ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	TAKING GET SET SERIOUSLY: YOUNG ADULTS DELAY IN RUNNING FOR OFFICE
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Young adults are drastically underrepresented at every level of government. This is not a necessary outcome of any political system and thus requires explanation. This dissertation focuses on the lack of young adult representation in state legislatures, a traditional steppingstone to higher office. Several different theories for the underrepresentation are proposed and tested. The results critically suggest thinking about young adults not as those who are choosing to stay outside of the political sphere, but as potential actors who have not yet been pushed into action.

TAKING GET SET SERIOUSLY: YOUNG ADULTS DELAY IN RUNNING FOR OFFICE

BY

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Dedication

For my Dad, who told me not to get a PhD and not to be a teacher but supported me anyway.

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Chapter 1: The Case of the Missing Young Adult State Legislators

Introduction

In 2018, 4 teenagers ran for governor in the State of Kansas. None were old enough to vote, but a loophole in Kansas state law allowed them to be governor. The Kansas state legislature had recently passed a law that raised the age of candidacy for the governorship to 25 years old, but the law wouldn't go into effect until 2019, giving the teenagers one last chance to run until the 2026 elections. The teens did not have a direct impact on the outcome of the 2018 Kansas Governor's race, garnering only 1.5% of the primary vote on the Republican side and 2.5% of the primary vote on the Democratic side, combined. Their story, however, raises both normative and empirical questions about representation in the United States.

There is no question that young adults are underrepresented in elected positions in the United States. There are only two U.S. Senators under the age of 40, while there are three over the age of 80. Barely more than 5% of the U.S. House is under 40. There are no governors under 40. In 2014, less than 4% of state legislators were under the age of 35 (NCSL 2020). The youngest average age of any single state legislative chamber in the United States is just over 48 years old. Even among candidates for state legislatures, the second most common occupation is "retired" (Moncrief et al 2001). The U.S. Constitution makes all citizens eligible to vote at 18, but for essentially the first 20 years of being considered a legal adult, young voters have paltry descriptive representation. This requires explanation. Why are there so few young adults in elective office?

In this dissertation, I examine several possible causes of this phenomenon. Using observational data, surveys, experiments, and interviews, I extensively study institutional, political, social, and other factors that may provide a better understanding of why young Americans do not find themselves in the elective bodies of the United States. I propose several hypotheses to explain why young adults might delay seeking elective office. Then, I investigate each of these suspects to move closer to an answer to the question: where are all the young adult representatives?

The Puzzle

Studies of political ambition in the United States establish that many people know by high school whether they are interested in pursuing a political career (Lawless and Fox 2015, Lawless 2012). Certainly, by the time potential candidates have graduated from college, many have formed opinions about whether or not they want to become an elected official (Shames 2017). Indeed, surveys of high school students indicate that 7% have decided they will, at some point, pursue political office and another 4% are willing to seriously consider the possibility (Lawless and Fox 2015).

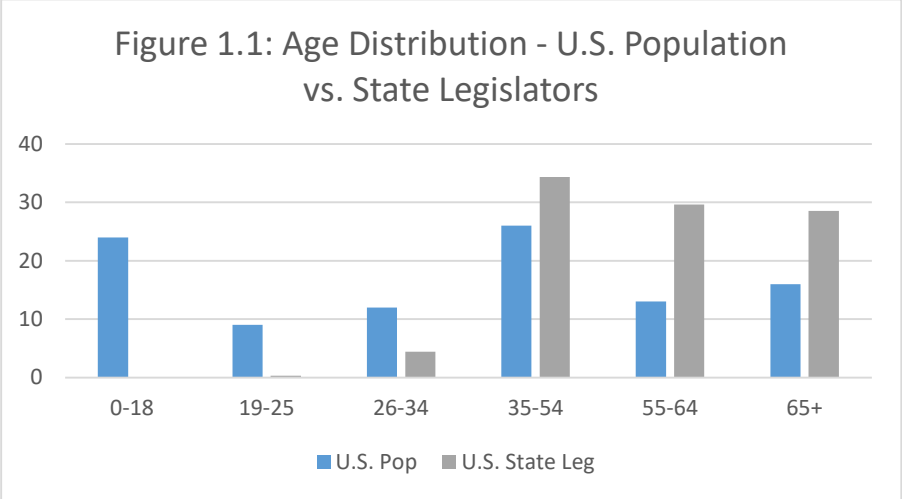
Political ambition is surely dynamic in that it can wax and wane over time (Lawless 2012). However, it would be a mistake to discount these high school students as idle wish casting. Research in socialization, however, indicates that adolescent ambition is a major factor predicting future career choices (Trice and McClellan 1993, Schoon and Parsons 2002, Ashby and Schoon 2010, Brown et al. 2011, Schoon and Polek 2011, Schoon 2001). Together, these studies indicate that, at any given time in the United States, there is a sizable group of young adults who have already seriously thought about becoming a candidate for some elected office. And these young adults may have already made significant decisions, such as which university to attend or what to major in, with a future electoral career in mind.

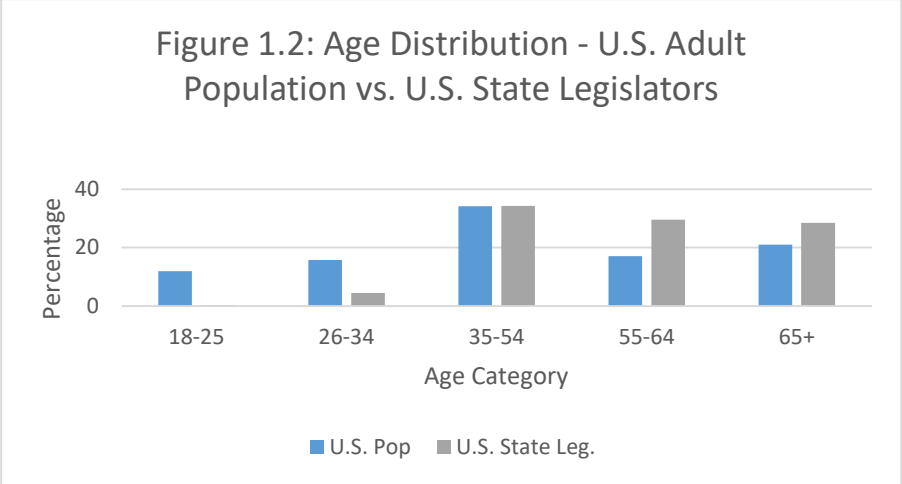
Yet, somewhere between the nascent ambition of running for office and the swearing-in of actual elected officials, this group of ambitious young adults disappears. This is the case this dissertation will investigate: where are these missing young adult legislators?

Attempting to find every missing legislator would surely prove too daunting a task. In this dissertation I focus on state legislatures for several reasons. First, many potential candidates think of politics as a ladder and state or local politics as the "entry-level" job on that ladder (Lawless 2012, Lawless and Fox 2015, Maisel and Stone 2014). In fact, about 50% of those who become members of the U.S. House of Representatives (let alone those who run), have state legislative experience (Maisel and Stone 2014). This means these are the offices most likely to be filled by young adults rather than those who already have elective experience and are therefore necessarily older. As a result, state legislatures are a good place to examine the presence or absence of young adults. Secondly, state legislatures allow for variation in institutional and political context that allow investigation of more hypotheses than, say, the U.S. Congress – especially in their age requirements to enter the chamber. At the same time, state legislatures have sufficiently high-quality data to allow deep exploration of the question, unlike the relatively poor data at the local government level. In addition, local level offices are less likely to be sought out as steppingstones for a future career (Deckman 2007). Finally, state legislators make many decisions that directly affect young people, making them an inherently important part of the story of the missing young adult representatives.

Despite the evidence of nascent ambition, the underrepresentation of young adults in state legislatures is clear. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 display the underrepresentation of young people in U.S. State legislatures, using data provided by KnowWho and supplemented by my own data collection. Figure 1 shows the vast gulf between the age distribution of the United States and the

age distribution of state legislatures. Even when restricting the data to those over 18 (which isn't strictly necessary considering that in 7 state legislative chambers in the U.S., those under 18 are allowed to serve[1]), it is clear that older people are significantly overrepresented while young adults are underrepresented.





Previous research suggests that this is not a new phenomenon (Uslaner and Weber 1979), nor is it a phenomenon that is unique to the United States (Kissau et. al 2012, Norris and

[1] The seven chambers are the House and Senate in Ohio, Vermont, and North Dakota, along with the State House in North Carolina.

Franklin 1997). Indeed, young adults, despite their desire to be elected representatives, somehow disappear when elected officials actually convene.

If some young adults already know they want a political career, why do they not begin their careers immediately? In few other professions do those who wish to be practitioners not enter the profession until years (and sometimes decades) after they become eligible. Why is elected office different? Where are the young adult elected officials?

Why Look for the Missing Legislators?

The case presented above is important for political science to address for a number of reasons. Some of those reasons are normative questions of representation, while others are gaps in the literature that can be partially filled by this research.

Normatively, descriptive representation matters a great deal for democratic legitimacy (Mansbridge 1999). Descriptive representation sends signals about who is a legitimate member of the body politic and worthy of being listened to. Though age may not have the same normative implications as gender, race, or ethnicity, the logic of descriptive representation applies to young people as well. Research suggests, for instance, that generation is an identity, and it can have major effects on a variety of political attitudes and actions (Ross and Rouse 2018). A nation with a wide age distribution governed primarily by those over retirement age raises issues of democratic legitimacy. Young adults could seriously ask whether a system that does not look like them can actually represent them. With record-low levels of trust in government (Ross and Rouse 2018), today's young adults pose a serious problem for the legitimacy of U.S. Institutions.

This problem may be especially acute for young adults, given that they are also the future of the country's population. Young adults who do not see themselves represented in government today may lose trust in government institutions for the future (Lawless and Fox 2015). If the young adults of today who do not trust government grow up to be older adults who do not trust government, serious problems for democracy begin to emerge that could extend beyond current cohorts of young people. Representative democracy requires a large number of citizens to be willing to step up to be representatives for their fellow citizens (Fowler 1993). Competitive elections are the only way to provide actual choices to the broad characteristics of the populace. If the reason that there are few elected young adults is because they are choosing not to run, rather than being defeated, it could foreshadow a big problem in the future. This is especially true if the reason for this is a cohort, rather than a life-cycle effect.

Empirical findings regarding age in other political contexts also suggest that the lack of descriptive representation may result in a lack of substantive representation. There is no question that age is relevant to political participation (Strate et al. 1989), political attitudes (Settle, Bond and Levitt 2011), and partisanship (Jennings and Markus 1984). Recent works have found important political differences between today's young adults and other age cohorts (Ross and Rouse 2018, Lawless and Fox 2015). Evidence from Japanese mayoral elections suggest that this relationship between descriptive and substantive representation holds in the context of age (McClean 2019). Thus, the underrepresentation of young adults may be distorting the most basic tenets of a democracy and creating problems for future generations. Climate change, for example, has an important time component in that it will affect younger generations more than older ones (Ross and Rouse 2020). A lack of young adult representatives, however, means that older generations are the ones tasked with addressing this problem.

These normative concerns are especially important when considering institutional constraints. If institutions systematically disadvantage one or another part of the population, it calls into question the democratic legitimacy of those institutions. Constraints that are legal in nature (age of candidacy laws, term limits, multi-member or single member districts, ballot access laws), or heavily affected by policy choices (two-party competition, cost of campaigning) should be held to specific scrutiny (Seery 2012). If young adults are well-represented in places where the opportunities are of a high quality, it provides evidence that more young adults want to run for state legislator and rational calculations are keeping them from doing so.

Outside of normative considerations, this research can draw from and speak to a number of important literatures in the political science discipline. As I review in the next section, this research can be thought of as an extension into research on both political ambition and political participation. It also may give new insight into voter decision making. Together, these normative and empirical questions strongly suggest that it is important to examine the missing young adult state legislators. Knowing why they are missing may provide evidence about whether and how their absence is a problem.

Examining Potential Theories

Existing literature suggests several possible clues for where we might find the missing young adult legislators. In this section, I will review those theories and explain why they don't yet have enough evidence to draw a satisfactory conclusion. Then, in the next section, I suggest a strategy for following the clues we have and finding more, in the hopes of ruling in or out various theories.

Throughout this section I reference mostly two literatures. The first is the literature on candidate emergence[2]. This literature seeks to answer two central questions: Why do some people run for office while others do not? How do people who want to run for office decide when to do so? In fact, this research can be seen as directly answering the second question. Research in this area has rarely focused on age as a directly relevant factor, but the structure of the theory can be applied to young adults.

The second literature that may hold explanatory value for these questions is literature on political participation. Running for office can be seen as a higher, very costly form of political participation (Lawless 2012). Though political scientists often like to separate "elites" from "average voters," the fact is that in many of the elected offices in the U.S at the local and state level, that distinction is a very fine one. Those who are elected as school board members or county supervisors are, in many cases, are more like the "average voter" than the candidates in national or state level elections. In fact, many state legislatures were specifically designed to be "citizen legislatures," intended to be served in by average citizens (Squire 1992). Overall, the decision to run for office and the decision to volunteer for a campaign or speak at a community meeting can be based on some of the same factors.

The research specific to young adult and youth participation in the United States tells a relatively consistent story. Young people do not participate at commensurate levels to older people (Sapiro 2004, Dalton 2015, Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1998). The various

[2] This literature is sometimes referred to as literature on political ambition (Kazee 1994). For the purposes of this dissertation, the term "candidate emergence" is more precise. Though literature on ambition usually involves the progressive ambition of already elected officials (Schlesinger 1966), I am interested here in the initial decision to become a candidate.

explanations for this lack of participation in lower-cost activities could become explanations for the lack of young adult participation in the higher-cost activity of running for office.

It should be noted that, in many cases, the theories presented here are not mutually exclusive. They may combine, work against one another, build on one another, or operate independently. For example, young adults may not run for state legislator because they simply do not want to. But that does not deny that, if they were to run, they would be at a disadvantage compared to older candidates. This research will treat each of these theories as a potential explanation of the missing young adult legislators, while understanding that they may, in fact, overlap.

Comparative Research

Before delving into the theories, it is useful to review the literature that has already addressed part of the question of what determines the age at which legislators achieve their office. Though research in the United States on age representation is very limited, there has been some research in a comparative context. The applicability of much of this research to the U.S. is questionable, given that it generally occurs in parliamentary systems, where parties have a great deal more control over who becomes a candidate[3]. However, the research does suggest several categories of variables that may have an impact on the age distribution of candidate in U.S. state legislatures.

In both Europe and Asia, research has found that institutions have a major impact on the legislator age. Stockmer and Sundstrom (2019) find that countries with lower age of candidacy requirements for their internal elections tend to send younger deputies to the European

[3] It might be that parliamentary systems themselves are more conducive to young adult legislators than winner take all systems. But the lack of research on winner-take-all systems makes comparison difficult.

Parliament. Joshi (2013) finds that variation in electoral systems explains a good deal of variation in the age of legislators in Asian parliaments.

Political variables also have an impact. Though the effects are generally small, multiple studies have found that some parties (most commonly, leftist parties) are more accepting of younger candidates than others (Stockmer and Sundstrom 2019, Gherghina and Chiru 2010, Norris and Franklin 1997). These findings are exclusively in PR electoral systems, but they suggest that parties make strategic calculations when selecting candidates, which is also widely accepted as true in the United States. In a review of Asian national legislatures, Joshi (2012) and Joshi and Och (2014) find that in proportional representation systems where parties have a great deal of control and young candidates don't endanger any particular seat, younger people have a greater chance at being in office. This suggests that strategic party calculations play a role in the age of legislators.

The social context in which candidates and parties find themselves is also relevant. The demographics of constituencies have a detectable impact on the ages of elected legislators, with younger and more liberal constituencies electing younger legislators (Stockmer and Sundstrom 2019). In addition, when age becomes particularly relevant, such as during student social movements, younger candidates have greater electoral success (Shin 2001). Of course, individual-level variables also matter. Stockmer and Sundstrom (2019) find that young women are more likely to be represented than older women.

Thus, the literature on other governments suggests some places to look in the United States. However, the existing literature doesn't rule out any set of variables –institutional, social, political, and individual level variables may all matter. That means there is little reason to ex ante rule out any potential theory to answer the question posed in this research.

Psychological Theory

The puzzle before us relies on an unstated assumption that young adults desire to be legislators. Whether this assumption is true or not is an empirical matter. The psychological theory suggests that young adults are simply less likely to desire political office – either as a lifecycle effect or a cohort effect. If political office is not viewed as valuable by a great many young adults, then there is no reason to believe that a great many would be found in the halls of state legislatures. After all, it is quite rare that one accidentally becomes an elected official.

In the candidate emergence literature, the psychological theory presents itself as the study of political personalities or nascent ambition. The argument states that some people have political personalities while other people do not (Lasswell 1930, Barber 1965). People who have political personalities are likely to become candidates, while those lacking these personalities are not likely to seek political office. If young adults are less likely to have political personalities (as a cohort effect), it could explain why there are not young adults in state legislatures.

This is the first suspect we identify because the candidate emergence literature has essentially converged on this argument for why young adults are not found in office. Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox (2015) argue that a lack of nascent ambition among young adults is concerning for the future of American democracy. They find that only 11% of the high school students that they studied were willing to seriously consider a political career. Views of politics as toxic and unproductive were prevalent in their sample. Similar findings were apparent among high-achieving students in policy-relevant graduate school settings (Shames 2017).

Though these studies are well executed, I argue that they are actually strong evidence that young adults display more than enough nascent political ambition. A relevant question left unanswered by both Shames and Lawless and Fox is "how many politically ambitious youths are

enough?" Though some may say that more is always better, the tone of the literature is that the lack of political ambition among young people is an emergency. The findings, however, do not support such dire warnings.

Though 11% seems like a low number of high school students to want to be elected officials, it is in fact more than adequate. Lawless and Fox note that, based on the number of elected offices (519,682, by their count, see page 20) in the United States, about 1 in every 600 Americans is an elected official at some level of government. This means that for the election to every political office in the country to have more than one candidate, just .0033% of Americans must be willing to run for office. If just five percent of adult Americans were to run for office, there would be more than 24 candidates for every elected office in the United States. Even if 95% of those claiming they would run for office in Lawless and Fox's sample never do and not a single person from the group claiming they would not change their mind, every office in the United States would have about 3 candidates competing for it. When these numbers are compared, 11% doesn't seem such a daunting number. More than enough young adults to fill every office in the United States are politically ambitious, according to Lawless and Fox's research. It seems that there are more than enough young adults with "political personalities."

In addition, evidence suggests that young people are not so different from older people in terms of political ambition. Lawless (2012) and Shames (2017) pursue essentially parallel strategies while focusing on different age groups. Both recruit elite samples of potential candidates – those most likely to pursue a political career. For Shames, that sample is graduate students at elite universities, which are relatively young (median age is 27). Lawless' sample was of lawyers, educators, businesspeople, and activists, traditional occupations to precede an elective career. Lawless' average age was 48. Despite studying very different groups, the results

of both studies were remarkably similar. Fifteen percent of the Lawless sample and 14% of the Shames sample claimed to have "seriously considered" running for office. Meanwhile those in the younger sample were more likely to have had the thought of running for office cross their mind, 46% to the older samples' 37%. Young adults and older adults are similarly political in their personalities, but one is drastically underrepresented. This suggests that it is unlikely that a difference in nascent ambition explains the difference in outcome.

In addition to the similar sample means, similar factors influenced decision making by both groups. Lawless argues that the most impactful factors in deciding whether to be a candidate included race, gender, and family support, as well as experience with politics. Shames reports that race, gender, and family support are crucial to her sample's ambition as well. Both report that a general distaste for raising money and a view of politics as a dirty, unproductive career pervades their samples. Thus, it seems that age is not a very relevant factor when considering nascent political ambition. Rather, when comparing samples across age categories, the variables and causal factors appear to stay consistent.

In addition, young elected officials are more likely to be ambitious than older elected officials (Schlesinger 1966, Hain 1974). The causes of this relationship are unclear. It's possible that more ambitious people simply run at a younger age, or that younger elected officials believe that they have more time to achieve their goals. Regardless, the data seem to suggest that young adults are no less ambitious than their older counterparts.

Rational Choice Theory

As with most questions in political science, rational choice theory suggests an answer. The rational choice answer to the question of missing young adult legislators builds on a vast intellectual foundation, but the logic is quite simple: when the rewards of running for office are

greater, and the costs lesser, a person is more likely to run for office. Thus, if young adults face greater costs or lesser rewards to running for office than older adults, we should expect to see fewer young adult candidates.

This explanation follows from the theory of political opportunity structure. The argument presented is that politicians are strategic and that they engage in cautious risk-taking (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). This means that politicians carefully survey the field of available opportunities and make rational calculations about when to reach for a new opportunity and when to pass, either to preserve their current office or preserve their availability for future opportunities (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). The rational calculation that these politicians must make, according to the theory, essentially boils down to when the expected benefits of pursuing a new office outweigh the expected costs. This requires a way to calculate the costs and benefits. Though not a universally agreed upon definition, Dowling (2008) formalized a way to investigate those rewards and derived Equation 2.1, presented below, which gives a good idea of the factors that scholars generally consider to be important (see also Black 1972, Rohde 1979, Sweet-Cushman 2018).

$$\text{Equation 2.1: } u(O) = P(B) - (C_{Institutional} - C_{Personal})$$

Essentially, the utility of running for a particular office [u(O)] are a function of the probability [P] of winning the election multiplied times the actual benefits of the office [B], less the institutional [$C_{Institutional}$] and personal [$C_{Personal}$] costs of running for office. The argument for political opportunity structure theorists is that if this utility rises above zero for an individual, then they will run for office.

Political opportunity theory is well-developed in political science. However, it has yet to address the puzzle presented above. A few trends in the literature explain this gap. First, the

literature has focused mostly on progressive ambition, or the desire of politicians to move "up" in elective offices. An extensive literature exists on how incumbent politicians, especially incumbent state legislators, make decisions about moving to a new office (Schlesinger 1966; Black 1972; Rohde 1979; Squire 1988; Herrick and Thomas 2005; Sweet-Cushman 2018; Oliver and Conroy 2018, 2020). This focus on incumbent politicians necessarily glosses over the initial desire to run for office. In fact, most of the rational choice works in this space explicitly assume that the people they are studying desire political office (Rohde 1979). This makes sense, since they already hold office.

In other words, the rational actor theory focuses less on the decision of whether to run and more on the decision of when to run. These two questions are substantively different and likely driven by different variables (Maestas et al 2006). Thus, much less is known about the decision to first seek office[4] but in general the rational choice theory suggests no theoretical limitations that would prevent its extension to first-time candidates. The limited research on potential candidates also suggests that similar factors concerning opportunity structure play a role (Lawless 2015, Shames 2017, Bernhard et al. 2021).

The second trend in the literature on political opportunity structure which explains the existing gap around young adults is that the theory has focused almost exclusively on the structural variables that affect when to run, rather than the individual-level variables that might also affect the decision. Indeed, the literature has largely eschewed research into costs and benefits and instead focused mostly on the probability of winning (Fowler 1993). Thus, the fact

[4] This is, in part, because of data limitations. Getting a reasonable sample of people who will eventually run for office, but have not yet made any concrete steps towards doing so, is an incredibly difficult task. Lawless (2015), Shames (2017) and Bernhard et al (2021) are excellent examples of attempting to get around this problem.

that the costs and benefits may change over a lifecycle has been understudied. Instead, studies of opportunity structure tend to emphasize a similar set of variables.

A simple listing of these many costs and benefits of running for office, however, would not satisfactorily answer the question of missing young adult legislators. Running for office is costly and being in office has many benefits. A dissertation making those points would surely not pass the prospectus stage. Rather, the application of rational choice theory to this puzzle would require evidence of differential costs and benefits across age groups. Any costs to running for state legislature that are higher for young adults or any benefits that are lower would be evidence in support of the rational choice theory.

Thus, any number of hypotheses could be proposed to suggest a rational choice approach. Age of candidacy requirements, for example, have basically no effect on those over the age of candidacy, but are a decisive factor for those who have not yet achieved that age. Because the age of candidacy for the Colorado State House is 25, a 24-year-old in Colorado is presented with no opportunity for that office, while a 50-year-old can completely disregard this restriction in their calculations. If a lower age of candidacy is associated with more young adult legislators, it would be evidence that strengthens the case for the rational choice theory.

Resources Theory

Closely related to the rational choice theory is a theory of resources. Here the theory is not that young adults have to pay more in costs to run for office, but that they simply are less able to pay. In this theory, young adults would like to run for office but lack the resources to do so. Rather than political opportunity structure, the roots of this theory can be found in the research on youth participation.

Research consistently finds that socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of participation (Fraga 2018). This is true not only across generations, but between young adults in the same generation (Wicks et al 2014, White and Gager 2007, McFarland and Thomas 2006). If resources are necessary for participation, and young adults have less of those resources than older people, that could explain lower levels of participation. The basic logic of this theory is simple but operates slightly differently depending on the definition of "resources."

There are material resources, like money. Though economic wealth is generally a good predictor of all kinds of political participation (see Brady et al 1995, Solt 2008), running for office is perhaps the best-case example of where money matters. Running for any office in the United States requires at least some disposable wealth. For many offices that are not high-profile, raising that money falls mostly on the candidate, either through self-funding or through networks of friends and family (Hogan 2004). Young adults are less likely to have a great deal of disposable income, and their friend networks are also unlikely to have money to donate. Young adults who consider becoming, or even become, a candidate may not be set up for success due solely to a lack of funds.

The resources theory takes on a different hue when the resource is 'civic skills' such as speaking in front of others, leading a meeting, or writing a professional letter. Civic skills are often developed while in the workforce or as a result of education, which may help predict participation (Brady et al 1995). Young adults may have less experience in the workforce and thus may be missing some of those resources. If those resources encourage participation, especially at the highest levels of participation like running for office, it makes sense that young adults would be less involved. Some of those resources do seem to have an impact – students less

involved at school are less likely to participate in activities like voting or protests (Wicks et al 2014, Feldman et al 2007, Kahne, Crow, and Lee 2013).

A third kind of resource is what I call "focus." Young people are generally more mobile and less 'rooted' in their communities than older people (Dey and Pirrett 2014). Evidence suggests that being less rooted in a community makes one less likely to participate (Brady et al 1995, Hunt 2022). At even the most basic level, anyone who moves is less likely to vote in the next election, if only because they have failed to register at a new address (Flanagan et al 2012).

In addition, some argue that a lack of young adult participation is driven by unique distractions of young life (Converse and Niemi 1971, Strate et al 1989, Holbein and Hillygus 2020). The things young people supposedly focus on instead are varied, but typical theorization includes that

> *Young single persons in their twenties are inevitably preoccupied with two rather personal quests: the quest for a mate and the quest for a suitable job. These quests are to some degree incompatible with devotion of attention to broader events. Once a mate is found-and this generally means some kind of tolerable job as well-the individual begins to take a more stable role in adult life and can afford to turn his eyes outward in a new degree* (Converse and Niemi 1971, 461).

The idea that young adults are simply too distracted to focus on politics, however, suffers from some questionable assumptions. It assumes that those who are older are simply less busy and able to focus on other things – ignoring that most distractions are relatively constant throughout adult life (is there any reason to believe that having, keeping, and seeking to excel in a job is less distracting than finding one?) and that some distractions (escalating job responsibilities, homeownership, child rearing) actually tend to come later in adult life. Political participation is

"rarely a top priority for anyone" (Highton and Wolfinger 2001, 203). Why should it affect young adults more than others? This is especially true when analyzing a participation choice as involved as running for office. Though differences in the difficulty of voting may be wide (Holbein and Hillygus 2020), running for office is a universally difficult experience (Fowler 1993). This makes "distraction" an unlikely candidate for the lack of electoral participation as a candidate for why young adults don't run for office.

In addition, there are empirical challenges to the 'focus' resource theory, such as finding that young adults who have bought a house or remained stable are not much more likely to vote than others (Highton and Wolfinger 2001). Sociological studies of ambition suggest that young people do make major strides in achieving their goals in early adulthood (Ashby and Schoon 2010, Brown et al. 2011, Schoon and Polek 2011). Though to be sure politics is a more geographically based business than many, it is hardly different enough to explain a totally different outcome in ambition fulfillment. In addition, transience is, to some extent, a choice. For many ambitious young adults who believed that rootedness in a community was important to being a representative of that community, remaining in the community they grew up in is an option. The reasons for not exercising that option could then be considered the real cause of the lack of young adult political representatives.

The final set of resources that may play a role in participation is "non cognitive skills" such as grit and determination (Holbein and Hillygus 2020). Holbein and Hillygus (2020) investigate the dearth of young voters in recent elections and identify a lack of "noncognitive" skills among young adults ages 18-29. Noncognitive skills are skills "related to self-regulation" like 'grit' and 'perseverance' (Holbein and Hillygus 2020). Holbein and Hillygus argue that young adults often intend to vote but fail to follow through because they are less able to

overcome internal and external barriers to participation than older adults. They show that young adults with higher noncognitive skills participate more than young adults without those noncognitive skills.

Certainly, grit and determination are likely to serve a potential candidate well. Without these resources, it is unlikely that any candidate would be able to succeed in any race. If young adults have less of this resource than older adults, then even if the costs of running remain constant, it would be more difficult for young adults to become state legislators because they simply cannot pay the costs due to a lack of noncognitive skills. Holbein and Hillygus' argument is persuasive but lacks a key element that could label it a "smoking gun." Namely, while they show that young adults who are highly proficient in noncognitive skills skilled young adults vote at a higher rate than their comparatively less skilled counterparts, they do not present comparative data with older adults. With no data on the noncognitive skills of older adults, it is difficult to draw the conclusion that the abnormally low levels of participation among young adults are due to their lack of noncognitive skills. Still, it is possible that noncognitive skills become stronger over time and thus obstacles put in front of all voters disproportionately affect younger adults. This explanation, however, may be less persuasive when discussing running for office.

The political activity I am interested in is much more costly than voting. Running for state legislator is incredibly difficult. It usually requires months of work, thousands of dollars, and a willingness to subject oneself to any number of personal attacks. In short, it is not a task the "average" person would take on lightly. Anyone willing to run a campaign for state legislator is likely to have several standard deviations more "grit" and ambition than the average person. The increase in noncognitive skills over time would have to be dramatic to turn a young adult

without the grit to run for office into an older adult who has it. Without strong evidence of this effect, it would be premature to assume that older adults manage to get elected because of grit built up over time, rather than some other factor.

In addition, the authors argue that young people are uniquely unlikely to vote not because they are uniquely likely to lack skills, but because the unique barriers they face require skills to overcome them. In short, a young adult with low skills is less likely to vote than an older adult with the same level of skills. This alone suggests that skills themselves are not the driver of the lack of participation.

And indeed, research also suggests that a sizable number of young adults believe that they have the skills necessary for a career in politics (Lawless and Fox 2015, Shames 2017). If many young adults believe that they could run for office, it seems unlikely that they would feel unqualified to vote, write letters, or volunteer for a campaign. Still, research has thus far neglected to investigate the impacts of these resources on when in their lifecycle folks choose to run for office. Further work is needed.

Much like with the rational choice theory, a number of hypotheses might be suggested under the umbrella of the resources theory. A full explanation of this theory requires an identification of a cost, the resource required to pay that cost, and evidence that young adults lack that resource at a greater rate than older adults. For example, fees required to appear on a ballot require money to pay. Young adults being generally less wealthy than older adults would then be at a distinct disadvantage. However, many states allow a petition with a certain number of signatures to replace the payment of a fee. Signature gathering, however, certainly requires grit and free time. If there is evidence that young adults have less of those resources, it would certainly follow that a seemingly neutral set of laws had a disproportionate effect on young

adults, thus lowering the number that appear in state legislatures. This and other potential hypotheses will be the subject of exploration throughout the rest of the dissertation.

Political Theory

Another theory that can be thought of as closely related to rational choice theory is the political theory that young adult candidates simply do not win. Perhaps young adults are less likely to be in state legislators for no reason other than the working of a democratic system – perhaps voters simply prefer older candidates. Studies of voter bias have consistently shown that voters do rely on qualities such as race, gender, and attractiveness as heuristics when making vote choices (e.g. Bauer 2020, Holman et al. 2016, Schneider & Bos 2014, Kinder and Ryan 2017; Hutchings and Valentino 2004). Studies of whether age is a heuristic that voters use are few and far between, but the extant evidence is worth examining.

The first studies to directly examine age as consideration in vote choice actually found some support for the hypothesis that voters discriminate against older candidates, preferring younger representatives (Sigelman and Sigelman 1982). However, the strongest support in these early studies is for the similarity hypothesis – that voters prefer someone close to their own age (Sigelman and Sigelman 1982, Piliavan 1987). More recent studies have also highlighted this finding, though with very different effect sizes (Pomante and Schraufnagel 2015, Klofstad et al. 2015, Webster and Pierce 2019). The evidence is also mixed on whether voters prefer younger candidates (Hainmueller et al 2014, McClean and Ono 2020), middle-aged candidates (Klofstad et al 2015, Kirkland and Coppock 2018, Teele et al. 2018, Campbell and Cowley 2014) or don't seem to have a real preference (Roberts and Wolack 2022). Importantly, these studies have vast differences in survey design and only two of them include what I define as a young adult

candidate (Teele et al. 2018 have a 29 year old candidate and Roberts and Wolack 2022 use a 23 year old candidate)[5].

An additional 'flavor' of the political hypothesis suggests that, while voters may or may not be a problem, party leaders are. Party leaders are an important constituency when it comes to securing a place in any political office (Cohen et al 2009), and so bias among that particular group may play just as strong a role as bias among voters. If patterns of recruitment or party support somehow disadvantage young adults, it could put up serious additional roadblocks to seeking office. This bias has yet to be examined closely in any literature.

Thus, mixed evidence suggests that voter bias may have a part to play in the lack of young adults in state legislatures. However, more research is needed to see if this is a primary cause of the missing young adult legislators.

Sociological Theory

The four theories already presented ask the question: who is making the choice to keep young adults out of the hallowed halls of our state legislatures? For the psychological theory, it's young adults, either too selfish or too busy to bother with elected office. For the rational choice theory, the young adults again make the choice not to run, this time because their opportunities are too poor. For the resources theory and political theories, it's the gatekeepers and holders of resources, either political elites or voters themselves who have chosen to keep the young adults far away from seats in the legislature.

[5] It is also important to note that many of these studies are not studies of age, but simply include an age component in their experiments, which leaves the theorization of age effects at a surface level at best.

These theories, though never directly tested by the literature, are hinted at and suggested by previous works. Anecdotally, they are also the theories posited by political scientists whenever I mention my dissertation topic to one of them. The final theory, though, is even less tested by the compendium of political science and answers a completely different question than the other theories. Instead of asking "who is making the choice," I ask the question: "is a choice being made?"

Economists define 'choice' as one alternative being selected over another (Schmitz 2012). Thus, choice necessitates both a set of alternatives and the action of selection. If an alternative is never presented or never enters the mind of the person doing the selecting, then a choice cannot be made. I would, of course, choose to win the lottery if I were given the opportunity. But since I do not know that the next set of randomly generated numbers in the machine at the gas station are the winning numbers, I do not get to choose whether or not to win the lottery – I only get to choose whether or not to play.

Asking the question "is a choice being made" means asking the question of whether young adults even consider the alternative of running for office. Young people may have the belief that they are not qualified for office or would be considered unqualified if they ran. This belief may or may not be true, but if it is held by a large number of young adults, it could explain the lack of young adults in state legislatures. Essentially, this theory argues that young adults never reach the rational choice stage of deciding whether to run for office because they do not consider it a possibility at their age or level of experience. They never realize that they do or do not have the resources; they never give the voters a chance to reject them, not because they do not wish to be in office, but because they do not even entertain the alternative that they can be.

Not being in office is the default. The baseline. Because, as established above, it is always costly to run for office, one must make a conscious choice to do so. One could also make a conscious choice not to do so, but in the absence of any conscious choice, young adults (or anyone) will not join the legislature. It's not something that happens by accident. Thus, the lack of young adults in state legislatures could be due to choices or could be due to a lack of making a choice. The sociological theory argues for the latter.

Though unstudied in young adults, what I call the sociological theory has a rich history in candidate emergence literature. It argues that only some people are seen (and see themselves) as viable candidates (Matthews 1954). Who is considered "eligible" for office may be more than the legal definitions of the term. Early versions of the theory centered around the idea of an elite ruling class that resembled a caste system (Fowler 1993). More recently, however, social sanction as a part of the process of running for office has become softer, but no less impactful (Kazee 1994). For example, Black Americans immediately following Reconstruction may have been legally allowed to seek office, but few did so, because unstated sociological eligibility requirements prevented it. These eligibility requirements are non-institutional but may nonetheless be real. "[T]he context of eligibility is ignored if we focus primarily on candidacy as the product of a decision about costs and benefits; ambition may be an irrelevant consideration if candidacy is denied because of an individual's gender, race, or ethnic status" (Kazee 1994, 12). Those who never even begin the process of rational weighing of the option to run for office because people "like them" are not thought of as real candidates can't truly be thought of as having made a "rational" calculation.

The most influential scholar in the 'softer' sociological tradition, Donald Matthews, is worth quoting at length here:

> *In order to answer questions of this sort a far broader and less formalistic conception of the selection process is needed. Who becomes a political decision maker is not just decided by elections, primaries, and voting but rather is also the result of a continual sifting and sorting of the citizens who enter the quest for political power. By conventional devices and practices, societies set up barriers to political advancement for some and encourage others. The way in which this social selection is done and the bases and criteria of elimination have considerable impact on the competence of persons who become political decision makers. Certainly, these subtle processes may eliminate a far larger number of potential decision makers than do primaries and elections; and the continued existence and efficient operation of a political system depends upon the development and attraction of competent political decision makers* (Matthews 1954, 4)

It is important to note that, according to the sociological theory, these beliefs of potential candidates need not bear any relationship to reality. Rather, these sociological barriers may be internalized such that, though someone would like to be in office, they never seriously consider running. This point has been made extensively about female candidates (see, e.g. Lawless and Fox 2010, Dolan 2014, Dolan and Lynch 2014, Elder 2004). Whether the same extends to young adults has yet to be examined. In addition, such sociological barriers may change who is recruited to run for office, which, as explained above, has a huge impact on who actually decides to run.

Thus, if young adults never consider running for office as a young adult, then they wouldn't show up in the halls of state legislatures because they would never become candidates. Older Americans, on the other hand, do consider running because they meet the unspoken eligibility requirements.

This answer to the question is categorically different from the other potential theories. First, it is necessarily prior – a choice must be presented before a choice can be made. While the other theories argue that young adults are sitting on the sidelines, this theory posits that they never even thought of joining the team – or that if they did, they assumed they would never make it. Secondly, this theory implies that no one's mind needs to be changed to get young adults into the game. No one has made the conscious choice to keep young adults out, young adults are not in state legislatures simply because they don't realize they can be! In this theorization, young adults are a massive potential source of political talent that is being held back by nothing. They simply have to have that talent and power pointed out to them.

Investigatory Strategy

Any one of these theories, or a combination of them, could explain the lack of young adult representation in state legislatures. Each has a potential claim as the best explanation for why young. The aim of the dissertation proposed here is to determine which, if any, of these theories can best help crack the case. Because of the lack of previous work in this area, a number of different kinds of data are called to examine a variety of theories. The dissertation is organized around data sources, rather than around theories, because the data often tell us about more than one theory at once.

Before the investigation begins, the question must be asked "who is a young adult?" Of course there is no objective answer to this question; any cut-off date will necessarily be arbitrary. I choose to focus on adults under the age of thirty for the purposes of this research. A few factors influenced this definition of "young adult." First, those aged 18-29 are the most underrepresented of any age group. While citizens aged 30-39 are also underrepresented, the underrepresentation

is not as dramatic, as can be seen from Figure 1.1. Since this research is motivated in part by the normative aspects of representation, it is appropriate to focus on those who are the most underrepresented. The second reason is theoretical. Perhaps the most obvious knee-jerk reaction to the question of why young adults are underrepresented is that they lack the "real-world" experience to get elected. Testing that theory requires a focus on those who have very little "real-world" experience, usually those who are just graduating from college, which most often happens in the 18-29 age range. Finally, 30 years old is the highest age of candidacy for a state legislature in the country (the Tennessee Senate). Essentially, this means that a 29-year-old in Tennessee is the oldest person in the country that the law considers unqualified to be a state legislator. This law arbitrarily sets 30 as a critical age for potential state legislators. For these reasons, I choose the arbitrary cutoff of 30 years old to be considered a "young adult."

Sources of Data

Aside from general observational data, several data collection efforts play a big role in this investigation. Other data sources will also be used, but the reader would be well-served by knowing of these sources ahead of our investigatory journey.

The first major source of data are two original datasets containing the ages of state legislators and state legislative candidates. Using data from KnowWho, a commercial data analytics firm which collects and sells information about state lawmakers for lobbying purposes, which I supplemented with extensive research into news archives and other online data sources, I have collected a dataset that contains the approximate age of 4768 state legislators from 2016. This represents about 65% of state legislators in the country. The sample of legislators is similar to the population on a number of variables, including gender and race, which adds confidence that there is no major selection bias in the group. The KnowWho data, however, only contains

those who actually succeeded at becoming state legislators. Thus, the data would be unable to detect if young adults are running for, but not winning, seats in the state legislature. To answer this question, data on state legislative candidates is needed. However, data on legislative candidates is not easily available. Thus, I have created a dataset of state legislative candidates using public records requests from Secretary of State Offices in California, Washington, Arizona, Rhode Island, and Maryland. I requested public records from each state that requires candidates to list their date of birth (or equivalent information) on official data forms, and these states were the only ones to respond.

The second data source is an original survey of young adult students in policy relevant fields. Building on Shames' (2017) research, I conducted a survey of both undergraduate and graduate students not just about nascent ambition, but about when the young adults might consider becoming candidates. The survey asks about what qualifications young adults consider necessary to become a state legislator, what qualifications they currently have, and whether they perceive a bias against young adults in the electoral process. Some respondents were also recruited to give longer interviews about the same subjects.

Limiting the sample to those likely to be politically ambitious is necessary because the theories that this dissertation tests are theories that seek to explain the actions of politically ambitious young adults, not all young adults. In order to generate a sufficient sample of young adults with nascent political ambitions, one must go where those politically ambitious young adults are likely to be. Since it is unlikely that a great number of politically ambitious young adults fail to attend college, surveying both undergraduate and graduate students likely gives a close to accurate look at the population of politically ambitious young adults.

Thirdly, I conducted interviews with elites who may play a role in candidate recruitment. This includes local party leaders and nonprofit organizations dedicated to recruiting young adults. These interviews focused on general candidate recruitment strategies as well as specific questions about young adult candidates.

Finally, two original surveys will serve as major sources of data for this dissertation. One, the Critical Issues Poll conducted by the University of Maryland, asked 3379 voters a number of questions about whether they consider age to be a relevant factor in deciding who to vote for. An original Qualtrics survey contained an experimental instrument that showed voters pictures of hypothetical candidates. Included in the experiment was a short vignette of either a 62 year old or a 25 year old candidate for state senate and asked a number of questions about the person's ability to do the job and whether the respondent or people like them would be willing to vote for the candidate.

These four data sources, along with other observational and qualitative data, serve as the backbone of analyses.

A Note on Methods

Readers of this dissertation will no doubt realize that most of the methods in this investigation are more basic. This is not because more complex statistical tests are not possible or advisable, but because of the nature of the inquiry. This dissertation sits in a peculiar gap in political science's compendium. That is, it is not a well-worn question on which I propose a new theory or a logical extension of other work. Though, to be sure, there is a great deal of political science that can and is referenced and cited here, there is much new ground to survey.

As such, I have made a conscious choice to keep the statistical tests simple. The true story here is surely complex and delicate and I highly encourage future scholars to take up the

mantle and continue the search. My goal here is not a final answer to the question of where the young adult legislators might be found, but to shed some light on where the culprit may be hiding and hopefully to rule out (to the extent possible) some places where they certainly are not. In this endeavor, providing baseline relationships between variables is likely the most useful. Future scholars can then take those relationships or lack thereof and endeavor to explain them further.

In addition to a theoretical reasoning for the simplicity of my tests, there is a literary one. I have often found that if a relationship cannot be observed by a simple test, it is much harder to convince even the most methodologically advanced reader that the relationship is very impactful. The simple relationship is much more convincing. Of course, these relationships can be spurious – though careful theorization may be a better guard against such an outcome than more complex statistics. Readers are encouraged to think through these relationships carefully, rather than to simply observe huge regression tables.

As the various theories are tested, I also encourage the readers to think critically about null results. Of course, null results could be the result of simply lacking statistical power or the right mix of controls. In this case, however, if we take null results at their face value as showing 'no relationship,' it may actually be evidence in favor of one of the other theories – mostly the sociological theory. Every time we find that something does not matter, it could mean that it's not being taken into account by young adults. And as the number of things young adults are not taking into account piles up, it becomes harder and harder to assume that they were taking anything into account. Or, more simply, that they were making a decision at all.

Plan of the Chapters

Chapter 2 will focus on institutional variables that may affect the prevalence of young adult candidates in state legislatures. Exploiting variation in many institutions across states, I investigate several different legal structures that surround running for office. The tests in this chapter inform mostly the Rational Choice, Resources, and Political Theories by evaluating how the costs and benefits of running for office affect the dependent variable.

Chapter 3 uses data on voters to continue to shed light on several theories. Though it will mostly be helpful in evaluating the Political Theory, the Sociological Theory and Rational Choice Theory also make assumptions about voters which this chapter will address. Chapter 3 also addresses any biases among party leaders, relying mostly on elite interviews.

Chapter 4 goes right to the source and asks young adults about their views of running for office. This chapter has obvious application to all of the theories presented above. This chapter utilizes both survey and interview data to understand where young adults see themselves in the complex world of candidate emergence.

Chapter 5 will sum up and provide conclusions from the previous chapters. By evaluating the strength of the evidence for each theory side-by-side, this chapter will discuss how those theories might interact with one another. It will discuss remaining questions and suggest future areas of research. Finally, I will discuss the normative implications of the conclusions of this research.

Chapter 2: Structured Opportunities

Introduction

Before we can consider whether young adults are missing an opportunity, we have to consider if that opportunity actually exists. A key ingredient in moving from nascent ambition to expressive ambition is opportunity. A desire for office cannot be realized without an opportunity to seek that office. While, in the United States, legal opportunities are abundant - as Lawless and Fox (2015) point out, there are more than half a million elective offices in the United States, not to mention appointive offices or less formal offices like party chairs. Thus, at first glance, "lack of opportunity" seems a poor explanation for the missing young adult legislators.

As is often the case, however, the first glance is misleading. While young adults may not be legally barred from office (though, as we will see, they sometimes are!), the quality of the opportunities presented to them may be very poor. If presented with poor opportunities, many politically ambitious people may choose to wait until a more favorable opportunity comes along. By this logic, if young adults are presented with systemically poorer opportunities to become state legislators than older adults, it may serve as the key to understanding why young adults are not found in state legislatures across the country.

Theory

As explained in Chapter 1, no chapter in this book completely tests one theory or tests only one theory. Rather, the results presented in this chapter could strengthen or weaken any of the theories previously discussed (or even suggest clues leading to a new theory!) depending on

how it is read. However, these tests have a more obvious connection to some theories than others.

The theory that is probably most relevant to this chapter is the rational choice theory. The institutions that govern state legislative elections certainly affect the costs of running for office and the institutions of the state legislature themselves affect the benefits of being in that office. The goal of these tests is essentially to test whether those costs are uniquely borne by young adults, or the benefits are uniquely unattractive to young adults. It bears repeating that running for office is invariably costly and for the population we are interested in, they are invariably seen as having some benefits. The question is one of the differential effects on politically ambitious young adults versus politically ambitious older adults.

What does support for the rational choice theory look like in the following tests? Rational choice theory would predict significant effects of institutions on the share of young adult legislators, which would mean, more often than not, rejecting the null hypothesis on the following tests. Of course, formal institutions are not the only way that costs might be greater or benefits lesser for young adults than older adults. Thus, null results from the following test should not lead the reader to completely reject the rational choice theory. Rather, it puts the rational choice theory on much thinner ice.

Secondly, the tests below weigh heavily on the resources theory. Since the resources theory is closely related to the rational choice theory, this should come as no surprise. The difference is that rational choice focuses on the willingness to pay costs, while the resources theory focuses on the ability of young adults to pay those costs. This difference is small, but the predictions generated by the two theories are actually quite different. The focus is still on the differential effects of institutions, but because running for office is invariably costly, the

resources theory would predict an overall lower level of young adult legislators than the rational choice theory might. In addition, the resources theory would predict that benefits of being in office would have very little effect on the share of young adults in the legislature, whereas the costs of gaining office would have a significant effect. This would be evidence that young adults are willing to run for office but are unable to pay the significant costs.

Thus, support for the resources theory from the tests that follow looks like failing to reject the null hypothesis for institutions that affect the "benefits" side of the equation while rejecting the null hypothesis for those on the "costs" side of the equation. Of course, this is complicated by the fact that institutions have more than one effect. Being in the "upper" chamber of state legislatures, for example, likely has more benefits than the "lower" chamber but is more costly. For this reason, readers are again reminded that no single test in any single chapter should be taken as the "key" test of any single theory. Rather, take each result as part of the complicated tapestry that tells us more about each theory.

Though less directly related, there may be evidence for or against other theories as well. The party competition and single member district variables may tell us something about how voters see young adult candidates when more is on the line. Age of candidacy laws may contribute to the perception that young adults are not welcome in state legislatures, even once they have technically passed the age.

Data

The main empirical parts of this chapter come from analysis of a dataset of sitting state legislators in 2018 (which I will hereafter refer to as the "Legislators Dataset"). This dataset contains 7305 state legislators in the United States. I have at least a year of birth for more than 88 percent of those state legislators. Much of the data I purchased from the advocacy data firm

KnowWho, which compiles and sells this information in order to assist lobbying firms in targeting state legislators. I supplemented KnowWho's data with extensive internet research. Searching local newspapers and media outlets, other databases of state legislators, and personal social media of these state legislators, I was able to determine the approximate age of several thousand more legislators than existed in KnowWho's data. This makes it, to my knowledge, the most complete dataset of state legislator ages ever created.

In addition to the Legislators Dataset, occasional reference will be made to the Candidates Dataset. This dataset contains 2831 candidates for state legislator across 10 states (or 20 legislative chambers) in 2018. Of those 2831 candidates, I have found at least a year of birth for 2626, or 90.8%. This data was compiled from official candidate records or by matching declared candidates to publicly available registered voter lists. The Candidates Dataset is, to my knowledge, the only dataset that has state legislative candidate ages which is not based off of survey research subject to non-response biases. It is also larger than any survey dataset I could find.

The existence of these datasets is crucial to advancing the study of age in electoral politics because it allows contemporaneous comparison across contexts. Existing data on age in the U.S. Congress is useful but falls into the usual pitfalls of having to compare across time in order to get variation. In addition, given that close to half of the members of the U.S. Congress come from state legislatures (NCSL 2022), state legislative data gets us closer to the start of many politicians' careers. In addition, a focus on state legislative candidates can tell us a great deal about political behavior and representation that cannot be determined by those who are actually elected.

This data exists at the individual level, so the unit of analysis can be the individual legislator or candidate when needed. However, the main dependent variable of interest in this chapter is the share of young adult legislators in a grouping. That grouping is either a state legislative chamber or a state legislature as a whole, depending on the level at which the independent variable is measured. For example, the age of candidacy is often different between legislative chambers in the same state, so the dependent variable of that analysis is the share of young adult legislators in a legislative chamber. On the other hand, state party lean is obviously measured at the state level, so the dependent variable must also be the share of young adult legislators in the state as a whole.

I have chosen to focus on the share of young adult legislators in these groupings because it carries the biggest normative weight. While individual young adults being presented with poor opportunities certainly affects the quality of representation that young adults receive, it is much less impactful than the systemic exclusion of young adults from office. If every state legislature had 20% young adult representation, there would be little need for this research, even if some individual young adults were dealt a bad hand. So, while I occasionally make reference to analysis using the individual as the unit of analysis, for the most part the legislative chamber or the state is a more useful focus to address the questions this research seeks to examine.

An interesting result of these choices is the large number of zeros in the dataset. Of the 99 legislative chambers in the country, 61 have no members under 30 in the dataset[6]. Because this

[6] It is possible, of course, that some of these have legislators for which I am missing birth dates and are under 30. If, somehow, data collection was systematically skewed against finding birth years of particularly young state legislators, this would pose an enormous problem for these data. Anecdotally, however, I doubt this is the case. Unusually young state legislators are often a novelty in such a way that they attract the attention of local reporters, who write profiles specifically highlighting how young they are. Thus, young adult's age is probably more likely to be included in the dataset than a middle-aged or older adults.

quirk in data structure often skews more advanced statistics, I attempt to rely in this chapter mostly on simple, direct comparisons. My hope is to give the reader a sense of the data without too much statistical manipulation. If the political opportunity structure truly explains the dearth of young adult representation, it should show up in these simple comparisons across states. When it does not, we should be skeptical of this explanation.

Independent Variables

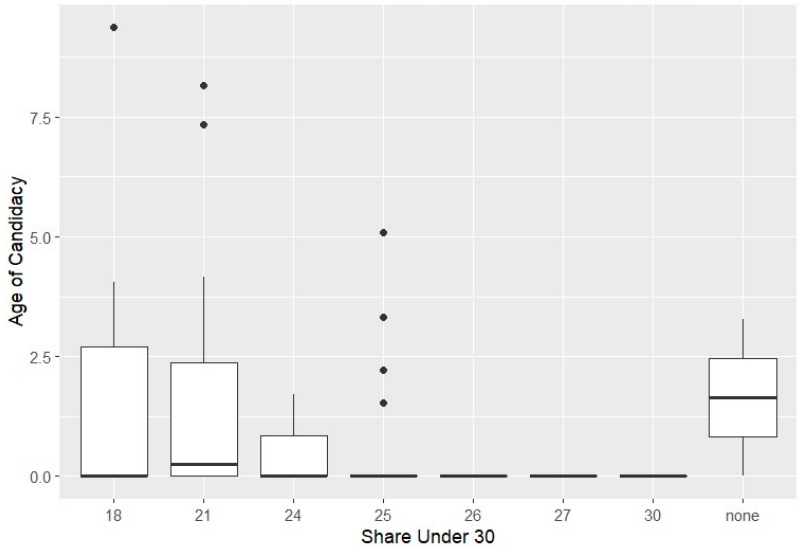
Age of Candidacy

The most obvious variable that restricts young adults from running for office is age of candidacy laws. Age of candidacy laws are laws that set the minimum age of any candidate for an office. For example, U.S. Representatives must be 25 years old, U.S. Senators must be 30 years old, and candidates for President must be 35 years old. These ages are set by the U.S. Constitution. Every state, except for Vermont, has a minimum age requirement for their state legislators.[7] Thanks to these laws, young people are the most common group legally barred from seeking office in the United States. Curiously, however, political science has never addressed questions regarding age of candidacy requirements in the United States. A Google Scholar search of the term "Age of Candidacy" returns only 187 hits, most of which are works of comparative or international political science, some of which are about candidacy for clinical trials of medicines, and many of which are actually about the voting age.

[7] For some states, there is no explicit age of candidacy, but they require that candidates be registered voters in the state. Since in every state there is an age of majority for voting, those act as de facto age of candidacy laws in those states.

Of course, age of candidacy has an obvious potential connection to the representation of young adults – when young adults are not eligible to be representatives, their representation naturally suffers. In terms of the rational choice theory, it certainly counts on the "costs" side of the equation, though in this case that cost operates more like the resource theory – young adults are unable to 'pay' this cost, rather than unwilling. In addition, young adults may see the age of candidacy requirements as a signal that they are not welcome in the state legislature, even after they have reached the nominal age of candidacy. An ambitious 25-year-old could be forgiven for believing that they are not being presented with a high-quality opportunity to become a state legislator when at 24 they would have been legally excluded from such a position.

Figure 2.1
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Age of Candidacy



The graph above shows the distribution of young adults in state legislatures with different age of candidacy laws. The graph shows that the story is not quite as simple as the intuition would suggest. Though certainly it appears that states with lower ages of candidacy have higher shares of young adult legislators, the median share in every group except for the group of chambers with an age of candidacy of 21 and the "No Age of Candidacy" group is still no

representation for young adults. Since the "No Age of Candidacy" group contains only the Vermont State House and Senate and the median in the "21" group is still only .25% of the legislature. This is hardly a ringing endorsement for age of candidacy laws as the culprit behind the missing young adult legislators.

Simple statistical tests bear this out. I used a Kruskal Test (essentially a non-parametric ANOVA Test that does not require a normal distribution) to determine if there were statistically significant differences between legislative chambers with different age of candidacy laws. I tested both the Candidate Dataset (to see if lower age of candidacy requirements generated more young adult candidates) and the Legislators Dataset. The test on the candidates dataset was statistically insignificant ($p = .21$), implying that there is no evidence of a relationship between lower age of candidacy laws and more young adults running for office. The Legislators Dataset story is somewhat more complicated. A naïve Kruskal test was insignificant ($p = .16$), but there was evidence of significant outliers. In fact, four legislative chambers were considered extreme outliers.[8] With those four chambers removed, the Kruskal Test does show a significant relationship ($p < .05$).

This result does not show the full picture, however. The four chambers that were removed in order to generate this result were the Arizona and Colorado State Houses and the Maine and Oklahoma State Senates. These four chambers are also the only four chambers with an age of candidacy of 25 or over that actually have young adult representatives. So, while it is certainly telling that these four are considered extreme outliers, their removal essentially stacks the deck in favor of finding a significant difference between the different age of candidacy

[8] Values above Q3 + 3xIQR or below Q1 - 3xIQR are considered extreme outliers.

groups. Pairwise comparisons show that the "significant" result is driven entirely by the zeroes in the group where the age of candidacy is 25 – which all 4 of the outliers actually fall into.

There is little evidence of a clear and direct effect of age of candidacy laws on the ages of state legislators, and even less evidence of a direct effect on the age of state legislative candidates. The evidence that does exist for a relationship is not substantively significant. Even in a state where the minimum age of candidacy is technically "being born," less than 2.5 percent of the state legislators are young adults. This suggests that this is at least one 'resource' that does not fit within the resources theory. The lack of relationship is the first sign that the electoral institutions may not be a major driver of the lack of young adult representation in our state legislatures. The rest of the chapter continues to investigate if this initial finding holds.

Chamber

Much like the U.S. Senate, state senates are often viewed as the "upper chamber" of a bicameral legislature. The expectation is that state senators are more experienced and more powerful than members of the state house. State senate seats often represent a larger constituency than state house seats. Indeed, state house members often try to "move up" to a state senate seat, viewing the state senate seat as a "higher office."

As discussed in the theory section, how this variable operates is different between the rational choice and resources theories. In the rational choice theory, though the costs of running for a state senate seat go up, the benefits also increase. Thus, ambitious young adults would certainly be more likely to be found running for state house, but a young adult running for state senate would not be unusual if the costs and benefits rise at approximately the same amount. For the resources theory, however, increased costs of running for state senate would prevent most young adults from running, regardless of the fact that the benefits also increase.

Of course, the logic of both applies to all potential candidates – those with less experience in elective office are likely to be found in the state house. However, because young adult legislators are more likely to be early in their careers, it would make sense that state houses have a higher proportion of young adults than state senates.

Figure 2.2
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Chamber

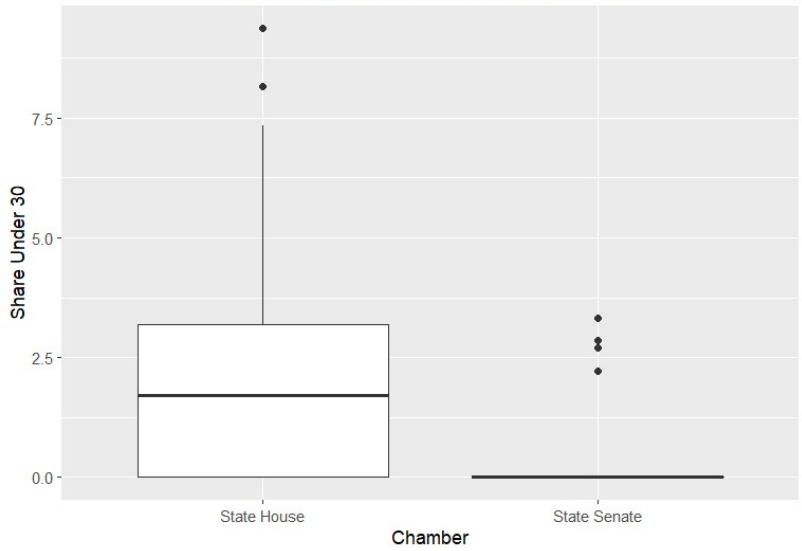


Figure 2.2 seems to confirm the suspicion. The median state senate has 0 young adult members, and indeed the 4 state senates that have young adult members are statistical outliers – despite the fact that each of them has only 1 young adult member![9] In state houses, on the other hand, only 15/49 have 0 young adult members. That is not to say that state houses are paragons of young adult representation, of course. The mean state house still only has 2.05% young adult members. In 12 of the remaining 35 cases, a meeting of the "Young Adults Caucus" would still occur anytime a member dined alone, and another 11 would only require a table for two.

The difference shown in Figure 2.2 and implied by the simple stats above is confirmed by a Kruskal Wallis Test. There is a statistically significant difference between state house and state

[9] Values above Q3 + 1.5xIQR or below Q1 – 1.5xIQR are considered outliers.

senate membership ($p < .001$). In fact, the same relationship holds for candidates for state legislatures, as well ($p<.001$). For the purposes of this research, however, these differences are probably not substantive in answering the questions posed. For one thing, though it shows variation across the states, all states but Nebraska already have "lower chambers," so it can't explain the low level of absolute representation in the United States. Finally, there is little reason to believe that, were State Senates to be abolished in favor of unicameralism in the states that there would be a significant increase in young adult representation. In fact, the single unicameral state in the nation, Nebraska, has no young adult representatives in its legislature.

Single Member Districts

Duverger's Law (Duverger 1965) states that first past the post, single member district (SMD) elections will tend to lead to an electoral system of two parties. The United States is perhaps the best example of Duverger's Law in reality, not just in theory. The SMD election is perhaps the most important aspect of the U.S. electoral system for deciding who gets elected. And there are reasons to believe that it might uniquely hurt young adult candidates. The fact that a third party is unlikely to succeed in the United States stunts the creation of a new party that speaks directly to the concerns of young adults, like exists in some European countries (Munger 2022). Single-member districts also mean that voters are not presented with a "ticket" of candidates, but with one candidate only.

How does this variable play into the various theories presented? In terms of the rational choice theory, single member districts don't seem to directly affect the benefits of gaining office. On the costs side, however, it is possible that running as a 'ticket' with other candidates may decrease the costs of running somewhat because the costs can be split between multiple candidates. Thus, an individual candidate might be able to raise less money because advertising

costs can be split between the campaigns and volunteers can be shared since voters are unlikely to split their ballot, especially within a multi-member district (Hellwege and Gerrish 2021). This decrease in costs means that both the rational choice theory and the resources theory would predict an increase in the number of young adults running for and winning state legislative offices in multi-member districts as opposed to single member districts.

The multi-member district might also affect the P term in the rational choice equation, which represents the perceived probability of success. Young adults might see multi-member districts in which they have established allies as a better opportunity than the atomized competition of single-member districts. This would again suggest that the rational choice theory would predict a positive, statistically significant effect of utilizing multi-member districts as opposed to single member districts.

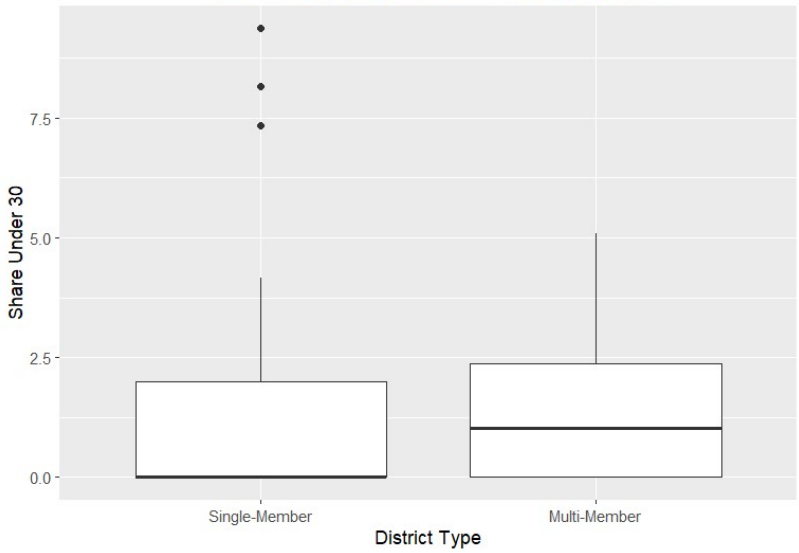
This also, of course, suggests that there may be some evidence here about the political theory. If voters are hesitant to support young adult candidates because of a lack of experience or because of stereotyped perceptions, then the ability to pair those young adults with older adults may reassure voters. Thus, young adults would be more likely to be elected in multi-member districts because voters are not forced to put all of their eggs in one basket. Thus, the political theory would likely also predict a positive, statistically significant effect in favor of multi-member districts over single member districts for young adult representation.

Most of the extant evidence about how young adults get elected comes from places with parliamentary systems, which generally do not have SMD elections. The results from these studies show that electoral institutions can have a major impact on how many young adults are elected. Joshi (2013) finds that variation in electoral systems explains a good deal of variation in the age of legislators in Asian parliaments. Similarly, variation in European electoral institutions

affect the ages of delegates sent to the European parliament (Stockmer and Sundstrom 2019). In addition, there is evidence that parties strategically place young adults on their tickets, though the effect sizes in these studies in generally small (Stockmer and Sundstrom 2019, Chiru and Gheringa 2010, Norris and Franklin 1997). All of these results should lead us to ask whether the single member district voting system itself poses a major obstacle to young adult candidates. In part, this will be dealt with in Chapter 4, when I analyze how voters feel about young adult candidates. The institutions, however, deserve their own scrutiny.

Though SMD elections are, by far, the dominant form of election in the United States, several states do use multi-member district (MMD) elections for their state legislature. Each of these MMD systems is unique but the states can be well-sorted into those that use SMD and those that use MMD systems. Figure 2.3 shows the average share of young adult legislators in state chambers that use single member districts and chambers that use multi-member districts. The graph shows that the average MMD chamber has a slightly higher share of young adult legislators than the average SMD chamber. This would fit the expectations that the literature suggests. However, a Kruskal Test shows this difference not to be significant ($p = .17$). It is worth noting that states are more likely to use MMDs for their state house elections than their state senate elections (6 states use an SMD system for their state senate elections, but an MMD system for their state house elections). Given the strength of the results suggesting that lower chambers are more likely to have young adults than upper chambers, this may help explain the difference that Figure 2.3 shows.

Figure 2.3
Share of Legislators Under 30 by District Type



The data show, in contradiction to the rational choice theory, the resources theory, and the political theory, that MMD systems are not statistically more likely to elect young adult candidates than SMD systems. This data may be tempered by the fact that even states with MMD systems exist in an environment with two dominant parties because most elections in the United States are SMD elections. It is thus impossible to draw any strong conclusions from this data, because an MMD system in a few states in the U.S. is a fundamentally different system than MMD used worldwide. If the United States were to adopt an overall MMD system, it is possible that it would improve representation of young adults, but this data is simply unable to make any real suggestive claims on the matter.

Term Limits

There is a long history in political science as seeing term limits as a way to improve the representation of minority groups (see Carroll and Jenkins 2001 for an extensive summary of those making the argument). In general, this hope has turned out to be wishful thinking (Lawless 2015, Caress 2003, Carey et al. 1998, Carroll and Jenkins 2001, Moncrief et al. 2007). Young

adults, however, might be the best-case scenario for term limits improving representation. In states with no term limits, state legislators are likely to continue to win because of the strong incumbency advantage at the state legislative level (Hogan 2004, Carey et al. 2000, Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002). When incumbents win, the legislature necessarily gets older, because those incumbents are older than they were when they last won an election. Term limits break this natural aging process of state legislatures and thus provide the possibility for younger legislators.

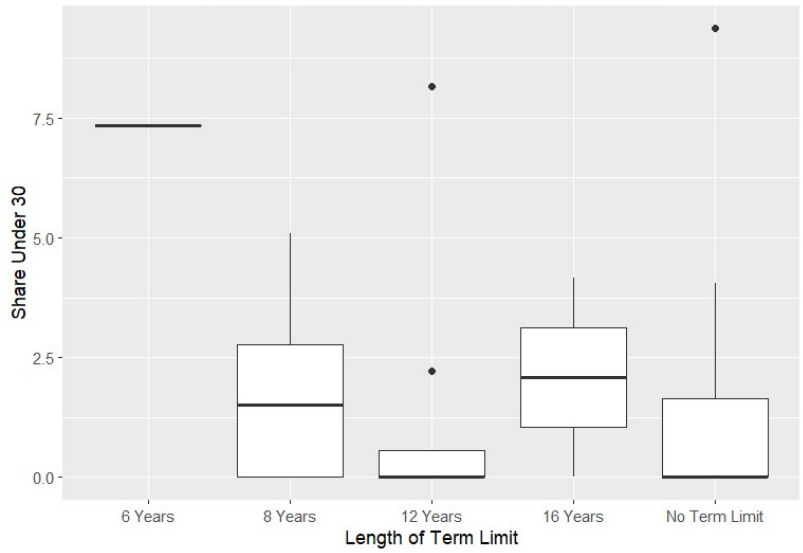
This straightforward logic falls neatly within the rational choice theory and fits with the resource theory as well. It costs more to run against an incumbent than against a non-incumbent and the likelihood of success is substantially less. Thus, young adults, who are very unlikely to be incumbents would be less likely to run for office in places where there are more incumbents, and there are more incumbents in non-term limited states. This idea is intuitive enough that it prompted some of the few research that uses age as a dependent variable in state legislatures. Carey et al. 2006 analyzed the effect of term limits on several different identity and demographic categories, including age. Using survey research, they found a consistent, but small and statistically insignificant effect of term limits on age, in the expected direction. That is, in states where term limits had been fully implemented, the legislatures were "younger…across the board" but that "[t]he shape of the age distribution among legislators in term-limit states is no different from that in non-term-limit states" (Carey et al. 2006, 114).[10]

[10] It is important to note that Carey et al. focused on age overall, not, as I do, age as a category. In their analysis, electing a member who is 50 years old to replace one who is 60 years old has the same effect as replacing a 35 year old member with a 25 year old member. This is a relevant and important question but is slightly different from the one I ask here.

There is, however, another potential way to think about term limits in terms of rational choice theory. Term-limited offices are less valuable than non-term limited offices. This is especially true for young adults, who have decades ahead of them before reaching retirement age. A young adult may look at an office that they can only hold for 8 years and decide that it is not worth it to run for the office so early in their lives, knowing that they have to leave it soon. This version of the theory would then predict that young adults would be less likely to run for office in states with term limits. This explanation does not affect the resources theory, however, because it weighs on the benefits term rather than the costs term of the rational choice equation.

What does the Legislator Data say about this relationship? Figure 2.4 shows that the effect of term limits on the share of young adult legislators is highly inconsistent. The chamber with the shortest term limit (6 years in the Michigan House of Representatives) does have one of the highest membership rates of young adults (7.34%). However, the chamber with the actual highest share of young adult legislators is the West Virginia State House (9.38%), which has no term limits at all. On the other hand, 14 of the states with no young adult representation whatsoever do have term limits. A Kruskal Test shows that the there is no statistically significant pattern ($p = 1$) in the share of young adult legislators by the length of term limits.

Figure 2.4
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Term Limit



It should be noted here that the Candidates Dataset tells a slightly different story, though it can probably be attributed to a statistical anomaly. A Kruskal Test measuring the share of young adult candidates in states with different term limit lengths actually does generate a statistically significant result ($p < .05$). Closer investigation reveals, as seen in Table 2.2, that this result is driven entirely by the Michigan State House, the only legislative chamber in the country with 6 year term limits. Even then, the result only appears when the Ohio State House is removed as an outlier. It would strain limits of the rational choice theory to explain why a 6 year term limit increases the share of young adults vying for state legislative seats while an 8 year term limit has no such effect. Given that the effect also disappears by the time an actual legislative session begins, this result probably does not have a significant impact on the actual explanation of the missing young adult legislators.

It is possible that both effects hypothesized above from the rational choice theory are true and act in counteracting ways to equal an essentially null result. However, this seems like a less

parsimonious explanation than simply that term limits have very little effect on how young adults think about running for office.

Cost of Campaigning

American elections are expensive, and they are not getting cheaper (OpenSecrets.org 2020). Many prospective elected officials express that the need to raise campaign cash is a major impediment to them actually deciding to run for office (Shames 2017, Lawless 2015). Though this is surely an obstacle for many of all ages, there are a few reasons to believe that this reticence might especially affect young adults. For one thing, young adults have less of their own money to contribute to a campaign (Munger 2022). In addition, much of the money raised for state legislative campaigns comes from personal networks (Powell 2012). The personal networks of young adults are likely to be younger and thus less wealthy than the networks of older adults. In short, young adults have less access to capital than older adults do, so the more expensive a campaign is, the more likely it is that young adults will be screened out of the process.

Clearly, this variable has the most direct impact on the resource theory. Young adults who cannot generate enough cash to compete for office will of course not show up in the halls of state legislatures. The cost of campaigning obviously also plays into the rational choice theory, as it is an increase in the cost of running for office.

FollowTheMoney.Org compiles campaign income and expenditure reports and calculates the cost of winning a state legislative seat in every state. Unfortunately, the data does not exist at the chamber level, but only at the state level. In this case, it is interesting to observe both the Candidate Dataset and the Legislator Dataset to get a full picture of the effect of expensive campaigns on young adults becoming state legislators.

The Candidate Dataset has a major shortcoming in observing this effect in that, because the data is only measured at the state level, the number of observations in the dataset is only 10. Understanding this limitation, however, we can take some general impressions away from the data. Given the low number of observations and non-normal structure of the data, I investigated the data categorically. I sorted states into three roughly equal sized groups: high cost states (winning costs $150,000 or more), medium cost states ($66,001 – $149,999), and low cost states ($66,000 or less). The share of young adult candidates in each of those categories is displayed in Figure 2.5.

Figure 2.5
Share of Candidates Under 30 by Campaign Costs

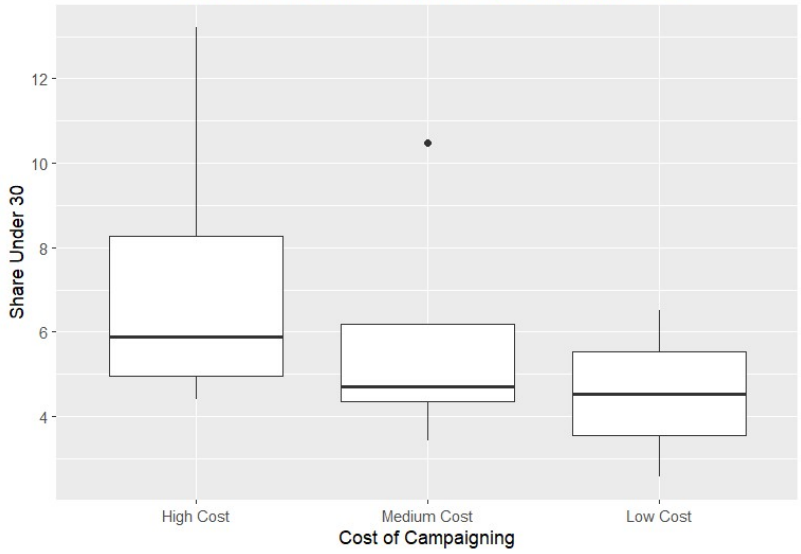


Figure 2.5 shows an interesting and counter-intuitive result – high cost states (California, Florida, Ohio, and Washington) actually attract more young adult candidates than either the medium cost states (Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, and Michigan) or the low cost states (Delaware and Rhode Island). These differences are not statistically significant ($p = .649$), but the pattern is quite surprising. Basically, no theory yet presented would explain why young adults are more likely to run in states with higher cost elections. Perhaps some unmodelled covariate could explain the

pattern, or perhaps it is simply an artifact of the 10 states that happen to have their age data most accessible. Perhaps high cost states encourage stronger party development or external sources of recruitment, which then particularly recruit young adults. Party recruitment and non-profit support will be discussed more in later chapters.

Figure 2.6
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Campaign Costs

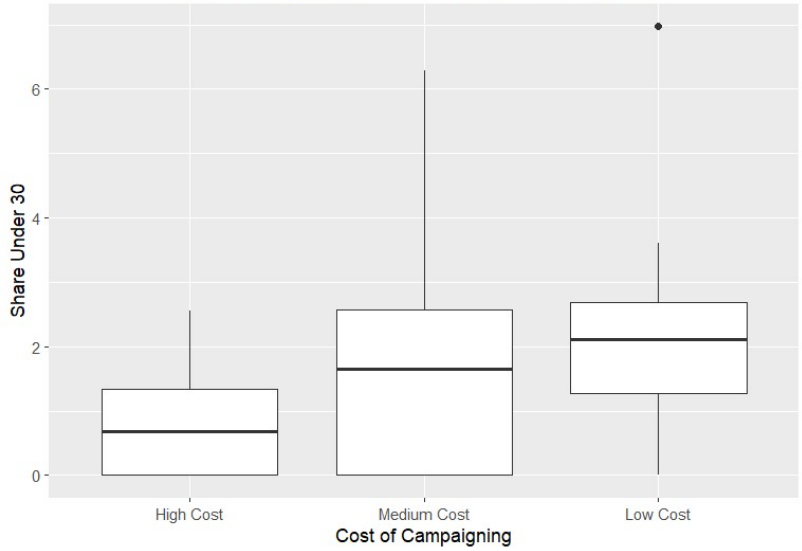
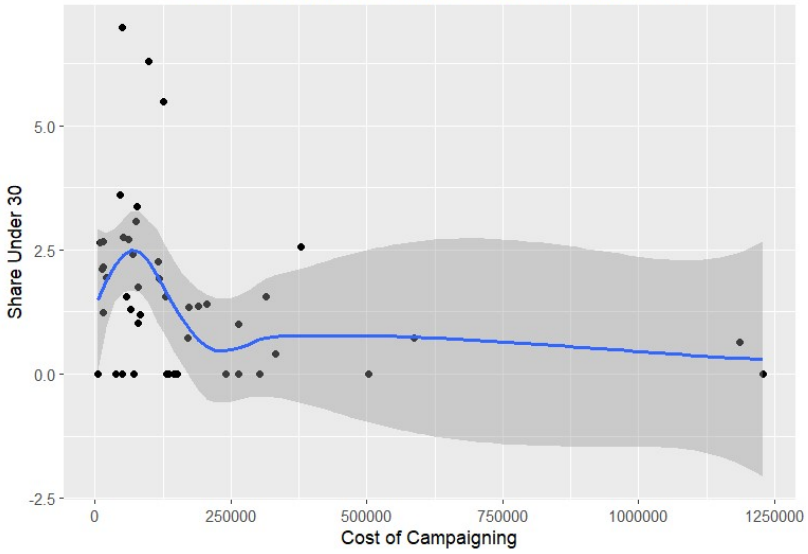


Figure 2.6 displays the same information, this time using the Legislators Dataset. Here, the relationship between the cost of campaigns and the share of young adult legislators is much more intuitive. High cost states have low levels of young adult representation, while low cost states have higher levels (though, to be clear, these are differences of small degrees!). This difference is statistically significant ($p < .05$). Substantively, the median share of young adults in a state legislature in low cost states is more than 3 times the share in high cost states. Though the absolute levels remain low, this could be explained by the fact that the absolute level of campaign costs in the United States is high. Recall that a state can have a "low cost" election in this data if it costs $66,000 to win an election. Since the median household income of a 25-35 year olds in the United States was less than $72,000 in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau 2021), even

this “cheap” election is likely to be cost prohibitive for the vast majority of young adults. Without personal or network wealth, it is unlikely that young adults can afford to become state legislators.

Again, however, this data is far from conclusive. Figure 2.7 shows a scatterplot with a loess regression line. The relationship between cost of campaigns and share of young adult is not linear, nor is it monotonic, in this data. There is no straightforward explanation for why we should expect more young adult legislators in a state where winning costs $75,000 dollars than in a state where winning costs $150,000 dollars and a state that costs $1,500 dollars to win.

Figure 2.7
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Campaign Costs

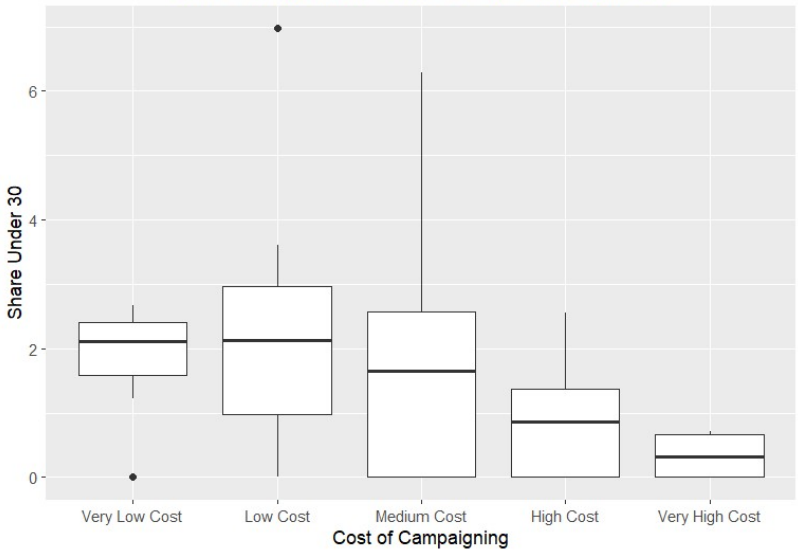


In addition, the statistically significant result for legislators is sensitive to coding decisions[11]. I originally divided the data into three roughly equal groups. This strategy, however, counts the cost of winning a seat in Indiana ($151,847) as the same as the cost of winning in

[11] These coding decisions, while defensible, are somewhat arbitrary. Ideally, the data could be used categorically. However, the data are not linear, meaning that a Pearson’s Correlation or similar methods are not possible to calculate. Rank correlations are also not useful because of the large number of zeroes in the dependent variable. Thus, categorizing the data is the best way to explore it.

California ($1,228,690). If, instead, the data is divided into 5 categories, with seats costing below 25,000 and states costing more than $500,000 in their own categories, the relationship is now only marginally statistically significant ($p < .1$), though the basic look of the data remains the same, as seen in Figure 2.8.

Figure 2.8
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Campaign Costs



In short, the data available here does not tell a conclusive story about the relationship between campaign costs and the share of young adult state legislators. The data suggests that cost might be a place to continue investigating – which this research will do. The resources theory, in particular, seems to receive some tentative support.

Legislative Professionalism

Other than party, state legislative professionalism is perhaps the most ubiquitous control variable in the study of state politics. Professionalism is most commonly defined as the state legislature's "capacity to perform its role in the policy-making process with an expertise, seriousness, and effort comparable to other actors in that process" (Mooney 1994 48, see also Mooney 1995, Bowman and Kearney 1988, Burns 1971, Rosenthal 1996). Essentially, it

measures what kind of a job the state legislature is in a given state – a full-time, professional career or a lightly compensated citizen volunteer activity.

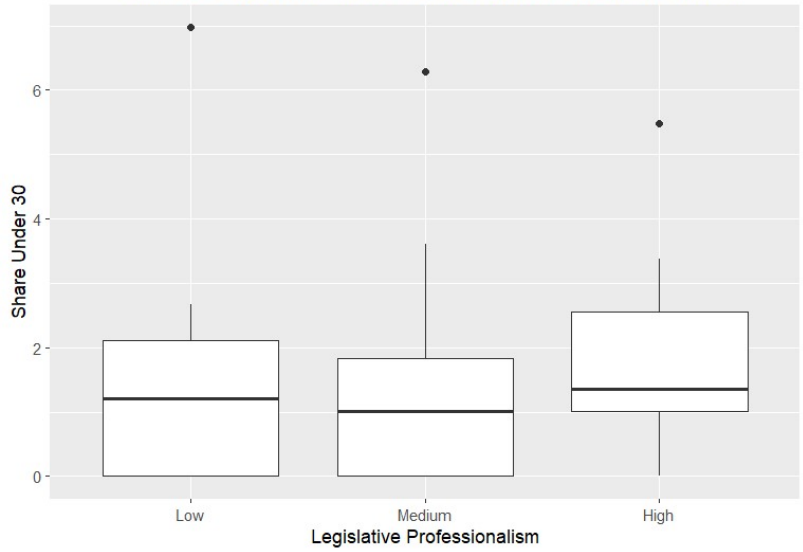
Legislative professionalism may impact the share of young adults in the state legislature in a number of ways. These potential impacts do not all work in the same theoretical direction, so they may counteract one another, which makes it a helpful way to differentiate between multiple theories.

First, in the terms of the rational choice theory, it may affect the 'benefits' term and thus whether young adults even want the job. Politically ambitious young adults may be more attracted to highly professionalized legislatures – for the better pay, more stable work environment, or generally higher prestige. However, this is not unique to young adult legislators. All politically ambitious adults would benefit more from higher pay and better work/life balance, so there is not necessarily a differential effect. Thus, the rational choice theory would predict a positive relationship between professionalism and the share of young adult legislators. Because it affects the benefits term of the equation, not the costs term, however, the resources theory would predict no difference in young adult representation between highly professionalized and less professionalized legislators.

For the political and sociological theories, however, a seat in a highly professionalized legislature might appear to require greater qualification – either to voters for the seat or to potential candidates. Such a socialized belief, conscious or unconscious, in either or both the potential candidates or the voters might work to the detriment of young adults. These theories would predict a negative relationship between professionalism and the share of young adult legislators.

The data shows very little relationship between legislative professionalism and the share of young adult state legislators. Again, correlation statistics are misleading due to the structure of the data, so I separated the states into three roughly equal categories of legislative professionalism using the latest Squire Index, an index of legislative professionalism (Squire 2017). Figure 2.9 shows the boxplots of each of those categories. As can be seen from the figure, states high in legislative professionalism have the highest median share of young adult state legislators, but the difference is small. An ANOVA confirms what the figure shows, that there is no statistically significant relationship between professionalism and the share of young adults in a state legislature (p = .7).

Figure 2.9
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Legislative Professionalism



This is perhaps the best variable yet at differentiating between multiple theories. The results show no relationship (and certainly no monotonic relationship) between professionalism and the share of young adults in a state legislature. This is predicted by the resources theory, but works against the rational choice theory, the political theory, and the sociological theory. Of course, this result is far from a smoking gun, so all these theories remain in play as suspects.

Party Competition

There are multiple kinds of party competition which might influence how many young adults end up in a state legislature. Though these concepts are sometimes thought of interchangeably, they have important differences that require them to be considered separately (Schufelt & Flavin 2021).

The first is party competition in the government. States in which control of the government is in question every election can be expected to have different politics than those states dominated by one party. The second is party competition in the electorate. Here, the focus is not on control of government, but close elections between individual candidates. Elections that are consistently decided on razor thin margins are likely to produce different political strategies than elections that are consistently blowouts. These differences in politics from both kinds of competition could have major effects on who participates in those politics. These differences may extend to party recruitment, as I will explore in the following chapters.

How might more party competition in the government affect the share of young adults in state legislatures, according to the various theories proposed in Chapter 1? For the rational choice theory, it may affect the benefits term – being in the majority in the state legislature would confer more benefits than being in the minority. Thus, this theory would predict that more candidates would run when there was less competition in government. However, there does not seem to be a good reason why this incentive would uniquely affect young adults. Thus, the rational choice theory does not seem to have much to say about the effect of party competition in government. This is also true for the resources theory – the measures of party competition in government do not account for how difficult individual races are so they seem unlikely to affect the cost of running for office.

Rather, this variable is most relevant to the political theory, but with a focus on parties rather than voters. It is possible that parties prefer younger candidates in some races than others. Two different and competing hypotheses show how this might play out and affect the share of young adults in state legislative seats.

The first hypothesis is what I call the "Safe Choice" Hypothesis. This argument contends that in states with high competition for control of government, parties are less likely to take risks to win contested seats. Thus, they support candidates that have the usual markers of success – which often includes a good deal of experience and age. With so much at stake, parties may be reluctant to turn to newcomers and those without the "traditional" resume. The same could be said for elections that are likely to be close. If the margins are tight, why rock the boat?

Alternatively, there is the "Exciting Choice" Hypothesis. This works in exactly the opposite direction. In states with high competition, some might choose to gamble big, looking for someone outside the box to appeal to new voters or energize a segment of their base. Here, party leaders might make a strategic calculation explicitly looking for someone young. This hypothesis fits especially well with party competition in the electorate, though it may apply to party competition in government as well.

Both of these Hypotheses also work for the political theory explanation of party competition in the electorate. When an individual race is tight, party leaders might similarly look for "safe" or "exciting" choices.

Once again, both the rational choice theory and resource theory do not easily explain any significant relationship between competition and the share of young adult candidates. While tight elections are likely to provide less high-quality opportunities because of a decreased likelihood of winning and increased costs (Cox and Munger 1989), there is no reason to believe, from a

rational choice perspective, that those things uniquely affect young adults. The resources theory, on the other hand, looks at the increased cost and sees a potential barrier to young adults that older adults are less likely to experience. Thus, the resources theory would predict that party competition in the electorate would decrease the share of young adults in a state legislature.

The measure I use of competition in government is the folded Ranney Index of each state for the 10 years prior to 2018. The Ranney Index uses the average democratic share of seats in both chambers of the state legislature, the average democratic share of the popular vote for governor, and how often the government has been under unified Democratic control. The unfolded Ranney Index is therefore a measure of Democratic control of the state government over a period of time, and the folded Ranney index is a measure of in-government competition over a period of time. I calculated a 10-year Ranney Index using data from the New York Times (for governors' vote shares) and the Book of the States (for state legislative seat shares and unified government)

The second measure of competition, competition in the electorate, is operationalized using the Holbrook and Van Dunk (HVD) index. Holbrook and Van Dunk (1993) create a measure that assesses competition based on electoral returns – an average of the vote share of winners, their margin of victory, the number of uncontested seats, and the percentage of safe seats (those won with more than 55% of the vote) in a state. This essentially calculates how close the average election is in the state and is thus a measure of the party competition in the electorate. I calculated the HVD index for the 2016 election in each state using data from Klarner (2018).

The data for the Ranney Index and the HVD Index are displayed in Figures 2.10 and 2.11, respectively. Again, the data were sorted into three roughly equal categories for each

measure, High Competition, Medium Competition, and Low Competition based on each score. As can be seen from Figure 2.10, there is very little difference in the share of young adult legislators in states with High, Medium, or Low Competition in government. A Kruskal Test also shows no evidence of such a relationship (p = .95). Although Figure 2.11 appears to show that legislative chambers with higher levels of competition in the electorate have higher shares of young adult legislators, the difference is not statistically significant, according to a Kruskal Test (p = .13).

Figure 2.10
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Competition in Government

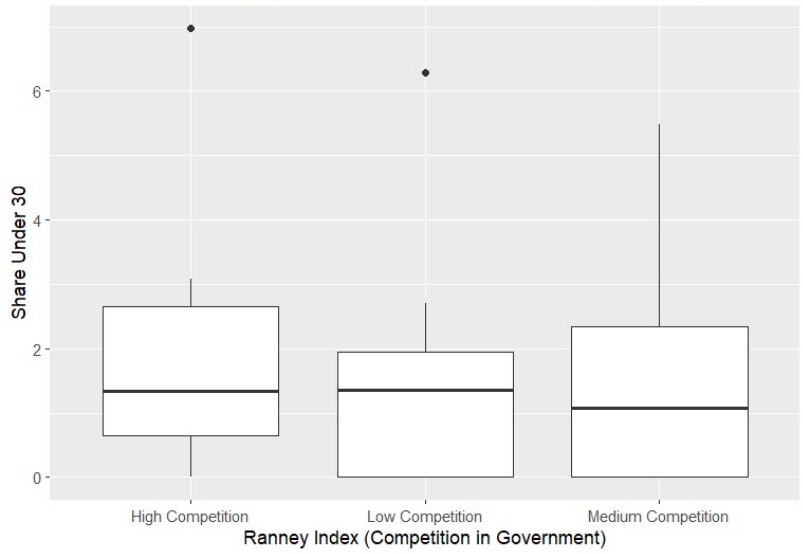
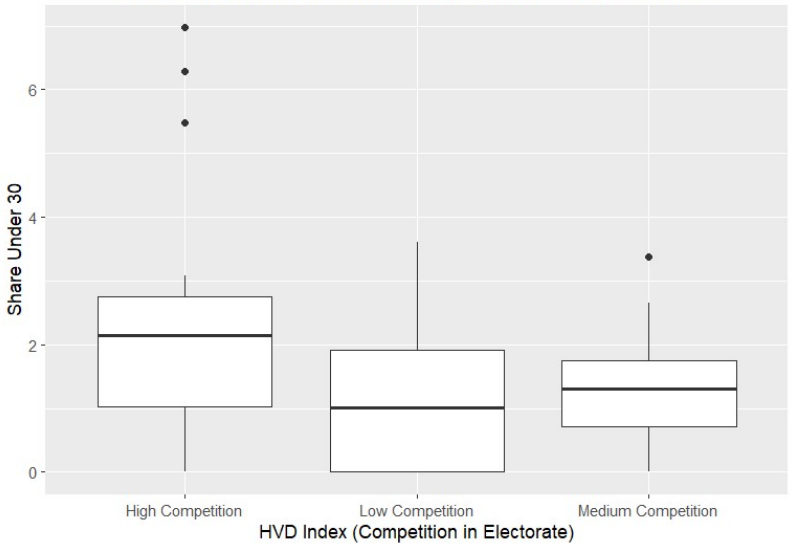


Figure 2.11
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Competition in Electorate



As with much of the other data presented in this chapter, these results show very little effect of institutions on the age distribution of legislators. This test is not an ideal test between the Exciting Choice and Safe Choice hypotheses, because it is possible that parties adopt both or neither, depending on circumstance. Much more evidence about those hypotheses is presented in Chapter 4. However, this test serves as some weak evidence that the political theory may not be the holy grail of explanations. The results also work somewhat against the resources hypothesis, as explained above. Competition between the parties does not seem to have a large effect on the share of young adults in state legislatures.

Ballot Access Requirements

Perhaps the best variable to test the Hollbein and Hillygus (2016) argument about "grit" is ballot access requirements. These are the laws and regulations that govern whether or not a candidate can appear on the official ballot of any given election. These laws vary widely across states, but every state has a minimum number of signatures and/or minimum filing fee to be

included on the ballot. They range from 5 signatures (and 2 dollars!) for the New Hampshire State House to 2,000 signatures for the Utah State Senate.

These ballot access requirements are exactly the sort of obstacle that Hollbein and Hillygus discuss as requiring 'grit' to overcome. Gathering signatures is not easy – for large numbers, it usually requires hours and hours of door knocking and talking to strangers. Raising money is also no small task, especially early in the campaign as a candidate attempts to establish themselves. Thus, higher ballot access requirements may discourage young adults from running simply because they are a high barrier and show up very early in the process. Research on women candidates shows a similar effect in action – as ballot access requirements increase, the number of women candidates for office decreases (Mitchell 2014).

The Hollbein and Hillygus argument fits well into the resources theory. In addition to the "grit" resource, states that require filing fees set up an additional resource hurdle that may uniquely affect young adults. An effect here fits less well with the other theories – rational choice theory cannot explain why young adults would be uniquely put off by these costs and political and sociological theory have very little to say about the paperwork aspects of running for office. Thus, this test is best thought of as another test of primarily the resources theory.

The fact that ballot access requirements vary so substantially across the states makes analyzing them statistically difficult. In some states, a candidate pays a fee, in others they collect signatures, in others they can do either and in some they must do both. I operationalized ballot access requirements into "Restrictive" and "Non-Restrictive." Legislative chambers were counted as "Restrictive" if they required a fee of 500 dollars or more or more than 100 signatures. If a chamber gives candidates a choice in either signatures or dollars to reach the ballot, I used only the less restrictive means of reaching the ballot. So, for example, the Kansas

State House requires a potential candidate to either obtain 105 signatures or pay $120 to appear on the ballot. Though the signature requirement is considered restrictive, the payment option is not, so access to the ballot is not restrictive. In states where there is a signature requirement and a fee requirement, I counted each signature as costing 5 dollars and then added the signature "cost" to the fee and applied the $500 threshold.

For this variable, it is interesting to look both at the Candidates Dataset and the Legislators Dataset. Figure 2.12 shows the relationship between restrictive ballot access laws and the share of young adult candidates. As the figure shows, states with lower hurdles to reaching the ballot do, in fact, get more young adult candidates (Kruskal Test $p < .05$). The average share of young adult candidates in legislative chambers with low barriers to entry is 7.41%, while in restrictive state chambers the number is only 4.0%. It appears that restrictive ballot access requirements may be more difficult for young adults to overcome than for older adults. This follows the general finding of the literature on ballot access requirements that they essentially defend the status quo (Shock 2008, Dormiter and Rincke 2009, Mitchell 2014).

Figure 2.12
Share of Candidates Under 30 by Ballot Access Restrictions

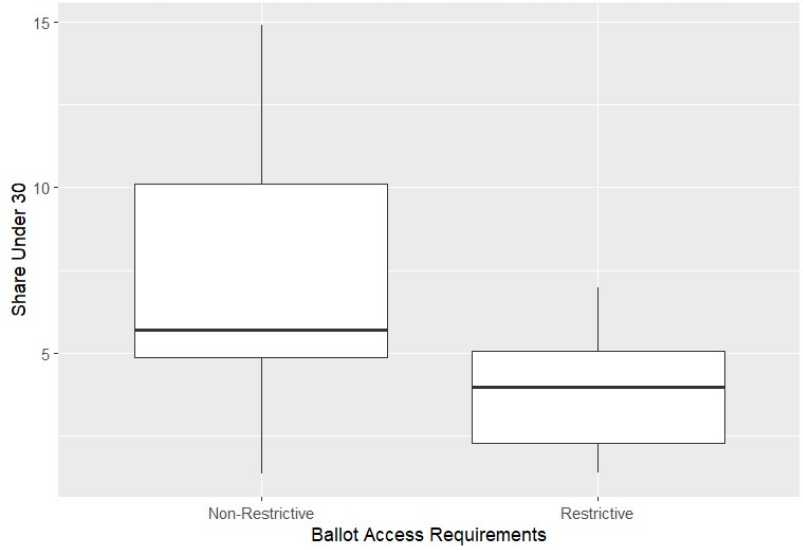
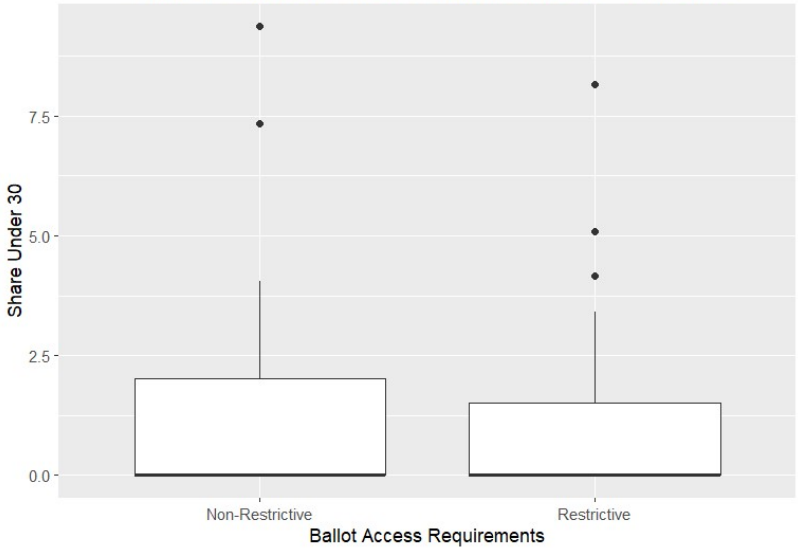


Figure 2.13, however, tells a different story. When it actually comes time for legislators to be sworn in, the statistically significant difference between restrictive states and non-restrictive states disappears (Kruskal Test, p = .51), as the median share of young adults in both groups drops to zero. It appears that those young adults who do manage to get onto the ballot have a difficult time actually getting elected. Chapter 5 focuses on those election dynamics, but this data shows that it being easier to get on the ballot does not mean it is easier to actually get into the legislature.

Figure 2.13
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Ballot Access Restrictions



This relationship is a strong point in favor of the resources theory and may be support for the political theory. It appears that in races with lower barriers to entry, a greater share of the candidates are young adults. This suggests that young adults would enter other races if less resources were required, but do not have the required resources. This is, of course, the exact logic of the resources theory. Though not confirmatory of the theory, it is certainly suggestive.

On the other hand, however, lower barriers to entry do not lead to more young adult legislators. This could be seen as evidence for the political theory – even when young adults are

more likely to appear as candidates, it appears that voters are unlikely to actually give them the job. Other explanations, however, could have to do with the number of young adult candidates entering races with low ballot access requirements. If multiple young adults enter a single race, but only one of them can win that race, then the same pattern of high numbers of candidates with low numbers of legislators would be observed. In races that include at least one young adult candidate, however, the average number of young adult candidates is only 1.16 – not exactly evidence that there is a crowding effect in these races. In races with restrictive ballot access requirements, the average number of young adult candidates is 1.10, while in those with loose ballot access requirements, the average number is 1.18. This, again, seems to work against the crowding theory.

It is interesting that young adults are more likely to enter crowded fields. The mean number of candidates in a field containing at least one young adult candidate is 3.8, while the mean number of candidates in fields without any young adults is only 2.4. This difference is statistically significant (Kruskal Test $p < .01$). This could help explain the relationship between ballot access restrictions and the share of young adult legislators, if for some reason more crowded fields work to the detriment of young adults. This would still likely fall under the umbrella of the political theory.

In the end, it seems ballot access requirements provide a deeper understanding of the story for why young adults are so underrepresented in state legislatures. However, it is difficult to attribute causal significance to such laws, because they don't seem to matter when we reach the end of the story.

Conclusion

It is crucial to remember the original question this research proposed to answer. I seek to understand the absolute low level of young adult representation in state legislatures, not the relatively low level in some states versus others. The variation in institutions across states gives us some leverage to investigate if those institutions are contributing factors, but an absolute low level persists across the board.

Based on the results, one of the worst sets of state institutions for young adults can be found in the Texas State Senate. The Texas State Senate is an upper chamber with an age of candidacy of 27, highly restrictive ballot access (500 signatures AND $1,250), and a high cost of campaigning (more than $500,000). The Texas state senate has no young adult members, which would seem to support the theory that institutions matter. But looking across the country to the Montana State House, we find a much more friendly set of institutions - a lower chamber with an age of candidacy set at 18, a low cost of campaigning (less than $12,500) and easy ballot access requirements ($15). The Montana State House has 3 members under the age of 30, or 3.19% of their members. The case of the missing young adult state legislators has us searching for hundreds of them – finding 3.19% is hardly the goal the dissertation set out for itself. Thus, it hardly seems that institutions are the major culprit of the lack of representation for young adults in state legislatures. Still, we must answer the question which theory, if any, best explains this particular set of results?

The rational choice theory, based on political opportunity structure, would suggest that young adults are more likely to run when there is a better environment for them to run in. The data in this chapter shows little support for this theory. This is because the variables with the best evidence of having an effect on the share of young adults (chamber, ballot access requirements,

and cost of campaigning) do not have a great explanation for why they would affect the calculus of young adults but not older adults. The exception, of course, is the age of candidacy variable. This, however, is hardly evidence that young adults are doing a great deal of rational calculation, since this is not so much a cost as a constraint.

If this absolute low level persists across the states but there is some truth to the political opportunity structure theory, then the next step requires taking a step back. If nearly every political opportunity presented to young adults is a poor enough opportunity that they choose to pass, what is causing these uniformly poor opportunities? Alternatively, is there something about the perception of these opportunities among young adults that make good opportunities look like bad opportunities? Those who wish to view the problem through a rational choice lens alone can read the next several chapters as answering those questions.

The resources theory, however, receives a good deal of support from these tests. The clearest results in this chapter come from the literal, monetary costs of running for office – the ballot access requirements and the average cost of running for office. Though these theoretically affect all candidates equally, it weighs heaviest on those who do not have resources. Since young adults are less likely to have resources than older adults, this could help explain why so few young adults are represented. In addition, the results for upper chambers support this theory. The increased benefits of being in an upper chamber may increase a potential candidate's willingness to run for office, but not their ability to do so. This also helps explain the absolute low level of young adults, regardless of the set of institutions.

Of course, all of these analyses presume that young adults look at these opportunities as opportunities and make a choice. None of these factors matter if the young adults are simply not making a choice. The null results in this section suggest that, for the most part, regardless of the

situation, young adults do not run for office. Any theory of choice would say that different situations would result in different choices. If that is not true, it may be read as support for the idea that there is no choice being made – that young adults are simply not considering the possibility of running for office.

Overall, institutions do seem to have some effect on young adults running for office, but do not seem to be the deterrent to youth representation that might be expected. Though electoral institutions may discourage some young adult candidates, the almost complete dearth of young adult candidates suggests that other factors are more impactful.

Even when presented with good opportunities to run, young adults who are politically ambitious choose not to. This means we must look beyond formal legislative and electoral institutions to find what is causing the drastic underrepresentation of an important group in society. The case continues.

Chapter 3: The Gatekeepers

Introduction

Only six people have ever been elected to the United States Senate as a young adult. Given the 30-year-old age of candidacy, this is perhaps not surprising. What is surprising, however, is that the sixth youngest person ever elected to the office of U.S. Senator was later the oldest person ever elected to the office of U.S. President – Joe Biden. Joe Biden's longevity in politics is a testament to his skill as a politician. For the purposes of this research, however, it is most interesting based on what it says about voters.

Voters elected Joe Biden at 27 years old to a seat on a county council. They elected him at 29, 35, 41, 47, 53, and 59 to the U.S. Senate. Biden was 65 when voters again gave him their support to be vice president, and he was 77 when voters made him the President of the United States. In the case of Joe Biden's political success, age is clearly not the culprit - even rudimentary causal inference would suggest that age was not the most important factor in Biden's success in any of his elections. That of course, may change as he runs to again be the oldest person ever elected President at more than 80 years old in an election where his age and mental acuity have become major points of contention. Indeed, the 2024 election between the two oldest people ever to run for office has left many loudly wishing for a younger generation of leaders – and wondering where they are!

Biden's career is, of course, unusual. Very few politicians start as early as he did and even fewer become President. So perhaps the phenomenon of voters either not caring or being willing to overlook age is also unusual. Biden's story, however, suggests two groups of suspects in the case of the missing young adult legislators – voters and parties. These groups seemed

happy to support a young man to occupy seats on the county council, a Senate Office, and the White House, but they could have just as easily made Joe Biden disappear. In just the same way, it is possible that they make the young adults we are searching for disappear. To continue the search for the missing young adult legislators, we need to know more about the gatekeepers to political office – party leaders who groom candidates and voters who give or withhold their support.

Theory

In this chapter I test data on parties and voters, which most often bears on the Political Theory, that voters or party leaders prefer candidates who are not young adults. Young adults' choices may be severely limited by these constraints. This theory is perhaps the most straightforward of all the theories presented in Chapter 1, but the precise causal mechanism of this theory is important. It is not a question of whether voters prefer younger candidates to older candidates, but whether young adult candidates are at a particular disadvantage to any other candidate. The theory treats age as a categorical variable, not a continuous one. Though, in general, transforming a continuous variable into a categorical variable decreases the information available, in this case it is appropriate because the question revolves around one category of potential candidates. We are not interested in how voters feel about a 45 year old candidate versus a 55 year old candidate.

Why might voters disfavor young adult candidates? Some might see young adults as simply incapable of doing a good job. Voters might see young adults as unlikely to be ideologically aligned with their views. Or voters might simply prefer descriptive representation as it relates to age. In that case, the fact that young adults vote at a much lower rate than other eligible voters could be a major cause for the lack of young adults in elected positions.

Regardless of the reason, if voters prefer non-young adult candidates, it could explain the lack of young adults in state legislatures (and in other elected offices throughout government).

The political theory mirrors voter bias theories that apply to a wide variety of other identity categories. These theories fall into the Michigan School of voter behavior, most famously laid out in The American Voter (Campbell et al 1960). The essential argument of the Michigan School is that voters make electoral decisions with very little information and thus rely on shortcuts, often called 'cues' or 'heuristics' to decide for whom to vote. Today, by far the most powerful heuristic is partisanship (Campbell and Cowley 2014) but gender, race, religion, education, occupation, residency, and even whether someone owns a dog have been shown to have effects on how voters make decisions (see, e.g. Campbell and Cowley 2014, Gershon and Lavariega 2021, Lawless 2015, Hunt and Rouse 2023, Mutz 2010). The literature on such cues is far too extensive to review here, but it is safe to say that the debate over the existence and size of such effects for each of the variables above is robust.

Age has not been ignored in this research, but the findings, as reviewed in Chapter 1, are far from conclusive. In addition, many of the studies treat age as a continuous variable, not a categorical variable as I do here. Those that do rarely include candidates that are under 30 (with the exception of Teele et al. 2018 and Roberts and Wolack 2022). The most relevant literature, however, is a conjoint survey experiment in Roberts and Wolack 2022. Using candidates aged 23, 50, and 77, they investigate the effects of age on voter perceptions, using a similar approach to what will be utilized here. They find that voters see young adults as less qualified and less conservative than older adults, but that these evaluations do not cause them to support congressional candidates at a lower rate. These findings challenge the political theory, which

would suggest that such evaluations would make voters less likely to support young adult candidates.

The political theory would suggest that there should be significant effects in many of the tests of voter behavior in both experimental and observational studies and that those effects should work to the detriment of young adult candidates.

The second part of the political theory is the recruitment hypothesis. That hypothesis is that young adults are less likely to run for office because they are less likely to be recruited by party leaders. As is true of almost all the hypotheses tested in this dissertation, this one is not exclusive of others, nor is it explained by only one of the theories presented in Chapter 1. What, then, would each of the theories predict in support of this hypothesis?

The most obvious theory impacted by the recruitment hypothesis is the political theory. Since the recruitment theory deals with fundamentally political actors – party leaders and staff – who are making fundamentally political decisions – who they believe should be a candidate. Indeed, it is possible that party leaders make these decisions based off of very similar logic to the political theory. If the party believes voters will not support young adult candidates, they will not recruit them. Alternatively, if party leaders simply don't believe that young adult legislators can do a good job, they may not recruit them. Thus, support for the recruitment hypothesis would be good news for proponents of the political theory. If the tests do not support the recruitment hypothesis, though, it eliminates only one possible mechanism of the political theory.

Support for the recruitment hypothesis would also fit with the rational choice theory. The rational choice theory would suggest that as a potential candidate considers a run for office, they are likely to gather as much information as possible about the process. Recruitment by a political party would grant the potential candidate a great deal more information. Of course, being

recruited by a party is a good sign for future success, so it would also increase the perceived possibility of winning. Thus, young adults not being recruited and therefore not running for office could be viewed as support for the rational choice theory.

The resources theory is similar to the rational choice theory when it comes to the recruitment hypothesis. Many resources come with party support, which is why the party is considered a gatekeeper. Meeting the resource challenges of a campaign is easier when the party helps you identify a campaign manager, solicit donations, and reach voter files. Thus, if young adults are at a disadvantage when it comes to party recruitment, it would stand to reason that they are at a disadvantage when it comes to overcoming the resource hurdles inherent in campaigning. This explanation, of course, relies mainly on material resources, but party involvement may also be able to compensate for shortcomings in civic skills or focus resources. Thus, support for the recruitment hypothesis is likely based on the resources theory.

If the tests find support for the recruitment hypothesis it could be explained by the psychological theory. Young adults, uninterested in running for political office, simply ignore the option until they are pushed into it. Thus, it is disinterest that prevents them and getting them excited about the prospect of public service is the solution.

The sociological theory does not make a firm prediction regarding the recruitment hypothesis. However, this does not mean that we cannot learn something about the sociological theory from this data. If young adults run when asked, it could be because they originally did not see themselves as qualified but are now being explicitly told that they are qualified. The sociological theory would not predict that a lack of recruitment is the cause of a lack of young adults running for office, as the recruitment hypothesis suggests, but it is possible that

recruitment could act as an intervening variable to overcome the biases that the sociological theory predicts exist.

Data

In this chapter, I utilize three voter datasets. First, I rely on results from June 2021 Critical Issues Poll. This poll includes questions explicitly asking voters their preferences in terms of the age of state legislators. This is a nationally representative survey of 3379 respondents carried out by the University of Maryland and Nielsen Scarborough.

The second data source is an original survey administered by Qualtrics. The external validity is increased through the use of a survey experiment. Respondents (n= 1220) were shown a picture of a candidate and provided a press release announcing their candidacy for a state legislative race. The voters were then asked questions about their perception of the candidate. Candidate age was manipulated, as well as gender and race.

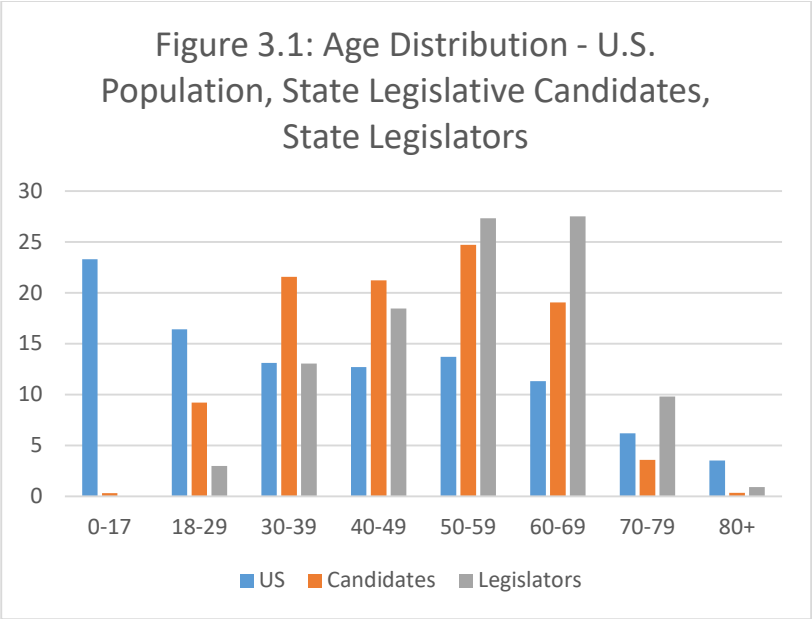
Finally, I utilize results of real elections involving young adult legislative candidates. The results of these elections are instructive for how voters act when they are actually presented with the choice of state legislative candidates in the voting booth. The Candidates Dataset described in Chapter 2 is the source of this data.

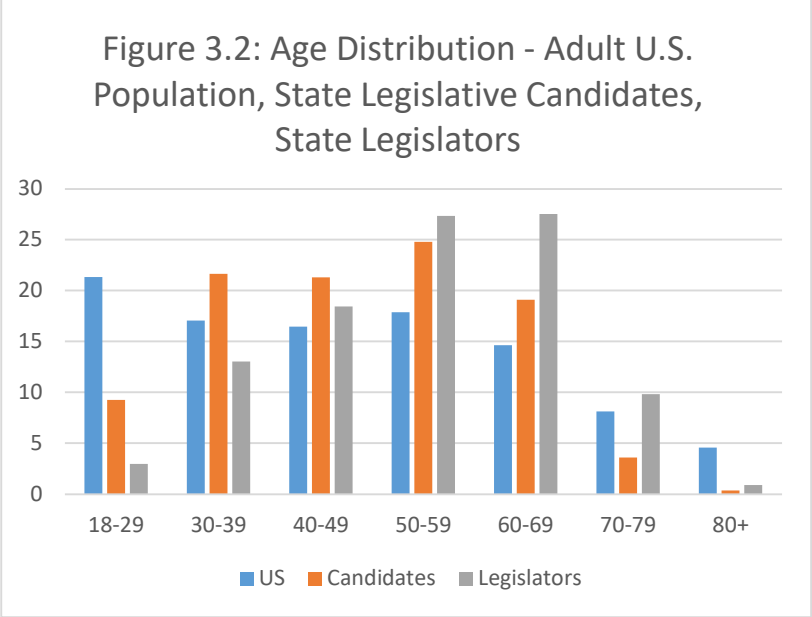
The Voters

Are There Young Adult Candidates to Vote For?

Before analyzing the data described above, there is the question of whether there are young adults available to vote for. If voters are never presented with a young adult candidate, they cannot ever cast a vote for one, which could make them look biased without just cause.

Using the Candidate Dataset and the Legislators Dataset described in detail in Chapter 2, along with U.S. Census Bureau Data, I compared the age distribution of the three populations in 2016. Figure 3.1 shows the distribution of all people, Figure 3.2 shows the distribution if the population is restricted to adults over 18 years old (as a note, this removes no elected state legislators, but does remove 7 state legislative candidates).





There are two main takeaways from the charts above. First, there are young adult candidates presented to candidates, though not many. Less than 10% of candidates are young adults, giving voters very little chance to express a preference for or against a young adult candidate. Additionally, it is clear that young adult candidates are drastically underrepresented given their numbers in the U.S. population, while 40, 50, and 60 year olds are substantially overrepresented. Still, there are enough candidates to draw some tentative conclusions about what happens when voters choose between a young adult candidate and an older adult candidate.

The second takeaway is that the charts above are excellent evidence for the political theory. Looking specifically at the bars that represent young adult legislators, it appears evident that young adults are less likely to win elections. Young adults represent a little over 9% of the candidates for state legislature but represent less than 3% of elected state legislators. If no one was at a disadvantage in elections, the share of candidates and the share of elected officials would be about equal across the candidates and legislator groups. The drastic drop between candidates and legislators indicates that, even when they enter elections, young adults are less likely to win them. Contrast this with the data for 50 somethings and 60 somethings. These groups have a higher share of state legislative seats than they do candidates, indicating that they have a distinct advantage once they become candidates.

It should be noted that the Political Theory is not the only theory that could explain this pattern. One could argue that the Rational Choice Theory or the Resources Theory have a claim to this result. Young adults who enter the race for state legislature could gather more information about the costs and benefits of their office and choose to drop out, though the Rational Choice Theory would predict that they mostly make the calculations ahead of entering the race. Alternatively, they could enter the race and simply not have the resources to compete effectively.

Young adults might also be overrepresented in races where their party is very unlikely to win, which is not quite a voter theory, but may have more to do with the informal institutions discussed in Chapter 2.

Regardless, there is clearly a need to better understand why young adults who do enter elections are unlikely to win them.

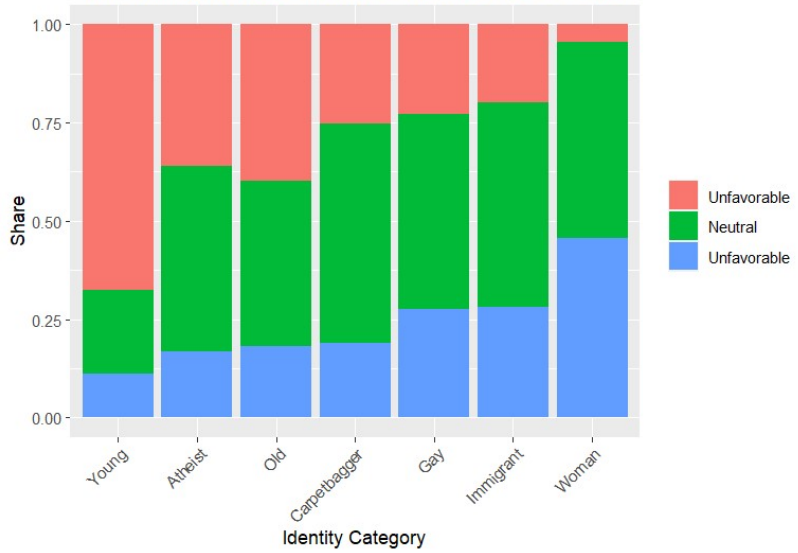
What Do Voters Say They Prefer?

The most direct way to answer the question of whether voters prefer candidates who are not young adults is to simply ask them. Asking such a direct question has both costs and benefits. In terms of benefits, it improves ease of interpretation and allows respondents to describe their preferences rather than reveal them. There are, of course, costs. Social desirability bias is an obvious concern, especially for questions about willingness to discriminate with their vote. Voters also may not readily be able to describe their preferences in such a direct way, even if they wish to. Ask respondents if they would like to eat a healthier diet and they will overwhelmingly say yes (Buchholz 2023). This does not mean, however, that they will turn down a Large Big Mac Meal when offered one.

These concerns are addressed as we progress through this chapter and present voters with candidate choices. However, social desirability bias is unlikely to be a major problem even in these most direct questions. Young adults are not a group usually thought of as discriminated against, especially not in a sense that is socially unacceptable. Stereotypes of young adults as lazy, unfocused, or inept are not roundly criticized the way racial or gender stereotypes often are. The results below will also show that such a bias, if it exists, is not very strong in affecting how voters evaluate young adult candidates.

The Critical Issues poll included a battery of questions gauging how respondents viewed particular identities in a candidate for governor, purposefully using particularly controversial identities. These identities were a candidate 25 or younger, a candidate 70 or older, a candidate who identified as LGBTQ+, a candidate who is an immigrant, a candidate from another state, and a candidate who is an atheist, and a female candidate. Obviously, the office of state governor is much different than the office of a state legislator. This affects the ability to compare these results to the results of other tests in this chapter. However, given all the identities are for the same office, the results are at least instructive of how voters generally think about these identities. The favorability and unfavorability ratings are displayed in Figure 3.3

Figure 3.3
Favorability Ratings of Various Identities for Governor



As Figure 3.3 shows, the young candidate had by far the highest rate of being viewed unfavorably. Fully two thirds (67.5%) of respondents viewed a 25 year old candidate (young) unfavorably. The next closest unfavorable rating (40%) was for a 70 year old candidate (old). Clearly, respondents were more than ready to reject a 25 year old candidate – more than any other identity tested. What's more, young adults had very few active supporters. Only 11% of voters actively wanted a 25 year old candidate for governor, below even an atheist candidate at

16%. As noted before, we cannot necessarily make the assumption that voter assessments about the position of governor are equivalent to assessments about the position of legislator, as these are different positions; nonetheless, it is a window into how age is a differentiator in these evaluations.

Of course, the social desirability bias discussed above could be at play here. Especially when it comes to a female candidate, immigrant candidate, or LGBTQ+ candidate, respondents may have felt uncomfortable expressing negative perceptions. This could affect the ordinal ranking of young adults in the list of identities considered, but it does not necessarily change the actual value of favorable or unfavorable ratings. However, it seems clear that young adults would still be more disfavored than candidates 75 and older and the carpetbagger candidates. Finally, the very fact that there is not a social desirability bias in discriminating against young adults would itself strongly suggest that respondents had a bias against young adults.

The Critical Issues poll also included the question asking voters directly what age they preferred their state legislators to be. The results of that question are displayed in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4
Best Age to be a State Legislator

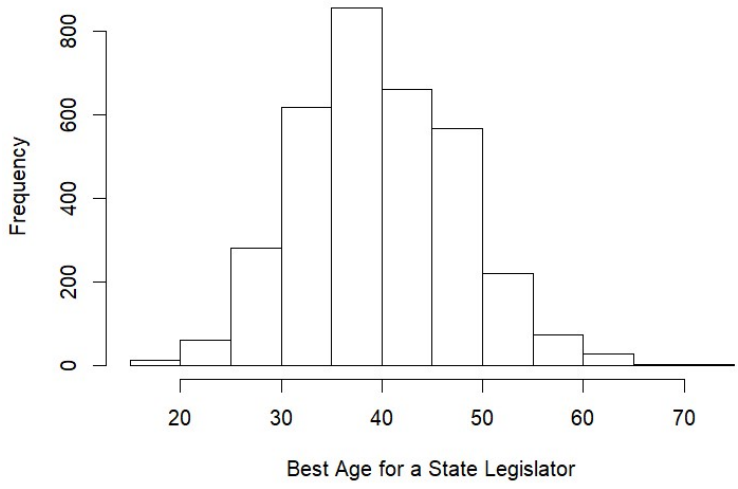


Figure 3.4 supports previous research which suggests that voters prefer candidates who are between 30 and 50 (Teele et al 2018). Young adults only received a little more than 2% support from survey respondents. 30-year-olds alone received 4 times more support than 18-29-year-olds combined. The only group less favored than young adults is senior citizens. Voters 65 and older account for less than .9% of responses. Forty something candidates are by far the most preferred, accounting for more than 45% of responses.

It should be noted that this question does not directly depend on whether respondents would be willing to vote for an older or younger candidate. Rather, it points us towards what respondents would be likely to do if all else were equal between two candidates – which, of course, it never is.

To determine if voters would be willing to consider younger candidates, the Critical Issues Poll also included a question asking how the voter thought a young adult candidate might fare in an election for state legislature. By depersonalizing the prompt ("do you think the voters of your state" rather than "would you support") the question attempts to minimize the possibility of social desirability bias. In response to this question, 56% of respondents said they believed that the people of their state would probably not support a candidate under 30 years old, compared to only 44% who said that their state was ready for such a candidate. Clearly, respondents believed that young adults were at a disadvantage when running for the state legislature.

Overall, these results paint a clear picture: young adults face obstacles in convincing voters to support them for office. All of these results strongly support the Political Theory – that young adults are not in office, at least in part, because voters do not want them there. Of course, none of these tests are definitive and more information is needed. These questions were blunt

instruments, intended to gauge public opinion where the world is simple. However, real elections take place in more complex environments where citizens consider a number of factors when casting their vote. Adding more context is key in order to demonstrate that the Political Theory is the theory that best explains the lack of young adult state legislative candidates.

A Simulated Election: How do Voters Respond?

Survey respondents stating their preferences outright is useful data. When presented with a more real-world situation, however, voters may react differently than even they would predict. In order to more closely approach the actual behavior of voters, I designed a survey experiment that presented voters with a fictional candidate. Respondents were shown a picture of a candidate and provided a short, fictional press release about the candidate. The pictures varied in terms of perceived age, as well as race and gender, though for the purposes of this study, age is the most important variable. The press release was identical for each candidate with the exception of the name given (Daniel or Danielle), personal pronouns for the candidate (he/him or she/her) and the stated age of the candidate (25 or 62). Examples of the images presented to survey respondents are available in the Appendix.

When asked how likely they would personally be to vote for the candidate they were presented with, more than eight-in-ten respondents (82%) said that they would be either very or somewhat likely to support a 25 year old candidate. In response to the same question, a little more than three quarters of respondents (77.5%) shown a 62 year old candidate said they would be likely to support that candidate. This difference is substantively small but striking. Given the experimental design, the limited amount of information available to the respondents about the candidate, and the equal education and identical job title, the difference in support is almost

certainly driven by age. The average likelihood of a respondent supporting a young adult candidate is statistically significantly more than the average likelihood of a respondent supporting a 62 year old candidate (T-Test, $p < .05$)

The story becomes more complicated, however, when respondents are asked about the likelihood of other voters in their state supporting the differently aged candidates. While more than 76% of respondents say that other voters in their state are prepared to support a young adult candidate, this is less than the very nearly 79% of the respondents who believe that the voters in their state are prepared to vote for the older candidate. On the other hand, 32.5% of respondents said that their neighbors would be "very likely" to vote for the young adult candidate, while only 25% of respondents gave the same "very likely" answer for the older candidate. The difference between the average likelihood rating for young adult candidates and older candidates is not statistically significant when asking about other voters in the state (T-Test, $p = .24$).

What can be made of these results? The results seem to work against the Political Theory. Young adults do not seem to be at a particular disadvantage, at least in terms of their age, and the results could be read to suggest that young adults are actually more likely to garner support, all else being equal. However, all of these results should be tempered by the choice of the ages to compare. Though 25 years old is in the middle of the young adult age category, the results shown in Figure 3.4 show that a 62 year old is not the ideal comparison. These results may be different if the experiment compared a 25 year old to a 45 or 50 year old candidate.

Overall, however, these results do not demonstrate strong support for the Political Theory.

How Do Voters React in the Real World?

Though elections to state legislatures are, no doubt, low information elections, there is still a great deal more information available to voters in the real world than in a survey experiment. So, when faced with a real-world situation in which a young adult might earn their vote, how do voters respond? Figures 3.1 and 3.2 already show that young adults win at a lower rate than other adults, even contingent on them entering the race in the first place. This is perhaps the strongest evidence for the Political Theory presented so far and justifies a deeper dive into that data.

Not all elections for state legislature are created equal. Some races are wholly uncontested, some races have hotly contested primaries and uncontested general elections (or, vice versa), some races have incumbents, and some do not. Each of these variables is likely to create a different dynamic for young adults who are attempting to become state legislators. For this reason, simply calculating the rate at which young adults win races could produce misleading results.

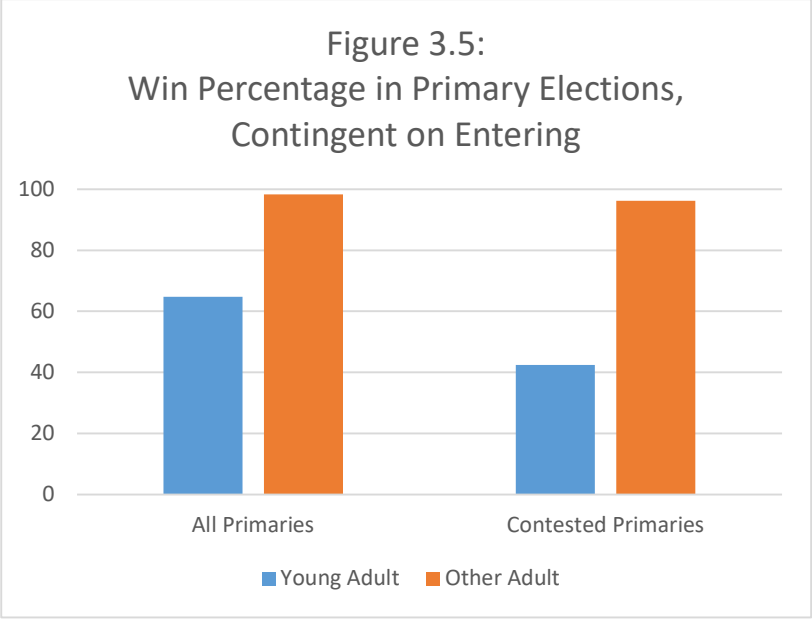
The calculations in this section do not always add to 100% because of the existence of multi-member districts – the statistics treat each district as a single race, which has more than one winner, rather than as two different races which each have a winner. This more closely reflects the reality of the choice presented to voters. In addition, the existence of open primaries in California and Washington somewhat complicates the interpretation of the results, as those primary races each may have more than one winner. Thus, these results should be thought of as having a slightly wider than usual "margin of error" surrounding them, but the general picture is likely similar to what is shown below.

If there is a disadvantage to being a young adult, primary races are where it is most likely to manifest. The reason for this is simple – while partisanship overrides nearly every other factor in general elections, it is not a cue that is at play in primary elections. In addition, primary elections tend to attract more knowledgeable voters (Sides et al 2018), who may actually have more information about the candidates, including something like age. Thus, if voters dislike voting for young adults, primary elections are the place where they would be most likely to express that opinion.

In order to express that opinion, young adults have to be on the ballot when voters enter the booth to cast their vote. The Candidates Dataset includes data on 1790 total primary elections. Of those 1790 primary elections, 173 had at least one young adult on the ballot. This means that in 9.66% of all primary elections in the dataset were voters given the option to express a preference for or against young adult candidates. Meanwhile, 1722 of the primary races featured at least one candidate over the age of 30. This statistic alone casts doubt on the Political Theory as the main driver of the hidden young adult legislator. Even if the Political Theory is correct that voters dislike young adult candidates, the fact that less than 10% of primaries had young adults would dwarf the effect of that preference. Voters can't express a preference if not presented an option.

Figure 3.5 shows how young adults and older adults fared in these elections. It presents the percentage of races that at least one young adult entered that a young adult won, compared to the percentage of races that at least one older adult entered that an older adult won. In all primary elections, young adults actually had a surprisingly high win rate: 64.74% of races that a young adult entered, a young adult won – 112 out of the 173 elections in the dataset. Though not as

impressive as the 98.31% win rate of other adults, almost 2/3rds of races in which a young adult appeared managed to win.



The news is not as cheerful as it sounds for young adults, however. Sixty-seven of the races were uncontested – meaning that the voters had no choice but to accept the young adult candidate[12]. When restricting the results to just contested races, a young adult only wins 42.45% of the primaries they enter. Compared to the 96.22% of contested races that older adults win, the young adult win rate is paltry. If more than half of the young adults who enter contested races are screened out before ever reaching the general election, it is little wonder that there are not many who show up in the halls of state legislatures. This result is relatively strong evidence for the Political Theory.

Interestingly, the numbers do not improve when controlling for incumbency. Even in primary races without an incumbent, young adults only win a third (32.86%) of all races they

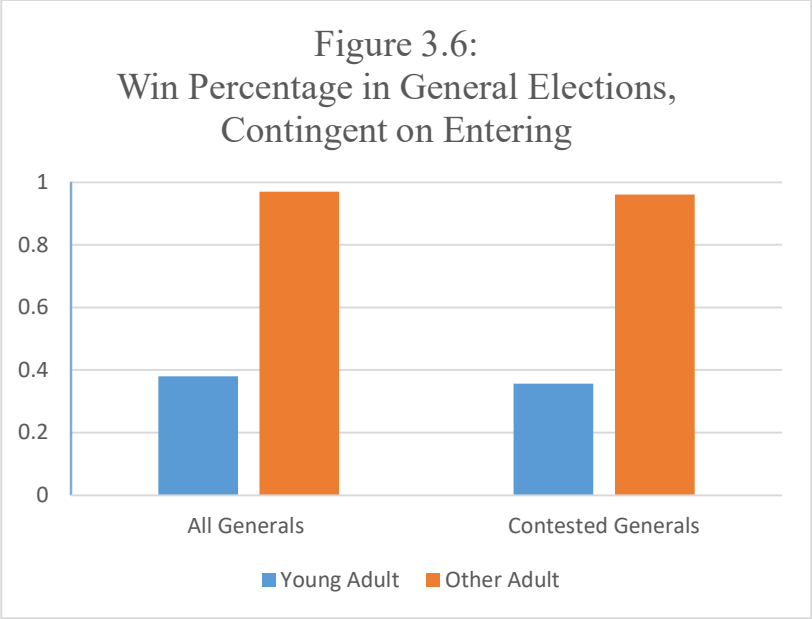
[12] Even worse, many were 3rd party bids, which means even lower turnout and less chance of actually winning a general election.

enter, and only a fifth (20%) of the contested races they participate in. What this means is that young adults win rates are actually bolstered by the 24 incumbent young adults in the dataset, all of whom won their primary elections (18 of which were uncontested). Overall, of the 184 young adults in the Candidates dataset, 112 made it through to the general election, and 67 of those were via an uncontested primary election. It seems that young adults are at a considerable electoral disadvantage in primary elections.

The young adults who do make it through the primary election still have to face the daunting task of winning a general election in order to become a member of a state legislature. If those young adults are still at a disadvantage when they reach this stage, it would be yet more evidence for the Political Theory.

One hundred thirteen young adults appeared in 108 of the 1,051 general elections in the dataset. That means that in only slightly more than 10% of the races did general election voters have an opportunity to express a preference about whether they wanted to be represented by a young adult. On the other hand, those voters were presented with an opportunity to vote for an older adult candidate in 1044 of the general election races or 99.33%. Again, most voters are not able to express a preference about young adult candidates.

Among those who are able to express a preference, their reactions to young adult candidates can be seen in Figure 3.6. Of the 108 races a young adult entered, a young adult won just 41 of them, for a 38% win percentage. Among contested races, at least one young adult entered 104 races and won 37 of them, for a win percentage of 35.6%. Compare these win rates of around a third of races to the win rates of older candidates: 97% of all general elections and 96% of all contested races. Clearly, young adults are less likely to win than older adults, in support of the Political Theory.



Again, when taking into account incumbency advantage, the numbers become even bleaker for young adults. All 24 of the young adult incumbents won their general election races, meaning that new young adult candidates only won 17 total elections out of the more than 1,000 available. In total, of the 184 young adults who entered a primary election in 2018, only 41 ended up with seats, a success rate of just 22%. For other adults, 2,700 entered races and 940 ended up with seats, for a success rate of 35%. It's clear that entering any race is likely a losing proposition, but these numbers seem to suggest that this is even more true for young adults. These findings are further support for the Political Theory.

Win rates provide a useful conceptualization of the state of the race, but a multivariate analysis can give us a better idea of what exactly the penalty for being a young adult looks like. For this analysis, I used general election vote share as the dependent variable. The main variable is a dummy variable for whether the candidate is a young adult. I also included control variables for whether a candidate is an incumbent, whether the general election was contested, and the vote share for their party in the previous election, along with an interaction for the party vote

share in the previous election and a dummy variable of whether that election was uncontested. The three main control variables are likely to be both strong and positive: incumbency advantage is well-established, uncontested elections will obviously rebound to the advantage of the only one running, and votes for a candidate's party in the last election are likely to be votes for them in this election. An uncontested general election will also likely be strongly positive since there is no opponent to take any part of the vote share. The vote share for the party of the candidate is also likely to be positive – regardless of the candidate, party ID is likely to predetermine a certain share of the vote, based on what the party received in the previous election (Kim and Zilinsky 2024).

The Political Theory would predict a statistically significant and negative relationship between general election vote share and a young adult candidate.

Table 3.1:

Multivariate Analysis of Vote Shares in General Elections

	Vote Share
Under 30	−0.983
	(0.976)
Uncontested General	31.210***
	(0.710)
Incumbent	2.874***
	(0.503)
Previous Election Result	0.862***
	(0.015)
Previous Uncontested	15.391***
	(4.322)
Previous Result * Previous Unconntested	−0.428***
	(0.045)
Constant	5.561***
	(0.740)
Observations	1,677
R^2	0.862
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The Table 3.1 below shows the results of a simple linear regression using those variables. There is a predictably strong positive relationship between previous election outcomes and current election outcomes, as there is with incumbency. The results show no statistically significant relationship between general election outcomes and whether the candidate is a young adult, in contradiction to what the Political Theory would suggest. Other variables in the model perform as would be expected – a strong and positive relationship between election outcomes and incumbency, previous election party performance, and the control for an uncontested election.

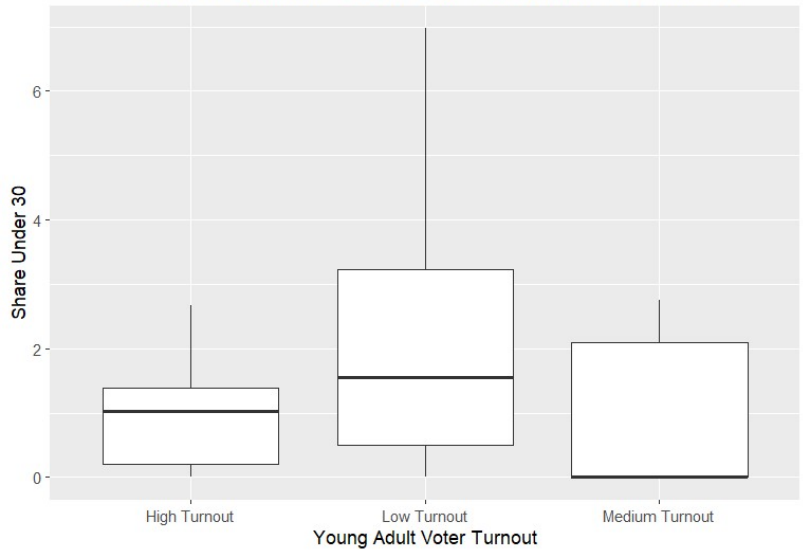
Does it Matter Who Votes?

These results above consider citizens as a whole. However, the literature reviewed earlier in the chapter indicates that voters may prefer candidates who are more similar to them. Combined with the fact that older Americans are substantially more likely to vote than younger Americans, a variation of the political theory is suggested. It could be that young adult candidates are not really the problem, but the lack of young adult voters.

The mixed evidence for any disadvantage for young adult candidates complicates this story. This is, after all, more of a mechanism than an independent theory. Without an effect to explain, it's difficult to make the argument that there is a mechanism driving an effect. Still, it is worth examining if, where there are more young adult voters, there are more young adult candidates.

Does the turnout of young adults affect the vote share that young adults receive? Using the Legislators Dataset, I sorted states into three equal-sized groups depending on the turnout rates (not the population share) of registered young adult voters (46% turnout and above as "High Turnout", 41% and below as "Low Turnout", and everything in between as "Medium Turnout"). Turnout rates vary from 21.7% (Hawaii) and 60.7% (Virginia) but are clustered between 40 and 50 percent turnout. Following the logic laid out in Chapter 2, I observed the share of young adults in state legislatures in every state as the dependent variable. The results are displayed in Figure 3.7.

Figure 3.7
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Young Adult Voter Turnout



The results show that, contrary to the expectations laid out by the political theory, state legislatures in states with low youth turnout rates actually have a higher share of young adults than those in either high or medium youth turnout rates. This relationship is marginally statistically significant (Welch ANOVA, $p < .1$). If we take this result at face value, it is certainly puzzling. States where young adults don't turn out to vote see a higher number of young adults elected. It is unclear exactly what factors not included in this analysis might explain these puzzling results. One possible explanation is that parties may attempt to recruit young adults to run in an attempt to motivate young adults to vote, but that this strategy does not succeed.

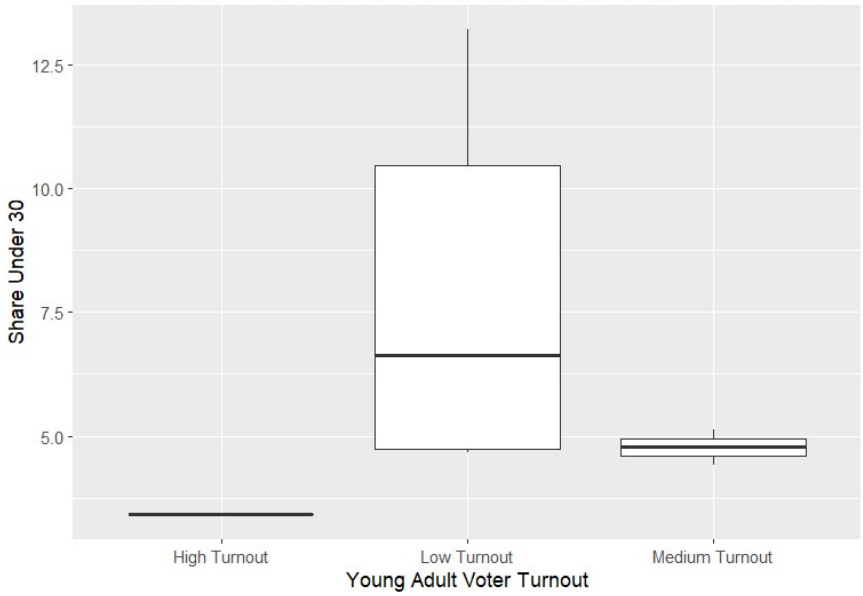
These results seem to work against the political theory. Though no other theory has an obvious explanation for these results either; these results don't necessarily directly contradict some of the other theories discussed. More research would be necessary to determine if these results are robust and the mechanism that might explain them.

Though this chapter is focused mostly on the political theory, these tests are also relevant for the rational choice theory laid out in Chapter 2. While young adults do not run statistical tests

like those I've engaged in here, the rational choice theory would suggest that they survey the landscape of voters before deciding to run. Thus, if they see an electorate that is not favorable, they may not run. In order to make that calculation, potential candidates would certainly have to observe the voters that reside in their district to see if they are likely to attract those voters. The most obvious potential constituency for young adults is other young adults.

If young adults are more likely to run in places where young adult turnout is high, then it may suggest that young adults are doing some rational calculation and that the reason young adults are underrepresented is because young adult voters are underrepresented. Young adults considering a run for office may start by looking at the young adult population share – however, this varies so little across states that any statistical leverage from examining it is likely to be ephemeral. Perhaps, though, the raw number of young adults in the state is less important than how active those young adults are. In states with high young adult voter turnout, are young adults also more likely to run for office? Figure 3.9 shows this relationship, with High Turnout states, those with greater than 46% turnout among young adults, Low Turnout States, those with less than 41% turnout and Medium Turnout States counting for everything in between. Though figure 2.14 appears to show a relationship, it is not statistically significant (ANOVA Test $p = .394$).

Figure 3.8
Share of Candidates Under 30 by Young Adult Voter Turnout



It would likely be strange to the discerning reader if I did not even mention the surprising result that Figure 3.8 appears to show. Without a statistically significant relationship to observe, we should be careful about drawing conclusions, but it is interesting that the apparent relationship between voter turnout and young adult candidacies is negative – the opposite of what would be expected by political opportunity structure theory. Here again may be some (relatively weak) evidence that the causation is backwards – maybe low turnout among young adults causes parties to specifically recruit young adult candidates in an attempt to boost their electoral fortunes.

The Parties

Introduction

What if the problem with young adult candidates lies not with the voters, but with the parties? This would still be support for the Political Theory, as it is a constituency that any candidate would do well to impress in order to become a state legislator. How do parties think about young adult candidates and how does that impact their chances of running and winning?

The idea that political parties play a role in candidate emergence is both intuitive and widely accepted. The precise nature of this influence and its causal mechanisms may be subject to debate, but the conclusion that parties matter is inescapable. Modern parties work in both formal and informal ways to recruit candidates for any office they believe they have a reasonable chance of winning (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). This surely has an impact on who does and does not run for office – if it didn't the parties would stop spending the time, labor, and money that it takes to recruit! A reader that desires systematic study of the idea, however, would not be left disappointed.

Many studies find that party involvement is critical to candidate recruitment (Aldrich 2000, Jewell and Morehouse 2001). The fact that parties are strategic (Maestas, Maisel, and Stone 2005) and are affected by the social status of potential candidates (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981, Matthews 1984) are similarly well-supported. Most literature on the impact of party recruitment strategies focuses on gendered outcomes. In a prototypical example of the literature, Fox and Lawless (2010) find that women are substantially less likely than men to be recruited for office, substantially less likely to be heavily recruited, and substantially less likely to be recruited from multiple sources. Fox and Lawless argue that this lack of recruitment is one of the reasons that women are less likely to run for office – indeed, the title of their article "*If*

Only They'd Ask" spells out almost their entire thesis quite nicely. Subsequent studies have also found that recruitment matters for whether or not women actually run for office (Cheng and Tavits 2011, Crowder-Meyer 2013, Tremblay and Pelletier 2001). The finding of recruitment effect is not surprising, given that other forms of political participation, such as voting, are also heavily influenced by whether or not someone is asked to participate (Mann and Bryant 2020, Barretto 2007).

From this literature, it is not difficult to reach the conclusion that, if young adults are less likely to be recruited to run for office, it could help explain their underrepresentation. The rest of this chapter tests whether such an effect exists.

Parties Data

I use three additional sources of data to test the recruitment hypothesis. These data are sometimes used in combination with datasets that have been introduced in previous chapters.

The first new source of data comes from unpublished work by Matthew Geras. Geras created a dataset of the formal representation of young adults in party structures. Specifically, Geras' measure counts the number of voting members on a state central party committee that are required to be young adults. Most often, these representatives come from the Young Democrats/Republicans or the College Democrats/Republicans. This gives a reasonable measure of the formal recruitment of young adults into the party, if not into actual elected offices. Geras demonstrates that this measure is correlated with younger candidates for U.S. House in the 2018 Midterm elections, which provides some validation that the means of formal representation may have an impact on how the party thinks about its membership and potential candidates. Besides that, formal representation on party steering committees ensures that young adults are more visible to party leaders who help make decisions about who the party recruits and supports.

The second source of data comes from a candidate recruitment organization. In order to assure candid responses, I assured all interviewees that their anonymity, including the anonymity of their organizations, would be maintained. This organization has a presence in all 50 states and runs workshops to give potential candidates the tools they need to run a successful campaign. The organization and the workshops are non-partisan, and the organization does not directly recruit candidates. Rather, they take candidates that have already been recruited by outside groups – parties, labor unions, interest groups, civic organizations, etc. and provide training. Thus, the people at these workshops are those who have experienced some level of recruitment. By looking at their demographics, we can learn more about who gets actively recruited for office. For the last few years, this organization has focused primarily on state legislative candidates, making this data an excellent source of information about the specific recruitment strategies being employed at the state legislative level right now.

The final source of data is a dozen original interviews conducted with political elites. Some of the respondents are state legislators who ran as young adults (5), some are party leaders who play a role in recruitment (4), and some are non-profit sector leaders who specialize in candidate training (3). Interview respondents were selected through personal connections and then snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted online and lasted between 15 minutes and an hour. The interviews focused mainly on the beliefs that the elites had about whether young adults were at a disadvantage for recruitment as well as if they believed that young adults were at a disadvantage when it came to voters.

Does Formal Representation Matter?

Does the formal representation of young adults in party structures lead to more young adults running for or being elected to the state legislature? If this relationship holds, it may be evidence

in favor of the recruitment hypothesis. Even if the recruitment is not explicit, having such representation may be seen as a form of recruitment in itself. I use the Candidates and Legislators Datasets to test whether high levels of formal involvement in the party correspond to high levels of young adult representation among either candidates for state legislature or elected state legislators.

For these purposes I separate Geras' measure of formal involvement into three categories. States with High representation are states with more than 2 central committee seats reserved specifically for young adults, states with medium levels of representation are those with 1 or 2 members, and states with low representation are those with no formal representation of young adults on the state central committee. The results of the test are shown in Figures 3.9 (Candidates) and 3.10 (Legislators).

Figure 3.9
Share of Candidates Under 30 by Official Party Representation

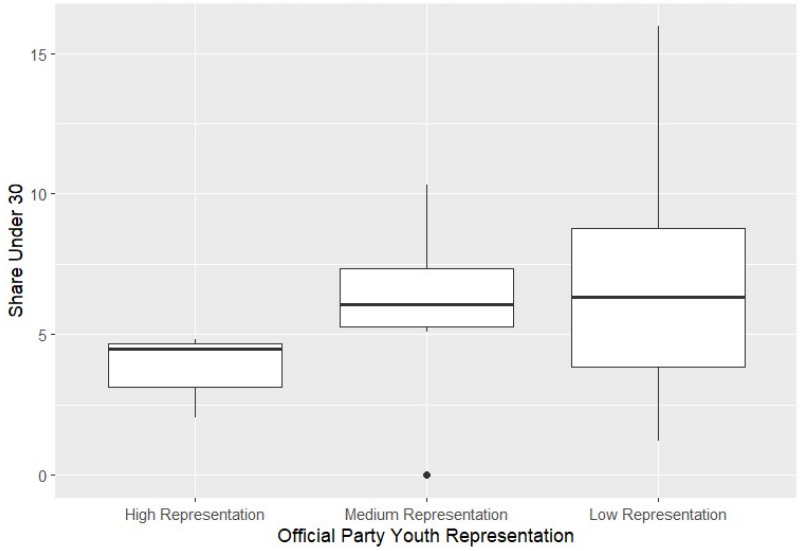
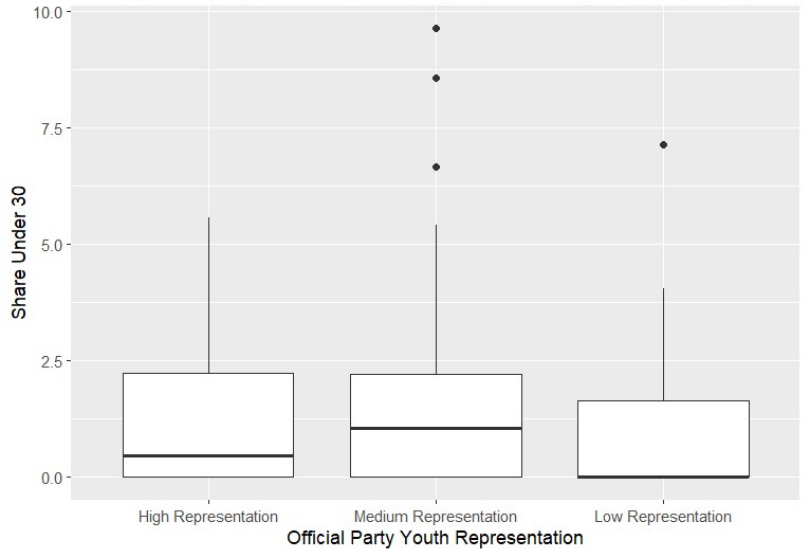


Figure 3.10
Share of Legislators Under 30 by Official Party Representation



Figures 3.9 and 3.10 both show that formal representation in a party does not appear to increase young adult representation in state legislatures. If anything, the results show that having high levels of formal young adult representation in the party structure decreases the number of young adults that end up in the state legislatures. ANOVA tests, however, confirm the lack of a relationship between the variables (for candidates, $p = .324$, for legislators $p = .440$).

This, of course, is not the end of the recruitment hypothesis. Formal representation is only one means of potential recruitment for young adults into state legislative positions.

What About Private Recruitment?

The data from the candidate training organization shows that young adults are actually well represented in their workshops. Between 2021 and 2023, workshops for this organization feature 17.1% attendees under the age of 30. Though technically this number includes some who are not, by my definition, considered young adults (aged 15-18), it is still a significant number – significantly more, for example, than the percentage of actual candidates or legislators. The

number is also much closer to the actual share of the U.S. population that is between 18 and 30, though still not quite there.

This would seem to work against the recruitment hypothesis. Since the candidate preparation organization does not itself recruit candidates, these potential candidates must have been recruited by someone else. That will not always be the party – and is in fact most often civic groups or unions, according to the non-profit staff. However, these groups often belong to party coalitions even if they are not a formal party apparatus.

It is worth noting that this data is not a perfect snapshot. For example, although the organization is staunchly non-partisan, more than 80% of attendees identified as Democrats. In addition, private, non-profit organizations are, again, not the only source of recruitment – and actually may over-select for those who do not currently feel qualified, which (according to the sociological theory) is likely to mean an overrepresentation of young adults. Those who are confident in their ability to win and do not perceive any special challenges are less likely to seek out help from organizations like the one this data comes from. Thus, we should take this data with a grain of salt – but at least appreciate that some young adults are actively being recruited and sent to learn about becoming a strong candidate.

A different recruitment organization, which I again assured anonymity, a bipartisan non-profit focused on encouraging young women to run for office provided data that tells a similar story "We've trained 25,000 women in this country and only 100 of them have run," the CEO told me. This suggests that a lack of recruitment cannot be the biggest barrier to becoming a candidate – if it was, more than .4% of those recruited by this organization would have become candidates!

What Do the Recruiters Say?

Patterns of recruitment are best understood by talking with those who get recruited (or not) and by those doing the recruiting. As described in the data section of this chapter, I also interviewed a number of party leaders and elected officials, who I assured anonymity in order to ensure candidness. And the first takeaway from speaking to a number of people involved in that process, was that recruitment and mentorship matter. Every one of the elected officials I spoke to mentioned a politically engaged mentor as part of their impetus for running. Though these mentors were not always official party leaders, they were engaged in partisan politics. Given the importance of mentors, did the political elites most involved in the process see any disadvantage for young adults in the process?

To discover the answer, I first asked those I interviewed about what makes someone qualified to be a state legislator. Much like potential candidates themselves and voters, if the elites involved in recruitment believe that a certain qualification is necessary to be effective, then they are likely only to recruit people who have those qualifications and thus people with those qualifications are much more likely to run. The answers to these questions, however, steered far away from certain professions or degrees. Rather, those in positions to affect the recruitment of candidates very much emphasized that their primary objective was not to find someone with the perfect qualifications, but to find someone who could win. Rather than looking for those who might be most effective when they got to the state house, the parties were looking for someone who could effectively manage a campaign to get to the state house. "We're looking fundamentally for a person who is known in the community, who can raise money and who is going to have the time to get out to knock on doors," one party leader told me. The director of a candidate recruitment nonprofit said that parties "are just thinking about who the right person

might be for a district… they're really helping us do the hyperlocal thinking about regardless of age, or ethnicity, background, who might be the right person…It tends to be that very specific local political landscape that they have in mind if they are doing recruitment for the state legislature."

Put another way, one party leader told me that they were looking not for specific qualifications or even personality but that "[t]he way we thought about it was, if you were going to put together a committee to get new lights for the baseball field, who would you want in charge of that committee?" When I asked the elites what makes someone a good state legislator, nearly everyone mentioned community ties and good people skills – which they framed more as skills needed to be a good candidate than to be a good legislator. A good state legislator, to them, was someone who could win, not someone with particular qualifications. In fact, another recruitment nonprofit official said "I cannot tell you how many law school letters of rec that I have written because I have all of these phenomenal humans who believe that law school is their only trajectory in order to be a political leader. And you, know I try to talk them out of it!"

This focus on winning by the parties is not surprising. Parties are organizations designed to take and hold power. However, a focus mainly on winning does not rule out that young adults are at a disadvantage when it comes to being recruited. In fact, it suggests asking the question of whether these political elites believe that young adults are less likely to win? If so, the focus on winning would in fact make them less likely to recruit young people. This would be true were the bias conscious or unconscious.

The answers to this question varied somewhat across the interviewees. One state legislator who had originally run as a 23 year old told me that in his conversations with community leaders about whether or not he should run, his age was brought up as a disadvantage

– not that the community leaders thought he wasn't capable because those "folks knew me and had worked with me," but because they thought it might be a disadvantage with voters. In fact, he agreed with this assessment: "If I had been planning it out, it was not the ideal time to run... there are challenges to run at 23, but the advice I got from my mentors was 'you don't get to choose when your opportunity comes.'" However, when it came time to actually run the campaign, he found that while some voters did think "you're 23, you just graduated college... or it's like, you haven't had the experience of raising kids in this community, of trying to make your mortgage payment of...living on a fixed income," it was not close to the majority of voters. "I thought it would be a lot more of a barrier than it ended up being," he said.

Other elites echoed the belief that young adults were carrying liability. One party leader who had originally run as a young adult told the story that when he ran, he emphasized the fact that he was already a father in an attempt to seem older. He believes that had an effect on his ability to win "It's not just about age, it's also about perception and how you present yourself." Another party leader lamented that young adult candidates were likely to be mistaken for volunteers while canvassing, rather than being seen as candidates themselves.

Other elites disagreed with this sentiment. They saw no unique disadvantage for young adults among voters. "Age used to mean experience…I think it has diminished in how it matters" said one recruitment nonprofit official. "I don't think they [party recruiters] look at it [age] as a liability" a young legislator added. Still, it was clear it was not the first time that any of the elites had considered the issue of whether age affected voters. Even those who ended up concluding that there was no disadvantage seemed to have a gut feeling that there might be.

These statements suggest a potentially major hurdle for young adults to clear. Regardless of whether voters are actually a barrier (which the evidence earlier in the chapter suggests they

are not), the belief among party officials that they could lead to young adults not being recruited. Party leaders obviously want to recruit candidates who could win, and if their perception of young adults is that they would lose, they simply would not recruit them. This would be support of the recruitment hypothesis.

Beyond the question of whether young adults can win comes the question of whether young adults get considered at all. Perhaps, much like the psychological theory suggests for self-evaluations, parties simply don't consider young adults when thinking about who might help get new lights for the baseball fields. Young adults are less likely to have participated in such projects in the past simply because they have been alive for fewer such projects. In this way, despite no conscious bias against young adults, they would be at a disadvantage.

The idea of a conscious bias against recruiting young adults was roundly rejected by the interviewees. "I've never seen that kinda like that ageism thing - where people are like oh, you're too young to run, you're too old to run, at least not from insiders in the caucus, at least in our conversations about the election," said one party leader. Another expressed a similar sentiment: "If there are [any groups left out of recruitment] I'm not aware of it and it's certainly not something that's intended." A recent young adult candidate said, "I really don't think we're at the point where we're looking for young candidates or older candidates."

A conversation with one party leader, however, spelled out the potential for an unconscious bias quite well. When I asked if she had to remind local party leaders to broaden their horizons when searching for potential candidates, she simply replied "yes." She added "anecdotally, I think there is this euphemism of experience that replaces age that sometimes is a sort of soft spoken, behind the scenes, does she have the experience do this." She continued:

"I do think not by design but by default we do end up looking at people in their 30s and 40s a lot because they're established in the community, they've had time to be known, that kind of stuff…It's not by design, it's not that we're saying no, it's that I've got 100 seats to recruit for, right? I probably have 75 candidates, I've gotta go, I don't have time [to search specifically for young adults]"

Conclusion

This chapter focuses on voters and parties as the potential culprits in the case of the missing young adult legislators. It asks the question "are young adult candidates at a disadvantage compared to older adult candidates in either recruitment or elections?" The results of the analyses here are decidedly mixed. The multivariate and experimental evidence does not show any disadvantage for young adults among voters, while pure observational evidence and survey results seem to support the Political Theory. Meanwhile, formal representation does not appear to increase young adult recruitment and political elites seem to believe that there is some bias against recruiting young adult candidates. And yet data from organizations that have trained these candidates show that there are a good number of potential young adult candidates who have been recruited – but still very few young adult candidates! How can we square these seemingly contradictory findings?

Essentially, voters indicate that they prefer older adult candidates to young adults. However, when presented with a candidate (actual or fictionalized), there doesn't appear to be an overwhelming bias against them. The data here do not give us great insight into the inconsistency, but a relatively intuitive explanation is that the age of a candidate is much less important to voters than other characteristics, likely including party. If presented with the choice of a young adult candidate of their own party and an older adult candidate of the opposite party,

most voters would likely choose the candidate of their preferred party. This includes those who may not originally indicate a party, but when pushed to choose would select a preference.

The complicating factor in this explanation is the observational evidence. Young adults only win slightly more than 36% of the contested general election races that at least one young adult entered – compared to 96% for older adults. This would seem to suggest that young adults are still at a major disadvantage. However, as the multivariate analysis shows, that disadvantage may be overstated. It is possible that young adults are winning primaries more often in places where they are very unlikely to win the general. In fact, of the 112 primaries that were won by a young adult, 38 of them (more than 1/3rd) were for races in which, in the previous election, their party had received less than 40% of the vote. In comparison, only 31 young adults won primaries in which their party had received more than 50% of the vote in the previous election. This means that a young adult was more likely to be nominated for a seat which they had very little chance of winning than for a seat which they would be favored to win, based only on the previous elections results.

These findings suggest support for the political opportunity structure hypothesis (examined in chapter 2) rather than support for the Political Theory. Young adults lose most of the races they enter not because of voter bias (which exists) but because they only manage to appear in races which, for other reasons, they are less likely to win. However, this should not be taken as a total indictment of the political theory. Certainly, it seems that voters do not prefer young adult candidates. This bias may present itself in very close elections, which would play some role in explaining the dearth of young adult candidates.

Does the Political Theory do a better job at explaining the role of party leaders in the recruitment of young adults? It is possible that parties have some bias against recruiting young

adults, but that the bias is not large. As most of the interviewees emphasized, parties recruit whomever they can find that they believe can win. Young adults may be at some disadvantage here, but that disadvantage may be easily overcome by being good candidates in other ways. Certainly, none of the political elites interviewed believed that being a young adult was a death knell for a potential candidacy and most mentioned other factors that were far more important – community ties, scandals, gaffes, public speaking abilities, confidence, etc. All of these factors could be correlated with age but are not reasons that age itself is a disadvantage.

A second potential explanation is that the lack of party support is a major disadvantage for young adults, but that disadvantage might not matter. Perhaps party recruitment is overblown as a cause, given that informal recruitment can be such a powerful motivating force. Of the elected officials I spoke to who have been recruited, only one mentioned a targeted recruitment campaign organized by the party. The rest came through less formal means.

Finally, it is possible that the biases exist, but do not get the opportunity to manifest themselves. If young adults do not want to run as young adults, the fact that they are recruited might not be enough to make the difference. Alternatively, it may be that recruiting young adults would lead to more young adult candidates, but that the lack of recruitment is not the cause of the lack of candidates. This scenario would be that some necessary prior cause keeps young adults out of the running. Recruitment might be able to remove that cause, but it is not the cause itself. This is the explanation suggested by the sociological theory, as explained in the "theories" section of this chapter.

None of these three explanations help differentiate between the theories presented in Chapter 1, other than to work against the political theory. They all suggest that some other cause

likely helps explain why young adults are underrepresented, but do not give good leverage to determine which of those causes is the true cause (or which combination).

Thus far, I suspect most readers find the lack of a clear answer to the mystery of the missing young adult legislators somewhat frustrating. While we have followed many clues and eliminated several suspects, the lack of differentiation between the theories through two chapters leaves us grasping for the next avenue of investigation. Luckily, the next chapter allows us to interview both suspect and victim of our mystery – and discover whether the two might be one in the same.

Chapter 4: From the Source

Introduction

Young adults are considered vibrant, full of life, and generally willing to spend their disposable income. For this reason, young adults are a coveted demographic for media companies – they are targeted by television shows, movies and books. Common themes of that media include follow your dreams, believe in yourself, and that if you can dream it, you can do it (Niemec and Wedding 2013)! Is it possible that such messages have not sunk in?

Perhaps young adults do not believe in themselves. Not in the sense that they look at themselves in the mirror and say, "I cannot do it," but in the sense that they never make it up to the mirror at all. Perhaps young adults simply do not believe that they can or should be members of state legislatures. Maybe, when we ask young adults their career goals and they say that they would like to be elected representatives, they answer in the same way a child does: with a completely unrealistic answer that they have basically no intention of pursuing. Perhaps "running for office" is in the same category as movie star, astronaut, or professional video game tester. Maybe young adults simply don't see any way for themselves to enter the hallowed halls of their respective state legislature. This is the theory that this chapter seeks to test.

Theory

This chapter focuses on the sociological theory. This theory argues for a somewhat nebulous belief among young adults that they simply do not belong either in the campaigns for state legislature or in the actual seats of a state legislator. More than that, it argues that they do

not see themselves as qualified to make a choice about running for state legislature, because they do not see the alternative before them. This theory posits that a sociological hurdle exists before even entering into the rational choice calculus of whether or not to run for office. Rather than young adults having seriously considered the pros and cons, as well as the possibility of winning, the sociological theory posits that young adults make the quite irrational decision not to even bother with the rational calculation because they assume they know what the outcome of such a calculation would be. It is important to note that the sociological theory deals with belief, rather than reality. Whether the things young adults believe about the job of a state legislator, or their electability are true or not is irrelevant to the theory.

This chapter focuses mostly on survey and interview evidence, the design of which will be discussed more in the following section. In general, though, the survey asks highly qualified young adults who have chosen policy or politics-relevant career paths about their thoughts on running for legislative office. If these highly qualified young adults indicate that they believe that they are not qualified to be state legislators, despite objectively showing many of the traits that make legislators effective, it would be evidence that they have not seriously considered whether they could do the job.

Alternatively, if young adults express confidence that they could do the job, but do not believe they could be selected by voters to do the job, it could be evidence of either the rational choice theory or the sociological theory. This is because it is difficult to assess whether young adults have actually considered the electoral situation, they find themselves in or if they have simply assumed the electoral situation they would find themselves in. The interviews referenced in this chapter will help serve to differentiate the two theories, even if they cannot fully create distinctions.

If the young adults surveyed and interviewed in this chapter both believe that they could do the job of a state legislator and believe that they could be elected to do the job of a state legislator, but have still chosen not to pursue the job, it would serve as strong evidence against the sociological theory. That said, the evidence only truly applies if those young adults want to be elected officials at some point in their lives. As has been emphasized several times, this research is not about why young people in general do not run for office. Rather, I have specifically focused on young people who DO want to run for office and asked the question "why not now?"

Some questions in this chapter may also provide evidence for the Resources Theory, which claims that young adults do not have the requisite resources to run for office. Evidence that young adults believe that they could do the job, but that they could not be elected may be support for the resource theory, depending on why young adults have that belief. However, it is important to keep in mind that the resource theory argues that young adults actually do not have the resources, while the sociological theory would emphasize young adults' belief that they do not have the resources. The distinction between perception and reality is an important one.

Data

This chapter relies mainly on two original data sources. The first is a survey of young adults who are both likely to be interested in careers in public service and likely to be qualified for such careers. Specifically, I conducted a survey (in two waves) of young adults who were enrolled, either as undergraduates or graduate students, in public policy programs. The survey was distributed to a number of Big 10 universities across the country. I refer to it as the Highly Qualified Young Adults Survey (HQYA).

The biggest challenge working in the candidate emergence literature is identifying a population for study. The ideal population for this research in particular would be young adults who aspire to a career in an elective office but have not yet run. However, given the dearth of political ambition at any age (Lawless and Fox 2015, Lawless 2012) a survey of the general public is unlikely to produce a sufficient sample size from which to draw any conclusions. Unfortunately, there is, by definition, no "politically ambitious, but not yet publicly so" mailing list to which to distribute a survey. This seems to leave the researcher with either the prospect of doing enormously expensive work to survey tens of thousands of people or throwing up their hands and claiming that the survey cannot be done.

However, Lawless and Fox (2012) identify a third way. They identify populations likely to have a higher proportion of politically ambitious members and survey them, in hopes of revealing a sufficient subsample of politically ambitious respondents. In Lawless and Fox's case, they identify business leaders, lawyers, and community activists. These are excellent places for the research they wish to do. However, the research presented here is even more specific: not-yet-emerged potential candidates who are under 30 years old. Thus, I identified a group disproportionately likely to be politically ambitious and disproportionately likely to be young. While surveys of college students are often thought of as merely convenience samples that do not meet the standards for external validity, in this case they fit the bill well; I selected young adults who were in a policy-relevant major. While it is difficult to fully determine a sample population that will be disproportionately likely to be interested in running for political office, I assume that those who select a policy-relevant major may be more likely to be interested in or thinking running for political office.

The two HQYA survey waves are nearly identical. The second wave contained one additional set of questions. The only other difference between the two waves was which universities they were distributed to. As such, most results here report the overall response between the two waves. Between the two waves, 200 young adults responded to the survey. Some questions have slightly different response numbers due to individual questions being skipped by some respondents. This calculates to a nearly 7% margin of error at a 95% confidence level. This margin of error is higher than conventional expectations, which is why the second data source is an important addition to the chapter.

The second data source is follow-up interviews from the survey. After identifying those in the survey who indicated they either were or had considered a political career, I contacted them again and conducted 16 follow-up interviews to get more in-depth information about their attitudes. These semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom and ranged in length from 20 minutes to an hour. Direct quotes from interviewees can be found throughout the chapter.

The approach of the survey and interviews is similar to how this chapter will address the sociological theory. I begin by investigating general beliefs about the job of a state legislator, followed by questions about current state legislators. Specifically, are current state legislators well qualified for their job, and if so, what makes someone qualified to be a state legislator? I then turn the question back to the young adult interviewees and ask if they are qualified, comparing their current qualifications to the qualifications they listed as necessary for the job. After asking about their ability to do the job, I turn to questions that tap into their ability to get elected to the job. The survey questions are available in the appendix.

If the sociological theory is correct, one would expect to see a mismatch between the objective qualifications of these young adults and their belief that they could do the job effectively or get elected to the job.

Views of State Legislators

The Job of a State Legislator

The most basic questions of qualification cannot be answered until we know the answer to a previous question: is it hard to be a state legislator? Three Likert-scale questions give some idea of young adults' beliefs about this question. The first asked survey respondents the extent to which they agree that being a state legislator is a difficult job that requires a great deal of skill. The second asked whether being a state legislator is a demanding job that requires a great deal of personal sacrifice. The results of these two questions are presented in Figure 4.1 and 4.2 (respectively) below.

Figure 4.1: State Legislator is a Difficult Job

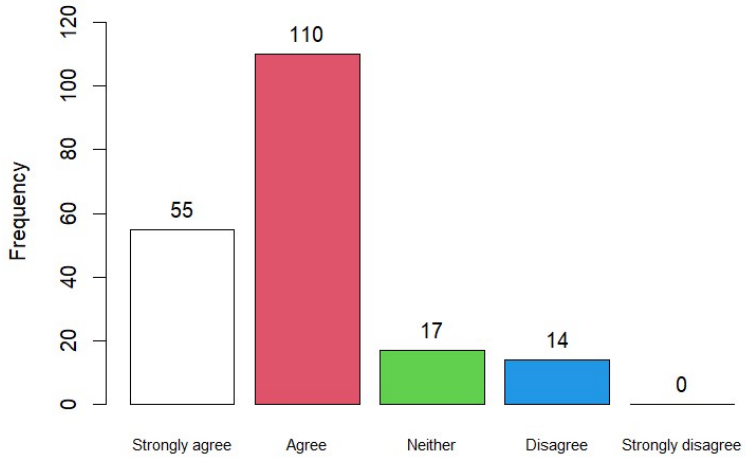
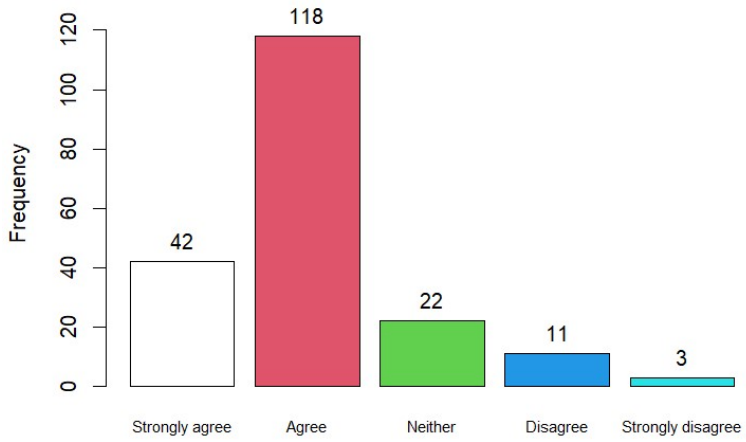


Figure 4.2: State Legislator Requires Personal Sacrifice

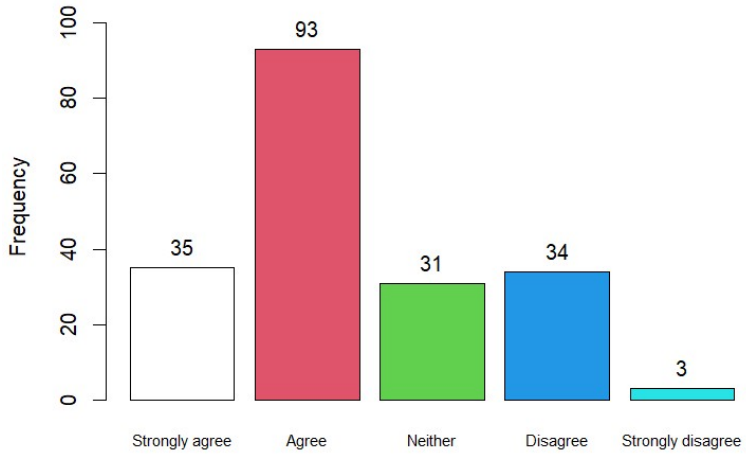


Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show that, overwhelmingly, young adults do believe that being a state legislator is difficult and demanding. These results, by themselves, do not tell us much about any of the theories presented in Chapter 1. They may serve as some suggestive evidence for the psychological theory that young adults are simply uninterested in elected office or the rational choice theory that the costs are not worth paying. Indeed, questions like this are used as evidence for such theories in the literature (Lawless and Fox 2015). However, these arguments are unconvincing – the fact that something is hard does not independently mean that it is undesirable. These questions do not capture the benefits of being a state legislator and therefore are weak evidence at best for the psychological theory and do not provide much support for the Rational Choice Theory.

Instead, these findings begin to tell the story of how young adults might see themselves in the job. Easy jobs lend themselves to seeing oneself succeed at more difficult jobs. The fact that young adults see the job as difficult and demanding might contribute to their belief that they are unqualified, but more evidence would be needed to draw this conclusion.

The third survey question gets even more into the sociological theory. It asks young adults to what extent they agree that being a state legislator requires special skills or training, The results from this question are presented in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3: State Legislator Requires Special Skills



Here, we once again see agreement, but to a much lesser extent than the previous two questions. We should not over interpret this difference, especially given the large margin of error on these questions. However, it seems that at least some young adults believe that the job is difficult and demanding but are less convinced that any particular skillset is necessary. Perhaps they prefer to think of their legislators as "citizen legislators" – everyday people who choose to work hard and make sacrifices to do good for their community. The clear majority, however, believe that special skills or training are necessary. What those specific skills might be requires further questioning, which will be presented later in this chapter.

What does this tell us about the sociological theory? The majority of young adults surveyed believe that being a state legislator is difficult, that it requires personal sacrifice and special skills. It should be noted here, however, that these young people have received extensive

formal training in policymaking. In the face of this majority, there is a considerable minority of the population of interest who believe that being a state legislator is a demanding job that requires no special skills. If this is the belief, the next logical question is whether they believe themselves capable of such a demanding job, since it would not require specific training.

Current State Legislators

What do these young adults think of those who currently sit in the positions of state legislator? Again, the answer to this question helps us understand the ability of young adults to see themselves in the job. If current state legislators are unqualified, perhaps it is easier to believe that one could do the job better. On the other hand, if current state legislators are highly qualified individuals with intelligence and skill, it may be more difficult to believe the job is something that our respondents could do.

Two questions get directly at this query, while a third gives some insight not only into elected state legislators themselves, but also those who run for the office. The first two questions are Likert Scale questions asking how much the young adult respondent agrees with the following two statements:

- State legislators are generally very smart and accomplished people.
- State legislators have a great deal of policy expertise.

The results for these questions are shown in Figures 4.4 and 4.5, respectively, below.

Figure 4.4: Current State Legislators are Smart and Accomplished

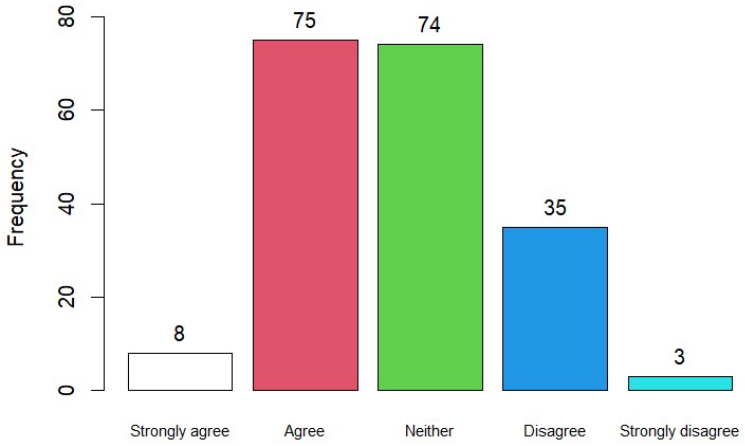
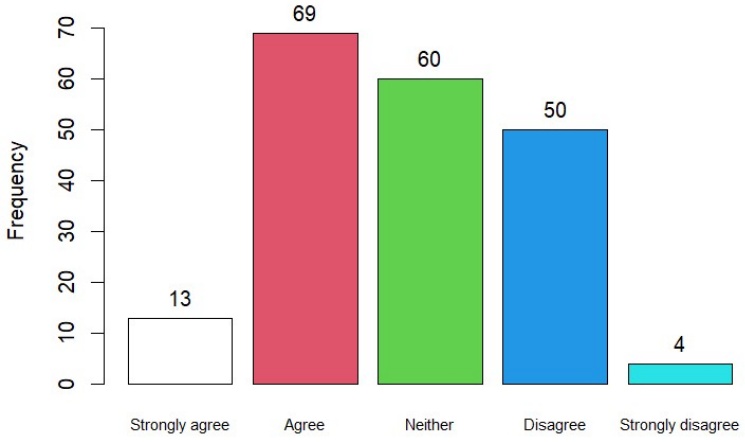


Figure 4.5: Current State Legislators are Policy Experts



As Figures 4.4 and 4.5 show, young adults are less convinced of the qualifications of current state legislators than they are of the difficulty of the job in general. Less than half of respondents believe that state legislators are generally smart or accomplished and less than half believe that they have a great deal of policy expertise. That said, a plurality does agree with these statements.

The final question in this section concerns those who run for state legislature, rather than those who are elected. Respondents were asked the degree to which they agree that people who run for the state legislature are qualified to be state legislators. The results for this question are displayed in Figure 4.6.

Figure 4.6: Candidates for State Legislators are Qualified

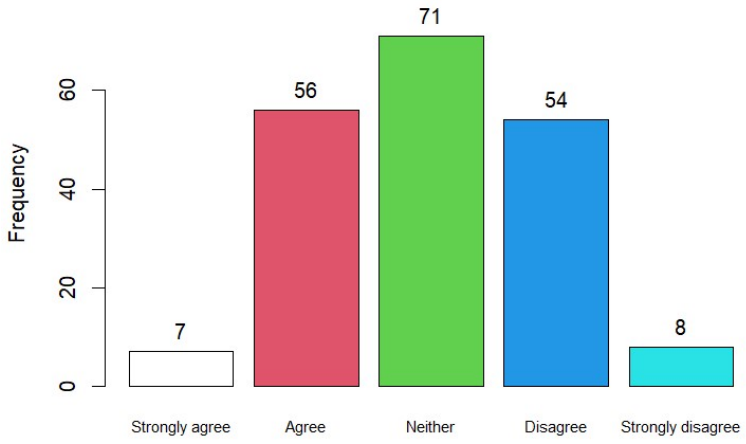


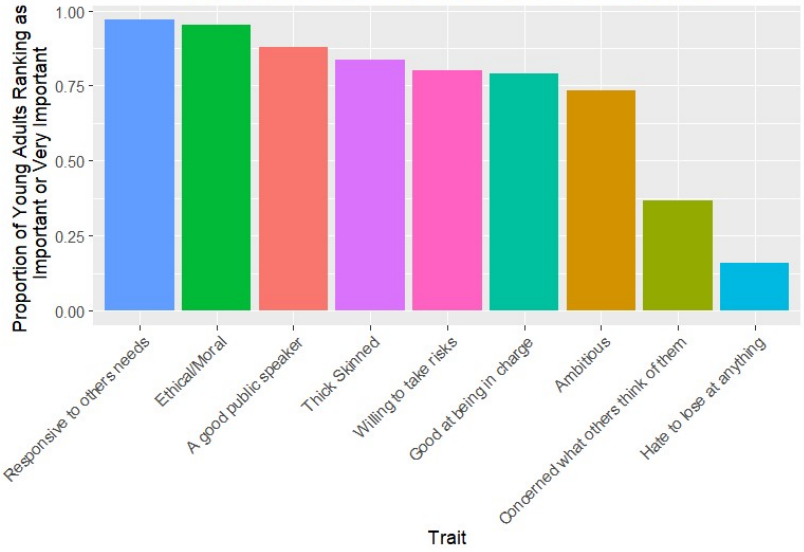
Figure 4.6 shows that, for the first time, a plurality does not agree with the statement presented and only one more respondent agreed or agreed strongly with the statement than disagreed or disagreed strongly. These young adult respondents are not nearly as impressed by state legislative candidates as they are by actual state legislators. The implication of this finding is that young adults believe the electoral process is at least somewhat successful in weeding out unqualified candidates. If respondents believe that the average candidate is less qualified than the average legislator, then it would seem that respondents may believe that voters are discerning when it comes to qualifications. Of course, the difference is not overwhelming, and more young adults do believe that candidates are qualified than believe they are unqualified. Still, at least some young adults appear to have faith in the electoral process.

The combination of these results is suggestive of three theories: rational choice, sociological, and opportunity structure. As with many results, differentiating between the rational choice and sociological theory is difficult. Young adults may believe that voters are able to distinguish qualification because they have done research or otherwise looked closely at the problem – a rational approach to potentially becoming a candidate. On the other hand, they may believe it without rational investigation, which would suggest the sociological approach. Of course, both or either could be at work to explain these results.

Knowing how young adults generally feel about state legislators is important because it gives us insight into the level of competition that they may or may not perceive. However, even more important is knowing what makes a state legislator qualified. Essentially, the next set of survey questions sets a baseline for what contributes to a young adult's perceptions of qualification. Later, I then compare this baseline of qualification to the actual qualifications of young adults.

The first set of qualification questions concern temperament, while the second focuses on training. All of the questions in this section of the survey were taken from a similar survey by Shames (2017). Young adults were asked how important particular traits were to being a good state legislator. Figure 4.7 displays the proportion of young adults who said that each trait was either important or very important.

Figure 4.7
Importance of Particular Traits for State Legislators



As Figure 4.7 shows, young adults do seem to have a relatively high bar for the personality traits of state legislators. More than three-quarters of respondents said that it was important for state legislators to be responsive to other people's needs, ethical, a good public speaker, thick skinned, willing to take risks, and be good at being in charge. Nearly three-quarters also said that they should be ambitious.

Beyond these personality traits, there are also particular experiences or expertise that young adults may wish for their state legislators to have. I selected a number of potential experiences that are traditionally thought of as avenues towards public office (Fox and Lawless 2011). Figure 4.8 shows the proportion of young adults in the sample who ranked each trait as important or very important.

Figure 4.8:
Importance of Particular Experiences for State Legislators

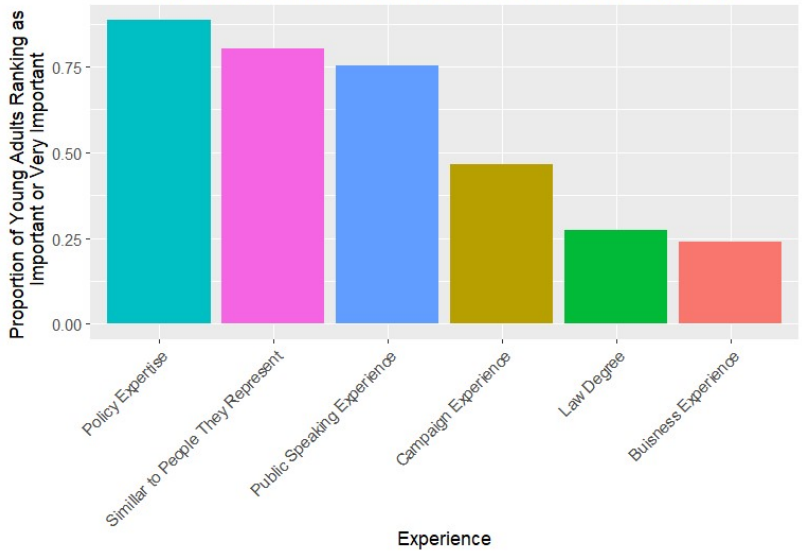


Figure 4.8 shows that these young adults, who are students of public policy, strongly prefer that their state legislators have policy expertise. In addition, supermajorities believe it is important that state legislators be similar to the people they represent and have public speaking experience. Less than half, however, believe it is important that a state legislator have direct political experience in the form of campaign experience, legal experience in having a law degree, or business experience of any kind.

Figures 4.7 and 4.8 tell a story of young adults who have high expectations for state legislators. However, the traits they rank most highly are, for the most part, not age dependent. Of course, the personality traits could occur in young adults and these young adults in particular are likely to have policy expertise – indeed, to be specifically trained in public policy!

Being similar to the people represented is an interesting trait when considering age. Of course, any elected representative is going to be mostly dissimilar from their constituents with regard to age because age is well distributed across the spectrum, but a legislator can only select one point on the spectrum. Further investigation will be needed (and will be carried out later in

this chapter), but there is no a priori reason to believe that this trait would 'disqualify' any of the young adults surveyed here. Finally, young adults may or may not have public speaking experience. Given that these young adults in particular are currently taking university classes, it seems more likely that they would have recently been required to give a presentation than the average American, but it is difficult to know for sure.

It seems, then, that none of the qualifications that young adults have identified as important are likely to a priori count them out. However, the objective comparison of perceived needed qualifications and personal qualifications is not the basis of the sociological theory. Rather, it is a question of whether young adults perceive themselves as qualified without doing an objective comparison or investigation. This is the subject of the next section.

Views of Self

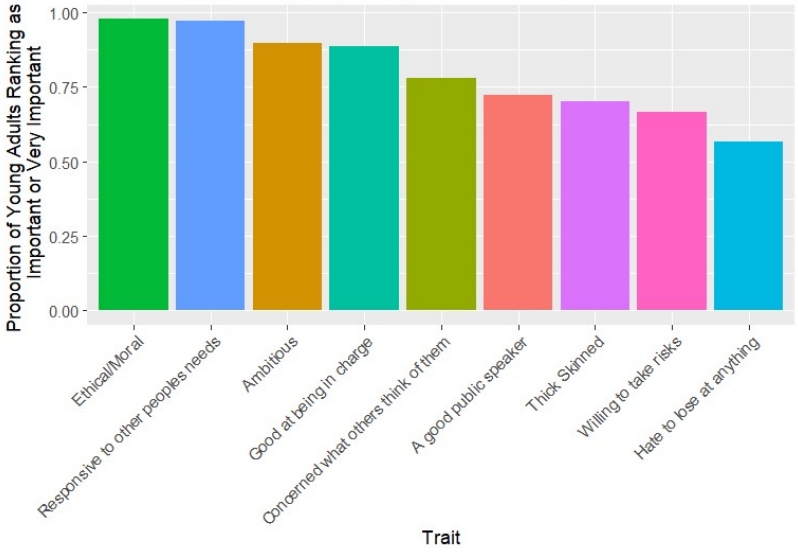
Personal Qualifications

Now that we have examined how young adults feel about those who currently represent them in state legislatures, the jobs they do, and those who want their jobs, we ask the question: are YOU qualified?

It is important to note again that these qualification questions are subjective. Of course, there are very few objective criteria for qualification for office – although, as discussed in Chapter 2, age actually is one of them! It is also important to remember that these are self - evaluations – not subjective based on the opinion of others, but only of the self. This is important to remember because it is the very basis of the sociological theory – that it is individual mental blocks that prevent young adults from reaching office rather than anything extrinsic.

The first set of questions to look at is whether young adults see themselves as qualified when not posed the question directly. In order to determine whether young adults saw themselves as having the temperament to be a state legislator, I asked the respondents how well a group of traits described them. These are the same traits that are presented in Figure 4.7. By looking at the correlation of these two sets of questions, we can get a sense of whether young adults believe they possess the qualifications they themselves seek in an elected representative. Figure 4.9 shows the proportion of young adults who said that the trait described them "well" or "very well."

Figure 4.9:
How Well Particular Traits Describe Me



As Figure 4.9 shows, young adults rate themselves highly in some of the same categories that they rate as important for a state legislator. Specifically, an overwhelming majority list themselves as being ethical and responsive to other's needs, which were the top two traits that were listed as important for a legislator. Nearly 75% rated themselves as a good public speaker, which was the next most important trait. The most disparate traits were those that young adults did not believe were important, but nonetheless described them – being concerned about what

others thought of them and hating to lose at anything. It is hard to say that these traits are disqualifying, though they may serve as support for the psychological theory. A person who hates to lose and is overly concerned with what others think of them may be less likely to enter the notoriously scrutinized profession of politics (Shames 2017), where losing is often much more common than winning.

Overall, however, it appears that young adults seem to believe that they have temperaments that would make them effective state legislators. Of course, comparing Figures 4.7 and 4.9 does not tell us about how any individual respondent views the qualifications. In order to do so, I matched the answers about the importance of traits with the self-assessments of how well the same traits described each respondent. The average respondent thought that they possessed 84.97% of the traits that they listed as important in running for office. This is, again, strong confirmation that based on the qualifications young adults themselves set, they see themselves as qualified to be state legislators.

In order to test the sociological theory, then, we must test whether young adults feel as qualified as their responses would indicate. Three questions help me explore this query. The first two ask young adults about whether or not a person like themselves would be qualified to be a state legislator and whether a person like them could do a good job as a state legislator if given the chance. The results of these two questions are below in Figures 4.10 and 4.11. In Figure 4.10, we see the answers to the Likert scale question: “Someone like me would not be qualified to be a state legislator.” Figure 4.11 is a similar response to the prompt: “Someone like me could do a good job as a state legislator if given the chance.”

Figure 4.10:
Someone Like Me Would Not be Qualified to be a State Legislator

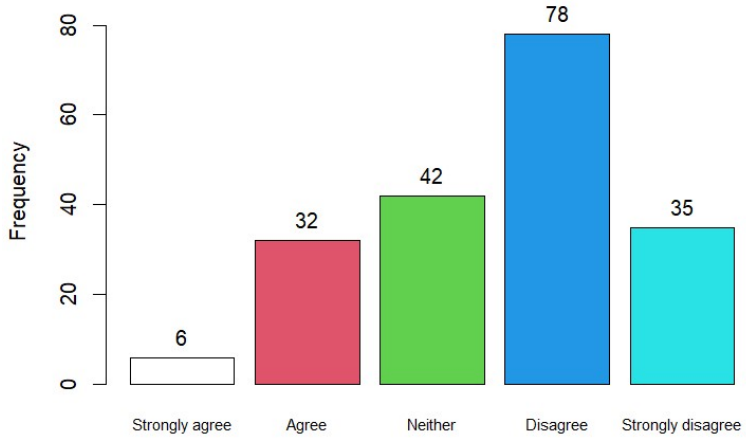
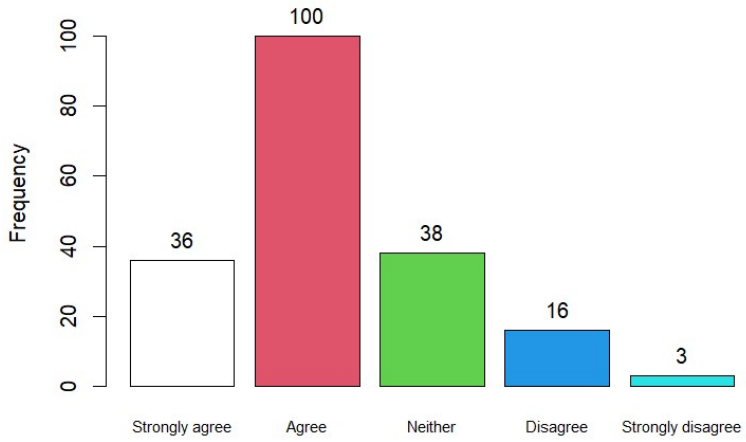


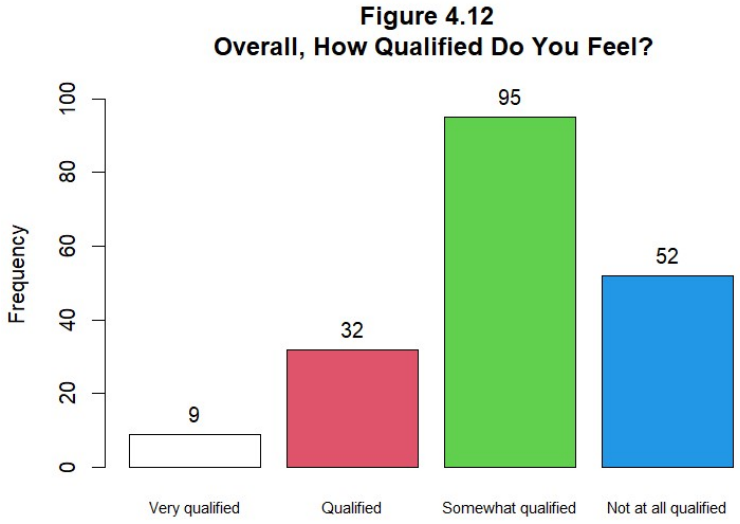
Figure 4.11:
Someone Like Me Could Do a Good Job as a State Legislator



These results challenge the sociological theory. Young adults are very clear that they believe that a person like them could do a good job as a state legislator and that they would be qualified. This is the opposite of what the sociological theory would predict. Based on these results, young adults do not seem to be taking themselves out of the running!

The next question, however, shows much more support for the Sociological Theory. When asked about themselves specifically, the results are less positive for the young adults.

Figure 4.12 displays the results of a Likert question prompt: “Overall, how qualified do you feel to be a state legislator?



In Figure 4.12, we see that young adults are more likely to classify THEMSELVES as unqualified than definitively qualified or very qualified. It is also important to remember that these young adults are among the most qualified in their age group – they are undergraduate or graduate students specifically studying public policy problems. They also consider themselves to have the temperament and skills for the job. By both objective and subjective standards, they ARE qualified. So why is there such a disparity between “people like me” and “me”?

The Sociological Theory does help explain this disparity. Young adults recognize that they have the skills to be legislators and recognize that people like them could be legislators. They can imagine a hypothetical person very much like themselves walking the halls of the state capitol and casting votes. When asked to replace that hypothetical person with themselves, however, they suddenly can no longer see that same picture. This is far from a Rational Choice

or Resources Theory explanation. Young adults see opportunity, but they do not believe that they themselves can or should take advantage of it.

However, I should also note that the pattern of responses could be a result of the survey design. It is possible that when the young adults were asked about "people like them," age was not the identity category or trait that came to mind. A young Black woman respondent, for example, might well think of the phrase "people like me" as describing Black people, women, Black women, public policy nerds, conservatives, liberals, or any number of other attributes. When asked about themselves, however, age may have been more relevant. Of course, it is also possible that age was never the consideration, even for the question about themselves personally. This could be evidence for the sociological theory. If, when asked whether they considered themselves qualified for office, young adults did not even think about age as a disqualifier but simply assumed it, then it would be evidence that they never even considered it.

In addition, "somewhat qualified" is not the same as "completely unqualified" and thus deserves some more qualitative nuance. Luckily, that qualitative data is readily available in the form of the interviews I conducted.

The young adults I interviewed talked about whether they themselves were qualified to be state legislators. I specifically asked them not whether they could be elected, but whether they could do the job itself. Almost half (7/15) of the young adults interviewed said they could do the job. Slightly more than half said no. At the same time, 11 interviewees said that they did not feel qualified to be a state legislator. This includes 5 who said they could do the job. This result alone indicates that these young adults are not rationally assessing their qualifications for the job!

Three of those who said they were not qualified actually gave some version of the answer "not yet." Oliver, a graduate student in public policy, summed up the general feelings of this

group when he said: “You feel very unqualified, but on the other hand you don’t really know who IS qualified.” Later he followed this up with "Young people…probably don't feel like they deserve it, I certainly don't feel like [I do] ... it would be impossibly entitled for me to say I deserve it." Katherine, who felt she had the skills to be a state legislator, but not the knowledge base, clarified that it was mostly a “lack of confidence.” In fact, no respondent, when asked why they felt unqualified, gave a specific skill that they lacked. Rather, they spoke vaguely about how they did not understand the process or issues well enough.

Hannah, a graduate student in public policy, seemed to think through whether she felt qualified in real time: “*Even then, I don't think I'm at anywhere near ready in my career or life path to do that yet, so it's very abstract… It's hard to picture myself in that position… but I guess I'm not 'ready', but I don't really know what ready would look like per se... I think there's a difference between having the skills to like technically make you able to run for something, but then anyone can run for anything, there's no real limit bounding people but... I don't know, the question is why don't I feel like I have the ability to do that?"*

A final source of evidence on this question comes from the elite interviews introduced in the last chapter. Though the question of young adults feeling unqualified was never directly addressed, several of the political elites offered their thoughts:

An official at recruitment non-profit focused on young women: “*They feel like they have to have multiple degrees and multiple experiences in order to run… [They say] ‘I don't feel qualified enough to lead my community because I need more experience.’*

A former party leader (who originally ran as a young adult): "*Young people can kind of pick up on that, they want to go to a local central committee meeting, but... they're the youngest person in the room by 20 years, they don't feel they can really be included."*

A current party leader: *"Some [young adults] just think they don't know enough to run… You have to talk to them about why you think they are qualified even if they are young, they still bring something to the table that I may not."*

Interviews with young people lend support for the sociological theory. The young adults I interviewed certainly had not done a deep dive into the job of a state legislator and decided that they could not do the job well. Rather, they simply assumed that state legislators were highly qualified people who had a great deal of specialized knowledge. This belief led them to the conclusion that they simply were not qualified to do the job. That said, some did still believe that they would be effective as state legislators. Another part of my hypothesis about the sociological theory requires further testing – do young adults believe that they could win?

Chance to Win

The sociological theory argues that young adults do not believe that they are electable. The difference between the sociological theory and the rational choice theory on this point is the degree to which the young adults have actually thought about whether being young is an electoral disadvantage. If young adults assume there is a disadvantage without evidence or thought, this points to support for the Sociological Theory. If, however, they conclude that being young is a disadvantage after careful consideration, then it would be support for the Rational

Choice Theory. If young adults do not presume any disadvantage, neither theory may find meaningful support.

The HQYA survey asked several questions to determine whether young adults perceive such a disadvantage. The first asked whether the young adults agreed that "someone like me could never get elected to the state legislature." Figure 4.13 shows the results of that question.

Figure 4.13:
Someone Like Me Could Never Get Elected

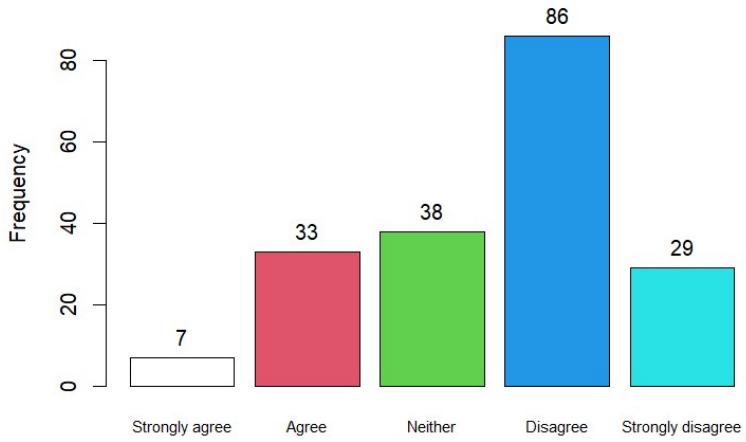
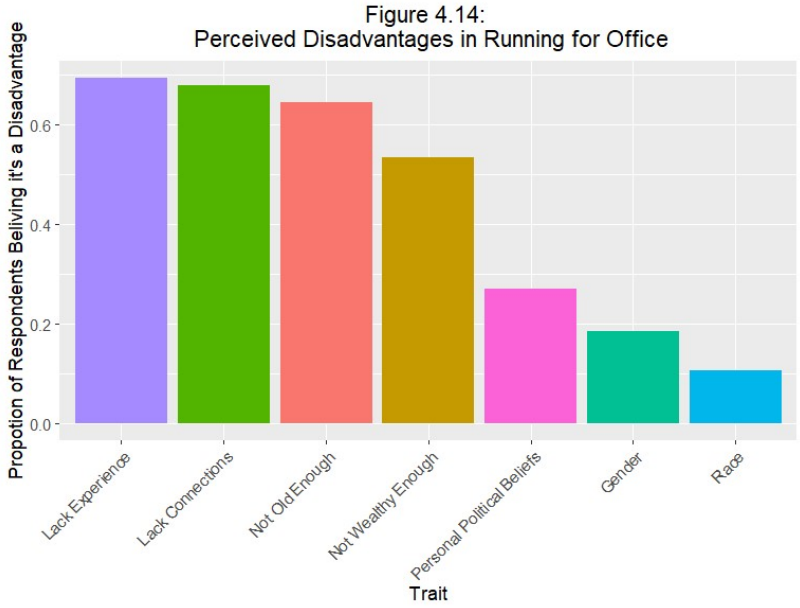


Figure 4.13 presents a pretty substantial challenge to both the sociological and rational choice theories. A majority of young adults disagree that they could not achieve the office of state legislator. Though the question is somewhat vague, the initial reaction of a majority of the young adults surveyed is that someone like them could be elected. If this were the end of the evidence, it would make sense to discard both the Rational Choice and Sociological Theories altogether – or at least the portions of those theories dealing with electoral outcomes.

Figure 4.13 is not the end of the evidence, however. Figure 4.14 displays the answers to a series of questions about why one might be at an electoral disadvantage. The questions asked the respondents if they agreed or disagreed that, for example, "A person like me does not have

enough experience to be elected to the State Legislature" or "A person like me is the wrong race to be elected to the State Legislature." Figure 4.14 displays the proportion of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with those statements.



The Y axis shows the proportion of respondents who agreed that people like themselves had a particular trait that made them undesirable as a candidate.[13] As the Figure shows, more than 60% of respondents believed that people like themselves were not old enough to be elected. In addition, nearly 70% said that they lacked the experience, which may act as a proxy for age. More young adults believed their age to be a problem than their personal political beliefs or wealth (which is especially striking given the general lack of wealth among young adults).

This result provides greater support for the sociological and rational choice theories. Young adults DO seem to believe that being young is an electoral disadvantage. Remember that,

[13] Special caution should be taken in interpreting the 'race' and 'gender' bars in this graph – a majority of the HQYA survey respondents were male and an overwhelming majority were white, which helps explain such small results.

for either of these theories, this belief does not necessarily need to be correct. Indeed, evidence presented in Chapter 3 suggests that this disadvantage is either very small or nonexistent. The belief in such a disadvantage, however, could convince young adults to stay out of the race, even when the belief is unfounded. This is especially true of the sociological theory, which assumes that young adults have not actually done research to support their beliefs.

+ Additional evidence for this theory can be found in Figure .4.15, which shows whether young adults believe that people in their community are ready to vote for a person with a particular trait or identity (compare Figure 4.15 to Figure 3.3 in Chapter 3).

Figure 4.15:
Would People Vote for This Identity for State Legislature

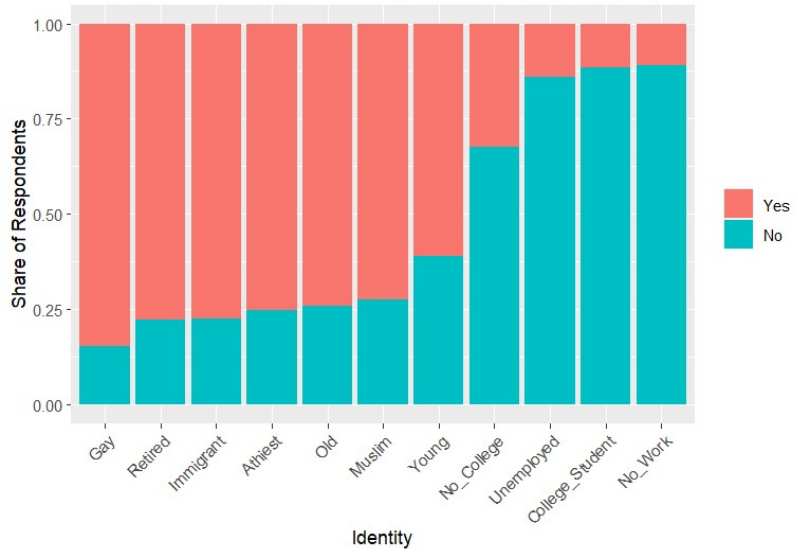


Figure 4.15 shows that young adults do perceive being young as a disadvantage – but perhaps not an outright barrier. For this question, less than half of young adults believe that their communities are not ready to vote for a person under 30 years of age. Though this is the most perceived disfavored identity category – more than being an atheist, immigrant, or Muslim – it is not exactly a ringing endorsement of the belief that young adults are at a specific disadvantage.

However, when looking at the most perceived disadvantages – which range well into the realm of 85% or more believing that their communities would not support this person, we find results that can shed some further light on the perceptions of age. The biggest perceived disadvantage is having no work experience. This, of course, is more likely to be true of young adults than older adults. The second biggest perceived disadvantage is being a college student – again, this is, for the most part, an age-related feature. In fact, the biggest clue that age is a factor comes from the difference between a "college student" and someone with "no college degree." The vast majority of college students do not yet have a college degree, but they do have some college education. Some college education would seem to be an advantage over those with no college education, if voters are simply looking for people with particular knowledge. The results show, however, far more respondents perceived being a college student as being a disadvantage than having no college degree. The salient difference between these two choices is that a college student is almost certainly perceived to be young, while a person without a college degree could be of any age.

Overall, what do these findings tell us? A high proportion of the young adults surveyed believe that being young is a disadvantage – but not one that would necessarily prevent young people from winning an election entirely. The question of whether someone like them could "never" get elected was rejected – implying that at some point, a person with their traits could get elected. This may be additional evidence that youth is a disadvantage.

Information from the follow-up interviews also provides qualitative evidence that young adults see being young as a disadvantage in an election. Bridget, an undergraduate student in public policy, made this disadvantage explicit when she said that "I don't think I have that base

of support, if you will, at my age… You can ask me again in like 20 years." Other respondents made similar claims, as below:

Christine, an undergraduate student in public policy: "*It's just seeing that people don't take young individuals super seriously, but I think that has been changing… But again, it's a matter of what other people would think."*

Jamie, a graduate student in political science: *"I feel like in order to succeed, especially if you are young and inexperienced, you need to hit a very sweet spot, of a very sweet, sweet spot with your constituents."*

Luis, a graduate student in public policy: "*Cuz I know, if you are too young and ... it doesn't have any like, can prove that you have experience or that you have gained the required, a certain amount of knowledge, voters will question you about how fit you are to run for office."*

Mary, a graduate student in public policy *"I would think so, I guess if we think of like the, like who we imagine the likely voter, rather than like your registered voter, their typically older, I imagine they would want to identify more with the candidate, rather than not identify with the candidate, so when they see like a young kid coming up and trying to get voted and there's someone who might have a similar age as them, similar level of life experience they might just maybe just implicitly biased against the younger candidate because of that."*

Nadine, a graduate student in public policy: *"People are kind of skeptical of younger people, thinking they're not experienced enough…In this current phase of my life the answer is no... in the future who knows? I'm open to it."*

Oliver, a graduate student in public policy: *"I don't know how the guy who was like 25 in Florida* [Maxwell Frost, the first Gen-Z member of the U.S. Congress] *got elected…It's surprising that the person the party kind of, like, went with was a person who is so young! I'm kind of impressed by his ability to have connection to that. He's part of a different group of young people..."*

Only one interview respondent saw being young as an advantage. Isaac, a graduate student in public policy, argued that he could win an election specifically because he was young. When pressed, he said: *"I feel like a lot of times, especially for, I mean if we're talking specifically about like state legislature type things like the voting bloc you're not often gonna hear from is like the 18 to y'know 29 age group, so if you can have someone who can relate more closely to those people and care more about the things that they care about then I think that that can definitely be an advantage in certain areas."* When I asked him if the reverse logic would be true – that older voters would prefer someone older, he said *"Not necessarily, like, if you're able to kind of like code switch between different age groups and different constituencies in general."* Even the most optimistic interview respondent believed that young people would have to speak differently to older people to convince them that they were acceptable to vote for. Of course, all campaigning involves tailoring yourself to particular audiences. The fact that age is an explicit consideration in that tailoring, however, strongly suggests the relevance of age to the campaign process.

Some young adults were less convinced that "age" was a factor and more concerned with "experience":

Christine, an undergraduate student in public policy: *"Age doesn't really matter it's more like a 'sufficient experience', like you can have all of the bright ideas that you want, but*

I've learned that in certain situations it is good to have that experience so you can like or you can actually or you have the ability to make it happen."

Hannah, a graduate student in public policy: *"I think I would need more applied experience to do so [win an election] …"*

Jamie, a graduate student in public policy: *"I don't have a JD or a PhD or any of that stuff, and I don't have enough job or life experience."*

Mary, a graduate student in public policy "*I think [young adults] feel like they don't have enough experience."*

Luis, a graduate student in public policy: "*Age is not necessarily a factor that I would consider when it comes to running for office but more of experience and knowledge."*

Jamie's answer is particularly intriguing for another reason. At some point, Jamie described a friend he had who he felt was totally qualified to run for office. He said that this person's qualifications were that they had graduated with a degree in political science from the largest state university in the state – the same university Jamie had graduated from with a degree in public policy, and the same university from which Jamie was now finishing a master's degree. Jamie saw his friend as qualified and able to win an election, but despite having arguably more experience, did not see himself the same way.

How are we to interpret 'lack of experience' as an explanation for feeling unqualified? Is it a truly different factor or simply a proxy for age? Certainly, young people are less likely to have experience because they have had less time to accumulate that experience, so it is difficult to tease out the difference. However, Figure 9 provides some evidence that 'lack of experience' is in fact acting as a proxy for age. Figure 9 shows that young adults did not think it was important for their legislators to have business experience or a law degree. Experience only

seems to come into play when discussing young adults running for state legislative office. Additionally, very few of the young adults interviewed identified the experience necessary with any specificity. Rarely, it was "experience with government," but most often, there was only the nebulous, un-specified 'experience.' Given this vagueness, it is hard to conclude that experience, in this case, is acting as an independent variable that is distinguishable from (young) age.

If we accept that young adults perceive an electoral disadvantage in running for office (and that, as shown in chapter 3, such a disadvantage does not actually exist), the challenge remains to differentiate the cause between the sociological theory from the rational choice one. The first question is how much thought these young adults have put into these beliefs. The second is the extent to which this belief stops them from running. For the answers to these questions, we delve deeper into the qualitative evidence provided by the follow up interviews.

Affordability of Winning

A set of questions about financial resources can be used to flesh out the resources theory a bit more. The HQYA survey asked students three questions about money to determine if they would be financially able to run for office. There are several drawbacks to this data that should be noted at the outset. First, these questions ask the young adults to estimate their future monetary position – a decidedly tricky thing to do. These young adults may misestimate, at which point these data tell us very little. Secondly, there is no clear cut off in "can" and "cannot" afford to run for office. Rather, the data are suggestive of whether young adults have the financial means to even begin to consider a run for the state legislature.

The first question asked young adults how much money they made in the last year. Being college students, these numbers are generally rather small. Exactly half (93/186) of the young adults reported making less than $10,000 dollars in the last year. Another 26 (14%) reported making less than $20,000. Only 28 (15%) reported making more than $50,000 per year. These numbers seem to indicate that the majority of those surveyed did not have the financial means to make a serious run at the state legislature.

However, given that those surveyed are current students, the second question might be more relevant to their true financial situation. The second question asked, "About what annual income do you expect to earn at your first job after graduation?" The answers to this question can be seen in Figure 4.16.

Figure 4.16:
Expected Annual Income Post-Graduation

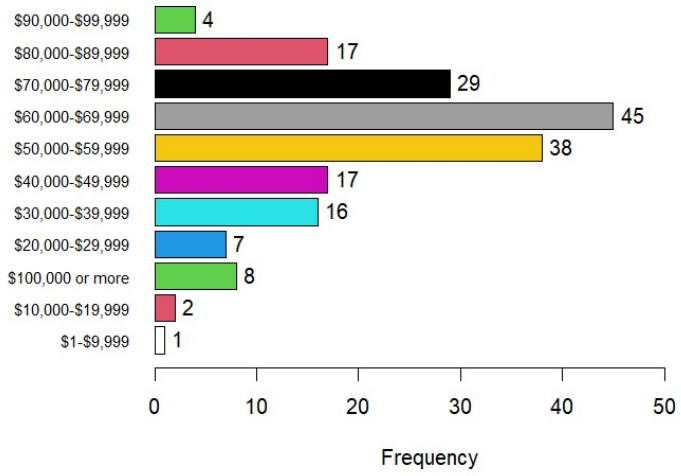


Figure 4.16 shows 158 of the 184 students expect to be making at or more than the median individual income in the US ($40,480, according to the Current Population Survey) in only their first year after graduation. It would seem that they are relatively confident in their earning potential after graduation. Though, again, there is no clear cutoff for whether one can

afford to run for state legislature, these relatively high-income estimations suggest that young adults will be at least financially secure enough to think about a run for office.

A major potentially complicating factor in this story is student debt. If the students expect reasonably high incomes, but also expect a great deal of debt, their financial situation may not allow them to run for office. This is a particular concern for young adults that may not affect older adults in the same way because they either attended college when it was cheaper or have had time to make substantial progress on paying off their student loan debts. Again, there are no clear-cut points here for "little debt" or "high debt", but the data is instructive. Figure 4.17 displays how much debt the young adults expect to have by the end of their current education program.

Figure 4.17
Expected Student Loan Debt

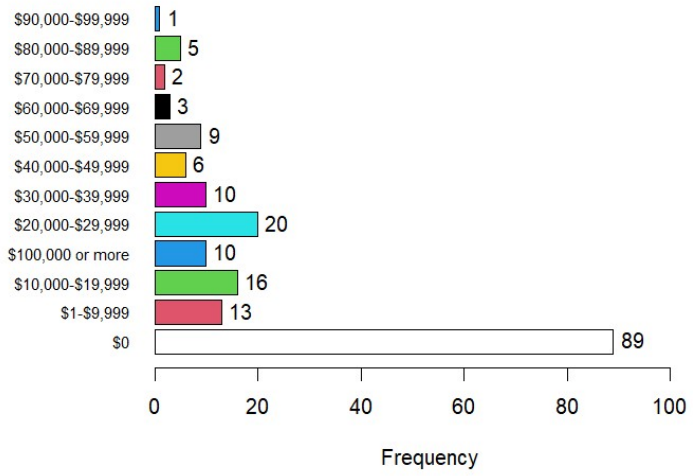


Figure 4.17 shows that nearly half of respondents expect to have no student loan debt that would keep them back from running for office. Another 16% foresaw having less than $20,000 dollars in debt to pay off. These numbers are generally not daunting, especially given the expected income distributions.

Does this data support the resources theory? It depends a great deal on one's interpretation of how wealthy someone must be to run for office. However, overall, these young adults expect to be making more money than the average American and holding not overwhelming amounts of debt, again compared to the average American. In short, there is little reason to believe that they are LESS able to run for office than a 35 or 45 year old without their advanced training.

Rational vs. Sociological

Is the belief that young adults cannot win elections to serve in state legislatures a knee-jerk reaction or a well-considered opinion? Though many scholars argue that most political beliefs are based on little evidence (Converse et al 1965), the population that this research focuses on could be different. The population of interest is politically ambitious young people, not young people in general. And the young adults in the survey sample are at least somewhat educated and interested in policy or politics, given their enrollment in public policy programs. In fact, more than 60% of HQYA survey respondents said they follow national news 'closely' or 'very closely'. The survey respondents who were recruited for a follow-up interview were those who specifically said that they had thought about running for office. In short, this is likely the best-case scenario for finding young adults who had approached the prospect of running for office from a rational choice perspective.

One question set from the HQYA survey can provide some clarity on this distinction. This question asked survey respondents what, if any, steps they had taken to investigate running

for office. Recall that at least 193 survey respondents had some opinion on whether being young was a disadvantage in running for office. However, only seven reported that they had discussed running for office with a community leader. Only six said they had investigated how to get on a ballot and only two had discussed running for office with party leaders. Overall, only twelve survey respondents out of 200 in a highly specific sample reported having taken any steps in investigating running for office other than speaking to family and friends. Though respondents may be of the opinion that being young is a disadvantage in running for office, they did not come to that conclusion through rational calculation.

Interview respondents, however, did not offer well-considered and well-sourced reasons for their beliefs. The general impression can be summarized by an answer given by Abigail, an undergraduate survey respondent in public policy. Unprompted, after being asked whether she thought she could be elected (to which she said no), Abigail said, "I also wanna say that I kinda pulled that out of nowhere because I haven't had any conversations with other voters about what're you looking for in the state government." A proponent of the sociological theory could hardly ask for a better response. Nadine, a graduate student in public policy expressed similar sentiments, "This just might be a stereotype that I'm thinking of when I'm thinking of that line of work."

Interview respondents did hit on a consistent theme when discussing why they believed that they (or young adults like them) were not electable to office. A sample of these responses are below.

Fernando, a graduate student in public policy: *"A lot of people that we see in House and Senate are elderly, especially on the Democratic side..."*

Hannah, a graduate student in public policy: *"It's hard to picture myself in that position, whether that be because I don't see other folks my age or on my path doing the same, that could have something to do with it… I think the visibility of seeing other folks of age range running for office is a big thing. Especially on the national scale, many people, like what of all the current congress people, how many are under 40, under 30? Not a lot. So, I think just seeing that in politics day to day is just like oh, I'm not X age, why would I run cuz I think there's just such a bias in age right now."*

Matt, a graduate student in public policy: *"Most of our politicians are not young adults, so that's, if, when we see y'know, most of them are older people who have who are like 70, 80 years old are making up a substantial portion of a lot of elected representatives, we say okay well crap maybe we gotta wait that long or have at least a comparable level of work experience or life experience to get elected, because that's the type of people that we DO see get elected"*

Nadine, a graduate student in public policy: *"I haven't seen any other South Asian women so that is definitely another factor."*

Several of the interview respondents seem to attribute their belief that young people are at a disadvantage to the fact that they see so few young adults being elected. This, of course, touches on a deep literature surrounding representation (see, e.g. Pennock 1968, Banducci et al. 2004). But more importantly for the purposes of this research, it gives us insight into how much young adults have researched their beliefs. An ardent defender of the rational choice theory could look at these statements and say that they are evidence-based assessments of the likelihood of being elected. A proponent of the sociological theory might say that these statements by

survey respondents are not based on evidence, or at least that they do not appear to be the kind of in-depth evidence that one might expect from the rational choice theory.

The second wave of the HQYA survey can provide additional evidence on this question. Seventy-one respondents from the second wave answered a series of questions asking them to estimate the percentage of state legislators in their state who fit certain demographics. What percentage of state legislators are under 30, over 70, unemployed, retired, etc. The true percentage of state legislators over 70, based on the Legislators Dataset introduced in Chapter 3 is a little under 11% (10.71%). Only 11 of the 71 (15.5%) respondents to this series of questions correctly guessed the percentage when offered the range of "0-20%." Almost two-in-ten respondents (18.3%) believed the number to be between 61% and 80%! Clearly, these beliefs are not based on a great deal of actual data or investigation. Of course, the rational choice theory does not require that the beliefs of the young adults be correct, because it argues that they make rational decisions based on perceived information. But without much evidence that young adults ARE researching or at least heavily considering these options, it is difficult to write off the sociological theory as a stronger explanation than the rational choice theory.

An interesting twist to this theory is that young adults really might not be as welcomed in state legislative seats as one might think. In the elite interviews, many expressed that the parties were happy to have young adults run for state legislature, but they seemed to believe that they were not taken seriously once they reached the state house. In fact, several of the legislators I spoke with expressed some level of feeling used by the party to win the seat – only to be largely ignored once they won. One particularly candid state legislator said:

> *"You've got a lot of older folks who say they want to help young people, but then when the rubber hits the road, that's really just lip service and in fact what they really want is to maintain their power and control over the situation. And so, they want to be able to use young people because they see them as being malleable and something they can shape, but they don't really have any intention of letting go of their own power and influence."*

Others expressed similar sentiments, that "there is certainly an old guard that are skeptical... navigating that is probably more challenging than navigating the running part" and "I know [young adults] have a hard time when they get to the legislature…that has to do with being in a room with a bunch of old, white, men."

If young people are picking up on this perceived aversion to allowing them to actually make change, then it may be evidence for the Rational Choice Theory rather than the Sociological Theory. Young adults seem to have barriers once they enter the legislature – if this is true, it would make the job less attractive. Whether young adults perceive such barriers is an open question.

Conclusion

This chapter paints a picture of ambitious young adults that are respectful of the job of a state legislator, confident in their current state legislators, and pessimistic of their own ability to get the job. Of course, no single piece of evidence in this chapter is dispositive of supporting the sociological theory. The silhouette of an answer to the second question presented in the first chapter, "is a choice being made," however, has begun to take shape.

A reader can surmise, after the evidence presented in this chapter, that young adults are not confident in their ability to do the job of a state legislator – despite the fact that many of them possess more than enough education and many of the traits that they themselves deem important to do the job well. A reader can also conclude that young adults are skeptical of their ability to win an election to become a state legislator and that at least part of this skepticism is a result of their age or lack of experience.

The biggest question that a reader might come away from this chapter with is whether they should take this evidence as support for the rational choice or sociological theories. Of course, no one study should be the basis of a final answer to such a question. However, the last section of this chapter should lead the reader directly to that crossroads. Certainly, the young adults interviewed were intelligent and politically savvy, and they made many comments which displayed that they knew the vocabulary to discuss electoral outcomes. However, not a single one said that they had ever sat down and decided whether they were electable or not after weighing all the evidence. If they are engaging in a rational choice process, this process is, to a large extent, ad-hoc and vague. The more one sees these processes as informal, the closer one gets to conclusions supported by the Sociological Theory as opposed to those that would be in line with the Rational Choice one.

So, is a choice being made? This question will be revisited shortly in the conclusion, but considering only the evidence from this chapter, it seems likely that these young adults are not making a choice not to run for office. When asked to actually consider if they are qualified on a survey, of course they give an answer. But to assume that the act of giving that answer is the same as having considered their qualifications prior to being asked would be a fundamental

attribution error. So, while the survey evidence gives us answers about their gut feelings, it is likely that they have never asked their gut those questions before.

Instead, relying mostly on the interview evidence, it seems clear that these young adults were considering the questions asked of them for the first time. They were not relaying information or beliefs that they had stored in the back of their minds, they were processing and considering new hypothetical scenarios. This should suggest that no choice has been made to not run for office.

Two final quotations from the interviews may push a skeptical reader towards the Sociological Theory:

Jamie, graduate student: *"I feel like a lot of people who are ambitious don't run because they wouldn't deem themselves electable."*

Mary, graduate student: "*It might be more of a self-select out of the process at the initial stage."*

These are strong clues towards the Sociological Theory and suggest that young adults may themselves be the suspects we have been searching for. Still, any good investigator would review all the available evidence before pointing a finger. The next chapter does just that.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Case Revisited

The mystery presented in Chapter 1 was built on two clear facts. First, there are young adults who wish to be in elected office. This fact has been established through existing research (Lawless and Fox 2012). Second, very few young adults appear in the halls of our elected offices. This fact is easily observed in nearly every elected body. These two facts raise the question of what happens to these young adults in between the desire to sit in a chamber of a state legislature and the actual sitting in the chair. Where are the missing young adult legislators?

Two fundamental answers were suggested to this question. The first is that there was a choice made, by someone, somewhere, that keeps young adults out of elected office. The choice could be voters who explicitly believe that a state legislator should have more experience. It could be donors or party leaders who overlook young adults. It could be the young adults themselves, deciding that the opportunity is not good enough, but someone made a choice. The second possibility is that nobody made a choice. That young adults simply stick with the default because they don't realize the choice in front of them. That young adults are on the sidelines simply because it has not occurred to them that there is nothing between them and the field.

Four theories sought to find a cause by applying the first answer and the final theory sought to answer the second. It should be clear to the reader that we did not find a smoking gun in favor of any of the theories. However, some of the theories are stronger than others. Using both qualitative and quantitative empirical evidence, we can point to one or more culprits. The

tests of each theory are spread throughout the dissertation, so for each theory, I present a table of the tests and how the theory fared.

The Theories

The Psychological Theory

The Psychological Theory was one suspect that received almost no investigation because previous researchers had already done extensive work on it. Lawless (2015), Shames (2017) and Lawless and Fox (2015) paint a compelling picture about the Psychological Theory. They posit that young people are simply uninterested in pursuing elected office. The 'missing' young adult legislators we were searching for were not actually missing, they simply didn't exist.

The evidence they presented, however, was missing a crucial piece of context: that there were more than enough young adults with political ambitions to fill the halls of every state legislature in the country, yet very few could be found. The youngest students that Lawless and Fox interviewed in 2012 would have been turning 19 in time for the 2018 midterms found in the Candidates and Legislators datasets. Lawless interviewed 4,200 such students and 11% (462) said they wanted to pursue elected office. Only 113 young adults in the entire country ran for state legislature in 2018. That's less than $1/4^{th}$ of Lawless and Fox's sample, let alone the entire population of politically ambitious young adults across the country. Where had they gone?

Thus, even if there is some truth to the Psychological Theory that young adults, either in the current cohort or as a lifecycle effect, are uninterested in running for office, there are still missing legislators to be explained.

The Rational Choice Theory

The Rational Choice Theory is perhaps the most developed theory in previous literature. It makes very clear predictions about a huge number of variables and their effect on the dependent variable of share of young adult legislators. The most basic explanation of the theory is that young adults may look at the path to elected office and decide that, for reasons that have to do with their youth, the attempt simply isn't worth the cost. This weighing of costs and benefits is the key distinguishing feature of rational choice theory.

Table 5.1 displays all the tests that rational choice theory underwent in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Table 5.1: Rational Choice Theory Tests

CLUE	**RESULT**	**REFERENCE**
Age of Candidacy	No Support	Figure 2.1
Chamber	No Support	Figure 2.2
Single Member District	No Support	Figure 2.3
Term Limits	No Support	Figure 2.4
Cost of Campaigning	Support	Figure 2.6
Leg. Professionalism	No Support	Figure 2.9
Ballot Access	Support	Figure 2.12
Young Electorate	No Support	Figure 3.8
Recruitment Hypothesis	Mixed Support	What About Parties?, Ch. 3
Primary Win Rates	Support	Conclusion, Ch. 3
Qualifications	No Support	Figure 4.12
Interview Responses	No Support	Rational vs. Socio., Ch. 4

As can be seen from Table 5.1, Rational Choice Theory does not well explain most of the clues found throughout the substantive chapters. The best evidence for the Rational Choice Theory is that young adults don't win very often because they often find themselves in difficult situations, which would imply that most young adults are choosing not to run for office because the opportunities that they are presented with are generally poor. However, Rational Choice does not have a clear explanation for why the opportunities for young adults are poor – except for the idea that voters or parties may only present those opportunities to the young adults. At that point, Rational Choice Theory starts to sound a bit more like the Political Theory than an independent explanation for a lack of young adult legislators.

The other support for the Rational Choice Theory can also be better explained by other theories. Resources Theory seems to have the strongest claim to the "Cost of Campaigning" clue, while the Political Theory is the main theory tested by the Recruitment Hypothesis.

To be fair to the Rational Choice Theory, many of the results that are listed in Table 5.1 as "No Support" are null findings, rather than observed relationships that cannot be explained by Rational Choice. An absence of evidence is not, in itself, evidence of absence. But in the search for the missing young adult legislators, Rational Choice seems a poor suspect.

The Resources Theory

What of Rational Choice's near cousin the Resources Theory? Young adults may be attempting to get to elected offices, but simply find themselves unable to pay the exorbitant prices. Of course, a true explication of this theory requires the identification of which particular resources young adults lack – and several different resources were investigated.

Table 5.2 displays the tests that may have something to say about the Resources Theory and how the theory fared in those tests.

Table 5.2: Resources Theory Test		
CLUE	**RESULT**	**REFERENCE**
Extant Literature	Mixed Support	Resources Theory, Ch. 1
Upper vs. Lower Chamber	No Support	Figure 2.2
Single Member Districts	No Support	Figure 2.3
Cost of Campaigning	Support	Figure 2.6
Leg. Professionalism	Support	Figure 2.9
Competition	No Support	Figure 2.10
Ballot Access	Support	Figure 2.12
HQYA Survey Evidence	Mixed Support	Figures 4.18 and 4.19

The Resources Theories strongest support comes from the fact that, as the cost of winning a seat goes up, the number of young adults who occupy or even vie for that seat goes down. This is exactly what the most basic form of the Resources Theory would project – that young adults simply can't afford to be elected officials. If this is true, it is normatively disturbing. The idea that an entire group of legally and qualitatively eligible citizens cannot become a state legislator simply because of cost would indicate a serious problem in the functioning of American democracy.

The only evidence to temper this concern comes from the HQYA Survey. These highly qualified young adults predicted that they would have enough money to be comfortably in the upper middle class, and thus likely not far from being able to afford a run for office. Still, however, more than half of them said they were not wealthy enough to get elected (see figure 4.15). These

results also come from the most qualified young adults – those with a public policy background in higher education. They are necessarily a small subset of young adults who might be politically ambitious. The idea that one would need a graduate degree from a Big 10 institution to be able to afford to run for office as a young adult is only slightly less problematic than one where even those young adults cannot afford it.

The Resources Theory seems to be a strong candidate. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which these barriers actually exist. Specifically, measures of how much wealth a person actually needs in order to be reasonably competitive for a state legislative seat would be needed. These obviously go beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the true value of the Resources Theory cannot be determined without such measures. The evidence we have is highly suggestive, however, that young adults lack of resources has caused at least some of the young adult legislators to disappear.

The Political Theory

At some point, when discussing the political decisions of political actors in the political arena, one must turn to the most obvious suspect: politics itself. If young adults are at a political disadvantage when attempting to reach the hallowed halls of state legislators, it would explain why they are less likely to make it there. Voters and party leaders are both gatekeepers to political office, so they are the most obvious political place to look for a culprit.

Table 5.3 summarizes the case for and against the Political Theory.

Table 5.3: Political Theory Tests		
CLUE	**RESULT**	**REFERENCE**

Single Member Districts	No Support	Figure 2.3
Leg. Professionalism	No Support	Figure 2.8
Party Competition	No Support	Figures 2.10 and 2.11
Ballot Access	Support	Figure 2.12
Primary Win Rates	Support	Figure 3.1
General Win Rates	Support	Figure 3.2
Critical Issues Poll	Support	Figures 3.3 and 3.4
Survey Experiment	No Support	A Simulated Election, Ch. 3
Multivariate Analysis	No Support	Table 3.1
Formal Representation	No Support	Figure 3.10
Recruitment Nonprofit	No Support	Private Recruitment, Ch. 3
Winnability Bias	Support	What Recruiters Say, Ch. 3
Noticeability Bias	Support	What Recruiters Say, Ch. 3

The strongest support for the Political Theory comes from looking at the win rates in actual elections that young adults enter. A young adult is less likely to win a race that has young adults in it than an older adult is to win a race that has an older adult in it. From the primary level to the general election level, there is simply no debating the fact that young adults simply don't win. This could, in part, be because the races that young adults run in are more difficult – but this simply moves the question back a step to why young adults are pushed into difficult races when older adults don't necessarily have to take on those challenges.

In addition, there is some qualitative evidence that young adults are less likely to be recruited by party leaders than other adults. There is evidence from interviews of both a

winnability bias and a noticeability bias against young adults – they are perceived as less likely to win, when they are perceived at all.

Both of these explanations are plausible, but each suffers from one key fact that makes counting them as the main culprit difficult. For the election win rates, the problem is the absolute low number of young adult candidates – less than 10% of races have a young adult candidate, and many of those are primary races for long-shot third party bids that very few people participate in. Thus, the vast majority of American voters cannot gate keep against young adults because the young adults never reach their gate.

For the party leaders explanation, it once again does not describe why ambitious young adults are not searching out opportunities to run. To be sure, being asked to run or recruited by a party leader may move someone from the "don't run" column into the "run" column. But the recruitment cannot explain why they were in the "don't run" column to begin with. In order to believe that this is the major explanation for the lack of young adult candidates, one has to essentially accept aspects of the Psychological Theory but applied to all adults. The idea would be that even politically ambitious adults are always in the "don't run" column until asked to run. Then, the differential of recruitment would explain why so few young adults end up in state legislatures.

One must also grapple with the data from the non-profit candidate training organizations, as well as the stories of young adult candidates who have run that say that "party leaders" were not the ones who encouraged them to run.

That is not to say that young adults are not at a disadvantage when it comes to convincing party leaders and voters to support them. There is plenty of evidence for and against the theory – and it warrants more investigation. For now, though, it seems that the Political Theory explains

some additional hurdles and may explain why some young adult legislators are missing, but it is likely not the main culprit.

The Sociological Theory

We come, finally, to the theory that has motivated this research: what if young adults simply don't think about running for office now because they assume that it's not for them? What I have called the Sociological Theory predicts that young adults, while ambitious for office, are not confident enough to actually pursue it as young adults. It is the theory perhaps best suited to the argument that young adults are merely delaying their run for office until they are no longer young adults, rather than ignoring their ambitions altogether. Rather than a rational investigation of their chances predicted by the Rational Choice Theory, however, these young adults are simply operating under and assumption that they are either unqualified or unelectable. Table 5.4 lays out the case of the Sociological Theory.

Table 5.4: Sociological Theory Tests

CLUE	**RESULT**	**REFERENCE**
Leg. Professionalism	No Support	Figure 2.9
Believe Personally Qualified	Support	Figures 4.10, 4.11, 4.12
Believe Disadvantaged	Support	Figure 4.14
Interview Evidence	Support	Rational vs. Socio., Ch. 4

Here, finally, we have nearly unambiguous evidence for a theory. Aside from a null finding about Legislative Professionalism, there is basically no evidence presented throughout the dissertation that would cast doubt on the Sociological Theory, and a great deal of evidence in favor. Young adults who are ambitious for office and highly qualified, through both survey and

interview evidence, explicitly said that they just did not think of themselves as ready to be elected officials. But more than that, they did not provide any evidence of having thought of themselves at all, and none pointed to any evidence other than vague references to those who are already in office being older than them.

It is worth remembering that the young adults are legally qualified, objectively highly educated in the area of public policy, and meet their own subjective requirements for a state legislator. And yet, when asked if they were qualified for a state legislative seat, a plurality said "somewhat" and more said they were absolutely not qualified than said that they were. How many more would say that they were unqualified to be a member of the U.S. House or Senate? This feeling of inadequacy is the major impediment that must be approached.

Conclusion

Summing Up the Data

I argue that the evidence points to the Sociological Theory as the main theory through which we should view the missing young adult legislators. Other theories may be hurdles (more on them in a minute) but my analysis of the competing theories and my own show that the sociological theory is the cleanest and clearest explanation of the phenomenon. Young adults, when asked, are surprised to find that they do not have good reasons for not running for state legislature. They couch this surprise in discussions of not being qualified or not having enough experience. But they do not hold older Americans or even their similarly aged peers to the same standard. This discrepancy in standards is not well reasoned and considered – it is simply that, while these young adults can imagine some young adult running for office, they never thought to put themselves in that place.

Young adults do not ask the question "could I be a state legislator?" They do not investigate what is necessary or take stock of the opportunities that exist. They do not see themselves as someone who has those opportunities. Even if the opportunity is an objectively good one, young adults see it as an opportunity for someone like them without ever actually imagining themselves taking advantage. It is not that they are making a choice to remain out of the legislature. It is that they are unaware that a choice could be made. And so, they sit in their default position – and no one 'defaults' into running for state legislature, even if they are interested 'someday'.

Of course, the problem of remaining in default may not be restricted only to young adults. In fact, some of the same factors can be surmised from Lawless and Fox's various research studies (Fox and Lawless 2011, Lawless and Fox 2015, 2012). Most older adults, even if they may want to be an elected official, don't run either, simply failing to make the choice each election cycle. It is still significant, however, that young adults seem especially prone to the assumption that they are not qualified specifically because of their age. Even if the assumption that they are not qualified for office never changes, it matters that at this moment the cause of that belief is because of age.

The sociological theory's main contribution that can be carried out into other questions is that it gives an explicit voice to the 'default position," the idea that maybe no one is making a choice. What physicists would call the equilibrium. If the research presented here teaches us anything, it is that we should always think about the default position. Candidate emergence and political ambition literature often focus on the "yes/no" question of running for office, but sometimes forget that not everyone asks that question in the first place. We should not assume

that people made choices and landed on no – we should consider whether they made choices at all.

This research suggests that there is a large portion of the U.S. population that is normatively important that operates under an unspoken and unthought-of assumption that they are not good enough to lead. That this belief is tied, in some way, to a demographic characteristic. This alone should concern political actors and political scientists alike.

In addition, the research suggests that the Resources Theory and Political Theory are barriers to young adult representation as well. The reason to prefer the Sociological Theory to these other suspects that have evidence supporting them is a sequencing question. Young adults may not have the resources to compete for office and the voters may not be willing to support them – but most young adults will never find this out. If young adults never begin to even do the rational calculus for whether or not they should run, then they will never discover how much money they need to raise or how much voters seem to dislike the idea of a younger candidate.

Of course, support for the Resources Theory does suggest a serious normative problem for America's electoral institutions. It is too expensive to run for office in a way that counts out many people – young adults being just one subset that are barred from office not by voters or law, but by the almighty dollar. Debates about how to decrease the cost of American elections are deep and contentious and I will not wade into them here. Nearly no one is happy that American elections are seemingly so biased towards the wealthy, but how to fix it is another question.

Much of the literature surrounding candidate emergence likes to use metaphors of a literal "race" for state legislatures – the two most impactful studies in the literature about young adults are Lawless' "Running from Office" and Shame's "Out of the Running". I argue,

however, that young adults are not out of the race – they are simply still in the starting blocks in the "Get Set" position. Even highly qualified young adults do not believe that they are ready to start the race. They need more experience, more connections, more understanding of the issues, more time to get set to run!

Implications

The motivation for this research began with a normative concern – the lack of representation of young adults is potentially a problem for the legitimacy of the democratic institutions of American government. Any time institutional or policy choices are disproportionately affecting a particular class of citizens, there must be very good reason for those institutions to continue to exist in order for them to be legitimate. Do these normative concerns apply to the culprits we have identified?

The Sociological Theory is not the result of policy choices. Rather, it operates based on explicitly non-formal restrictions on who runs for office. Are there powerful people who communicate these informal restrictions? Of course. Are there policies (such as age of candidacy laws) that may reinforce these beliefs? Probably. But for the most part, the solution to the problem posed by the Sociological Theory (if, indeed, it is a problem), is to simply get young adults to realize that office is an option for them.

How can we do it? There are literally hundreds of psychological and sociological studies about changing attitudes, intentions, and behavior (Joyal-Desmararis 2022). A huge portion of the sub-field of political behavior is dedicated to answering the same questions about political beliefs. It is, of course, beyond the scope of this or any dissertation to summarize them all. Still, the findings of this research present some interesting avenues for addressing this problem. I focus on three:

1. Lower the age of candidacy. The age of candidacy does not appear to be a binding floor. Young adults wait until they are older to run regardless of what the age of candidacy is set at. So, it would likely make little legal difference whether the age of candidacy is 25 or 21. However, it could send a message to young adults in the state that their ideas are welcomed. The four teenagers from Kansas who inspired this research decided to run because a change in the age of candidacy law for the governor of Kansas made the issue salient to them. A change in the opposite direction could change the salience as well.
2. Utilize Recruitment. The evidence from the elite-level interviews suggests a bias against young adults. Though I argue that this bias is not the cause of the lack of young adult representation, reversing it could help alleviate the problem. If party leaders began to ask more young adult candidates to run, it could overcome the sociological bias against running. This avenue seems to work when the affected group of potential candidates is women (Fox and Lawless 2010). There is no real reason to suggest it could not work for young adults as well. Perhaps, rather than looking for who would be on the committee to get new lights for the baseball field, political leaders should also look for who is on the prom planning committee and University Student Senate.
3. A Snowball Effect. Several of the young adults interviewed mentioned not seeing themselves represented as a reason they did not believe that they were qualified to be in office. Though there are already some examples of young adults achieving major success in politics, increasing that number just a little bit may snowball to increasing

the number a lot. Increasing the visibility of those young adults could have a similar effect.

Avenues for Future Research

As was noted in Chapter 1, a good deal of the research in this dissertation is explicitly exploratory. The case here had been essentially unstudied, with a few notable exceptions that focused exclusively on the Psychological Theory (Lawless and Fox 2015, Shames 2017). To that end, the first avenue for future research is for more scholars to approach this puzzle and continue to test the theories that have been suggested. It is my hope that the Legislators and Candidate Datasets make such investigations and investments possible.

Future research should also extend the questions raised by each of the theories. Are there resources other than money that young adults lack? Or are there resources that they can substitute in for cash, like connections to powerful networks through parents or mentors? Future research in this area would probably necessitate a case study approach, studying the legislative strategies of those young adults who do manage to succeed – what do they have in common that other young adults may not?

The Political Theory also deserves much more attention. Though there is research emerging about age, it often focuses on the upper end of the spectrum rather than the lower end. It also often treats age as a continuous variable (which, to be fair, it is!). This treatment makes it difficult to investigate big differences in age because it treats 25 years old and 30 years old as the same difference as between 55 years old and 60 years old, which could obscure major cut points for voters. This research and other emerging research suggest that age is a relevant consideration

at both the higher and lower ends of the spectrum – the size and complexity of these relationships should be investigated.

A fourth potential avenue for research deals with age of candidacy laws. This research suggests that they do not have an impact on the age of those who are in office. Why, then, are they necessary? Where do these laws come from? Why is a 29 year old in Tennessee old enough to run for U.S. House, but not the State Senate? Are there hidden effects of these laws?

The most fruitful potential avenue of future research, however, comes from the findings surrounding the Sociological Theory. Sociological constraints have origins and effects. This research suggested that there is a sociological constraint about the age of running for office, specifically state legislatures. Surely, that has effects on how ambitious young adults approach their early careers. It also likely has an effect on their later careers, and the representation of young adults across the spectrum. Future research should search for these other effects. It should also search for the origins of this constraint. What are its boundaries? I chose 30 as a relatively arbitrary cut-off date for being young, but there is no reason to believe it is the magical age at which these doubts fall away. Are young adult women or young adult people of color more or less susceptible to these doubts? Has the constraint changed over time?

There is also practical research to be done. Can we work against the sociological bias built into young people's heads? What are the most effective avenues for doing so? The implications section offers a few ideas, but these ideas have not been systematically studied. Surely there are others, and surely the most effective strategies will change over time. Sociology does not stay stagnant, so this avenue is a never-ending source of continued study. If it matters whether young adults are in office (as I contend that it does) it should matter to political scientists who care about the health of democracy just how we might do it.

These areas for research are ripe for investigation. Scholars would be well served to take up these additional cases because they can tell us a great deal about a large swath of potential representatives, which matters from both a normative and empirical perspective. The young adults who do become candidates show us that there are young adults missing. This should be of interest to scholars. By searching for these legislators, we may learn a bit more about what it means to be a democracy and how we can embrace another aspect of our diversity. Or, as Tyler Ruzich put it while running for Governor of Kansas:

> "We don't have a voice at the table when policies are being made, I can be a spokesperson for the idea that young people need to be involved (Karson 2018)."

Appendix A

HQYA Survey

Practice Question: Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements [Strongly Agree, Agree, neither agree or disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree]:

- In general, college sports are more enjoyable to watch than professional sports.
- Professional athletes are paid too much money.
- College athletes should be paid.

Are you a U.S. Citizen?

- Yes, No

What is your age?

- Answer box

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements [Strongly Agree, Agree, neither agree or disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree] (Rotated):

- In general, people who run for the state legislature are qualified to be state legislators.
- Being a state legislator is a difficult job that requires a good deal of skill.
- Being a state legislator is a demanding job that requires a great deal of personal sacrifice.
- State legislators are generally very smart and accomplished people.
- State legislators have a great deal of policy expertise.
- Being a state legislator requires special skills or training.
- State legislators were generally well-connected before running for office.

How important would you consider each of the following traits to prepare someone to be a state legislator [Very important, Important, Neutral, Unimportant, Very Unimportant] (Rotated)?

- Ambitious
- Good at being in charge.
- Willing to take risks.
- Concerned about what others think of them.
- A good public speaker
- Hate to lose at anything.
- Ethical/moral
- Responsive to other people's needs
- Confident
- Thick-skinned

Please assess how important you think it is that candidates for public office have the following traits [Very important, Important, Neutral, Unimportant, Very Unimportant] (Rotated)?

- Worked in business.
- Expertise on policy issues

- A law degree
- Campaign experience
- Public speaking experience
- Is similar to the people they represent.

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements [Strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, strongly disagree]:

a. Someone like me could never get elected to state legislature.
b. Someone like me would not be qualified to be a state legislator.
c. Someone like me could do a good job as a state legislator if given the chance.

In thinking about someone like yourself, which of the following (if any) obstacles do you believe they would face if they ran for the state legislature? (check all that apply) (Rotated)

d. People like me do not have enough experience to be a successful state legislator.
e. People like me are not old enough to be a successful state legislator.
f. People like me are the wrong gender to be a successful state legislator.
g. People like me are the wrong race to be a successful state legislator.
h. People like me are not wealthy enough to be a successful state legislator.
i. People like me have politics that are too far out of the mainstream to be a successful state legislator.
j. People like me are not well-connected enough to be a successful state legislator.

Do you think people in your state would be ready to vote for a state legislator who is [Yes/No]: (Rotated)

k. Is under 30
l. Is over 70.
m. Is unemployed.
n. Is retired.
o. Does not have a college degree.
p. Has no professional work experience
q. Is a college student?
r. Is gay.
s. Is an atheist.
t. Is a Muslim
u. Is an immigrant.

What percentage of state legislators in your state do you think [None, between 0% and 20%, between 20% and 40%, between 40% and 60%, between 60% and 80%, between 80% and 100%, 100%]

v. Are under 30
w. Are over 70.
x. Are otherwise unemployed.
y. Are retired.
z. Do not have a college degree.

aa. Do not have professional work experience.
bb. Are college students?
cc. Are gay.
dd. Are atheists.
ee. Are Muslim
ff. Are immigrants.

Have you ever run for an unofficial office, such as an office in student government or the president of an extracurricular organization?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever run for elected public office (not including student government)?

- Yes
- No

Has anyone ever suggested or encouraged you to run for elective public office?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever thought of running for office?

- Yes, I have seriously considered it.
- Yes, it has crossed my mind.
- No, I have not thought about it.

[If 13 = Yes] How often do you think about running for office?

- It is always in the back of my mind.
- At least once a year
- Sporadically, over the years
- It has been many years since I last thought about it.

[If 13 = Yes] Have you ever taken any of the following steps towards running for office? (Check all that apply)

- Discussed running with party leaders.
- Discussed running with friends and family.
- Discussed running with community leaders.
- Solicited or discussed financial contributions with potential supporters.
- Investigated how to place your name on the ballot.

[If 13 = Yes] When you think about running for office, are you thinking about running.

- In the next 5 years
- In the next 5-10 years
- In the next 10-15 years
- In the next 15-20 years
- 20+ years from now
- No particular time

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements [Strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree] (Rotate)

- What I do now affects whether I can be successful running for office in the future
- I am careful what I put on social media because I know it might affect my future career.
- I have considered a future political career when making major life decisions (where to attend college, what to major in, etc.)
- I may not want to run for office now, but I want to protect the option of running for office in the future.
- I would run for office in the next few years if I felt I would win.
- I would run for office in the next few years if I could afford to do so.
- Running for office would interfere with other goals like starting a family.

Overall, how qualified do you feel you are to run for public office.

- Very qualified
- Qualified
- Somewhat qualified
- Not at all qualified

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- Yes
- No

Please check one or more boxes below to indicate what race(s) you consider yourself to be:

- White
- Black
- American Indian
- Asian
- Hispanic or Latino
- Other

Are you a graduate or undergraduate student?

- Graduate
- Undergraduate
- Neither

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to answer.

Which of these categories best describes the highest education level your father received and got credit for? (If you were raised by a stepfather or some other male relative, please answer for that person.)

- 8th grade or less

- Some high school
- High school graduate
- Some college (not including technical school)
- College degree
- Some graduate training
- Postgraduate or professional degree
- No father/father-figure, or don't know.

Which of these categories best describes the highest education level your mother received and got credit for? (If you were raised by a stepmother or some other female relative, please answer for that person.)

- 8th grade or less
- Some high school
- High school graduate
- Some college (not including technical school)
- College degree
- Some graduate training
- Postgraduate or professional degree
- No father/father-figure, or don't know.

Which state do you consider your "home" state?

- [Drop List of 50 States]
- None of the above

Which of these describes your personal income last year?

- $0
- $1 – $9,999
- $10,000 – $19,999
- $20,000 – $29,999
- $30,000 – $39,999
- $40,000 – $49,999
- $50,000 – $59,999
- $60,000 – $69,999
- $70,000 – $79,999
- $80,000 - $89,999
- $90,000 – $99,999
- $100,000 or more

About what annual income do you expect to earn at your first job after graduation?

- $0
- $1 – $9,999
- $10,000 – $19,999
- $20,000 – $29,999
- $30,000 – $39,999
- $40,000 – $49,999

- $50,000 – $59,999
- $60,000 – $69,999
- $70,000 – $79,999
- $80,000 - $89,999
- $90,000 – $99,999
- $100,000 or more

About how much student loan debt do you anticipate having when you graduate from your current program?

- $0
- $1 – $9,999
- $10,000 – $19,999
- $20,000 – $29,999
- $30,000 – $39,999
- $40,000 – $49,999
- $50,000 – $59,999
- $60,000 – $69,999
- $70,000 – $79,999
- $80,000 - $89,999
- $90,000 – $99,999
- $100,000 or more

10 years from now, which aspect of your life do you hope would have progressed the most? (Rotated)

- Romantic Relationships
- Family Relationships
- Career
- Friendships and social situation
- Financial Situation

How well, if at all, does each of the following terms describe you [Very well, well, poorly, very poorly]? (Rotated)

a. Ambitious
b. Good at being in charge.
c. Willing to take risks.
d. Concerned about what others think of them.
e. A good public speaker
f. Hate to lose at anything.
g. Ethical/moral
h. Responsive to other people's needs
i. Confident
j. Thick-skinned

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or something else?

- Republican
- Democrat
- Independent
- Something else

[If Democrat or Republican] Would you call yourself a strong [Democrat] or not so strong [Democrat]?

- Strong [Democrat]
- Not so strong [Democrat]

[If Independent] Would you say you lean more toward the Democratic Party or the Republican Party?

- Democratic Party
- Republican Party

When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as more liberal or more conservative or neither?

- Liberal
- Conservative
- Neither

[If Liberal or Conservative] Would you call yourself very [liberal] or somewhat [liberal]?

- Very [liberal]
- Somewhat [liberal]

[If Neither] Do you think of yourself as closer to liberals, or conservatives, or neither of these?

Many people do not engage in many political or community activities. In which, if any, of the following activities have you engaged in the past two years? (check all that apply):

- Voted in an election.
- Wrote a letter to a newspaper.
- Joined or paid dues to a political interest group
- Contacted an elected official.
- Contributed money to a campaign.
- Volunteered for a political candidate.
- Volunteered on a community project, or joined community group to address a local issue.
- Attended a city council or school board meeting.
- Served on the board of a non-profit organization.

How closely do you follow national and local politics? (Not closely, somewhat closely, closely, very closely)

- National

- Local

Would you like to be contacted for a follow-up interview (and be entered in the raffle for a $100 Amazon Gift Card?) If so, please type your email below.

Appendix B

Survey Experiment Conditions

	Young	Old
White Man		
White Woman		

Black Man		
Black Woman		

Latino Man		
Latino Woman		

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