

The kids are alright: Aspiring political staffers are altruistically motivated, finds Canadian research

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Credit: Mikhail Nilov from Pexels

Young people who work as political staffers in Canada have long been

derogatorily labeled by politicians and pundits as "[the kids in short pants](#)," a comment about their age and perceived inexperience [coined by an adviser to former prime minister Stephen Harper](#).

Despite the important roles political staffers fill in our democracy, their work is often overlooked and undervalued by the politicians and voters that they serve.

It's these [young people](#) that we encounter when we contact a politician. Political staffers answer phones, respond to emails and organize community events. Political staffers often act as the link between voters and the decision-makers that we elect.

Within the halls of power, [political staffers serve politicians](#) by offering political advice, guidance and support in communications, policy, administration and parliamentary affairs. For better [or worse](#), political staffers are undoubtedly influential.

Self-interest or civic duty?

But who are these people and why do they want this job? Are these smart young people driven by careerism, [self-interest](#) and personal gain? Or are they guided by altruism, civic duty and dedicated to working in the [public interest](#)? What motivates the kids in short pants?

Just as we should be concerned with [why politicians run for public office](#), we should be interested in what motivates political staffers to undertake their work.

One way of answering these questions is to survey the young people who want to become political staffers: [university students](#) who study political science.

Political science majors have a [variety of career opportunities](#) available to them. They can pursue professional degrees in law or [public policy](#), work in the [private sector](#) in [public relations](#) or government affairs, or choose to join the civil services.

Yet some choose to become political staffers, a career that offers fewer material benefits and substantially less job security. Why pursue this work?

Polling students

We surveyed 252 university students in a [political science](#) course at the University of Toronto to find out.

We asked students if they were interested in going into a career as a political staffer, and why or why not they would pursue this option after university. In addition to examining whether the student is interested in working as a political staffer, we also categorized students [as either self-interested](#) or motivated to serve the public interest.

Among students who are not interested in political work, most stated it was because their own interests were better served elsewhere. Some believed that politics was a fool's errand, or that it was too deeply flawed to actually help the public. Some students feel unsuited for politics due to power dynamics, public scrutiny or required expertise.

Among students who are interested in working as a political staffer, students we categorized as self-interested express personal career aspirations or a general passion for politics without explicit references to helping others or the community.

Public-interested students were marked by a desire to serve the public interest, represent [under-represented groups](#) and address areas of social

concern.

Serving the public

Our analysis demonstrates that the vast majority of students interested in pursuing work as a political staffer are motivated by contributing to the public good.

Many of these students expressed interest in bettering their communities and Canada more generally. One of the students aptly expressed the group's shared vision: "I want to help people and continue the transition of humanity towards a better future."

Some young people are motivated by the opportunity to be part of positive political change: "I want to be a part of the next generation of Canadian politics." One told us:

"I want to be involved in working towards a better future for Canadians. I also want to help make change towards issues that matter for me such as environmental issues or advocating for human rights."

Another major goal of these students is the opportunity to represent under-represented groups:

"As a member of the Black community, representation in places of distinction or decision making tables are immensely limited and I want to be that advocate for policies and laws as it pertains to the benefit of my community in order to create more access."

In contrast to these responses, only a few students reported self-interested reasons for working as a political staffer. Among this group, self-interest motivations ranged from enhancing resumes to aiming for future high-paying jobs or influential positions, or, as one [student](#) bluntly

wrote: "I can make a LOT of money."

At the same time, some envisioned careers as a lawyer after working on politics or even the possibility of becoming politician themselves: "After a decade or so of working as a political staffer, I intend to run for public office."

Motivated by the public good

Working as a political staffer is underappreciated, underpaid and fraught with [job insecurity](#). But we need smart young people to undertake this work, and we also need people who are not influenced by ulterior motives to have access to the halls of power.

In a time of growing partisanship and [general political uncertainty](#), our short research project provides a snapshot of the young people who might one day walk the halls of power.

Aspiring political staffers are motivated by a consistent passion for public service and contributing to a better Canada.

Maybe the kids in short pants are alright after all?

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