Exploring Challenges Youth Face Seeking Political Office

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Disparities in running for office within the U.S.

In the United States, all citizens can run to become a member of congress, so long as they are at least twenty five years old, have been a U.S. citizen for five years, and reside in the state represented. However, as a result of the U.S. being a democratic nation with a system of checks and balances, politicians running must be voted into office which results in each candidate facing their own set of barriers. Not every candidate possesses the inherent qualities and characteristics necessary to effectively run for office, nor the financial assets to succeed. Typically, it's much easier for someone who either grew up in a family with politicians or with enough money/donors to afford the costs of a campaign to run and get elected, than someone who does not have these resources (Fox & Lawless, 2001). While resources play a large role in a candidate's ability to get elected, another factor important to consider is age. As the average age of members in Congress as of the year 2023 is 58 years old.
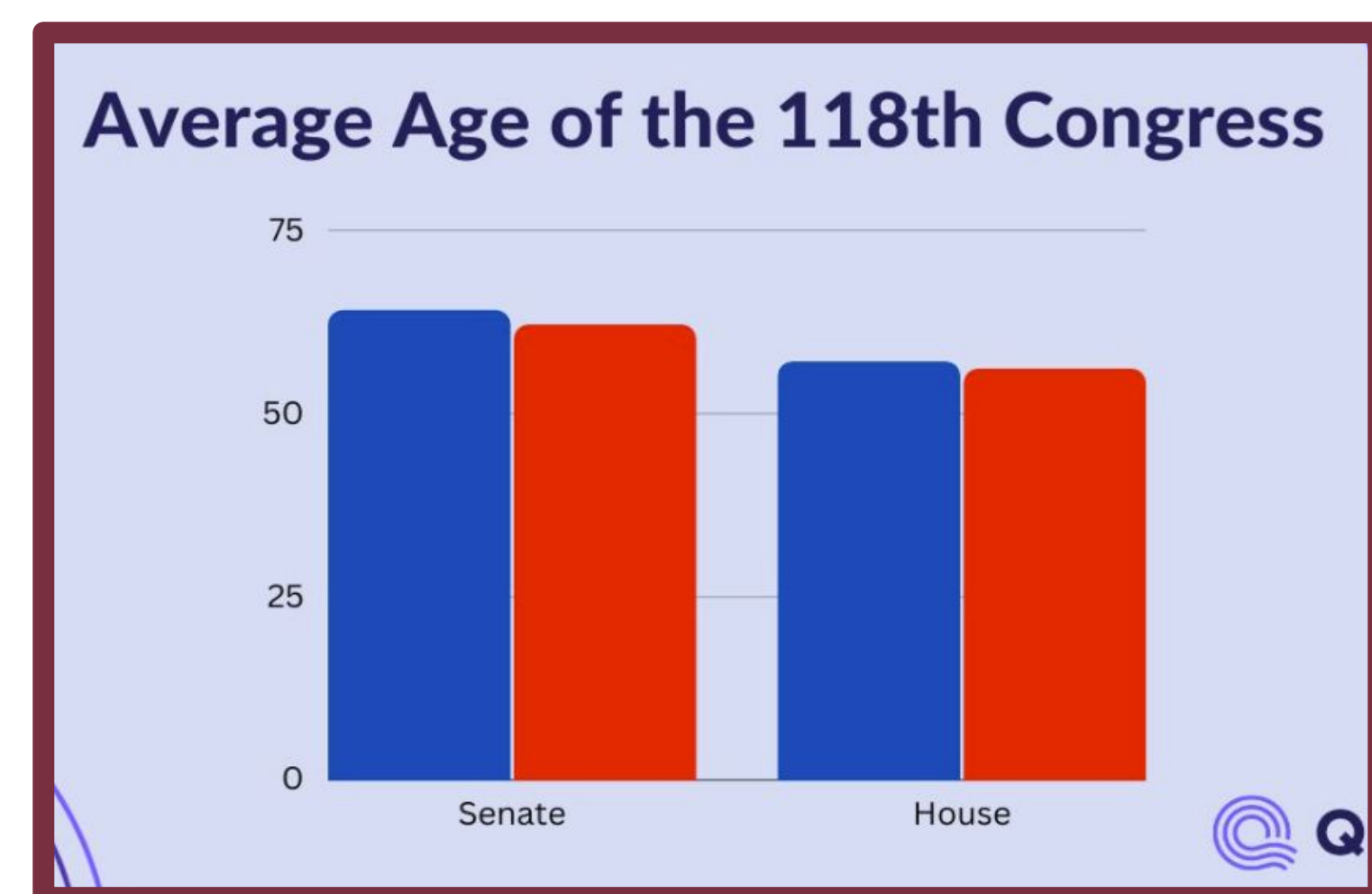

Figure 1: Shows the average age of the current Congress; separates data from the Senate and House of Representatives. Retrieved from *McConnell, 81, freezes again during press event.* Causes.com - Take Action on Issues You Care About. (n.d.).
https://www.causes.com/articles/55249-mcconnell-81-freezes-press-event

Having young politicians in office is pivotal to move forward as a nation. Young leaders bring with them new perspectives, as well as a deeper understanding of issues that their generation faces specifically (Skelton, 2010). However, young people are critically underrepresented in current global politics, creating a disconnect between the population and its leaders. Through collecting data about our youngest officials in Congress this research allows for a better understanding of the barriers young people face in being elected for political office. The purpose of the project is to aid future leaders to overcome these age barriers so that there can be more young and empowered people participate in the shaping of the world.

Methods

Participants: This study focuses particularly on the 51 youngest members of the 118th U.S. House of representatives to be elected into office. However, the research takes into account a wide array of congressional members. Such as, the incumbent's opponents in order to compare the specific credentials that contribute or hinder youth electoral campaigns.
Research Question: What barriers do youth politicians face when running for office?
Materials/Measures
- Per candidate a profile was elected and analyzed, which included: the age, race, education, peripheral government experience, veteran status, and amount fundraised of all fifty-two U.S. House of Representatives Future Forum Caucus members, which aims to bridge generation divides in policymaking, and their corresponding competition for the individual's first successful congressional campaign.
- Following that, the 2022 census district information for all twenty first-year U.S. House of Representatives Future Forum Caucus members' congressional districts were analyzed and compared to national benchmarks regarding age, race, education demographics, and the proportion of veterans.
- Notable variations within the studied congressional districts were compared to the candidate profile of the corresponding representative.
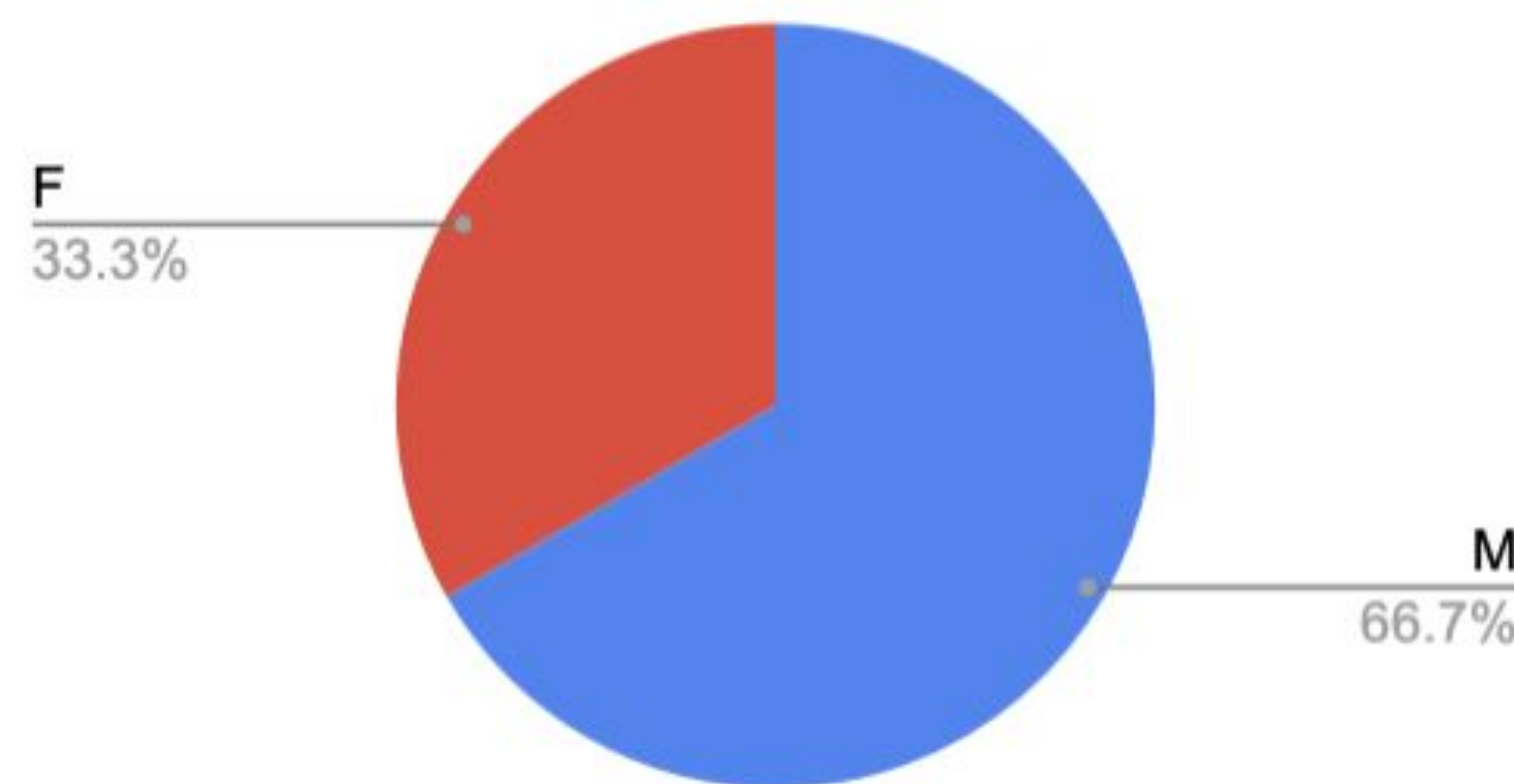
Results & Conclusion

Figure 2: M represents men and F represents the percentage of women in the 24 youngest members of Congress..
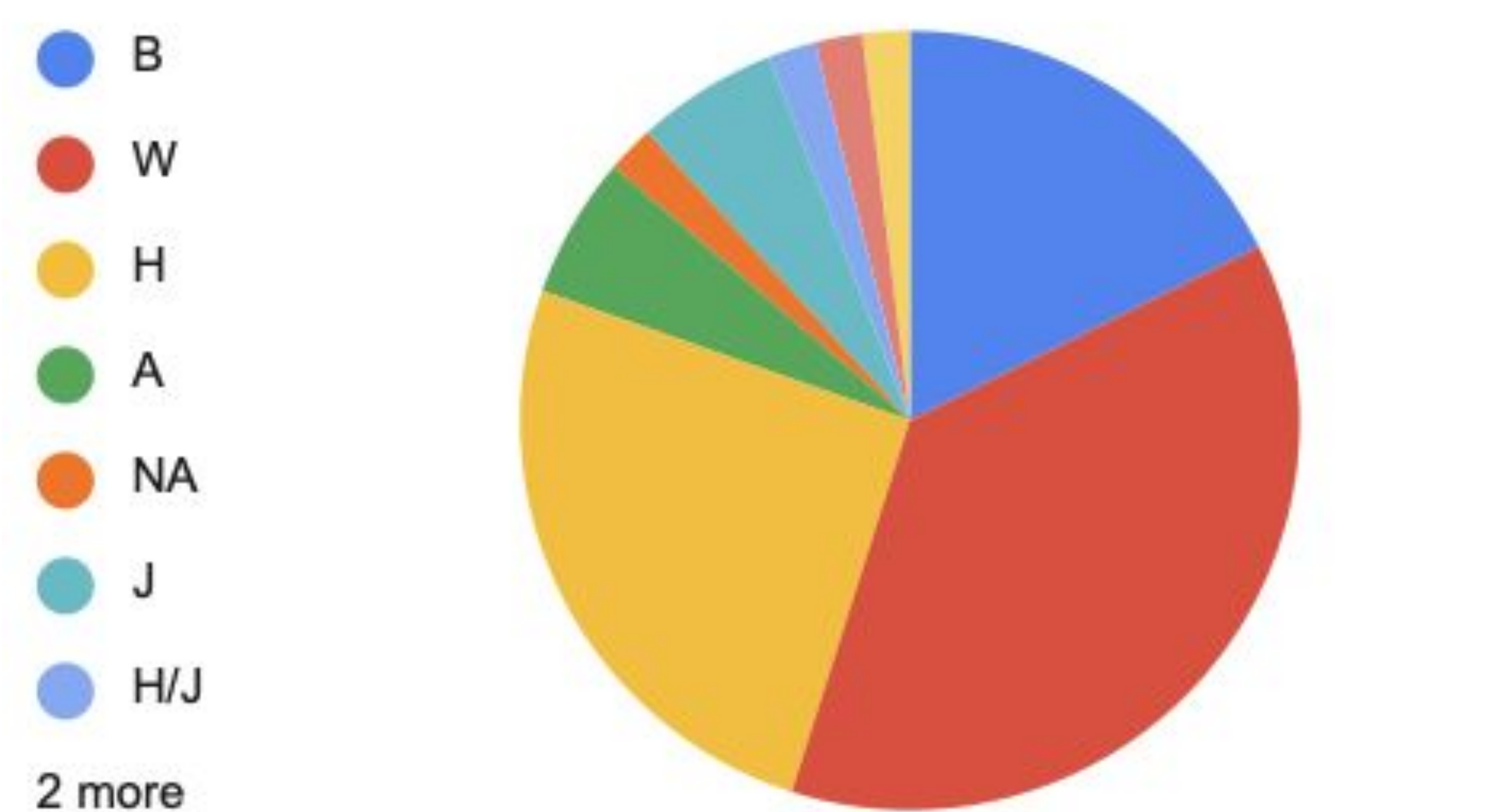

Figure 3: the racial breakdown of the 24 youngest members of Congress. B indicates black, W indicated white, H indicates hispanic, J indicates Jewish, A indicates Asian, and B/H indicates others.
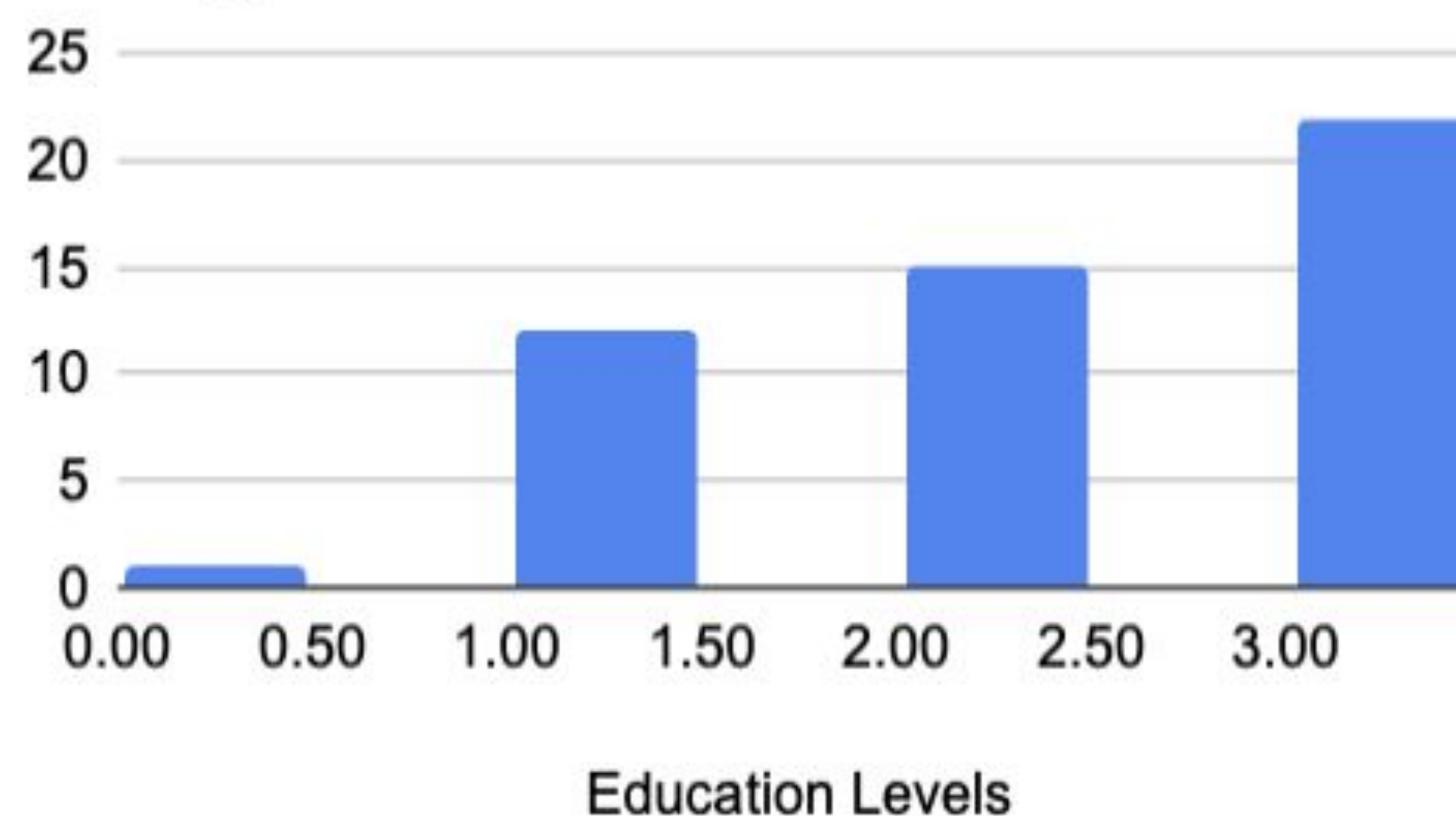

Figure 4: The level of education received by the 24 youngest members of Congress and the opponents they ran against. 0 indicates a high school diploma or less, 1 indicates a bachelor's degree, 2 indicates a masters degree, and 3 represents a JD or PHD.

Identified Trends with Youngest Members of Current U.S. House of Representatives:
- 2/3 are male
- The most common level of education is a Juris Doctorate (J.D.)
- Local government experience is not needed, but nearly half of the Representatives have state government experience
- The vast majority won their first race
- Nearly all Representatives out fundraised their opponent, or did not by a slight margin

Gender:
Gender was a large factor as only ⅓ of the individuals who won the election were women. However, men significantly outnumbered women in pursuit of a political career, which can be attributed when looking at the notable disparity in the representation of men and women in office.

Experience:
While data shows that not every candidate who ran for federal office had participated in local government and politics, 76.47% had prior experience in local politics. This is especially relevant when looking at the U.S. House of Representatives as each representative is voted upon by their local constituents, as opposed to a presidential campaign.

Fundraising:
One of the largest differences between those who were elected into office and those who were not is the amount of money raised during their campaigns. Almost every individual who was elected into office significantly outnumbered their opponent in terms of funding. While those who won despite having less donations fell short by only a couple thousand USD.

Acknowledgements

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References