



FROM INTEREST TO CANDIDACY:

Supporting Young People on Their Path to Running for Office

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ABOUT THIS WHITE PAPER

We analyze various data sources in order to explore who runs for office in the United States and how we might encourage and support diverse groups of young people to run. Throughout the white paper, we define young people as individuals between 18-25 years old.

After establishing who has been running for office to date, we closely examine factors related to aspirations for running. We consider demographic differences as well as variations in political involvement, ranging from using media for civic engagement to volunteering for a candidate's campaign.

We then identify potential barriers to running for office that young people may face, ranging from concerns about financial cost to a lack of confidence in their qualifications for running.

Throughout this white paper, we focus on multiple avenues for supporting young people on a path to running for office. We explore any disparities in how these supportive structures are distributed to provide insight into where interventions to grow the next generation of elected leaders may be most needed.

WHY IT MATTERS THAT YOUNG PEOPLE RUN

A healthy democracy can only be sustained when individuals from diverse backgrounds seek elected office.¹

A pool of candidates that represents different communities and interests means that voters have more choice when heading to the polls. Elected officials also tend to advocate for the issue preferences of the constituents whom they identify with, and this is particularly true for people of color² and women.³ Furthermore, when elections are competitive, **elected officials may be held accountable by a more politically engaged constituency⁴ and voter turnout is higher.⁵** Nevertheless, in 2020 more than 70% of elections went uncontested.⁶

National trends suggest that supporting young people to run for office is a promising approach to increasing the diversity of our elected officials. Young people are more racially and ethnically diverse than the broader population. While 82% of those aged 54-72 identify as white, over a third of 22- to 37-year-olds identify as a race or ethnicity other than white.⁷ In addition, young people are much more likely to identify as LGBTQ+. For example, the number of 18- to 24-year-olds identifying as LGBTQ+ was roughly 5 times that of those ages 41-56.⁸

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

01

Few young people run for office, and young women and young people of color are less likely to run than young men and young white people. However, the young people who do run for office are more racially diverse than older candidates.

Very few young people hold office today: one analysis at the state level found that only 6% of state legislators are under age 35.⁹ However, the issue goes much deeper than the number of young people holding office and reveals troubling inequities. In 2018, candidates for the U.S. Congress were overwhelmingly white and male,¹⁰ and our analyses showed that young people who ran for any type of public office also tended to be white and male. Women are dramatically less likely to run for office than men: only about a third of young candidates are female.

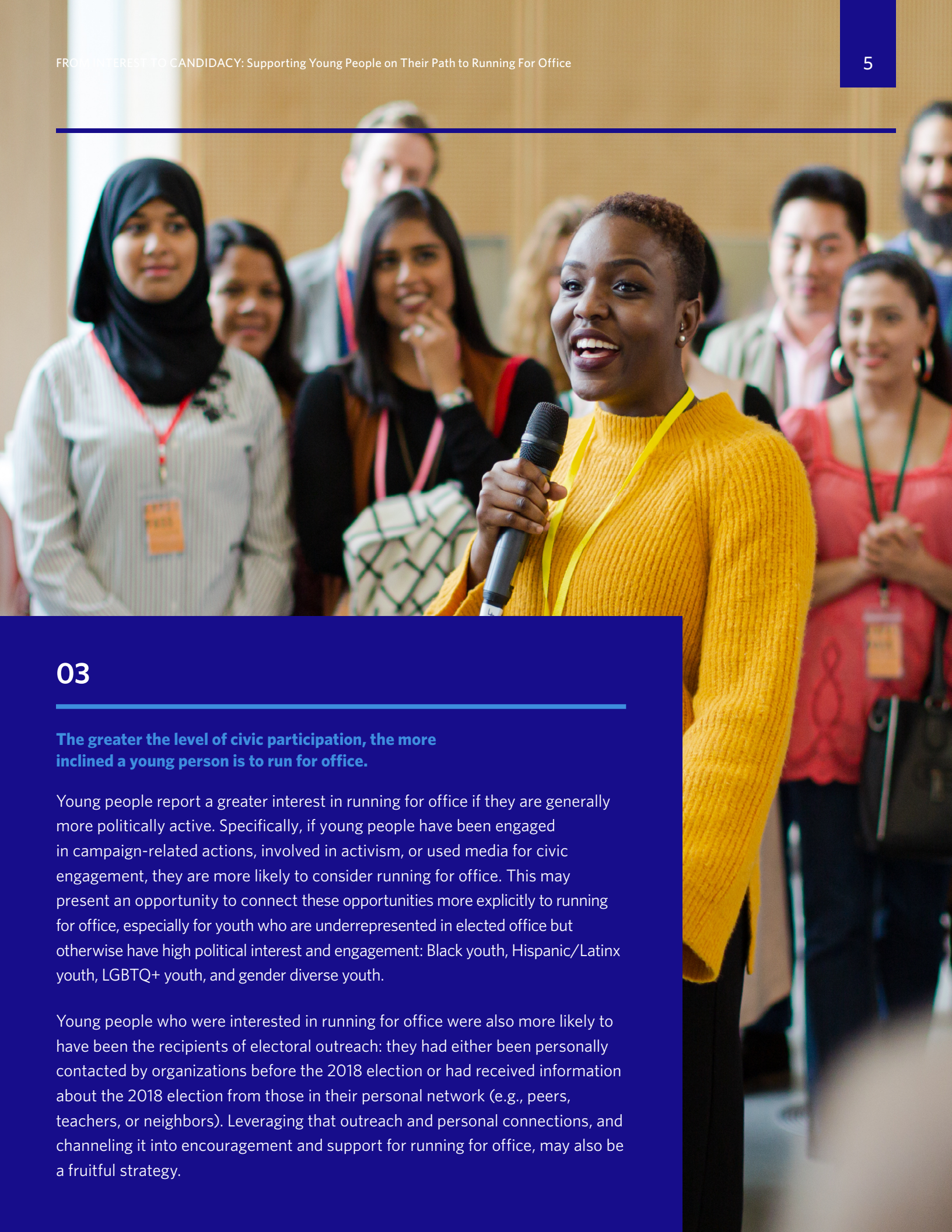
While that gender gap is also present among older candidates, the trend is different when it comes to racial/ethnic diversity. Compared to older candidates, younger candidates were more racially diverse; specifically, 25% of 18- to 25-year-olds who ran for office identified as Black, compared to 11% or fewer in other age groups.

02

More than 1 in 5 young people are interested in running for office and would run if given encouragement and/or if they felt qualified to do so.

Overall, young people were much less likely to feel qualified to hold office than older individuals. Young people were also particularly less likely to receive personal encouragement from friends, family, co-workers, etc. to run for office compared to older people, who often received encouragement from those in their personal network.

There are also inequities by race, gender and ideology, in who is encouraged to run. Black youth, women, and those identifying as Democrats were all less likely to receive encouragement of any kind compared to young people of other races/ethnicities, men, and Republicans, respectively. Particularly striking was the extremely low level of encouragement Black youth aged 19-25 received, despite feeling more qualified to run for office than older Black people.



03

The greater the level of civic participation, the more inclined a young person is to run for office.

Young people report a greater interest in running for office if they are generally more politically active. Specifically, if young people have been engaged in campaign-related actions, involved in activism, or used media for civic engagement, they are more likely to consider running for office. This may present an opportunity to connect these opportunities more explicitly to running for office, especially for youth who are underrepresented in elected office but otherwise have high political interest and engagement: Black youth, Hispanic/Latinx youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and gender diverse youth.

Young people who were interested in running for office were also more likely to have been the recipients of electoral outreach: they had either been personally contacted by organizations before the 2018 election or had received information about the 2018 election from those in their personal network (e.g., peers, teachers, or neighbors). Leveraging that outreach and personal connections, and channeling it into encouragement and support for running for office, may also be a fruitful strategy.

04

Young people are open to starting local but worry about losing income while pursuing public office.

Over the last 10 years, candidates ages 35-43 (older millennials) have increasingly run for local elections instead of other elections such as state/federal. On the other hand, candidates younger than 35 have varied over the years in terms of a focus on local versus other elections like state/federal elections.

It may be beneficial for young candidates to focus more on local races. One advantage of running for local office is the lower cost of running. The data show that a majority of youth would be “extremely concerned” or “seriously concerned” about the possibility of losing income or work while running for office: 59% of 19-to-25-year-olds and 62% of 26-to-34-year-olds expressed this concern, compared to 41% of individuals ages 62 and older. Young women of color are especially likely to perceive loss of income as a barrier to running for office; they are also concerned about other deterrents, like the increased media scrutiny that comes with being a candidate.¹¹

These real and perceived deterrents should be addressed when encouraging young people to run for office and during candidate recruitment efforts. Young candidates were more likely to have lower levels of educational attainment and more likely to be working part-time compared to older candidates; therefore, attention to professional and financial concerns that fit young people’s specific circumstances is crucial.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

01 Who Runs For Office?

- Older people were more likely to have run for office than younger people.
- In recent years, the rate of young people (aged 18-25) running for office has increased.
- Across age groups, those who ran for office were more likely to be male and white.
- Youth who ran for office were more racially diverse than older candidates: over a quarter of 18-to-25-year-old candidates identified as Black.
- Among young candidates, there is a lot of variation over the years in terms of whether the elections they participated in were at the local level.

IT IS DIFFICULT TO GATHER NATIONAL STATISTICS ABOUT THE DEMOGRAPHICS

of who holds public office. Our approach here is to examine data from a nationally representative survey that asked respondents whether they had ever run for office.

Between 2010 and 2020, approximately 3 to 4 percent of respondents reported having ever run for office. On average, this represents approximately 1,600 survey respondents per year. The following analyses examine trends among these survey respondents.

SECTION 1 DATA

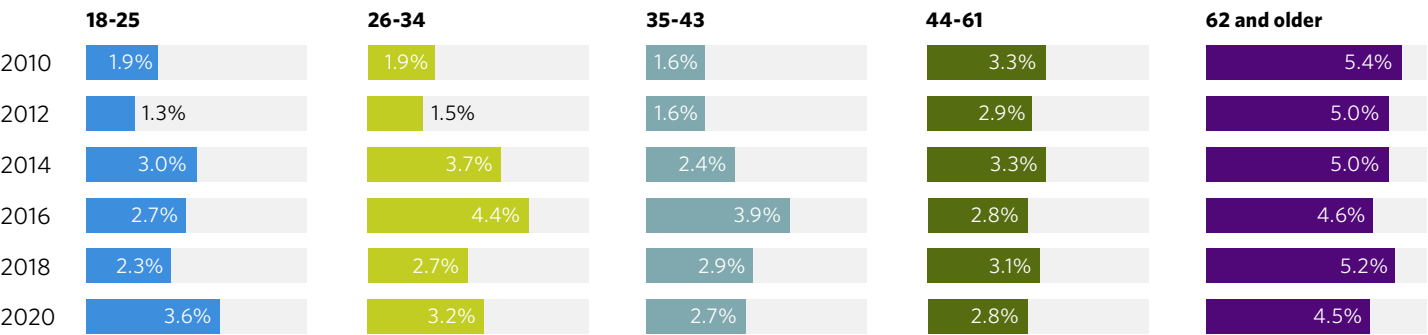
- Cooperative Election Study (CES)
- Nationally representative
- Data from 2010 to 2020, collected every other year
- 55,000 respondents per year

WHO RUNS FOR OFFICE?

The rate of young candidates is growing, but inequities by race and gender persist.

Analyses of who has run for office by age group reveal that individuals ages 62 and older are more likely to have run, and youth ages 18-25 are least likely. However, the rate of young people running for office has steadily increased in recent years: from below 2% in 2010 and 2012, to nearly 4% in 2020.

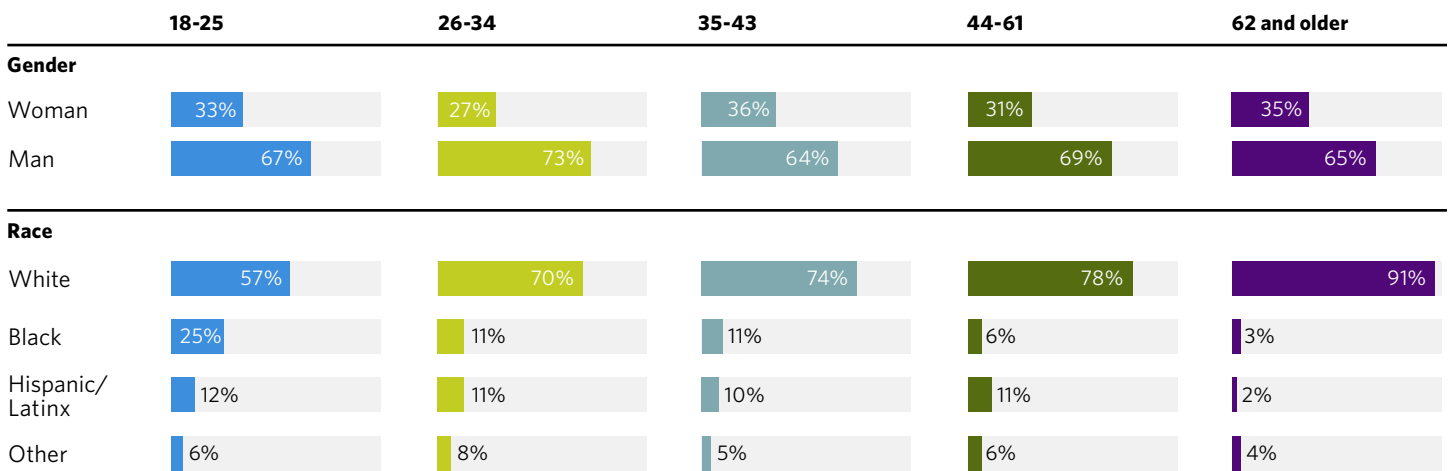
Percentage of people in each age group who ran for elective office between 2010 and 2020



Source: Cooperative Election Study

Across all age groups, only about a third of candidates identified as women. However, younger candidates were more racially diverse; specifically, 25% of 18- to 25-year-olds who have run for office identified as Black, compared to 11% or fewer in other age groups.

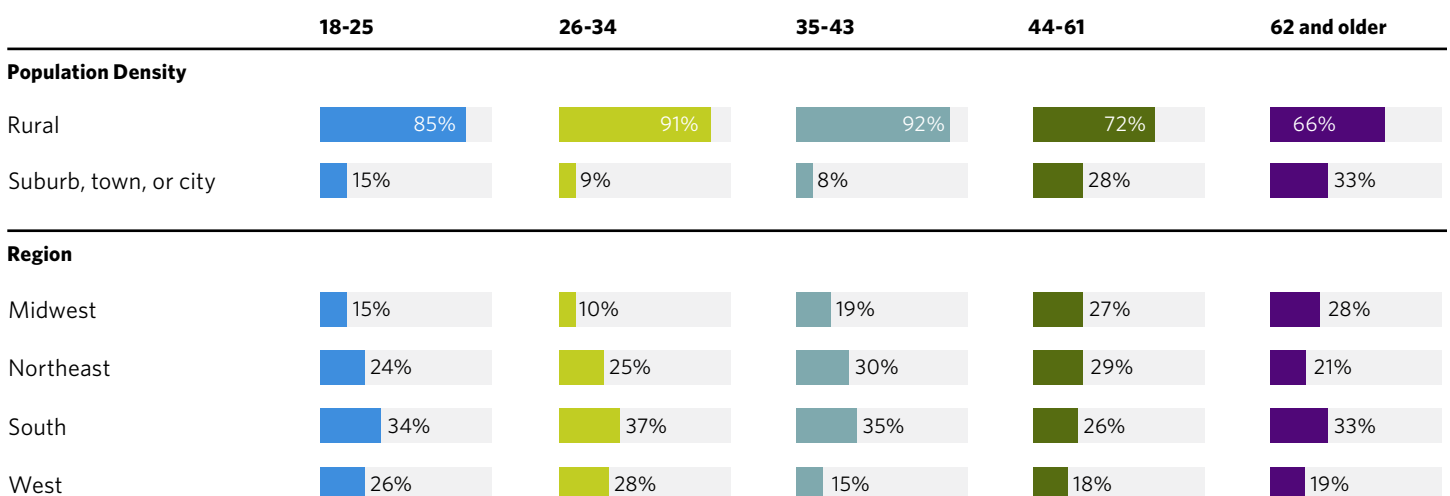
Gender and race of those who ran for office in 2020, by age



Source: Cooperative Election Study

Breakdowns by geography reveal that candidates over age 44 were more likely to be from rural areas. Younger candidates were more likely to be from states in the West, and less likely to be from the Midwest.

Population density and geographic region of those who ran for office in 2020, by age

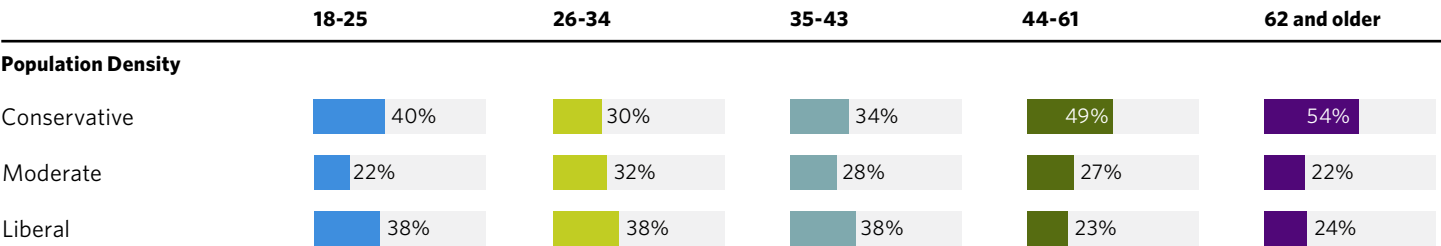


Source: Cooperative Election Study



Ideologically, young candidates were as likely to identify as liberal as candidates ages 26-43, but more likely than candidates ages 44 and older. They were, however, more likely to identify as conservative, and less likely to identify as moderate, as candidates aged 26-43.

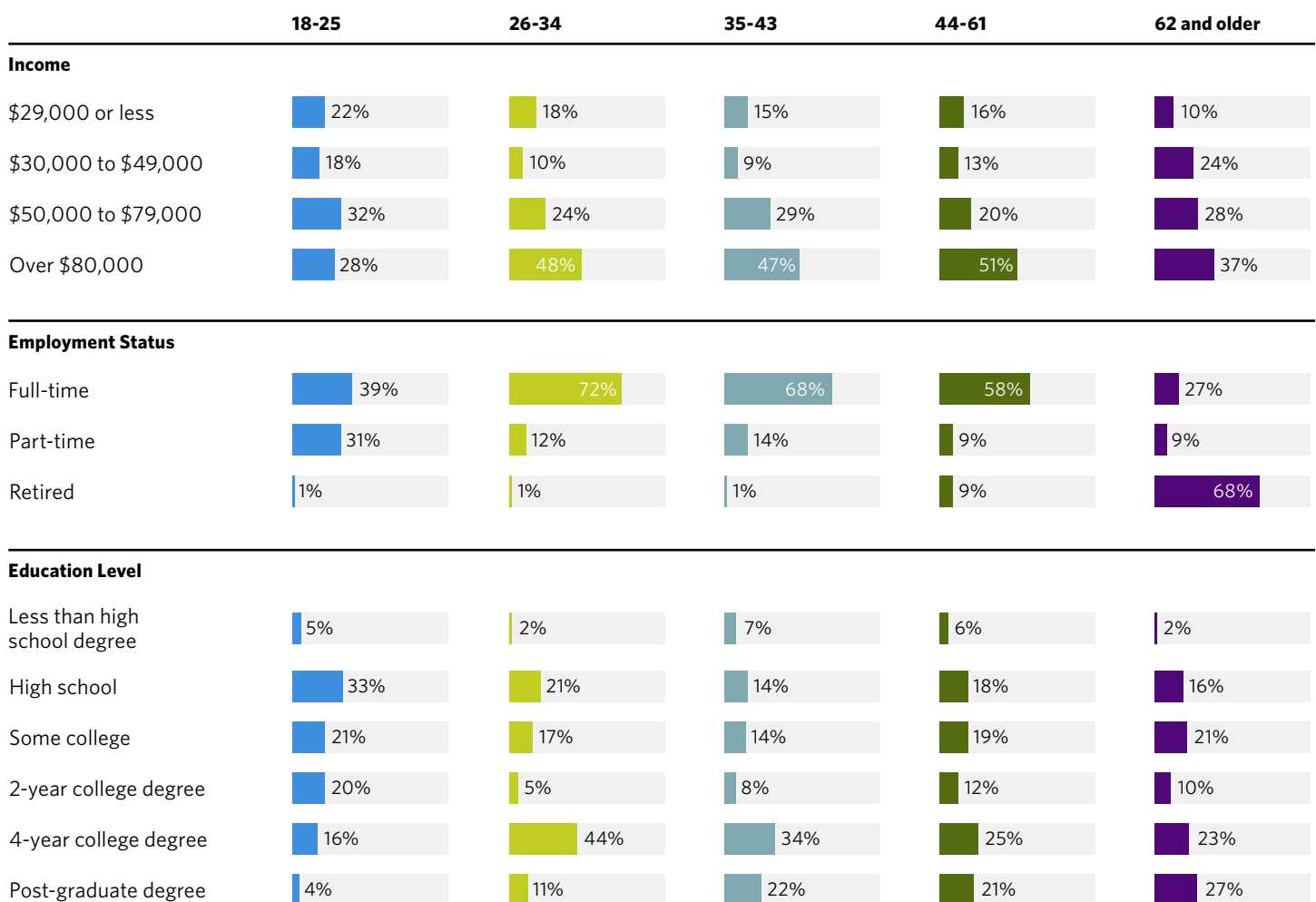
Political Ideology of those who ran for office in 2020, by age



Source: Cooperative Election Study

Young candidates were least likely to be making more than \$80,000 per year. They were also the most likely to be employed part-time—though we note that this was their employment status at the time of responding to the survey, not necessarily when they ran for office. Younger candidates had lower levels of educational attainment, although the proportion who had completed some college was similar for candidates ages 18-25 and for those 62 and older.

Income, employment status, and educational level of those who ran for office in 2020, by age

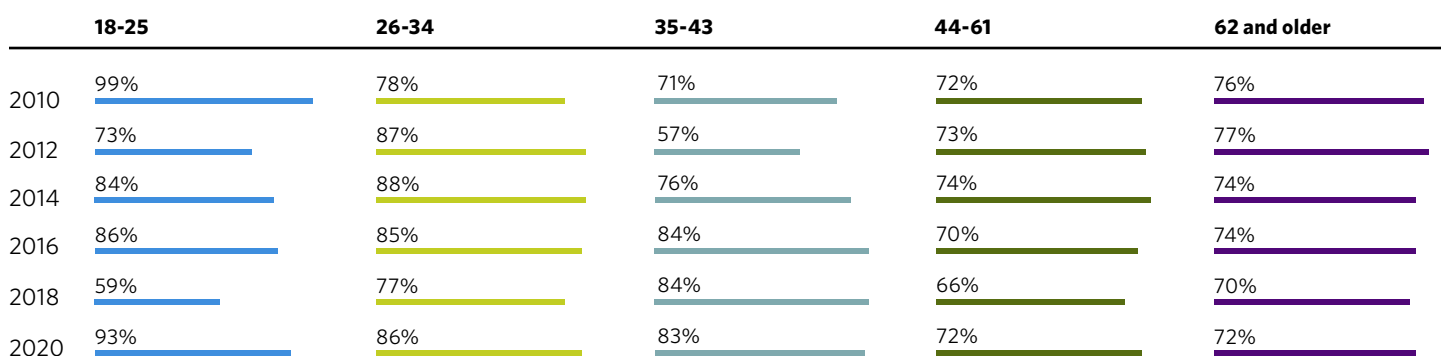


Source: Cooperative Election Study

WHERE THEY RUN: WHICH OFFICES HAVE YOUTH ASPIRED TO?

Consistently throughout the past decade, roughly three-quarters of older candidates (ages 62 and older) ran for local offices. However, the pattern among young candidates has been much more varied. For example, in 2010, almost all 18- to 25-year-olds who ran did so for a local office, but in 2018 only 59% did.

Percentage who ran for local office, out of those who ran for elected office

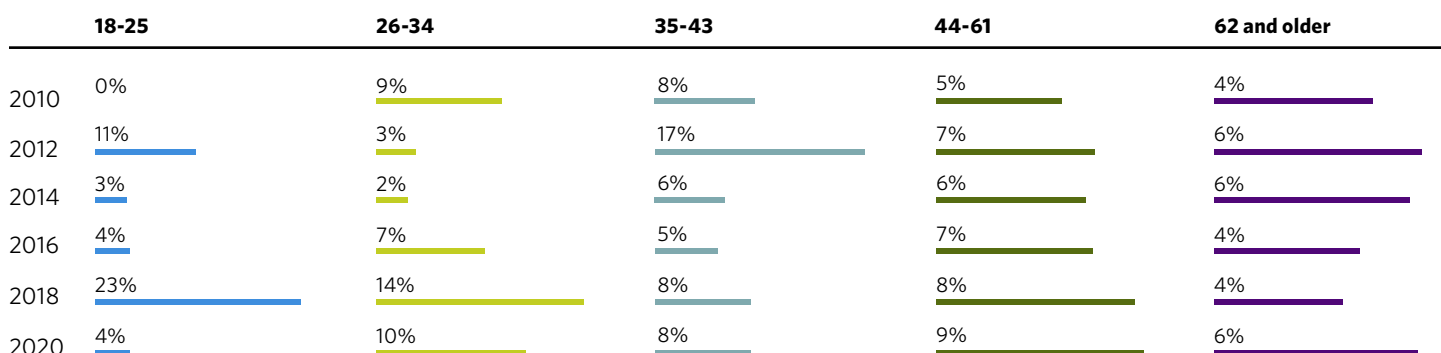


Local offices include school board, city council, mayor, city/district attorney, countywide office, and other local boards and commissions.

Source: Cooperative Election Study

Conversely, the percentage of 18-to-25-year-olds who ran for state or federal office jumped from none in 2010 to 23% in 2018. We have also seen an increase in the percentage of candidates ages 26 to 34 running for state or federal office in recent years.

Percentage who ran for state or federal office, out of those who ran for elected office



Source: Cooperative Election Study

RESEARCH FINDINGS

02 Fostering An Interest In Running For Office

- More than 1 in 5 young people are interested in running for office and would run if given the opportunity, including a large portion of Black youth and Hispanic/Latinx youth.
- Men were more likely to report interest in running for office than women.
- LGBTQ+ youth and those with a gender identity other than man and woman had high interest in running.
- Interest in running for office was related to a young person being more politically active, more attentive to elections, and feeling more capable of participating in politics.
- Young people who were interested in running were more likely to use media, including social media, for civic goals like finding out about issues in their community.
- Personal engagement with others related to elections was more common among young people interested in running for office.

INTEREST IN RUNNING FOR OFFICE

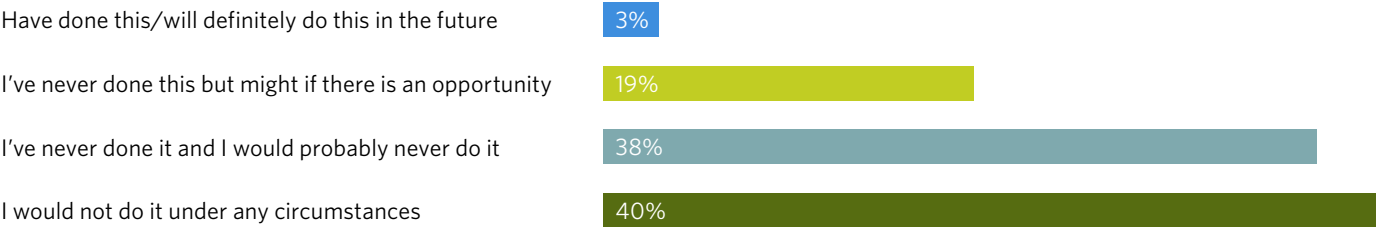
is not fostered equally across youth of different backgrounds. Some individuals may be exposed to settings and experiences that support them and lead them to see themselves as potential candidates or elected officials, while others may have experiences that lead them to feel that the role is not supposed to be for them.

To understand differences in interest for running for office, we categorized 22% of respondents as “interested” in running for office: 3% who said they had already run or would definitely do so in the near future, and an additional 19% who said they might do so if given the opportunity. The total 22% of respondents were categorized as “interested.” We compared their backgrounds and experiences with those of the 78% of “not interested” respondents who said they probably or definitely would not run for office.

SECTION 2 DATA

- CIRCLE pre-election poll conducted in 2018
- 2,087 participants
- Ages 18 to 24
- Nationally representative

Youth’s interest in running for office



Source: Cooperative Election Study

WHO WANTS TO RUN FOR OFFICE?

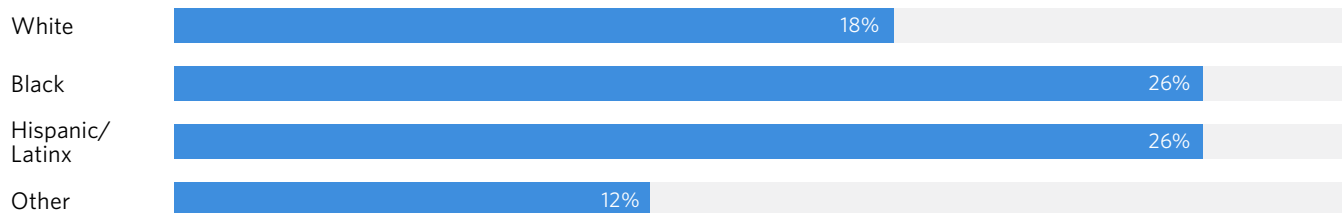
Youth of color and LGBTQ+ youth have interest that isn't yet translating into opportunities.

Interest in running for office was not related to educational attainment, household income, or employment status. There were also no differences by political party and no differences by geographic region.

However, there were major differences by race, gender, and sexual identity. Black and Hispanic/Latinx youth were more likely to express interest in running for office. Men were more likely than women to express interest, and those who identified as having a non-binary gender identity also expressed above-average interest in running. Youth identifying as queer (some sexual identity other than straight/heterosexual) were even more likely to express interest in running for office.

Percentage of youth in each group who expressed interest in running for office

Race



Gender



Sexual Identity



Source: CIRCLE pre-election poll 2018

INTEREST IN RUNNING FOR OFFICE CONNECTED TO POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

Past experiences with elections and civic engagement can be a pathway.

Opportunities for political learning and engagement are critical to young people's civic development, and are also unequally distributed among youth. We investigated the connection between those experiences and a desire to run for office, specifically examining data about young people's trust in government, political action-taking, attention paid to elections, political efficacy, and the use of media for civic engagement.



Youth who are interested in running for office were much more likely to be involved in a variety of political actions, whether through volunteering for/supporting a candidate's campaign or through involvement in activism, like attending a demonstration. Additionally, young people who paid more attention to elections were more interested in running for office.

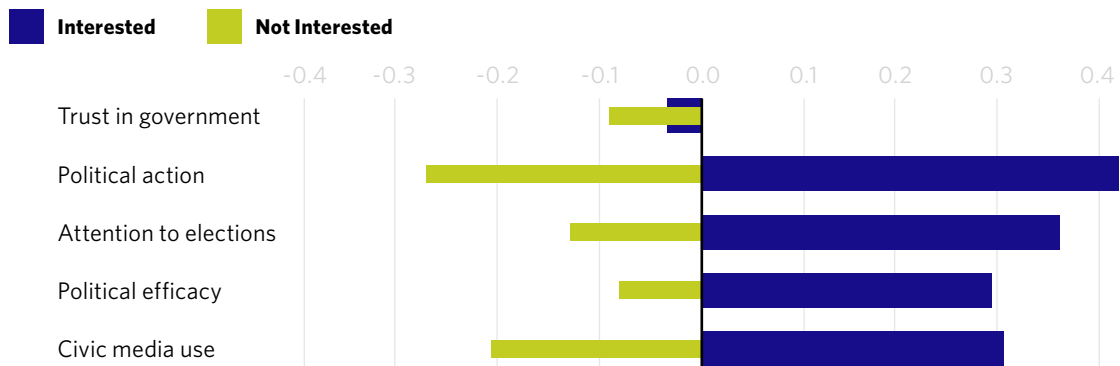
Interest in running for office was also positively related to higher "political efficacy," which we define as how capable one feels as a political actor. We measured political efficacy using questions such as "I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics" and "We can work together to promote important political goals."

We considered young people's use of media for civic purposes by measuring whether youth used online media, including social media, to stay informed about important political and social issues. Young people who used media in this way were much more likely to be interested in running for office.

There was no clear relationship between trust in government and interest in running for office. That does not necessarily mean trust/distrust does not affect a desire to run, and may mean that both can motivate youth. Some may be interested in running for office because they look up to and trust current governmental leaders or institutions; others may feel motivated because they do not trust current elected officials and feel that they could play a role in changing things.

Percentage of youth in each group who expressed interest in running for office

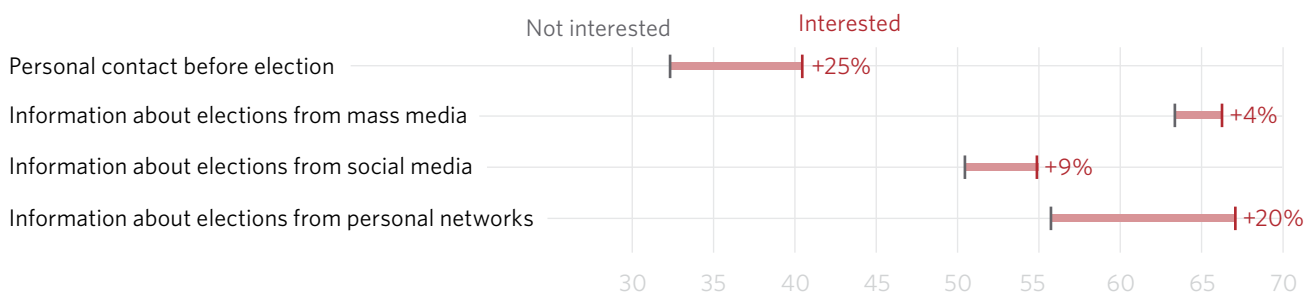
The average level of political engagement for all youth is represented by the center axis held at zero. Political engagement higher than the average is positive, while political engagement lower than the average is negative.



Source: CIRCLE pre-election poll 2018

Young people who were interested in running for office were also more likely to have been on the receiving end of electoral outreach. They had either been personally contacted by organizations before an election or had received information about elections from those in their personal network (e.g., a peer, teacher, or neighbor).

Engagement around elections and youth's interest in running for office



Source: CIRCLE pre-election poll 2018

RESEARCH FINDINGS

03 Differences In Support To Run For Office

- Young people 19-25 were much less likely than older people to feel qualified to hold elected office.
- Across all age groups, women were less likely to feel qualified than men and less likely to be encouraged to run.
- Among Black people, younger people felt more qualified than older people, but Black youth were very unlikely to be encouraged to run for office.
- Older people were much more likely to receive encouragement to run for office from those in their networks compared to younger people.
- Youth identifying as Republican were more likely to be encouraged to run than youth identifying as Democrat.
- About 60% of younger potential candidates (ages 19-34) were concerned about loss of income and employment if they ran for office.

GIVEN WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE
PERCENTAGE OF CANDIDATES WHO ARE YOUNG,

only a small subset of the youth who express interest in running for office take the necessary next steps to becoming a candidate. It is important to understand why that is, especially as different groups of young people may perceive the risks and benefits of running differently. For example, research has found that women of color tend to perceive greater barriers to running for office, citing costs such as loss of income and media surveillance as deterrents.¹² Supporting young people to feel qualified to run, and providing personal encouragement to individuals, may shift the cost-benefit calculus in meaningful ways.

SECTION 3 DATA

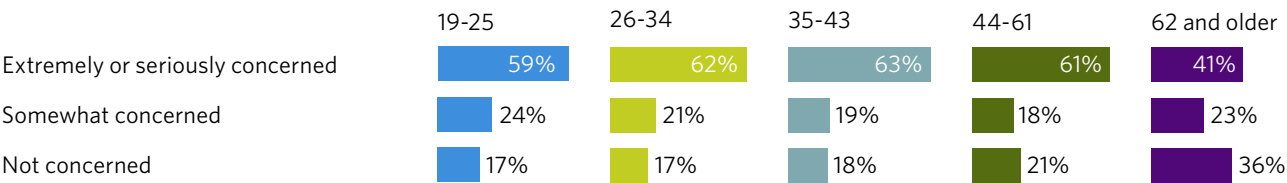
- LAPOP AmericasBarometer conducted July 2019.
- 1500 respondents aged 19 and up
- Nationally representative

POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO RUN: FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Youth, already more likely to have lower incomes, are more likely to be worried about the economic burden of running for office.

The data show that a majority of young people would be “extremely concerned” or “seriously concerned” about the possibility of losing income or work while running for office: 59% of 19- to 25-year-olds and 62% of 26- to 34-year-olds expressed this concern, compared to 41% of those 62 and older.

Concern about the possibility of losing income or work while running for office, by age



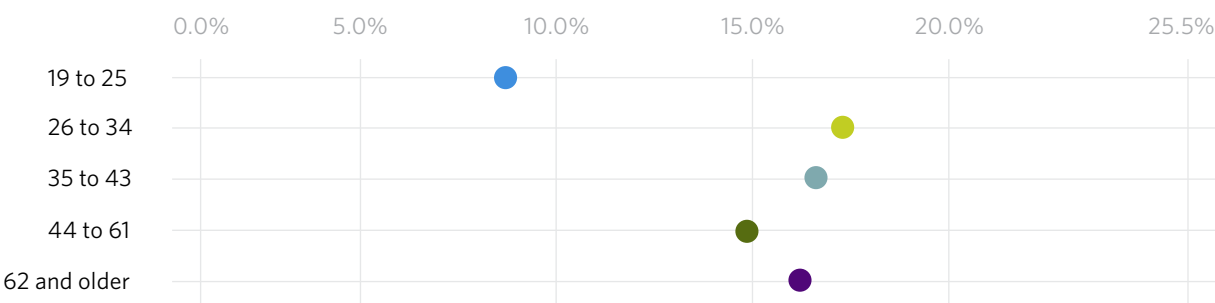
Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer 2018

POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO RUN: NOT FEELING QUALIFIED

There's a significant age gap in who feels qualified to run for or hold elected office.

Young people ages 19 to 25 were much less likely to express that they feel qualified to hold public office. Compared to between 15% and 17% in older age groups, only 8% of youth said they felt “very qualified.”

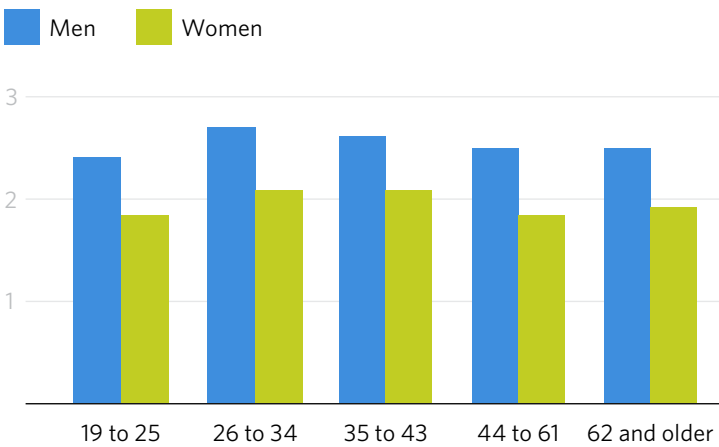
Percentage who feel very qualified to hold elected office



Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer 2018

Additionally, across all age groups, women were less likely to feel qualified to run for office.

Feeling qualified to run for office, by age and gender
Higher scores indicate feeling more qualified

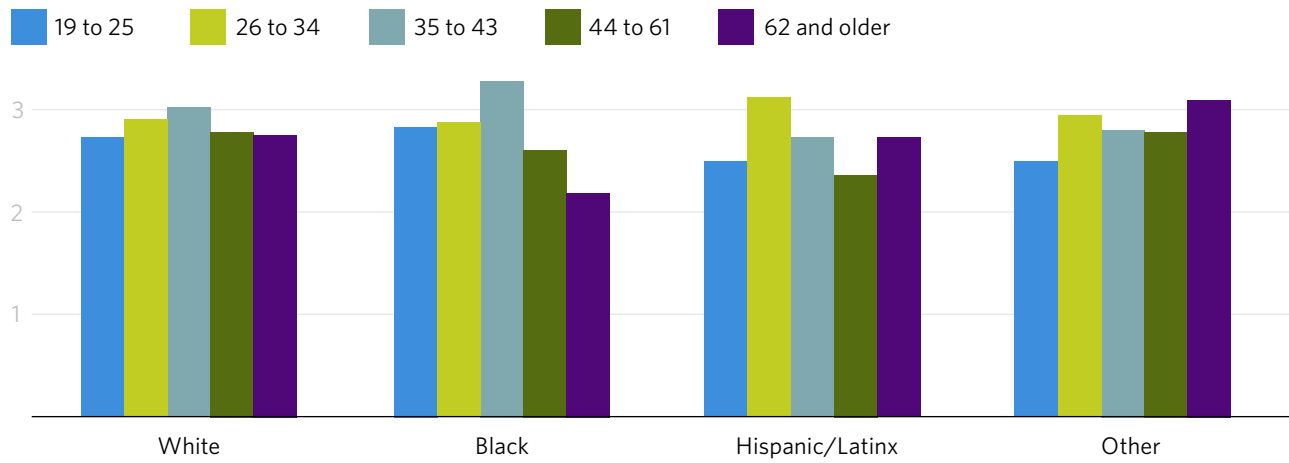


Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer 2018

Among individuals of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, important age differences emerged in terms of feeling qualified to run for office. White youth were about as likely to feel as qualified as older white people. However, Black youth were more likely to feel qualified to run than Black people ages 44-61 and, especially, those 62 and older.

Feeling qualified to run for office, by age and race

Higher scores indicate feeling more qualified



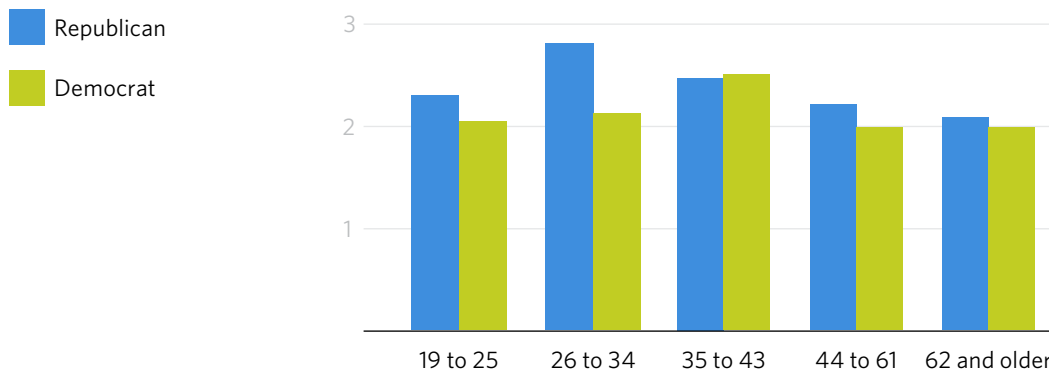
Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer 2018

Educational attainment also plays a role. Among individuals older than 44, people felt more qualified to run as their level of education increased. However, among people ages 19-34 and younger, it's individuals with some college education who felt least qualified. In this age group, people without a high school degree felt more qualified than those with some college education (but no degree). Those with a college degree (2-year or 4-year) or postgraduate degrees felt most qualified.

In terms of political parties, youth ages 19-34 who identify as Republicans were more likely to feel qualified to run for office than those who identify as Democrats. That gap disappears or shrinks among older people.

Feeling qualified to run for office, by age and political party

Higher scores indicate feeling more qualified



Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer 2018

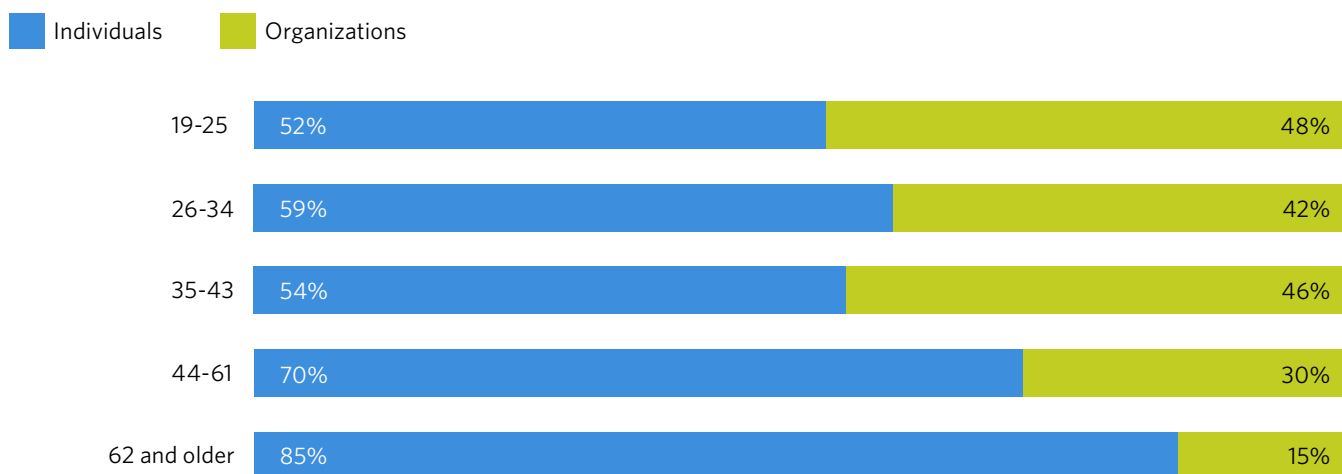
RECRUITMENT AND ENCOURAGEMENT ARE KEY SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Research shows that recruitment by those who can offer resources to candidates, as well as encouragement to run for office by others, are both critical to individuals—particularly women taking the step toward declaring their candidacy.¹³

We examined which groups of people received personal encouragement to run for office from organizations versus individuals that are in their personal network. Encouragement from organizations includes contact from political leaders (national, local); other leaders or groups in the local community; other national leaders or groups; a formal candidate training group; or members of the media. Encouragement from family, friends, colleagues, and others at work (boss, employer, manager) were counted as encouragement from individuals.

While we found that less than 1 in 5 people across all age groups reported encouragement of any type, who was encouraging people differed across age groups. Older people were much more likely to receive encouragement from individuals rather than organizations.

Encouragement to run for office by organizations versus individuals

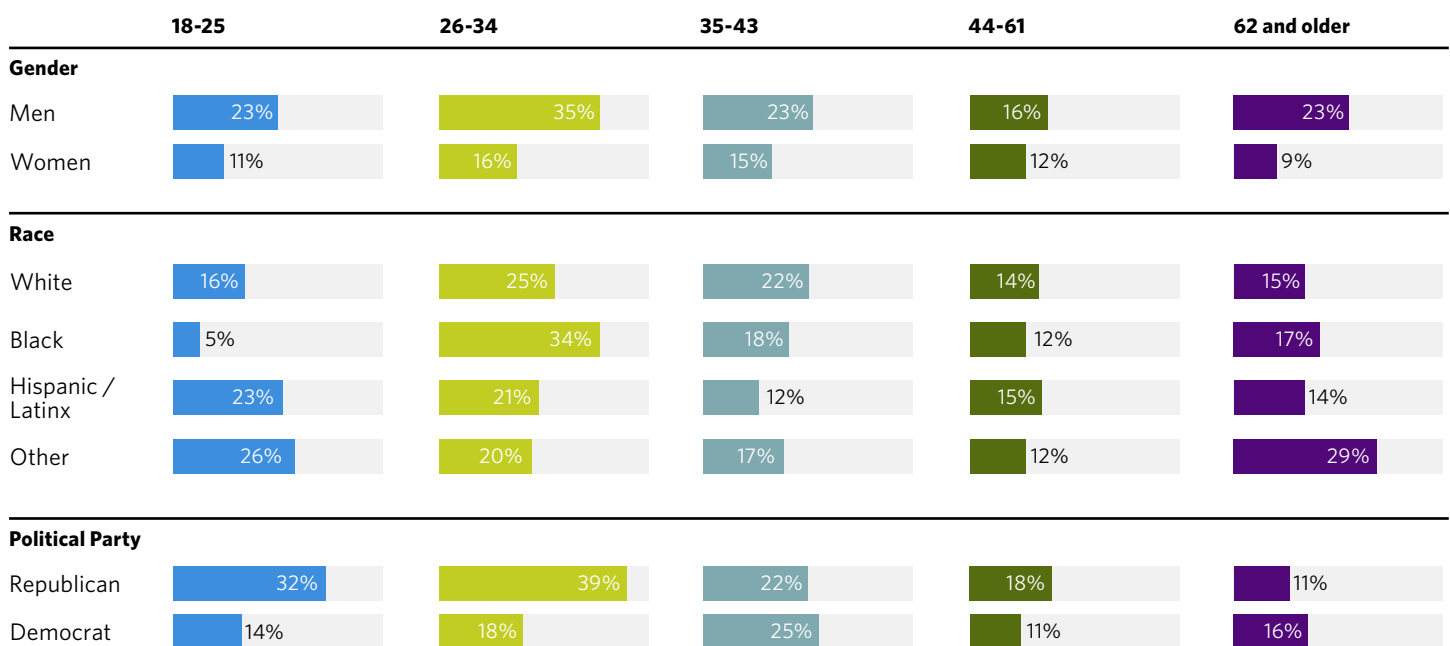


Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer 2018

There were also demographic and ideological differences in who was being encouraged. Republicans were more likely to be encouraged than Democrats, especially among younger people. In addition, men were more likely to be encouraged to run than women. That may be particularly meaningful, given young women's worries about loss of income and other potential barriers to running for office. Encouragement and support for young women to run could explicitly allay some of these concerns, which research has found have implications on female candidates' prospects.

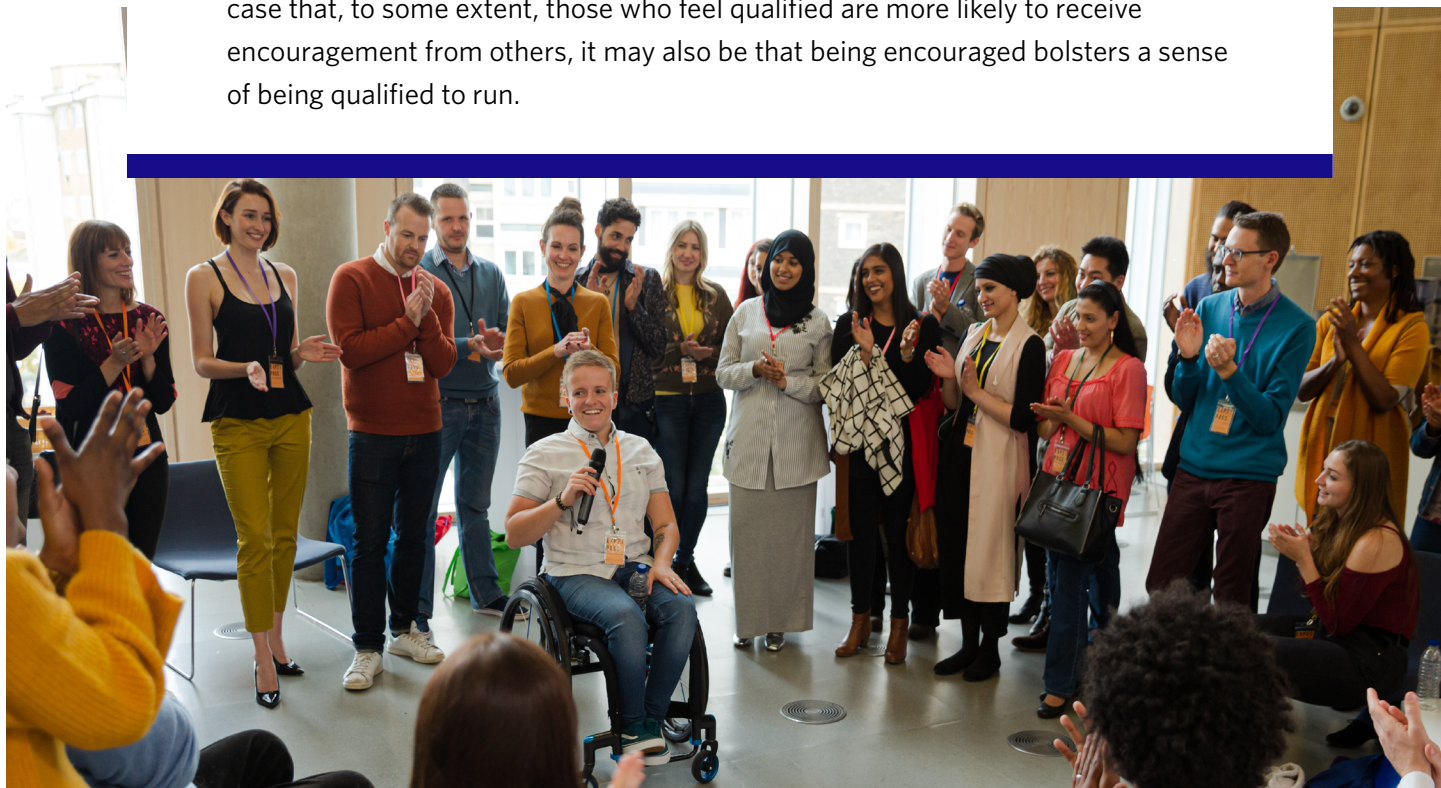
There were also significant racial/ethnic differences in who has been encouraged to run, especially among youth. Black youth were very unlikely to be encouraged, although slightly older Black people (ages 26-34) were more likely to be encouraged than other racial groups. Hispanic/Latinx youth (ages 19-25), and youth of other racial/ethnic identities, do report being encouraged more than white youth.

Percentage who had been encouraged to run for office



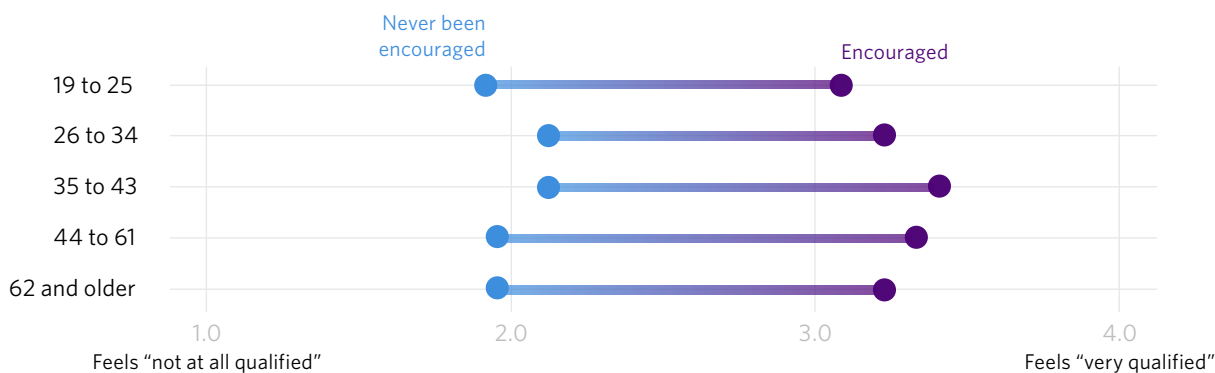
Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer 2018

Our findings underscore the importance of encouragement by showing that it is strongly linked to feeling qualified to run for office. Although it may be the case that, to some extent, those who feel qualified are more likely to receive encouragement from others, it may also be that being encouraged bolsters a sense of being qualified to run.



On a scale of 1 to 4, in which 1 represents people who feel “not at all qualified” and 4 represents people who feel “very qualified” to run for office, those who received encouragement were much more likely to feel qualified than those who had never been encouraged across all age groups.

Encouragement to run for office and feeling qualified to run for office



A PATH FORWARD: EQUITABLE ENCOURAGEMENT, OPPORTUNITIES, AND SUPPORT

The analyses in this white paper highlight that the underrepresentation of youth in elected office is a crisis of democracy that calls for concerted efforts and action.

Moreover, the further underrepresentation of young women, young people of color, and other candidates from groups that have been historically marginalized or excluded from political opportunities represents an additional, troubling layer of inequality in American politics.

Our findings clearly lay out what correlates with an increased desire and likelihood to run for office: opportunities for civic engagement and action, outreach from personal networks, as well as explicit encouragement and support that can foster feelings of being qualified to run and allay concerns about financial barriers and other deterrents. We also show how these supportive structures and opportunities are inequitably distributed by gender, by race/ethnicity, and sometimes even by party identification.

Despite the dearth of and gaps in support for some youth, potential interest in running for office is high—and sometimes higher among youth who are underrepresented among candidates. That mismatch should be a call to action. By understanding the experiences, desires, and concerns of different groups of young people, organizations, political parties, campaigns, institutions, and communities can support more youth to accomplish a run for office. Ultimately, this can help place the United States on a path to a more representative democracy.

The authors of this report are available to discuss these and other findings with the media or other interested organizations. You may contact us at circle@tufts.edu.

Preferred citation

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ENDNOTES

¹Lawless, *Becoming a Candidate: Political Ambition and the Decision to Run for Office*.

²Gamble, "Black Political Representation: An Examination of Legislative Activity within U.S. House Committees"; Minta, "Legislative Oversight and the Substantive Representation of Black and Latino Interests in Congress."

³Swers, "The Difference Women Make."

⁴Flavin and Shufeldt, "State Party Competition and Citizens' Political Engagement."

⁵Eichhorn and Linhart, "Estimating the Effect of Competitiveness on Turnout across Regime Types."

⁶Rosman, "Nothing to Lose: Uncontested Races in 2020 and Their Implications."

⁷Kim, "Early Benchmarks Show 'Post-Millennials' on Track to Be Most Diverse, Best-Educated Generation Yet."

⁸Jones, "LGBT Identification in U.S. Ticks Up to 7.1%."

⁹Anisha, "A Generation Without Representation: How Young People Are Severely Underrepresented Among Legislators."

¹⁰Center for Youth Political Participation, "Candidates for Congress 2018."

¹¹Shames, *Out of the Running*.

¹²Shames.

¹³Crowder-Meyer, "Baker, Bus Driver, Babysitter, Candidate? Revealing the Gendered Development of Political Ambition Among Ordinary Americans"; Celock, *The Next Generation: Young Elected Officials and Their Impact on American Politics*.

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