

Why Ja'Mal Green, Kat Kerwin, and Hadiya Afzal are Running for Office

Our elected officials won't make a change. So we will

Teen Vogue

Twenty-two-year-old Ja'Mal Green never planned to run for office. "It was something that I felt would corrupt you," he tells *Teen Vogue*. "I'd always look at leadership and saw that politics were corrupt, and I thought we could do better on the outside."

But now Ja'Mal is pulling 14-hour days on the campaign trail as a Democratic candidate for mayor of Chicago, challenging sitting mayor Rahm Emanuel. He's not alone; dozens of other young people in their teens and early 20s are running for office at all levels of government in the United States, ranging from the local school board all the way up to Congress.

In Kansas, six teenagers of different political affiliations made headlines when they entered the gubernatorial race. Eighteen-year-old Gabrielle Anzalone ran for the school board in Lindenhurst, New York, after almost getting suspended for participating in the National School Walkout; she entered the race with a month to go and came up less than 300 votes short of getting elected. And 13-year-old Democrat Ethan Sonneborn is gaining respect from adults in his run for Vermont governor thanks to his policy-driven campaign.

The impact of young people's activism and political engagement has been at the forefront of the national political conversation. Following the Parkland shooting in February, the power of young people has reached a fever pitch. The March for Our Lives — which took place in March as a response to the shooting at Marjory



photo: Lightspring / Shutterstock.com

Stoneman Douglas High School and the stream of gun violence impacting young people — has been called one of the biggest youth protests since the Vietnam War, with over 450 organized marches around the U.S. and the participant count in the millions. Of course, while rallies and marches are integral parts of democracy, they can often feel short-term and fleeting. People usually leave asking, "What comes next?" Now young people are setting their sights on making long-lasting change by running for public office. Sure, becoming a lawmaker isn't that glamorous; the hours are long and filled with nitpicky policy debates, angry constituents, Internet trolls, and endless fund-raising. But these young people say American politics needs an upgrade — and their solution includes getting new faces into the mix. Ja'Mal is running for mayor in order to take back a political position he feels is being

misused. Other contenders striving to make a difference include Kat Kerwin, a 21-year-old from Rhode Island who's running for Providence City Council Ward 12 against an incumbent who was first elected to the seat the year Kat was born, and 18-year-old Hadiya Afzal, who announced her candidacy for DuPage's District 4 County Board in Illinois at the age of 17, two months before she was even able to legally run for office.

For Kat, running for office means making Providence a national example of what progressive policy-making can achieve; she also wants to offer another candidate option to a community that has had the same representative for over two decades.

Meanwhile, Hadiya wants to bring her new perspective to a county board that she sees as not representative of a district that has undergone significant demographic shifts — particularly in political leanings — over the past 10 years. She already made it through the Democratic primary in March and will face off against another Democrat and two Republicans in November 6's general midterm election, per the district's election rules. (Kat's primary will take place on September 12, and Ja'Mal takes on the Chicago mayoral election on February 26, 2019.)

While some people may think the candidacies of young people are their first foray into the political process, Ja'Mal, Kat, and Hadiya all say that is far from the truth. Before he was campaigning for mayor, Ja'Mal was a leading young activist focusing on police reform and anti-gun violence in Chicago; he rose to national prominence in late 2015 after he spoke out about the release of police dashcam videos that recorded an officer killing teenager Laquan McDonald. Before that, Ja'Mal was already talking to thousands of students about gun violence through various local programs, and he later became an outspoken supporter of Sanders's campaign.

Meanwhile, Kat began working for Providence City Hall at 13 years old before moving out of state and attending the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She made local and national news running her university's Cocks Not Glocks campaign, which was based on the campaign organized by Jessica Jin at the University of Texas-Austin and called for people to display sex toys on their backpacks. The movement brought attention to the fact that many campuses have "obscenity rules" that threaten disciplinary action for publicly displaying sex toys on campuses, yet some lawmakers want to allow concealed weapons. Kat decided to organize a Cocks Not Glocks protest at her college in December 2016 after Wisconsin state representative Jesse Kremer reintroduced a campus carry bill that he'd already proposed in 2015. Hadiya got her first taste of more formal political engagement at 16 when she worked as a poll worker during the 2016 primaries and general election; she then became an intern for the DuPage County Democrats last summer and spent several months canvassing, talking to large swaths of residents across her district about issues. What she found was that people cared about the community and had serious concerns, but they didn't know which officials were in charge of listening to them or whom to hold accountable. "Those concerns were across party lines, because at a certain level of local politics, people want the same things: clean water, safe roads, good schools, low taxes," she tells *Teen Vogue*. "So we found that policy really mattered to people, but they didn't know who to speak to." Hadiya then looked at her county board and was shocked: Despite the fact that Hillary Clinton had carried DuPage County by 14 points in the 2016 election, there was only one Democrat on the 18-person board, only four women, no women of color, and no one under age 30. (According to the 2010 census,

people under 30 make up around 40% of the county population.) While conventional wisdom holds that women are asked to run, on average, seven times before they jump into the political fray, Hadiya decided to go for it way before anyone floated the idea by her; after hearing conversations among Democrats in the area who were looking for candidates, she asked *them* if she should run.

What has the environment been like since heading out on the campaign trail? Ja'Mal, Kat, and Hadiya all entered their races assuming they'd mostly see support from younger people; all three were pleasantly surprised to find that that wasn't the case. "Middle-aged and elder [voters] are excited about this campaign," Ja'Mal explains. "It was shocking. I think I'm presenting something that's refreshing. I'm someone who's not tainted, someone who's never been in politics, someone who's never taken dirty money." In addition, Kat and Hadiya are both floored by the help they've received not just from volunteers in their districts but from other women candidates running all over the country. "I think the best part of it is in my mind, whenever something is going wrong with the campaign or I don't know how to do certain nitty-gritty things, I have dozens of women...where I could immediately pick up the phone and they would drop anything and they would help me even though they have their own campaigns to be running and their own families or jobs," Kat says. "I think that's a really special thing." She says she also found kinship with two first-time candidates: her friend Nika Lomazzo, a 23-year-old running for state senate in Rhode Island, with whom she attends various events and shares a special bond; and Hadiya's fellow DePaul University student Bushra Amiwala, who ran for Cook County Board of Commissioners this year. I'd just really hope that young people who are reading think about...what an important

moment in history this is. We don't get many moments like this in our lifetime.

These young candidates' campaigns haven't been without challenges, however. All three have faced some ageism on the trail, in addition to other discrimination. Hadiya, who is Muslim and wears a hijab, mentions getting thrown a "sweetheart" or two from older men and having doors slammed on her. She was also asked at a recent campaign event how many children she had. "Not even 'Are you married; do you have children?' Just 'How many children do you have?' I think people just see my scarf and they age me up automatically," she says. "I have to be conscious of that when I'm speaking to people."

Kat says, however, that she's found that the discrimination does put her at a special advantage. "I've begun to realize that being the underdog and being undervalued is great because when I do come out and do a good job raising money or do a good job ID'ing voters, people are shocked," she says.

That said, most of the candidates' focus has been on typical campaign issues, like fund-raising, time management, and voter outreach. Hadiya is still a commuter student at DePaul, so she conducts campaign fund-raising calls on the train to and from school. Ja'Mal, meanwhile, is running for mayor of a major American city, which requires raising hundreds of thousands of dollars — sometimes millions. "The challenge is getting enough money to have the staff, open offices around the city, buy a lot of merchandise and things you'll need to put out," he says. "That's the only thing [my team is] worried about." Additionally, all three candidates, who are running as progressives, are hard at work galvanizing support for their platforms. Ja'Mal and Kat live in diverse, liberal areas, whereas Hadiya's district and the surrounding area is more conservative, white, and Christian. One

of the more controversial parts of her platform is her support for raising the age to buy tobacco products from 18 to 21, a DuPage County Board of Health–endorsed policy that aims to keep young people from lifelong addictions to smoking. "I've had people in my life tell me that if the age restriction had been 21, they never would've started smoking," Hadiya says. She recalls that a Republican county board member killed the measure in committee, where she says he argued that "if our young people can go fight overseas at 18, they should be able to come back and have a cigarette." It was logic that Hadiya found frustrating.

People need to encourage their friends, their family, their teachers, their peers in school; everyone needs to vote.

Setbacks from the other end of the political spectrum aside, Hadiya says there's plenty of reason to be excited in her district. "Just about a decade or so ago, DuPage used to be the second-reddest county in the U.S.," she explains. "In this primary, we had a Democrat running for every single county board seat with a lot of contested races, including mine." As the three candidates head into races starting in the fall, the big question on everyone's mind is whether young people will rise to the occasion and turn out to vote. Historically, young people haven't consistently voted at the rate of older people, especially during a nonpresidential election year. In general, turnout for these smaller-scale elections is low, topping out at around 21% across all age demographics in an average election on an odd-numbered year, according to data from the Knight Foundation. But the turnout specifically for young people is often far worse than these statistics suggest: A dramatic example is the 2015 mayoral race in Las Vegas, which is the 28th-largest American city by population. In that election, less than 2% of registered voters ages 18 to 34 voted,

compared with roughly one third of voters over 65.

Some of the early numbers are encouraging, however, both in terms of youth voter registration, turnout and the ability of young people to influence elections. In May, *The New York Times* reported that voter registration among people under 25 is accelerating ahead of other age demographics in crucial states. Youth voter turnout doubled in Virginia from 2009 to 2017, with 34% of the electorate aged 18 to 29 casting their vote in last fall's gubernatorial race compared to 17% in the same race eight years prior. Their votes added up, with two thirds of all young people who voted casting their ballot for Democratic candidate Ralph Northam, who won the race. There was a similar trend in Alabama's senatorial election in December: While voter turnout data is hard to compare to other races since it was a special election, 60% of young people cast their ballots for Democrat Doug Jones, the eventual winner. Still, these numbers have a long way to go in terms of catching up with the voting rates of older people; in Jones's election, for example, young people made up 13% of total voters, and only 23% of people ages 18 to 29 voted.

The bottom line? "Your vote matters," Hadiya says. "People need to encourage their friends, their family, their teachers, their peers in school; everyone needs to vote."

Putting all of the previous voter registration numbers aside, Kat believes her generation will rise to the occasion in this political era. "I'd just really hope that young people who are reading think about...what an important moment in history this is," she says. "We don't get many moments like this in our lifetime."