

What Makes Young People Run?

YELs come from political families: YELs grew up in homes where politics might well have been a dinner-table topic of conversation. When asked, “How often was politics discussed in your family when you were growing up?” 38 percent said “very often” and another 35 percent said “sometimes,” compared with 22 percent who said “rarely” and 5 percent who said “never.” By contrast, respondents in the CES study were much less likely to come from homes where politics was a major topic of discussion.

My grandfather lit my fire of political ambition. He was very opinionated and had something to say about everything. He made me realize how decisions made at all levels of government can impact our daily lives.

Midwestern Democratic Legislator

YELs’ families not only talk about politics – they engage in politics. Relatives of a substantial number of YELs (29%) have served in elected or appointed office at some time. Of those who said a family member had held office, a majority cited their fathers (51%). Also mentioned were uncles (19%), mothers (17%), and “another relative” (25%). Of all YELs with family members who have held office, eight percent were immediately preceded in their current offices by a relative.

Who among your relatives has held office?	
(Asked only of YELs who said a relative had held office)	
Father	51%
Relative other than those listed here	25%
Uncle	19%
Mother	17%
Cousin	7%
Brother/sister	6%
Aunt	2%
Husband	.9%
Wife	.9%

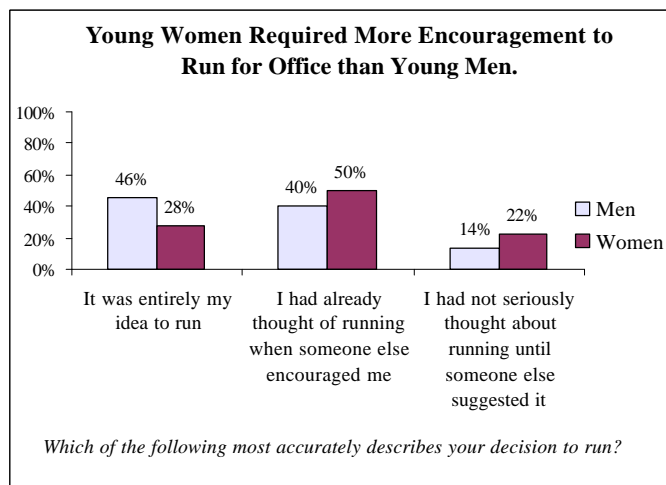
While we have no comparable data about the general public to place this finding in context, it seems safe to say that politics runs in families. Children of political families inherit both the inclination to pursue politics and also some concrete assets. Obvious advantages of having a relative in office might include local name recognition, a ready-made political Rolodex and readily available contacts and networks. If merely by example or proximity, public officials influence younger generations in their families to follow in their footsteps.

¹ Totals exceed 100 percent because multiple responses were possible for this question.

YELs are largely self-starters: Relatively few YELs got the idea of running for office from someone else. Only 15 percent reported they “had not seriously thought about running until someone else suggested it.” The overwhelming majority of these young political people said they were entirely or largely self-motivated in their decisions to seek elective office. Forty-three percent said, “it was entirely my idea to run,” while 42 percent said, “I had already thought of running when someone else encouraged me to run.”

However, when it comes to the impetus to run, a gender contrast emerges. Young women more frequently require encouragement than do their male counterparts. The difference between women and men as political self-starters is consistent with earlier research findings about candidates for state legislatures.¹

YELs are motivated by issues and inspired by role models: When asked who or what inspired them to seek political office, YELs most often cite either a specific person or persons (54%); almost half (48 %) cite “issues,” broadly defined,² as a motivation for seeking office.³



Issues: The “issues” mentioned most frequently fell into one of three categories: specific policies YELs wanted to promote; a desire for good government; a desire to be of service.

I was inspired to continue upholding the conservative values of the district I represent. I had and still have a desire to be in touch with those in my House district and to express their desires and values in my state government policies.

Southern Republican Legislator

I have always been interested in politics. I wanted to run so that I could become more involved and have a voice on issues in government. In particular, environmental issues are of great concern to me.

New England Democratic Legislator

- 1 A study of 464 non-incumbent candidates for state legislatures that asked the same question used on the survey of YELs found that men were more than three times more likely than women to be ‘self-starters,’ who threw their hats into the ring solely on their own decisions. By contrast, women were more than twice as likely as men to have been persuaded to run. (Gary Moncrief, Peverill Squire, Malcolm Jewell, *Who Runs for the Legislature?* Prentice-Hall Inc., 2001.)
- 2 For this purpose, “issue” was broadly defined to include not just public policy issues, but also broad concerns such as the quality of government and personal motivators such as the desire to serve the public.
- 3 Total exceeds 100 percent because multiple answers to this question were permitted.

It was not as much about being inspired by [a certain person] as much as it was that I just have a love for changing negative circumstances into positives one for people. The idea that this opportunity would allow me to help the masses as opposed to a few really attracted me.

Southern Independent Mayor Pro-Tem

It was more than a single issue. It was more a desire to be involved in the city that my family has called home for over 70 years and to make sure it stayed a great place to grow up for my two children and the children of our town.

Western Republican Councilmember

People: The “people” most often named as having inspired YELs were friends or mentors, particularly those in politics, as well as elected or appointed officials who were not necessarily personal acquaintances. Family members were also mentioned frequently – in many cases family members who had been active in politics.

When I was in first grade, Ronald Reagan was elected President. I was so interested and inspired by him that I decided then I wanted to be in politics.

Midwestern Republican Councilmember

My father inspired me at a very early age. He was always very involved in whatever community we lived in. His love for me and others made such an impression on me, it just became natural for me to do the same.

Southern Democratic Councilmember

My mother was my inspiration for getting into politics. At a young age, my parents were divorced and my father left the state and became a deadbeat dad, leaving my mother to raise two young children....I guess what I learned from my mother was that you should always be true to your responsibilities and never stop trying to make the world a better place, no matter how impossible the challenge may seem.

New England Republican Councilmember

A family friend who was an elected official...supported me and gave me an opportunity to learn about the issues that would then come to be my inspiration.

Midwestern Democratic Councilmember

Almost two-thirds (63%) of YELs have role models – people whom they would like to emulate. Personal acquaintances involved in politics-- friends, bosses, colleagues or mentors-- are the most commonly cited role models (24%). Other categories YELs mention frequently include: elected or appointed officials they do not know personally (19%); historical figures (13%); their fathers (12%); contemporary U.S. presidents, vice presidents, or cabinet members (11%).

Ambition

Today's young elected officials have high ambitions for a future in electoral politics, consistent with politicians of previous generations who entered office early. An overwhelming 86 percent aspire to offices beyond their current positions. Since no significant gender differences appeared in responses to this question, political women and men appear to be equally ambitious once in office.

Highest office desired: Asked to name the highest elective or appointive office they hope to achieve, 58 percent chose a position at the federal level – including 14 percent who want to be President, 2 percent Vice President, 24 percent U.S. senator, and 18 percent U.S. representative. Eighteen percent aspire to the top executive positions in their states or cities – 13 percent aim to become governors, and 5 percent mayors. Other offices were mentioned less frequently.

I had thought about being the President of the U.S. since I was six years old...
Democratic New England Legislator

Next office desired: Relatively few YELs are ready to climb directly onto the federal rung of the elective ladder. Only 2 percent name U.S. Senate and 13 percent U.S. House as their desired next step. Two percent see themselves as governors next, and another 23 percent as mayors. For more than a third of YELs, a seat in the state legislature is the immediate goal, with 18 percent aiming for the state senate and 17 percent for the state house or assembly. Other offices received substantially fewer mentions.

A Methodological Note

These findings are drawn from research about young elected officials conducted in 2002 by the Eagleton Institute of Politics as part of the Young Elected Leaders Project.

Between May 31 and September 30, 2002, the Institute conducted a national survey of elected officials who were age 35 and younger at that time. The survey included municipal officials who serve in cities with a population of 30,000 or greater, state legislators, state-wide elected officials, and officials who serve in the federal government. Eight hundred fourteen members of the target population were contacted by mail and asked to complete the survey either by mail or on-line. Three hundred ninety young elected leaders responded to the survey. Two hundred six respondents completed the survey by mail, and 184 completed the survey on-line. After the initial contact, four additional contacts were made with members of the population who had not responded to the survey to request that they do so. Respondents and non-respondents did not differ significantly on gender or party, two variables for which we had comparable data. The firm Schulman, Ronca, and Bucavalas, Inc. hosted and distributed the survey.

Comparisons between young elected leaders (YELs) and their peers who do not serve in elective office are based on data from a large, multi-phase study of civic engagement in America (.Keeter, Scott, Zukin, Cliff, Andolina, Molly, and Jenkins, Krista. (2002). The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait. CIRCLE, The Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning and Engagement.) That study, referred to here as CES (civic engagement study) was designed to document civic attitudes and behavior and the distinct ways in which each generation approaches

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