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Too Young to Vote, but Asking for Yours

By LISA W. FODERARO SEPT. 28, 2017

By any measure, Tahseen Chowdhury is no ordinary 17-year-old. He is president of the student government at Stuyvesant High School, among New York City's most selective public schools, and leads the student advisory council for the borough of Manhattan. He even helped found two companies: an event photography business and a firm that teaches students computer programming and engineering.

It stands to reason that Mr. Chowdhury, a senior, would cast the widest possible net when applying to college. But he is confining his search to New York — and not because he needs to stay close to family in East Elmhurst, Queens.

Rather, Mr. Chowdhury, a Democrat, is mounting a campaign for the State Senate, and wants to be within striking distance of the State Capitol in Albany.

With the State Legislature in session from January to June, Mr. Chowdhury envisions an unusual schedule of alternating semesters, one that would spread his college career over eight years. “If I win, I would take the spring semesters off to be in Albany and then go to college in the fall,” he said. “I will have to choose a college that will work with that schedule.”

Mr. Chowdhury's campaign is hardly unique. Across the New York region, and indeed the country, young people are turning their attention to politics, motivated in part by the election of President Trump. From mayoral races to state legislative campaigns, teenagers and others who are too young to vote are canvassing neighborhoods and learning the intricacies of electoral politics. Some are running for office themselves.

The trend is heartening to academics and observers of public service like Gerald

Benjamin, a professor of political science at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Dr. Benjamin said he has long detected a distinct lack of interest in elective office in young people, even those otherwise active in environmental advocacy and identity politics.

Mr. Trump's victory changed that, he said. "The reaction to Trump was: How did this happen and how do we keep it from happening again?" said Dr. Benjamin, himself a former county legislator in the Hudson Valley. "I keep telling people, 'Run for office.' There seems to be a new cohort of young people who are becoming engaged."

In Kansas, two 16-year-olds recently announced that they would seek the Democratic nomination for governor next year, and a 17-year-old announced this week that he would be running as a Republican. While some states have a minimum age for governors' races, Kansas does not. Neither does Vermont, where 13-year-old Ethan Sonneborn drew national press coverage — much of it lighthearted — after he announced his intention to run for governor.

In New York City, Mr. Chowdhury plans to challenge an incumbent state senator, Jose Peralta, in a Democratic primary in Queens next fall. In New York State, candidates must be 18 to hold state or local office, and Mr. Chowdhury will turn 18 just in time for the 2018 primary.

Mr. Chowdhury comes from a working-class immigrant family in Queens (his father works in a deli and his mother delivers newspapers). He said he became disillusioned with Senator Peralta's record after learning that he had joined the Independent Democratic Conference, a group of breakaway Democrats in the State Senate who collaborate with Republicans. The power-sharing arrangement allows Republicans to control the chamber despite being outnumbered by Democrats.

"Partnering with Republicans has resulted in progressive bills not coming up for vote," said Mr. Chowdhury, whose website lays out his position on issues like affordable housing, safe streets and single-payer health care. "I find that very deceptive."

The Independent Democratic Conference, which is led by Senator Jeffrey D.

Klein, is taking the high road for now. When asked about Mr. Chowdhury's challenge, Mr. Klein noted that he himself was elected as a state committeeman and district leader while still in his early 20s. "The political process should encourage young people to be involved," he said.

Some youthful candidacies have fizzled amid the realization that others may, in fact, be more qualified. Chetan Hebbur, who graduated from New York University this spring, pulled his hat from the ring only a few months after he announced his campaign for City Council in March. Instead, he threw his support behind another candidate, Jorge Vasquez, a fellow Democrat in his 30s from the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Mr. Hebbur was impressed by Mr. Vasquez's experience as a civil rights lawyer and community advocate. And his one-time rival's platform so closely mirrored his own that he "started feeling bad about running against the guy," he said.

As a result, Mr. Hebbur joined Mr. Vasquez's staff as his director of communications. (Alas, Mr. Vasquez lost the primary in mid-September to Carlina Rivera.)

Still, Mr. Hebbur believes that young people should capitalize on their age in seeking higher office, rising above any snickers or dismissals. "I was 21 and there was a novelty to me running," he said, noting an article in *The New York Post* about his brief candidacy. "If novelty makes people listen, then maybe novelty is O.K. as long as the message is good."

Douglas Muzzio, a professor in the Marxe School of Public and International Affairs at Baruch College, said that Mr. Hebbur's experience constituted an important engagement with civic life. "Running for office is like the tip of the political-participation iceberg," he said. "There's a whole mass of things that interested, informed young people can get involved in."

Other fresh-faced campaigns have run up against other obstacles. In the Westchester County village of Ardsley, N.Y., a high school junior, David Oks, thought he would appear on the ballot in November as an independent candidate for mayor. But last week, he was informed that someone had challenged the validity of his

petition signatures; a review put him below the required number of 75.

Mr. Oks is only 16, and according to state law, should have been ineligible to run. But because the county's Board of Elections did not rule on his age, his candidacy remained valid until his petition signatures were successfully challenged.

A student at the private Masters School in Dobbs Ferry, Mr. Oks is now planning that longest of political long shots: a write-in campaign. "For a lot of people, Nov. 8 was a pretty pivotal day," he said, referring to Mr. Trump's victory. "For me and for tens of millions of others, there was a necessity to get involved."

In Queens, Mr. Chowdhury is hoping that his inexperience will boost his chances next fall. "I'm so young," he said, "that it's impossible for me to have any special interests."

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