

15 February 2023 - House Bill 116 and Youth in Politics

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In 2020, at age 17, I became the youngest elected official in the United States, and in the Commonwealth of Kentucky when I was elected to serve as a Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisor in Scott County. About a year later, a bill was filed in the Kentucky General Assembly to remove me from office and establish a new age limit, 21 years, for the office in which I serve. That bill, 2022 Senate Bill 54, died in the House of Representatives when the session ended. For some context, my position was established in the 1940s, and there has never been an age limit. In fact, from what I could find, there has never even been a proposition of adding an age limit. It was never discussed until I took office.

This legislative session, a few members of the House decided to give it another shot - proposing that to run for the Board, you must be 21. 2023 House Bill 116 was proposed by and is being carried by Representative Felicia Rabourn. After an amendment to the original bill, the proposed age limit for the office is now 18.

But why is it that we need an age limit at all if for decades there has not been one? The sponsor, and her witness Allan Bryant, the President of the Kentucky Association of Conservation Districts, argued before the House Agriculture Committee that because I handle taxpayer money, I should have some sort of fiscal experience. Over the past two years, that is the only argument that has ever been presented. To that I respond: I began paying taxes at age 17. I began driving at age 16. Why should I, as a taxpayer and member of the community that raised me, be denied the ability afforded to everyone else - the chance to represent that community which I cherish so much?

For the past two years, I have served not only as a Conservation District Supervisor for my county. But also as a representation of what young people can do in politics. As the only minor ever elected to office in Kentucky, before 2022, I was forced to demonstrate the capabilities of all young people. The knowledge and skill of the upperclassmen who trained and educated me at the Kentucky United Nations Assembly and Kentucky Youth Assembly throughout Highschool, now all lived within me. And it was my responsibility to prove that we are worth listening to. That young people, all across the Commonwealth, have ideas that will change the future for the better. Ideas that, because they are viewed as 'inexperienced,' or 'too young,' may be lost in history.

For years, we young people have been told to leave the governing to the adults; to sit down and be quiet. To that I say, the future is ours. The people who have to live in the future the longest, are those who are young now . Why should they not have the ability to create, craft, design, and fight for the future that they wish to live in; that we wish to live in?

In politics, the young voice provides a much-needed perspective. Politics, in its current form, is dominated by people much older than the average age of the United States. It goes without saying, the world, the country, and

our Commonwealth have all changed since the people in office now were young. In order to ensure our own longevity, we must adapt to the world we live in. To do that, the voices of young people need to be considered. There is no one more aware of our surroundings, than the most connected generation in history. We should take advantage of the viewpoints of all ages, including young people, and use that unique knowledge to better our community.

House Bill 116 should not be passed. Frankly, it should never be proposed again. After it failed last year, it should have ended there. I am appreciative of the fact that the proposed age limit was lowered from 21 to 18; if I can serve my country in the military, I should be able to run for office. However, there should be no age limit, whatsoever. Last year, Crystal Renfro, Executive Director of the KACD, remarked that if we do not enact an age limit, we could end up with a board of 12-year-olds. I remind everyone, this is still an elected position. I have enough faith in the voters to believe that they would not elect only adolescents. Voters will create the board that they wish to represent them. It is their right to vote for who they want. If the voters feel that a few teenagers would best represent their interests, who are we to deny them that right? Last year, Senate Majority Floor Leader Damon Thayer spoke about how I served with distinction, and how I should be viewed as an example to the youth pages in the General Assembly. It goes without saying, young people, like myself, are more than capable of excelling in office. Let's not make attempts to block them.

Before HB 116 went before the Agriculture Committee on February 15, I requested to testify virtually, as I could not make it to the Annex. That request was denied by the Chair, Representative Richard Heath. As the person who triggered this niche discourse in the first place, why would my input not be wanted? Is it because, again I am young, and am being told that my opinion does not matter? The answer is clearly yes. In a phone call after, expressing my concerns, Representative Heath provided no resolution, simply telling me that my opposition to the bill is 'duly noted.' Although, other representatives, like Pratt, were more open to listening and responding to my concerns. Voicing how they believe a serious discussion needs to be had about why an age limit is needed in the first place. And if necessary, lowering the age limit to 15 or 16 because as Representative Dixon noted, we should not be creating blockades that prevent young people from acting upon their right to interact with and be a part of their government,

In everything that I do as a member of this office, I remember who I am serving, young and old, and act with their best interests in mind. Why, because of my age, am I deserving of any less respect than any other elected official? And why, in general, do young people not get to have a say in their future?

In closing, let me ask the question: would it better serve the community to have an impassioned and intellectual seventeen-year-old serve in office, or would it be better to leave the office vacant?

Landin Stadnyk, 19, is an elected Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisor for Scott Co. KY. A graduate of Great Crossing High School, he studies Political Science and Law and Theory at DePaul University. A guest speaker at the Harvard University Institute of Politics and referenced in University-level textbooks and national news sources, Landin is recognized for his work in youth involvement in politics.