

Twenty-somethings take N.J. political offices by storm

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By

SOUTH ORANGE — Alex Torpey strolled through South Orange's street festival on a recent Saturday afternoon in a blue-and-white striped button-down shirt and baggy khakis. Looking more frat boy than politician, the 23-year-old village president chatted with strangers, bought food from a vendor and took in a few attractions.

This is Torpey at work.

In mid-May, he uprooted wisdom, conventional and otherwise, and beat an experienced incumbent in a non-partisan election to become South Orange village president — and the state's youngest sitting municipal chief executive.

He held that distinction for just a few weeks: On July 1, 22-year-old Jim Kern III was sworn in as mayor of Pohatcong, in Warren County.



Joe Proudman/The Star-Ledger

Alex Torpey, the 23-year-old mayor of South Orange. He was New Jersey's youngest sitting municipal chief executive for a few weeks until 22-year-old Jim Kern III was sworn in as mayor of Pohatcong.

That Torpey and Kern follow in the electoral footsteps of other 20-somethings throughout New Jersey in the last few years could be an indicator the electoral landscape is shifting, with voters placing less of a premium on experience and more on innovation.

"It's sort of a harbinger of things to come," said Elizabeth Matto, director of the Eagleton Institute's Youth Political Participation Program, which has tracked younger political up-and-comers at the local, state and national levels for nearly a decade.

Matto attributed the rise in participation to the so-called Millennial generation's commitment to community, and a propensity to get and stay involved, which itself could be tied to current socioeconomic factors: a poor economy, high unemployment, ballooning national debt and growing angst tied to war and terrorism.

"There is a generation that is facing and will face significant challenges," Matto said. "They have a stake in the political process, not in 10 years, not in 20 years, but now."

And then there's a demographic factor at work, too: The Millennials — generally thought to be between 18 and 29 — will comprise up to one-third of the electorate within four years, Matto said, suggesting the number of 20-something officeholders — at the local, state and even national levels — could climb significantly.

William "Hank" Lyon, 23, could be in that vanguard.

Pending the outcome of a legal challenge, Lyon beat a three-term incumbent in the May primaries to become nearly assured of becoming a Morris County freeholder in January.

Lyon, a fiscal conservative allied with the Tea Party movement, said he was driven to run for office out of a sense of responsibility to his own generation. The Montville resident, who graduated last year with honors from the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts with a double major in physics and economics, said debt, at every level of government, is the over arching issue that convinced him to seek office.

"It's not a matter of what I want to do, it's a matter of what we have to do," he said.

Torpey agreed, saying a younger generation of elected leaders could help bridge the ideological chasm between the parties. "We're on the cusp of a generation of leadership that I believe will be less partisan, and more independent," he said.

That reasoning appealed to village resident Thurman McKoy, 67.

"Basically, I liked the idea, to put it in a nutshell, that he's a young man with new eyes on the issues. I liked everything he brings to the table," said McKoy, who contributed \$1,000 to Torpey's campaign after meeting him. "I was always amazed ... Here was a young man, single, without wife and kids, who had nothing but time and energy to put into this position – at least for a while. I thought, 'what a perfect fit.'"

Although Torpey, who earns his living as a new-media consultant, acknowledged that some might see his youth as an obstacle, most are open-minded, he said. That majority will judge him on his accomplishments. They already have an important ally.

"I'm my harshest critic," Torpey said.

He admits he still has "a lot to learn," and has sought counsel from those who came before him: the village trustees, department heads and residents.

Kern, the new Pohatcong mayor, is a year out of Rutgers University, where he majored in political science. Since then, he has studied the art and nuance of politics from the town council's dais.

Kern said he initially found the transition from student to elected official a little daunting. But, after beating an incumbent to a council seat in 2010, he found the perfect mentor – the township's now-former mayor.

He learned his lessons well enough to decidedly beat a 47-year-old former township police sergeant in May's mayoral election, a contest that drew comparatively more voters to the polls than in previous elections.

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"The hardest thing is the respect factor," said Kern, who was elected in a non-partisan election. "You have people twice, triple, sometimes four times your age" to contend with as opponents, and to deliberate with as colleagues.

"You have to come across as professional, but you have to be humble as well," said Kern, who is keeping his day job at a local ShopRite. "It's a difficult line to walk."

And, said Michael Hughes, a 21-year-old East Brunswick councilman, being young can present arguably an even greater burden than just

Alex Torpey, the 23-year-old mayor of South Orange.

having to earn respect.

"You have to have foresight," said Hughes, a Republican. "The decisions you make now are going to have effects 10 to 15 years from now" — including on young officeholders' children, when they choose to have them.

"We are the ones raising our kids here and living here," he said.

Hughes was 21 when he was elected to council last year — and he is already a battle-tested elected official. A self-described moderate Republican, he had already served a full, three-year tenure on the township's school board.

Hughes' occupation when he joined the board? High school senior.

At 26, Ziad Andrew Shehady is already a veteran of electoral politics, such that he's also tasted defeat at the ballot box.

Elected to the Springfield Township Committee at 23, he helped turn the partisan tide in his Republican Party's favor and was then chosen mayor by his committee colleagues. Shehady, though, was turned out of office in November. Undaunted, he sought and, last month, garnered his party's nomination for another run at a committee seat this fall.

"I definitely have leadership experience," said Shehady, a first lieutenant in the National Guard. "I have been tried and challenged in trying times."

Shehady, a Republican, said age does not necessarily translate into an advantage on the political stage, either at the local or even national levels, and can be overstated. Sometimes, he said, political longevity can even become a barrier to effective leadership if it causes stubbornness and "resistance to change."

"If you become cynical, you become lazy and too accepting of the status quo," he said.

Which could be among the most important lessons Shehady and the other young guns might need to memorize: Matto, the Eagleton political scientist, said that holding elected office at a relatively young age typically portends a future in politics.

"That's the pipeline into the leadership," she said. "There's a good chance they're going to be there a while."

By: Richard Khavkine and Abram Brown/The Star-Ledger

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