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## When Youth Run for Office

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# WHEN YOUTH RUN FOR OFFICE

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Bachelor of Arts  
with Honors College Graduate Distinction at  
Western Kentucky University

By

P. Francis Wilson

May 2019

\*\*\*\*\*

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*It is my hope that our children never again grow up hearing  
that politics is anything but empowering and self-less.*

To the youth that choose to challenge the norm and take action in your community:

you are roses that have blossomed from the thorns.

And to you, I dedicate this work.

*Cheers.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with gratitude that I acknowledge the support and insight of Dr. Saundra C. Ardrey, Dr. Angela M. Jerome, Dr. Donna Schiess, Dr. Helen Sterk, Siera Bramschreiber, Dr. Christopher Keller, and Kyla “Scantron” Scanlon, all of whom have helped make this project possible. I would also like to thank Dr. Jessica Ferguson for pushing me to “never be complacent;” it is through those words that I envisioned this project.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this work is threefold: to define the term ‘youth candidate’, to create a public data archive of youth candidates around the U.S., and to reveal what role age plays on the campaign trail for younger candidates. The first study shows the increase in young people running for office in the U.S.. The second study tells of age discrimination towards younger candidates on the campaign trail. Also within this document is an archive and photo album of youth candidates and their campaigns. The results of this research tell a data and experience-driven story of the quickly changing and ever-diversifying political landscape.

## VITA

### EDUCATION

- '15 - '19**      **Western Kentucky University**      *Digital Storytelling, B.A.*  
**Background:** Photo / Video / Marketing / Electoral Research
- Fall '18**      **Danish School of Journalism & Media**  
*Supervised by Europe's top photojournalists, created visual stories around identity and social justice in Denmark.*
- '14 - '15**      **Beijing No. 80 School**  
*U.S. Dept. of State scholar studying advanced Mandarin Chinese.*

### EMPLOYMENT / PROJECTS

#### **Kentucky Midterm 2018**

*Narrative coach and video producer for Dana Beasley Brown (D) campaign for Bowling Green City Commission. The videos went local-viral, helping her to win against 9 opponents, 3 incumbents. She was a first-time candidate.*

*Storytelling consultant for Patti Minter (D) primary campaign for House District 20. Helped her team in narrative drafting and social media positioning. She was a first-time candidate, and won.*

#### **Reg 2 Vote Campaign**

*On a 30-day timeline, I led a team that registered hundreds of first-time Kentucky voters, collecting 2,000 petition signatures to cancel class on election day. Video and photo campaigns went local-viral, provoking state media attention.*

#### **WKU Strategic Plan 2018-28**

*On a 14 day timeline, I led a team that surveyed 3,000 WKU students, creating a data-driven plan for the university to be more student-needs-focused.*

**Publication:** Student Needs Report

#### **Project Pengyou, U.S.-China non-profit**

*Freelance Media Strategist and Content Creator, at Harvard University '16 - '18. Led social media storytelling workshops, creating video/photo content for campaigns.*

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## **RATIONALE**

In today's democracies, youth are not typically considered a force at the polls or in legislating. They are a minority in politics. Youth lack proper representation in government, and, until reaching the age of eighteen, cannot vote, and thus cannot participate in the most fundamental exercises of democracy. However, youth frequently challenge political establishments and norms, giving bold, often radical, perspectives on policy and government. In recent history, there have been many influential youth-based political movements: the TianAnMen student protests, the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, the Arab Spring, climate strikes in the form of school walkouts, and the gun reform movement re-born by the Parkland, Florida survivors to name a few. Not all youth have the knack or desire for political work, but those who do begin at a young age to engage politics locally, involving themselves in campaign work, interning for government and non-government organizations, joining youth political parties, and even running for office themselves.

### **Setting the stage**

This is an unprecedented time in U.S. politics. To understand why more youth are running for office than ever before, one must consider the contexts of the Trump presidency, the 2018 Parkland shooting, and the 116th Congress.

In many ways, Trump has marked a change of pace in politics, and in doing so has brought issues of diversity and equality to the forefront of the nation's political dialogue. Trump's rhetoric has been a leading topic of international news since announcing his candidacy for president. While he is judged by many to speak in a

“vitriolic and inflammatory” manner (Stamper, 2018, p. 2), and is known for attacking people on Twitter (Quealy, 2017)—data reveals that Trump harnesses never-before-seen traction on social media for a politician (Economist, 2018), and 24/7 news coverage of him alone shows he holds immense social and cultural power.

For many, the Trump administration’s aggressive and controversial policies and communication have pushed certain populations and organizations forward, encouraging more civil action such as marches, demonstrations and protests. The Trump administration has thus far pursued the following: a border wall between U.S. and Mexico, a Muslim-country ban, the U.S. Supreme Court nomination of Brett Kavanaugh, to name just three of many controversial issues. Each of these policy actions has been met with viral social media conversations or upticks in social movement activity, such as marches and civil disobedience. Trump’s border wall action was challenged when Cards Against Humanity, a private joke-card-game company, bought parcels of land on the U.S.-Mexico border to prevent sections of wall being built (Hoffman, 2017), and reportedly raised \$2.25 million in just hours from 150,000 individuals (Janssen, 2017, Cards Against Humanity, 2017). In response to Trump’s Executive Order 13769, which barred entry to the U.S. for citizens from a number of Muslim-majority countries (White House, 2017), thousands began protests in and out of airports across the country (Doubek, 2017). In response to Trump’s unwavering support of Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court, in light of allegations of sexual assault against the nominee, more than 300 people were arrested in protest in the Senate building (Tatum, 2018), and protesters brought back the #metoo hashtags and established another viral

message: “Believe Women” (Hesse, 2018). Data shows that there were 8,700 protests between January 21, 2017 and December 31, 2017, 74% of those were against Trump’s actions and policy (Crowd Counting Consortium, 2018).

The U.S. has faced immense social and political upheaval on the subject of gun policy and culture since the start of 2018. The February 13, 2018 mass shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida has sparked arguably the most influential youth political movement in the U.S. to date. Days after the shooting occurred, the survivors, mostly high school students, stepped in front of the nation and demanded gun policy reform. What unfurled in the months after will likely not be understood for years, but indeed has changed U.S. politics forever. For what might seem the first time in U.S. politics, youth were front and center in a national policy dialogue that has only grown in momentum, making national headlines weekly, even months after the shooting. This “March for Our Lives” movement has inspired an estimated 1 million students to organize 3,000 spontaneous school walkouts on March 14, 2018 (Campo-Flores, 2018) and over 800 March For Our Lives rallies across the world (Patel, 2018). In addition, they organized a March for Our Lives event in D.C. where an estimated 200,000 attended, met publicly with President Trump, and confronted the National Rifle Association online by challenging “blood money” sponsors to drop their N.R.A. sponsorship (Hertz, Delta and United Airlines, Amazon, Apple, Youtube, FedEx to name a few) over Twitter. Through a 4-month March for Our Lives cross-country tour, they registered thousands of young people to vote for the 2018 midterm election and organized campaign rallies that supported youth candidates running for office (Swing SoCal Left, 2019).

Lastly, two years into Trump's administration, the newly elected 116th Congressional freshman class became the most diverse in U.S. history with the first openly lesbian, gay and bisexual people to serve, 123 women elected to Congress. This means that women now occupy more than a quarter of the Senate, including the first Muslim women to serve in Congress, first Native American women to serve (Pew Research Center, 2018). It is also important to note that the freshman class of the 116th Congress has 25 freshmen that are millennials (40 years and under), which lowers the average age of Congress by more than 10 years (Desjardins, 2018). The 115th Congress was the oldest in history (Millstein, 2018), with the average age of 59.8 years (Manning, 2018), following an aging trend in Congress since 1980 (Mheta, Silver, 2014). This Congress also welcomes the youngest ever elected Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, age 29 (Jin, 2018). It should also be noted the immense social media presence of Ocasio-Cortez, who garnered about 14.3 million interactions on Twitter in 2018, shy of Trump's 41.8 million, yet three times more than President Obama (Rothschild, Allen, 2019).

The contexts of the Trump presidency, the 2018 Parkland shooting, and the 116th Congress set the stage for young people's increased engagement in U.S. politics, and, in the case of the March for Our Lives youth candidate rally in Irvine, California, directly promote younger candidates running for office. It should also be noted the development of organizations such as Run for Something, which launched Inauguration Day 2017, work to promote young people running for office and lower the barriers of age in elections (Run for Something, 2019).

## **A Youth Candidate Story**

A '92 black Cadillac Eldorado with a “no toll road” bumper sticker pulls out of Pedro’s Tacos drive-thru. The windows are rolled down, letting the warm California breeze whip through the car and ruffle the campaign signs and leaflets in the back seat. Speakers blast John Lennon’s “Power to the People”.

Jake Rybczyk, 18, and Jackson Hinkle, 19, chant along between mouthfuls of carne asada and bean-cheese burritos, “power to the people, right on”. But they are afraid they won’t be able to keep their burritos down. For, tonight is election night, and they are two teenage, progressive candidates for San Clemente City Council, campaigning against a slate of 10 seasoned Republicans (Election 2018: San Clemente, 2018).

“I’ll probably be in the bathroom puking my guts out, but my friend says that’s only natural,” Rybczyk lets out.

While Rybczyk and Hinkle are first-year, political science students at Saddleback Community College, they are not new to politics. These two young men have been at the forefront of some of the most controversial and progressive campaigns in the U.S.— demanding gun reform alongside the Parkland survivors, organizing a sit-in on Nancy Pelosi’s office for The Green New Deal, marching against their local government’s toll road initiatives, and demanding for better nuclear storage infrastructure on the shores of their city (Hinkle & Brazil, 2018).

“Everyone I talk to on the campaign trail, the first thing they say is, ‘aren’t you a little young?’” Rybczyk admits, taking his glasses off and rubbing his eyes. But the

second he opens his mouth and talks policy to voters, they seem to forget his age. “When I walk away, I’m like — am I really just 18, though?”

Back in the car, driving around town, Jackson perks up. “That right there used to be tomato fields — now it’s an outlet mall. I used to run through those fields with my dog after school.” He went on, describing how a previous city councilor pushed legislation to get an outlet mall developed in their city, then later became the outlet’s attorney, directly profiting from his own legislation. “Not too long ago, wild bison and cattle would roam around here. Now it’s all developed,” he says softly.

We have to get money out of politics,” Rybczyk chimes in. And he means it.

Both young men ran grassroots campaigns, refusing corporate and P.A.C. donations (Hinkle, 2018). Their reputation as adept campaigners earned them recognition in their community and secured them the endorsement of the Democratic Party of Orange County (Sears, 2018).

On November 6, 2018, they lost both their campaigns, securing just under six thousand votes each — both losing city council seats by just a few points (Ludwig, 2018).

Rybczyk and Hinkle represent a change of pace in U.S. politics, running at a time when youth are steering national policy dialogue on gun reform and youth voter turnout is predicted the highest in a quarter century (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2018).

“We are doing something historic here. We are changing what people think about young people,” Rybczyk stated, looking out his window at the city and ocean they call home.

## **Research**

Youth have a stake in politics and have a documented history of shaping the political landscape through their organizing. How youth perform in the political sphere is varied, influential, and complex, and thus warrants study and thought. This particular work will lay a foundation for better understanding youth political movements and provide a framework for two studies on young candidates in the U.S.. The contexts of the current political atmosphere matched with the data and narratives studied here make this work timely and important, and certainly worth further study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Through reviewing past research on the topic of youth civic participation, one can better understand why and how youth get involved in politics. This review is a mix of political news media, independent studies, and scholarly research in the social sciences, namely politics, history—telling the history of youth in politics through familial and educational influences, voter turnout, and youth civil disobedience. While the stage has been set for this study, this literature sets the scene and provides perspective from the past and for the future of youth in politics.

### **Family & Education**

Youth participation shapes political atmosphere, therefore it is important to understand how young people learn about politics. Studies on the influence of family and education reveal pathways for positive civic engagement. Research on family influence tells of the importance of parents in the socialization and politicizing of youth. One such study looks at parental civic behavior, knowledge, and attitudes, in order to understand the influence of parent-to-child civic discussions. Similar to other work in the field of social science on this topic, researchers found that parents who speak to their adolescent children about current political affairs positively influence the adolescents' civic development (McIntosh & Youniss, 2007). Furthermore, researchers indicate that these parent-to-child civic discussions are the “raw material” needed to create a foundation for adolescent civic participation (McIntosh & Youniss, 2007, p. 498). Similar studies discuss that parents “imprint” their children with a level of political participation,



meaning that the more a parent discusses political affairs with their children, the more likely the child will be interested in politics (Dinas, 2014, p. 835).

Beyond the important context of family, is that of formal education. Studies on the efficacy of civics education in high school note that civics classes not only teach students the functions of government, but set a psychological base, showing students where and how they fit into democratic systems and how to sustain such systems for future generations (Youniss, 2011). Also important to educational contexts are in-school civic activities, such as student elections. Research surveying Australian schools shows that voting in school elections promotes the feeling of preparedness and commitment to vote as an adult and participation in peaceful activism (Sasha & Print, 2010). This study also reveals that young people who run for student office positions have a deeper knowledge of politics and are likely to be involved in activism as adults (Sasha & Print, 2010). These studies of familial and educational contexts indicate that young people have the capacity to be politically engaged from a young age and suggest that young people who engage political action will likely stay engaged as adults.

### **Voter Turnout**

To understand youth civic participation, one must also understand the general trends of youth engagement in politics. Looking at historical voter participation data is good place to start, as it gives a big-picture view of how youth are engaging the political system in routine ways. For a majority of U.S. history, up to 1971, youth below the age of 21 could not vote (Benson & Morely, n.d.). It was in 1971, with the ratification of the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, that the voting age dropped to 18 years (U.S. Constit. am. 26). In 1972, a presidential election year, youth voter turnout was 52%;

however that declined soon after (Jaeger, 2008). A study that analyses historical voter turnout shows that the average youth voter turnout for presidential election years (every four years) between 1972 and 2016 was 47% (C.I.R.C.L.E., 2018). Meanwhile, during this same period, average voter turnout of all eligible voters in the U.S. was 56% of the eligible voting population, with average youth turnout lowest and turnout of voters aged 60 and above being the highest (McDonald, 2018). Strikingly, data from post-election analysis of midterm elections from 1994 to 2018 find that the average youth voter turnout up until 2014 was only 21% (C.I.R.C.L.E., 2018). In 2018, however, youth voter turnout levels are predicted to average around 31%, a historic high (C.I.R.C.L.E., 2018). In looking to 2020, political analysts expect this historically high turnout to grow (Kilgore, 2019). This is backed by a recent Harvard poll, which found that youth are looking to participate more in the 2020 election cycle (Harvard O.I.P., 2019). This study also portrays a young electorate, mostly progressive, that is concerned about the moral state of the country (Harvard I.O.P., 2019). These data depict that voter turnout, particularly youth turnout, while historically low, has the possibility to make an impact and may play a consequential role in 2020.

When it comes to who is running for office, age makes a difference. Pertinent social and electoral studies show that age makes a difference in trust in leadership. Whether it's sports, art, business, or politics, the U.S. loves an underdog (Ceci & Kain, 1982; Allison, 2008). Numerous studies have shown that Americans tend to root for an underdog when there is even the slightest possibility of success, for there is little at risk if they lose, and a lot to gain if they win (Stromberg, 2015). However, studies have also

shown that the greater the stakes and the more at risk, support for the underdog tapers (Allison, 2008). While some voters might associate there being risk in voting for a younger candidate, considering factors such as experience and trust, electoral research shows that youth voters are more likely to trust younger candidates (Pomante & Schraufnagel, 2015). This study, which analyzed candidates under the age of 35 in four state races showed that not only more youth voted for the younger candidate, but youth voter turnout increased to match other demographics (Pomante & Schraufnagel, 2015). These studies indicate that there is a chance for younger candidates being successful in politics, while suggesting that age may be a conflict or risk for young candidates.

### **Youth Civil Disobedience**

Before voting law changed in 1971, youth engaged politics in other robust ways, namely protests and social movements. Movements like the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the (second-wave feminism) Women's Movement of the 1960s, and the (anti-war) Student Movement of the 1970s established the power and presence of youth in the political sphere before more youth could vote. Within these various movements, some events stand out as strong examples of youth power. The 1963 Children's Crusade in Birmingham, Alabama were a series of riots and marches in the name of racial equality, where at hundreds of young people were arrested (Gilmore, 2015). In 1968 at University of Georgia, hundreds of students protested for gender equality in university housing policy (Kross, 2002). And in 1970 at Kent State University, a student strike of the Vietnam War expansion to Cambodia engaged thousands, but was made famous after confused members of the Ohio National Guard

killed protesters (Lewis & Hensley, 1998). These events not only marked significant moments in the lifetime of their respective movements, but are the building blocks for the policy and systemic changes that came after. More recently, youth have shown political strength in the gun reform March for Our Lives Movement after the 2018 Parkland shooting and environmental activism through the Sunrise Movement to back the Green New Deal (Sunrise Movement, 2019).

### **Research**

Considering that youth have the capacity to be engaged in politics at a young age and with consideration of the history of youth power in making change through social movements, as well as in understanding that young people likely vote for young candidates, it follows that young people have the capacity to make great change through elected office. However, there is a lack of data on the topic of young people running for office. Following this line of thought, three immediate questions may come to mind:

1. What are the barriers for young people running for office?
2. If young people run, do they win?
3. Are young people qualified to be in elected office?

While these are valid questions and concerns, this work simply seeks to reveal the landscape for such conversations, hopefully serving as a platform for future research on youth candidates. Therefore, this work explores two basic questions:

1. Do young people run for office?
2. What role does age play in campaigning?

## METHODS

### Defining Youth Candidate

Before compiling any data, an age range for the youth candidates had to be determined. Many organizations and institutions vary in definition of a youth age range. The United Nations consider youth to be from 15-24 years old (UNESCO, 2017). Others split the definition of youth between three categories: early adolescence (under 14 years), middle adolescence (between 15-17 years), and early adulthood (between 18-24) (Pathways for Youth, 2013).

Voting age and eligible age limits for candidates were taken into account. In recent history, six teens (17-18) ran for Kansas Governor (Vera & Diaz, 2018), now 2020 presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard from Hawaii was once elected at age 21 to state house (Ballotpedia, 2019), and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez made history as the youngest Congressperson in history, at age 29. In addition, Vermont has had a 14 year old enter the race for state governor (Associated Press, 2018). To be elected to federal positions, there are strict age requirements, set forth in the Constitution of The United States. To be elected into House of Representatives a candidate must be 25 years or older by the day of the election (Article 2, section 2, clause 2). State representative age requirements vary from state to state, from 18-30 years (National Congress of State Legislatures, 2015). As for local, county, or city offices, they vary city to city. While San Diego, like many other cities, require candidates to be 18 or older (City of San Diego, 2019), Denver requires a candidate to be 25 years of age (City and County of Denver, 2019).

Taking into account the wide variety of institutionalized age definitions and restrictions across the country, as well as in consideration of recent younger candidates and the data presented previously, an age range was determined to best capture the definition of a youth candidate. For the current project, a youth candidate is to be defined as a candidate for public office between the ages of 14-27.

### **Study 1: Youth Candidates by Numbers (Quantitative Study)**

This study seeks to define youth candidates as a new political term, and establish a new niche of electoral study, by presenting new data on youth that have run for office.

Considering that archival data has not yet been compiled for youth candidates, the first step was to conduct an advanced web search to identify youth candidates in recent history. The key words “youth”, “candidate”, “youngest”, “Election”, “teen”, “youngest candidate” were input into Google Advanced Search engine, with location set to “United States”. A list of candidates was made, labeling name, age, state, and office pursued.

Scouring the hundreds of search results was a tedious process, taking nearly 10 months to compile and double-check the list of youth candidates presented in this study. While all candidates within the age definitions of this study were recorded, it is likely that some candidates, especially in local, city, and county races, may not have been recorded, due to inconsistencies online, such as lack of new reporting, lack of public candidate self-documentation, and lack of public data accessibility.

### **Study 2: The Role Age Plays on the Campaign Trail (Qualitative Study)**

This study explains how age can be a barrier for youth candidates on the campaign trail, by exposing youth candidate experiences with age discrimination.

In order to understand how age plays a part in campaigning, a representative portion of youth candidates were selected from the *Youth Candidate Archive* (Wilson, 2019). The age range for this study was between 18 - 23 years. The subject list totaled 14, however, due to unavailability, only 12 were interviewed.

Interviewing, and the opportunity to speak anonymously, allowed for more free-flowing data, as well as created a space and time for connecting with the subjects on a personal level. In these ways, interviewing gave opportunity for more personal and experiential data. Interviews were between 30 minutes to 45 minutes, depending on the subject's response lengths. Interviews were conducted by phone or in person, depending on availability, using a questionnaire highlighting general experiences as a youth candidate.

Data from responses were collected and recorded on an audio recorder, then processed through an artificial intelligence transcription service. All data were then compiled into an excel document to be analyzed. The collected data were qualitative and not all interview questions were considered for this study. Excel was informally coded for similarity, using salient terms, such as "discrimination", "age", to evoke similar narratives and experiences between candidates.

All subjects, paperwork, and data collection methods were required to have, and were approved by, an Institutional Review Board. Due to subject documentation restrictions, subject names will not be provided in this qualitative study and no personally identifiable data will be published or discussed. However, individuals will be quoted and responses will guide analysis.

## ANALYSIS

### STUDY 1

Through the recorded data, it can be understood that it is not common that youth run for elected office in the U.S.. Between 2007-2018, there have been 62 youth candidates in the country (tab 1).

In 2018 alone, 22 youth candidates ran for city, county, local, and state offices in the United States (tab 1). That is nearly three times the number of youth candidates in 2017—and an almost 600% uptick in average number of youth candidates to run for office between 2007-2017 (fig. 1).

Between 2007-2017, the average age of youth candidates was 22 years (tab. 2). In 2018, the average age is 19 years (tab. 2). Due to the sheer number of younger candidates in 2018, the average age of a youth candidate between 2007-2018 became 21 years (fig. 2).

YEAR	# CANDIDATES
2018	22
2017	8
2016	8
2015	1
2014	7
2013	6
2012	2
2011	0
2010	0
2009	3
2008	0
2007	5

*Table 1. Number of youth candidates by year, 2007-2018.*



### CANDIDATES vs. YEAR

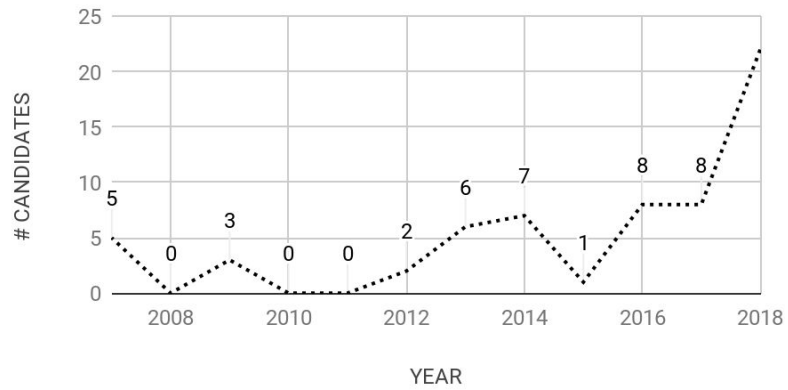
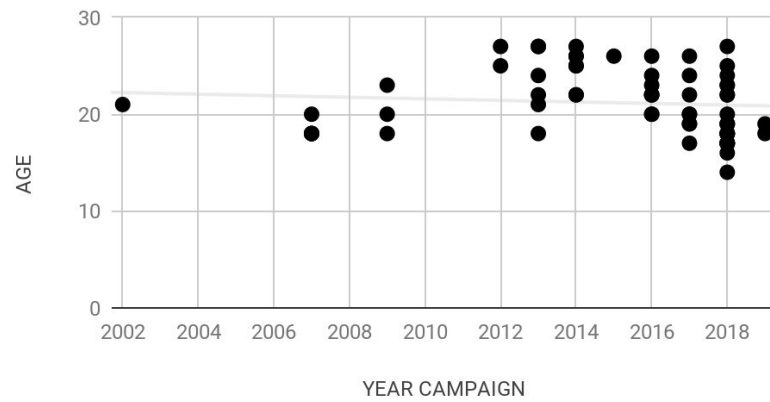


Figure 1. Number of youth candidates between 2007-2018.

YEAR	AVERAGE AGE
2018	19.54545455
2017	20.875
2016	22.375
2015	26
2014	24.71428571
2013	23.16666667
2012	26
2011	
2010	
2009	20.33333333
2008	
2007	18.4

Table 2. Average youth candidate age per year. There were no youth candidates recorded in 2008, 2010, and 2011.

## AGE vs. YEAR



*Figure 2. Average age of youth candidates (2007-2018).*

## **STUDY 2**

In all 12 interviews, subjects described experiences with different types of discrimination. While one candidate was criticized for the shade of their lipstick and the clothes they wore, another was spit upon after being called a offense racial slur. Other candidates dealt with profanity and door slamming. While some faced racial, religious, and gender discrimination at one or more points in their respective election cycles, all 12 subjects reported that they faced discrimination because of their age. These instances varied in nature and situation, and are described below.

### **Canvassing**

Four youth candidates relayed moments when voters told them while door knocking that they were too young. On two instances, candidates were interrupted by the voter guessing the candidates age. In both instances, the voter had guessed an age that was at least six years older than the actual age of the candidate. One candidate mentioned that some voters had told them their campaign was ego-driven. To this, the candidate shared in their interview, “If you want to experience a solid death to your ego, go ahead and run for office while you’re young.”

### **Public Forums**

Two candidates reported that older opponents would consistently call them by “boys” or “kids” or “high schoolers” in public forums. Three candidates mentioned that in public forums, opponents had attempted a negative attack on them, stating that they did not have the “experience” to lead, or that they were “too new to the issues” and could not be trusted. One candidate reported that the political party they were apart of did not allow them to be in the debates. Another candidate shared that once they had walked into an

event and was asked “what office are you from?”, implying that they were an intern or staffer. They replied, “My own.”

### **Asking for Support**

One candidate remembered a time when they had approached their former government teacher to gain an election petition signature, but was rejected because their age. When asking for campaign contributions, one candidate relayed that people were not comfortable giving money to them, because they were too young. Another candidate reported that many of their constituents were interested in having a younger candidate, but “had a hard time believing in the chances of one winning an election”.

### **Some Win, Most Lose**

Only two of the 12 interviewed won their elections, and remain in office today. However, from the end of the interview period in January 2019 to April 2019, two more of the past interviewees have won a new cycle of elections and are now in office.

## **DISCUSSION**

It should be no surprise that in response to Trump's policies and actions, a more diverse leadership would be motivated to step up and lead. The momentum unleashed through the Parkland survivors elevated the discussion of youth power in politics, and will likely encourage more youth to be bolder and more aggressive in their political activism. The presence of the 116th Congress and the media power of Rep. Ocasio-Cortez present youth with a greater possibility for leadership in the years to come. Considering how much new coverage and social media power around Trump, Parkland, and the 116th Congress, families would likely be discussing these issues and people with their children. Understanding that parents talking with children about politics has the outcome of more political engagement, and that children engaging politics in an educational context has a similar outcome, one could begin to presume that voter turnout will grow further in the wake of these issues and this leadership. So too, might the diversity of leadership increase, particularly in age. This paints a hopeful picture for the future of youth in politics, as it depicts a future where youth have better and more representation and power in the systems that dictate their futures.

In considering the instances of age discrimination of youth candidates detailed in this work, it shows that some voters consider there to be more risk in voting for a youth candidate. It is concerning that youth candidates were discriminated against because of their age. It is a problem that simple fact of their age, or their presumed age, was a deterrence. From the stress of finances to the long hours spent on strategy and messaging, campaigning is in no way an easy process. It is no more easier when the people you need to win think you are not qualified simply because of your age.

Today, in with onset of the 2020 presidential election, age is apart of the discussion in qualifying for the role of president. Current South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigeig is running for office as not only the first openly gay male to run for the position, but the youngest to ever run. Buttigeig is 37 years old, just two years over the constitutionally required 35 years of age to serve as president. On news networks and social media are concerns about his age being a hinderance to victory. To this, Buttigeig often responds about his experience in city leadership and the military. It is also important to note that Tulsi Gabbard, age 38, is running against Buttigeig. Gabbard, as aforementioned, was a youth candidate, as she ran for state office at age 21. As age becomes more of a discussion between these young candidates, it should be fascinating to watch how Gabbard, a woman who has defended her age sense she was a youth candidate, positions her age and experience in political messaging. Considering the future of youth in politics, it will be interesting to see the effects of age-inclusive messaging from the 2020 candidates. And in looking to the future, as more and more youth candidates enter races across the country, voters must begin to ask themselves if being young is an inherent negative characteristic for viable political candidates. While this study does not look into the efficacy of youth campaigning, it is important to understand that few youth candidates have won their elections. This offers opportunity for study on youth campaigning, specifically a chance to understand how youth campaigning might look and feel different from older candidates campaigning.

It is testified by history that youth have and will continue to step up when the moment arises, and will likely will gain more and more leadership positions as a result of

diversifying leadership and the state of political activism in the U.S. today. The trending increase of youth candidates portrays an America that is led from the bottom up, an America where youth march and protest and turn up at the polls— an America where young people steer the country through elected leadership positions.

### **Personal Reflection**

After speaking and sitting down with over 25 youth candidates across the country in and out the context of this work, I have come to understand that youth candidates hold immense power in their communities and should be deeply respected. Discussions with these individuals has led to conversations about defining what youth are and how youth are unique leaders. Such conversations ultimately define youth as people who are in a state of “limbo”, as one candidate terms, or an undefined state of being. Whether they are in school and cannot vote for the local school board, or fresh out of college, paying taxes, and being led by state politicians that cannot relate to the economic gap that being young defines in their respective communities, young people do not often have a voice in the political forces driving their lives and futures.

There is much to be learned from young activists and youth candidates, for they can give us perspective on where the U.S. might be heading.

It is my hope that this work, paired with the work of countless youth candidates across the nation and the world, sheds light on youth rights to lead their communities in more defined and authoritative roles.

**Limitations**

The data collected in this study may be one of the first to compile and analyze data on young candidates in America. However, this study may not have the exact number of youth candidates in U.S. history recorded. This study is a near-accurate representation of the numbers. Even after a year of archiving youth candidates in local and state elections, these candidates remain a difficult subject to track down and count, as there is a wide variety of depth in reporting on such local and state campaigns and not all youth candidates make the news. Understanding these factors as limitations to the study should, however, not degrade from the importance and relevance of this work.



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## APPENDIX

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## **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **FOUNDATION**

1. What is your name?
  - a. What is your age?
  - b. What is your hometown?
2. What is your level and study subject in school?
  - a. What is your school?
  - b. Public / Private schooling?
  - c. Did you run / vote for student office in high school / college?
3. What is your political affiliation?
4. What is your family annual income?
5. Do you have politicians/bureaucrats in your family?
6. When did you last run for office as a youth candidate?
  - a. Did you win or lose?
  - b. Why did you run for office?
7. Describe who made up your campaign team.
8. Describe your campaign competition.

### **INVESTIGATORY**

1. Describe your campaign platform.
  - a. How did your platform differ from your competition?
2. What message were you trying to communicate?
  - a. What tone was your overall message?

- b. How did this differ from your competition?
3. What ways did you try to communicate your platform?
  - a. What were the buzz words / phrases did you emphasize?
4. How did being a youth candidate in the election feel?
  - a. How did it feel being surrounded by career/experienced politicians?
  - b. On a level of 1-5 (1=low, 5=high), how well did your competitors accept a youth candidate as a valid competitor?
  - c. On a level of 1-5 (1=low, 5=high), how well did the average voter accept a youth candidate as a valid candidate?
  - d. Did you face any hesitancy, discrimination, lack of trust from anyone on the campaign trail?
5. How did being a youth candidate affect how you communicated your messages and platform?
  - a. How did being a youth candidate affect how you communicated yourself and your experience?

#### FORWARD-THINKING

1. What advice would you give for prospective youth candidates?
2. In the wake of various youth-based social movement happening right now in the USA, how do you envision the future of youth engagement in politics?

## THE YOUTH CANDIDATE ARCHIVE

For the purpose of empowering and promoting the future and recording the history of youth candidates, *The Youth Candidate Archive* has been created. This is the first-ever online database of youth candidates, and is publicly accessible. The web platform allows for data downloads and data submissions. Below is the most up-to-date data available.

NAME	AGE	STATE	CITY	RUN FOR	YEAR
Grady Keefe	18	CONNECTICUT	Branford		2007
Eric Smith	18	INDIANA	Hobart	Mayor	2007
Ytit Chauhan	18	NEW JERSEY	Atlantic City	City Council	2007
George Monger	18	TENNESSEE	Memphis	City Council	2007
Raul De Jesus	20	CONNECTICUT	Hartford	Mayor	2007
Tiffany Tupper	18	PENNSYLVANIA	Hampton Township	School Board	2009
Warren Seay, Jr.	20	TEXAS	DALLAS	School Board	2009
Joshua Padgette	23	FLORIDA	Boynton	Mayor	2009
Joe Sweeney	25	NEW HAMPSHIRE		STATE REPRESENTATIVE	2012
Alex Looyzen	27	NORTH DAKOTA		REPRESENTATIVE	2012
Lila Friedlander	18		Arlington	City Council	2013
Rashawn Davis	21	NEW JERSEY	Newark	City Council	2013
Catt Chaput	22	MASSACHUSETTS	North Adams	City Council	2013
Adam Lees	24	VIRGINIA	Charlottesville	City Council	2013
Jeramey Anderson	27	MISSISSIPPI			2013
Sarah Laszloffy	27	MONTANA			2013

Saira Blair	22	WEST VIRGINIA		STATE HOUSE OF DELEGATES	2014
Donald Hughes	22	NEW JERSEY	Durham	Mayor, Ward 1	2014
Melanie Stambaugh	25	WASHINGTON		STATE LEGISLATURE	2014
AJ Edgecomb	25	MAINE			2014
Kayla Kessinger	26	WEST VIRGINIA		HOUSE OF DELEGATES	2014
Ryan Fecteau	26	MAINE		HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES	2014
Jennifer Sullivan	27	FLORIDA		HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES	2014
Avery Bourne	26	ILLINOIS		HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES	2015
Bushra Amiwala	20	ILLINOIS	SKOKIE	COOK COUNTY BOARD	2016
Kaitlyn Beck	20	WASHINGTON		STATE LEGISLATURE, 49TH DISTRICT	2016
Gus Pedrotty	22	NEW MEXICO	ALBUQUERQUE		2016
Solomon Goldstein-Rose	22	MASSACHUSETTS		STATE REP, 3RD DISTRICT	2016
Christy Matthews	22	CONNECTICUT		STATE REPRESENTATIVE	2016
Tim Carlton-McQueen	23	NEW MEXICO	ALBUQUERQUE		2016
Brandon Dean	24	ALABAMA	BRIGHTON	MAYOR	2016
Rebekah Johansen Bydlak	26				2016
Tahseen Chowdhury	17	NEW YORK		State Senate	2017
Tay Anderson	19	COLORADO	Denver	Education Board	2017
Mary-Pat Hector	19	Georgia	Stonecrest	City Council	2017
Nicholas Cavalli	20	MICHIGAN	Sterling Heights	City Council	2017
Weston Lindemann	20	INDIANA	Meridian	City Council, Ward 5	2017

Hashim Walters	22	LOUISIANA	New Orleans	Mayor	2017
Tyler Ray	24	CALIFORNIA	Modesto	City Council	2017
Travis Bennett	26	NEW HAMPSHIRE		HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES	2017
Ethan Sonneborn	14	VERMONT		Governor	2018
Joseph Tutera Jr.	16	KANSAS			2018
Aaron Coleman	17	KANSAS			2018
Tyler Ruzich	17	KANSAS			2018
Jack Bergeson	17	KANSAS			2018
Aaron Coleman	17	KANSAS			2018
Tahseen Chowdhury	17	NY	NYC	NY STATE SENATE	2018
Ethan Randleas	18	KANSAS	WICHITA	GOVERNOR OF KANSAS	2018
Dominic Scavuzzo	18	KANSAS			2018
Jake Rybczyk	18	CALIFORNIA	San Clemente	City Council	2018
Mahmoud El Farra	18	CALIFORNIA	Mission Viejo	City Council	2018
Nadya Nokomoto	19	MASSACHUSETTS		CITY COUNCIL	2018
Tyler Flanigan	19	CONNECTICUT			2018
Jackson Hinkle	19	CALIFORNIA	San Clemente	City Council	2018
Ian MacDonald	20	CALIFORNIA	Buena Park	City Council	2018
James Allsup	22	WASHINGTON			2018
Will Haskell	22	CONNECTICUT	Fairfield County	State Senate	2018
Jonathan Reinoso	23	ILLINOIS	Greys Lake	School Board	2018
Manuel Chavez	23	CALIFORNIA	Costa Mesa	City Council	2018
Aundré Bumgardner	24	CONNECTICUT			2018
Drew Christensen	25	MINNESOTA		STATE REPRESENTATIVE	2018
Danny Weigel	27	NORTH DAKOTA	Grand Forks	Sheriff (Before: City Council)	2018

Matthew Mitnick	18	WISCONSIN	Madison	City Council	2019
Avra Reddy	19	WISCONSIN	MAdison	City Council	2019

*Table 3. The Youth Candidate Archive (Wilson, P.F., 2019). Link: <https://franciswilson.space/youth-candidate-archive>*



*Figure 3. Quick-scan QR code to access Youth Candidate Archive.*

## CAMPAIGN PHOTOGRAPHY

This collection of photographs displays 5 different campaigns from 4 different cities in Southern California, Fall 2018.



Rybczyk, of San Clemente, maps out the 9k on his turf, houses he's hit twice already.



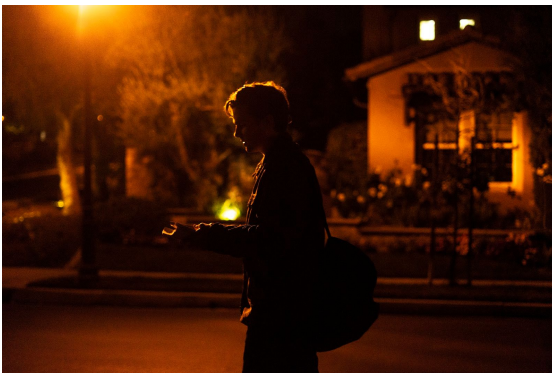
El-Farra, of Mission Viejo, checks his canvassing app, embracing political tech.



"Trump is a common-denominator here," said Chavez, of Costa Mesa, finishing up a conversation with a spanish-speaking voter.



MacDonald, of Buena Park, spends his evenings replacing signs his opponent pays to rip down. "I sleep 3 hours, if I'm lucky."



It's 2am on election day. Hinkle dropping material on thousands of front steps.



It was his first time voting, and Hinkle (San Clemente) voted for himself. "It was weird."



With 2 precincts reporting, it was clear they lost. More clear was the need for milkshakes. Once a tomato field where Hinkle would run, stands a mall built by developers.



## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DOCUMENTS



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY

DATE: June 25, 2018  
TO: Francis Wilson  
FROM: Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB  
PROJECT TITLE: [1254742-1] Youth Politicians: An exploration of youth campaign strategies in local and state elections  
REFERENCE #: IRB 18-432  
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project  
ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: June 25, 2018  
EXPIRATION DATE: January 31, 2019  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a *signed* consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of January 31, 2019.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Paul Mooney at (270) 745-2129 or [irb@wku.edu](mailto:irb@wku.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT



Project Title: Youth Politics, Interview
Investigator: Francis Wilson, WKU Communications Dept.
francis.wilson776@topper.wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

- 1. Nature and Purpose of the Project: This project seeks to find trends in the campaign strategies and narratives youth candidates deploy during election season in state and local elections. Ultimately, attempting to answer: How does being a youth candidate frame one's issues/platform/narrative in reaction to the level of acceptance they feel from voters and other candidates?
2. Explanation of Procedures: Interviewees will be sent interview questions 1 week in advance. Interviews will be approximately 1-hour long, conducted online through Skype or Facebook. Interviews will be recorded for analysis.
3. Discomfort and Risks: There is no known risk involved in participating in this interview and research process.
4. Benefits: Participants will be able to share insight into experiences as a youth candidate in elections.
5. Confidentiality: While subject information will be obtained through the interview process, data distinguishing individuals will not be used, published, or presented. Aggregate data will be used to show trends and themes. All data will be kept securely on WKU's campus for a minimum of three years.

WKU IRB# 18-432
Approved: 6/25/2018
End Date: 1/31/2019
EXPEDITED
Original: 6/25/2018

6. Refusal/Withdrawal: Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

Signature of Participant Date

Witness Date

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD Paul Mooney, Human Protections Administrator TELEPHONE: (270) 745-2129



WKU IRB# 18-432
Approved: 6/25/2018
End Date: 1/31/2019
EXPEDITED
Original: 6/25/2018