who have been discriminated against because of their disabilities. It's really incredible what businesses and organizations try to get away with.

The day the bill was signed into law is another focus of the author's book. For those who like partisan politics, it will be fascinating to read how President Bush staged the event to make it look like a Republican triumph... by discriminating against people who worked hard for the cause but just happened to be of the wrong party!

The one thing that hindered my enjoyment of the book was the confusing grammar. The narrative ping pongs back and forth between different tenses, past and present, simple perfect (will do something) and future perfect (will have done something). It's jarring for a reader; it makes for a nonlinear narrative that forces the reader to work hard for comprehension. I recently read another book from Beacon Press (Shots on the Bridge: Police Violence and Cover-Up in the Wake of Katrina) with the same confusing construction. I guess grammar is a fluid concept for this publisher.

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## **Kara says**

Professor Lennard J. Davis has not produced a cutting-edge, controversial, or time-critical work of scholarship in disability studies in his new book *Enabling Acts*. His magnum opus has been published with some fanfare in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and consequently all critical discourse is set aside. The scope of the work is the history of this revolutionary legislation and its significance to a truly wide range of traditionally underserved and underrepresented Americans. As the author himself acknowledges, his politics as well as relevant perspectives beyond his expertise (e.g. legal technical knowledge, experience in lobbying) are not brought to bear as he designates himself as journalist-historian for purposes of his examination of this topic.

Given the limited aim of the book -- to detail the history of a legislative act -- the book can be very dry at times. However, I would recommend it widely to all readers who are students of the still-unfolding struggle for civil rights and social justice in any and all forms. Disabled people's struggles are some of the least well-known and appreciated in our society, IMHO. Knowledge of the struggle for justice to date for this group will serve to edify readers about this population and remind us all of the importance of continued attention to their needs. The history is clear, complete, and taken as a whole, an ultimately compelling story.

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## **Ellie says**

*Enabling Acts* is a fascinating, in-depth examination of the history of the Americans with Disabilities Act was created and passed in 1990. Since I have taught this legislation to my students, I thought I was familiar with it but this book revealed much information about which I was unaware.

There are wonderful portraits of the various (and many) people involved in passing this legislation. I was both heartened by the cross-party lines support (disability affects people of all political affiliations-it is estimated that 1 out of 5 Americans will be disabled at some point in the lives) and saddened by the idea that this would most likely not be possible today.

I was aware of the ways in which the disability rights movement mirrors the Civil Rights Movement but it was interesting to see the many ways in which it differs. Getting people who are physically limited or controlled by caregivers or living in institutions to participate in mass gatherings is a real challenge. The internet is a huge facilitator in this movement allowing people who otherwise would have no voice the opportunity to speak out.

Of course, the Republicans (who were in office at the time of the bill's passage) took credit for the bill but this seems to be a small price to pay for this important step in the civil rights of all Americans.

The book ends with an examination of how the legislation has affected the lives of people with disabilities who continue to face discrimination in employment and housing. It is both moving and infuriating to see how the legislation both helps yet continues to be limited in its ability to move people with disabilities completely into mainstream life. It saddened and enraged me to see how the courts have not supported the intent of the bill and how far people with disabilities still have to go to attain equal access to jobs, housing, even independent housing and public transportation.

However, the book is inspiring in its picture of how progress can be made in the advancement of all people, including our most vulnerable.

My major criticism of the book is that although there are times it reads smoothly there are other times when  
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the dryness of the writing made it difficult to continue.

I appreciate the opportunity to read this book provided by LibraryThing in exchange for an honest review. The book was both interesting and enlightening. It is an appropriate testament to this legislation at the time of its 25th anniversary, both to Acts' achievements and limitations.

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### **Tansy says**

Even though it's American I found the book fascinating and engaging. It made me realise that Australia is a long way behind even though we are a first world country.

I recommend this book for anyone interested with disabilities and human rights.

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### **Linda Wright says**

A rollercoaster ride detailing the work prior to the the passage of the ADA twenty-five years ago. The twists and turns, negotiations and compromises in the political arena were from personal accounts. The book continues to describe the court cases which failed to understand the intent of the law and the pitfalls of the original legislation. The corrective language of the ADDA.

Thanks to the Audible I was able to read this book.

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### **Winifred says**

Fascinating topic, and a well done. Interesting emphasis on the politics of how passing the ADA was accomplished related (and in some cases didn't relate) to the work of advocates. Nice acknowledgement of some of the unsung (and in some cases actually unknown) heroes who contributed on the political side, and some of the accidents of history and larger forces that led to and shaped the involvement of particular people.

Engaging quotes and accounts from the people involved are included throughout the book, and the author embellishes what could be a dry topic with colorful scenes involving politicians pounding their fists on the table and advocates confronting politicians. Nice but succinct look at what motivated some of the major players, and how they related to one another and the events they were swept up in. For example this book looks at questions like, how did some of the people who worked day and night to get this bill passed actually feel at the signing ceremony? Did the famous capitol crawl actually have any bearing on whether or not the ADA was passed? Who were the real people that contributed to this huge change that had a ripple effect the world over?

A good overview for people less familiar with this topic and who may take the ADA for granted as a forgone conclusion, and a nice complement for people who are interested in and knowledgeable about the disability rights movement from an advocacy perspective.

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## Ellie Stitzer says

this book goes very, very in depth into the process of passing the ADA. most other things I've read on this topic have just been like "the crawl on the Capitol happened and then it was passed!" so it was cool to get to read about the nitty gritty stuff behind everything. would recommend

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## Kristi Richardson says

"The ADA is an excellent example of a bipartisanship no longer extant but made possible when a Republican President, George H. W. Bush, worked together with a Democratic House and Senate."

I received this book as part of the Goodreads First Reads program for an honest review.

One in Five of every American is disabled, so I would venture to say that unless you are a hermit, you or someone you love is disabled. It is so easy to forget what life was like for the disabled in this country before the Americans with Disabilities Act gave people their freedom. When you look at a city bus and see the ramp, take the time to realize before the ADA people in wheelchairs had to stay home. It was difficult to get jobs or go to school with everyone else. The entire story of how this act was conceived and finally passed is in "Enabling Acts" by Lennard J. Davis a man whose parents were deaf.

I enjoyed reading this book because I like to see how government works when it works, and how to make it work. I also am disabled with arthritis, my husband has epilepsy, a son is autistic and a daughter suffers from Multiple Sclerosis. I don't get SSDI and don't expect to but it is helpful for my son and hopefully my daughter will be able to get assistance soon. I think the most important thing to come out of the ADA was the integration of the disabled into normal life. It is less costly in the long run to accommodate and allow people to contribute to this country.

This is a fascinating story of the ins and outs of selling an idea and encouraging people on both sides to work together and come up with a plan that works. Sometimes this book worked like a thriller to me, as I wasn't sure how they could do it with so much opposition from businesses and the transportation industries.

There are many heartwarming stories like Senator Tom Harkin from Iowa whose older brother was deaf. In the early days, there were outside programs that would train deaf people for certain jobs and Frank was forced to become a baker. He hated the job and one day a man came in and bought his bread and asked him if he liked his job. He shook his head and this man, who happened to own a factory, asked him if he would like to come and work for him, the end of the story is that Frank did great in his factory job, because he wasn't bothered by the noise. Soon the man hired more deaf workers. It is a great story and one of the reasons the bill was able to pass was the fact that so many people know someone with a handicap and know that they are no different from anyone else.

The last chapter in this book shows me that the work is not complete. Too many businesses, state, and federal government are doing their best to undo the hard work that the ADA requires.

Lennard J. Davis wrote a great book about the Americans with Disabilities Act and how it passed and became the law of the land. Anyone who loves politics will enjoy this book, anyone who is disabled or knows someone who is disabled will like this book, and if you enjoy a thriller and mystery that happens to be true, you will enjoy this book.

## Toni says

Sorry Goodreads, I thought I finished my review on this but apparently only updated my status. This book was extremely valuable for anyone who wants or needs information on how the "disabilities act," or the more positive, "enabling acts," came to be born, and the widespread areas it covers. I won this book through a Goodreads Giveaway, and I'm very appreciative. Thank you.

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## Meredith says

I was slow in starting this book, in part because of feeling generally depressed about how the ADA has failed in enforcement, particularly when it comes to employment protections. This is especially rich since the Republican justification for it was always "then more disabled people will be employed and won't need benefits." After it passed the early court decisions totally shrunk the scope of what is or isn't a disability, to the extent that when two pilots were denied employment at United Airlines because they were nearsighted if they weren't wearing glasses/contacts, the court said they didn't have protection under the ADA because their impairments were corrected via glasses. Only they were still denied based on an impairment... This ruling affects wheelchair users as well, and anyone whose impairment is corrected with a device or medication. I know many people who were denied employment because they needed the accommodation of sitting down behind a checkout counter. That tiny thing, which causes no financial impact to a business, is still keeping disabled people from working and keeping us in poverty.

Once I did start the book, it was a good, compelling read, though don't believe the cover blurb about it being "a spellbinding political thriller." Davis writes well, and with some insight into disability pre-ADA (his parents are both Deaf), but he is not disabled and he does fall into ableist language at times (though being disabled doesn't necessarily prevent that, of course). The organization of the book is good though, and he describes the people involved well. The ADA was unusual in its formation, as there was a strict agreement that meetings would go on behind closed doors (mostly without any disabled people there, by the by) and no one would talk to the press. That way there would be less press and public pressure and response to specifics of the legislation, meaning more politicians were willing to back it.

It wasn't quite a five-star read for me (and I can't help but wish it had been authored by a disabled person). I recommend this book to everyone, really, in part to increase understanding of being disabled in the US (and keeping in mind this is one of the easier places in the world to be disabled). It's also an important reminder of just how different things are now, post-ADA. Curb cutouts, elevators in metro stations, accessible buses, these are relatively new and now (mostly) ubiquitous things. There are still many architectural barriers to accessibility, but it is so much better now, and it's easy to take those seemingly simple changes for granted.

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