

Strategies for increasing young adult interest in serving on a town board

On average, Twitter is about 99% political arguments (not an accurate number -- just my personal experience). Occasionally, I find a cat video here and there -- but most often, my peers' discussions focus on healthcare, abortion, climate change, and just about everything else. We spend so many of our waking hours setting up protests, spreading awareness about critical issues, putting up posters all over our schools, and of course, debating hot political topics online. My generation is determined to make a difference in any way possible... Yet, my age group's voter and town board participation levels are the lowest of all -- why?

To answer this question, I set up a survey for my classmates at school, asking if they would be interested in joining a town board or committee. Nearly 70% of respondents were not aware that they are able to join town committees at a young age. Of those who were interested in joining (58%), many were not aware of the purpose/roles of town boards and committees or did not know how to join -- but were thrilled about making a positive impact in the community. This is an issue of awareness -- not interest. In order to improve youth participation in local government, it is vital to delegate certain town board officials to create awareness and build enthusiasm about town board programs (Collura and Zeldin). These delegates visit classes at schools and universities, youth groups, sports teams, school clubs, voluntary associations, and religious groups to build long-term relationships with young adults in the community and encourage them to join local town boards. By having a representative from each town board reach out and build relationships with young adults throughout Wisconsin, they can clarify the purpose, roles, and eligibility requirements of a town board member -- thus eliminating one of the primary barriers to town board participation. Furthermore, the survey I conducted showed that it is crucial for youth to develop positive relationships and associations with local government, as one of the main reasons for definitive *dis*interest in town board participation was fear that they would be mistreated or not taken seriously due to their age (25%). Having an older member of the leadership reach out to youth in

Wisconsin would send a welcoming message of acceptance -- despite age -- and increase interest in participation.

While building face-to-face relationships is important, it is also crucial to improve town board recruitment on social media. After all, teens and young adults spend approximately 3 hours on average on social media per day (Kemp), in particular, Snapchat, Tiktok, and Instagram (Suciu). Social media can be an incredibly powerful tool; unfortunately, most town boards don't use social media to their advantage. Take my city's Twitter (Middleton), for example, which has been inactive for 4 years. Social media is crucial to reaching as wide an audience as possible: since 60% of the global population uses social media, social media can reach those who are not enrolled in college, are not part of youth groups or religious organizations -- it can reach those we can't reach traditionally. Additionally, a 2018 OECD report explains that although many young adults have lost trust in formal government processes, they "are likely to be interested in open government strategies and initiatives and the benefits that they can offer", especially when it comes to issues such as education, social inclusivity, climate change, housing, and health. By regularly sharing the impactful initiatives and legislature created by town boards, town governments can shape a more positive outlook on formal government, making young adults feel that they can make a difference through formal government about the issues that appeal to them. Furthermore, social media can be used to garner indirect youth participation in town government by posting discussion threads about local matters (this can later lead to an interest in town board participation). Social media is a great place to garner interest in town boards in a variety of different ways, whether by simply posting about recent developments or starting discussions on more complex issues.

In the survey I conducted, one of the primary reasons for disinterest in town board participation was concern about the time commitment (38%). This is not surprising: today, young adults are often busy with college classes, extra jobs, scholarship applications, young children and family commitments, and so much more. However, there are still many ways to alleviate this concern and increase interest in town boards. For example, Sarah Wrightsman, a young adult who joined her town planning board as an alternate member, explains that she ultimately decided to join when she was allowed to skip meetings

during the summer, due to her commitments during that time. Using -- and advertising -- similar strategies to make town board meetings more accessible for younger members would significantly increase interest in town boards.

Although many young adults are interested in joining town boards and making a positive impact in their communities, it seems that the majority are not aware that they are able to take part in town government or avoid joining due to other factors such as concerns about age and time commitments. These issues can be resolved by connecting with students in classes, on social media, and by making accommodations for time commitments -- ultimately leading to improved interest and participation in Wisconsin town boards. With these strategies, youth can make a meaningful change through Wisconsin town boards, as well as the (significantly less formal) debates on Twitter.

Works Cited

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