

World-Herald editorial: Politics has a place for all ages

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Since the nation was founded, governing in America has been a job for people of all ages.

Of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, the average age was 44. The oldest, Benjamin Franklin, was 70 on July 4, 1776. The youngest was 26, and a dozen others were 35 or younger.

Eleven years later, at the Constitutional Convention, the average age of the delegates was 43. Franklin again was the oldest at 81, while the youngest was 26.

Whether young, middle-aged or more advanced in years, governing is a job for all.

Which made it a bit discouraging to read World-Herald staff writer Jordan Pascale's report this week on the graying of Omaha-area city councils and county boards and the difficulty in finding younger candidates.

While the average age of Omaha Public Schools board members is 37, and one-fourth of Nebraska's 49 state legislators are under 40, Pascale writes, "Overall, young adult participation in government may be shrinking."

A new study, he reported, "shows young people are less interested in participating in civic life as they become more dissatisfied with the political atmosphere and with government."

Certainly partisan dysfunction and cynicism are corrosive, but new blood can be a powerful antidote. For the same reason we're better served by electing officials with a variety of backgrounds and viewpoints, we're better served by electing officials of all ages, too.

In 2002, the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University launched a study of young elected leaders. That year, a total of 814 men and women 35 and younger served among all officials in Congress, statewide elected executive posts, state legislatures and municipal governments of cities with more than 30,000 residents. That was just about 4.8 percent of 17,000 elected officeholders.

Older folks have worried about the commitment of younger folks for generations, of course, and there's no cause for panic in these findings.

Still, there are things that can be done to encourage more younger Midlands residents to get involved in their communities and politics.

Voting is a good start. So is volunteering, either with a community organization, candidate or political party. Taking part in the political process and working to build a better community are rewarding activities and can offer a connection with other engaged people.

Those studying the issue and young Nebraska officeholders offer solid ideas. Marque Snow, 26, a member of the Omaha school board, sees a need for mentoring, for older elected officials to take younger people under their wing. Making sure young people know about opportunities to serve is important, as is encouragement. It can be difficult to recruit younger candidates for elected jobs that require considerable time when they're already juggling careers and families.

But younger people, themselves, need to step forward and get involved as well. The Rutgers project found that most young elected leaders are self-motivated to serve.

Energy mixed with experience, new ideas blended with hard-earned wisdom, all can strike a productive balance in making decisions.

After all, the guy who got this whole thing rolling by writing the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, was just 33 years old when he picked up that quill pen.

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