

The Next Generation

The Eagleton Institute grilled the nation's baby-faced politicians to come up with a portrait of our future leaders. *By Bill Glovin*



after page of questions on them, asking for personal details such as their party affiliation, income, ethnicity, and marital status and why they sought political office. The survey, which had a 46 percent return rate, found that 50 percent classify themselves as Democrats, 41 percent as Republicans, 6 percent as independents, and three percent as “other.” They also checked on where this newest crop of politicians stands on the issues, from affirmative action (62 percent oppose it) to the death penalty (64 percent support it) to *Roe v. Wade* (60 percent feel that it should not be overturned).

As a male (86 percent of respondents) and a Caucasian (81 percent of respondents), Mike Ferguson, a 32-year-old Republican congressman from New Jersey’s Seventh District, is fairly typical of young pols. Feeling powerless as a teacher at a Bronx public school, where many of his students came from low-income families, Ferguson decided that politics might allow him to make more of a difference. The issues that bring young people like Ferguson into politics today are often community related: schools,

zoning, corruption, health care, and taxes. In a section of the survey that asked officials for comments on what drew them to politics, some wrote that they had been discouraged by community flight; others felt their ethnic group or demographic was under-represented.

With Abraham Lincoln as his role model, Ferguson came home to New Jersey to learn the political ropes: stuffing envelopes for candidates, meeting constituents, and familiarizing himself with the way county political organizations operated. By age 28, he positioned himself to run for a congressional seat in Monmouth County. Defeated but not discouraged,

Theodore Roosevelt was only two years out of college when he became an assemblyman. Calvin Coolidge was 26 when he became a councilman. Franklin Roosevelt was two years shy of 30 when he was elected to the Senate. Politicians, it seems, have long shown political fervor early in life, but just how widespread is it today and what does it mean for the future of government?

To find answers, members of Rutgers’ Eagleton Institute of Politics did what they often do when faced with a question: they devised a poll, the first ever of elected officials 35 and under. After finding 819 politicians in that age group, they dropped page

he ran again two years later in 2000 and became the second youngest member of the U.S. Congress.

“Don’t get me wrong. I love what I do, but elected office is a big sacrifice for any young person who is looking to establish a career and has a family,” says Ferguson, the father of two toddlers and an infant. “My wife and I decided that we could withstand the rigors of political life, but that doesn’t make it any easier. I’m generally away about half the week, and there are times when I’m unaware of what my kids learned in preschool that day. It’s hard, and a very good reason why more young people don’t run for office.”

Ferguson’s story will sound familiar to Ruth Mandel, director of Eagleton and founder of the institute’s Center for American Women and Politics. “There’s no question that once you’re more established professionally and your kids are a little older, it’s easier to run,” says Mandel. “The demands of public office keep many bright and potentially effective leaders—especially women—from running.”

The survey’s most striking finding is that young women, in fact, are steering clear of politics. Only 14 percent of the survey’s respondents were female, which mirrors the percentage of women currently in Congress, but it trails the 21 to 25 percent who now serve on the state level and as mayors of cities with populations over 30,000.

Mandel acknowledges that it’s a sobering statistic. “We have a built-in gene that associates youth with change,” says Mandel. “For 30 years, I’ve heard that the next generation will be different than the previous one. But in politics, patience is a virtue, especially when you consider that women were a mere five percent of the electorate when the first survey measured their involvement in the early 1970s. So, yes, I’m surprised, but things aren’t quite as bad as they seem.”

Still, the fact that women aren’t running for office at an early age may actually hinder their political careers. The younger an elected official gets started, the more likely it is that he or she will go on to achieve national prominence, according to research pulled together by the institute. Twelve of the 19 presidents in the 20th and 21st centuries were under 35 when they entered political life. Besides Theodore Roosevelt, Coolidge, and FDR, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Bill Clinton were all 30 or under when they first won elective office. New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey, who was 35 when first elected as mayor of Woodbridge, is also in good company: Half of the nation’s 50 governors and 269 out of 535 members of Congress meet the 35 and under standard.

Nor is youthful civic involvement new. Young people played a part in the earliest days of the republic: 12 out of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence and 11 of the 40 signers of the U.S. Constitution were under 35. They include Thomas Jefferson, 33, Alexander Hamilton, 30, and New Jersey native Jonathan Dayton, 27.

As part of Eagleton’s Project YELP (Young Elected Leaders Project) and funded with a grant from Pew Charitable Trusts, the survey provides benchmark data for the rest of the endeavor: a conference that brought 50 of the brightest young minds in American politics to campus in May and future events that enlist young politicians to counter voter apathy among young people. “After 9/11, many disaffected young people realized that government is connected to their lives. With Iraq, even more so,” says Mandel. “It may be a frightening connection, but just what that connection means in terms of voter turnout and political engagement was on the agenda.”

The conference also gave Eagleton’s faculty a chance to explore issues, such as why this young group of politicians isn’t more diverse in terms of religion (83 percent are Christian) and how growing up in a political family plays a role (29 percent have a close family member who has held public office).

While Mandel believes that “people might be surprised and disappointed to learn that the profile of the youngest elected leaders mirrors the profile of the current generation,” she also thinks it’s

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important to keep the long view in mind. “If you took all the young leaders in office at the start of the 19th century, put them around a table the size of a football field, and compare that to what we find at the start of this century, you’ll see that we’ve made enormous strides,” she says. “Barring some enormous reversal of fortune, our democracy—an inspiring, uplifting experiment in human history—and our politicians will look considerably more diverse and pluralistic when they’re seated at that same table at the start of the next century.” □