

# THE OKLAHOMAN

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## GOVERNMENT

# These Oklahoma Gen Z candidates are challenging the state's political status quo

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The 22-year-old candidate stood deep in the guts of the Oklahoma Capitol and questioned the veteran state representative who was trying to have him removed from the ballot.

Independent candidate Carter Rogers, seeking to win the June 18 Republican primary election, asked incumbent state Rep. Ken Luttrell, “If I could have you take a look at Exhibit A, which is from your own evidence ... it's voter information from the GOP data center.”

Heather Mahieu Cline, the Oklahoma State Election Board chair overseeing the proceedings, stopped Rogers, asking him, instead of “testifying ... ask the witness questions ... identify what this document is and how it is truthful in action.”

Rogers adjusted his question and continued questioning Luttrell, at times receiving objections from the petitioner's attorney, Anthony J. Ferate, a former chairman of the state Republican Party.

The effort to block his placement on the ballot was one barrier Rogers faced in his campaign to represent House District 37 near Ponca City.

Rogers is one of six candidates under 25 hoping to launch their political careers by running for a seat in the state Legislature this year. Although the number of legislative candidates under the age of 25 has declined in recent years, demographic changes and the emergence of new issues seem likely to reverse that trend in the future. The candidates in 2024 races expressed a common interest in working together across party lines and reducing conflict.

“They’re running because they have reasons. Because they’ve lived through some hardship or a school shooting, or health issues or have grown up in poverty,” Emily Stacey, a political

science professor at Rose State College, said. “They’re running to actually address issues that face everyday people.”

**Opinion:** Gov. Stitt's DEI executive order has destroyed a vital OU leadership program for women

People tend to think of candidates as having lived experiences before they run for office, but, she said, Gen Z is flipping that idea on its head. The generation includes people born from 1997 to 2012.

The campaigns are also a response to stagnant politics because policies coming out of Washington, D.C., and Oklahoma City are not hitting the issues Gen Z is concerned about, Stacey said.

In general, millennials – born 1981-1996 – dropped the ball on recruiting better and younger candidates, leaving a gap in government, she said. She pointed to the examples of the two octogenarian candidates running for president and the average age of members of Congress – about 65 for senators and about 57 for representatives.

Oklahoma does a little bit better than its federal counterparts, she said.

Candidates for office in Oklahoma, are mostly in their 40s, 50s and 60s, while younger candidates in their 30s trail behind. Most Democratic candidates are in their 40s and 50s, while most Republicans are in their 50s and 60s. Democrats have fewer candidates over the age of 59 than Republicans, according to data from the state Election Board.

“The fact that we are having a repeat (presidential) election this year from 2020 speaks to the desperate need to have fresh blood within our politics, whether that’s Republican, Democrat, all sides of the spectrum,” said Stacey.

She said as time goes on, Gen Z might have more of a chance to get elected because the Baby Boomer (1946-1964) generation is no longer the largest part of the electorate. Gen X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996) and Gen Z are likely more willing to vote for younger candidates.

## Issues they see in their communities

Issue changes from generation to generation may also influence elections, Stacey said. Reproductive health care, education, inclusivity, mental health, the economy and artificial

intelligence are more on the minds of younger candidates and younger voters in Oklahoma.

“I see a palpable shift in what issues are driving both young voters to the polls, but also motivating them to run for office themselves because they're not seeing these issues really addressed in a wholesale way,” Stacey said.

Although most Oklahoma legislators and state elected officials are Republicans, younger candidates and recently elected officeholders told *The Oklahoman* they are willing to work across party lines. “We understand that at the end of the day, we’re all Oklahomans before we’re Republicans and Democrats,” Rep. Daniel Pae, a Republican from Lawton elected in 2018.

The youngest candidate, Republican Kannin Koehn, was 20 years old when he filed for House District 58 near Cherokee. He’ll be 21 by the general election, meeting the age minimum for the House of Representatives. He faces Republican incumbent Rep. Carl Newton, who is from Cherokee, in the primary. Koehn did not return questions to *The Oklahoman* by press time.

## **Concerns about diversity and inclusion**

Reproductive health care, mental health care, education, artificial intelligence and immigration are top of mind this election season, and several bills were filed in the Legislature on these topics.

Stacey said older elected officials do care deeply about many issues, but perhaps not with the same attention or focus as younger candidates, because if they’re already out of that part of their life, they’re less likely to pay attention to policy that impacts those areas.

Oklahoma is ranked as the worst state for a woman to live, based on women’s economic and social well-being, safety and health care, according to WalletHub. Gov. Kevin Stitt signed a strict abortion law even before the Dobbs decision in 2022 and issued an executive order removing diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, which has not helped women, members of the LGBTQI+ community and people of color.

Nicole Maldonado, 24, is running in the Democratic primary for House District 88, near central Oklahoma City. She was born in Laredo, Texas, but grew up in Colombia and sees that people in her district face some of the same issues she saw in South America.

When she moved to Oklahoma City for a tennis scholarship at Southeastern State University, she became president of College Democrats and was on the school's Model United Nations team. She moved to Oklahoma City and started getting involved in the community and said she realized there's a bridge between public policy and helping people.

As a queer Latina woman, Maldonado said restoring humanity to the Legislature was critical, especially where it concerns people from the LGBTQI+ community. Lawmakers considered over 50 bills that targeted the LGBTQI+ community including bans on gender-affirming healthcare, penalizing public school employees for asking a student their pronoun and other topics.

“We have seen how bad they've been targeted by politicians,” she said. “They don't even see people as humans anymore, but it's just something that they can use to gain power.”

For Rogers, those concerns seemed similar to the state's troubled history with Indigenous tribes. He is a member of the Osage Nation and works as a junior web developer for them. He studied political science and philosophy at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, where he also made a run for city council to advocate for unsheltered college students. He moved back to Fairfax when his grandmother died in March 2023.

“What we really need is somebody who's able to bridge that gap between our Native American communities and the state government in a way that doesn't exploit those Native American tribes as they've been exploited for hundreds of years already by a colonist mindset, quite frankly,” Rogers said.

More power for the tribes when they negotiate compacts with the state would be a good start, instead of decisions being “railroaded” through by state officials with no meaningful input from tribal leaders, he said.

## **Concerns about mental health and the economy**

Mental health care has been a hot topic, and Oklahoma ranks 28<sup>th</sup> in access to mental health care, according to a report from national nonprofit organization Mental Health America.

As the son of parents who came from Mexico and spoke no English, Democratic Rep. Arturo Alonso-Sandoval, elected in 2022, and his twin brother translated complicated medical conversations for their parents so their older brother could receive mental health services. The fact there were no language services for families like his was an eye-opener, he recalled.

“I think a lot of legislators ... their main goal is to send a message that they want Oklahoma to be the least attractive state to migrants,” said Alonso-Sandoval, who is seeking reelection. “But that impacts a lot of the people that have been here for decades contributing by working, paying their taxes and just doing so many different things to contribute to Oklahoma.”

Beyond societal concerns, Gen Z candidates have an eye on the economy too, especially in rural areas. Oklahoma is still one of the nation's poorest states with a per capita income in 2023 at \$58,499, ranking at number 42, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Christopher Wier, 23, a Democratic candidate for House District 4, has experienced firsthand some of the issues faced by communities. Originally from Stigler, Wier moved to Tahlequah's Northeastern State University for a degree in advocacy and social justice. After experiencing food insecurity and living below the poverty line in a house where rain would come through the ceiling, Wier said he realized people shouldn’t have to live like that and thought about how to change it.

“As soon as they get out on their own, they don’t realize that to buy groceries, it’s half your paycheck sometimes,” he said, “so being able to afford rent and food at the same time is sometimes hard.”

As a Cherokee citizen, Wier was able to receive food subsidies. He feels his perspective matches that his prospective constituents, which is very much needed in the House right now, he said.

Cody Swearingen, a 24-year-old Shawnee born and raised candidate for Senate District 17, is running as a Republican against Sen. Shane Jett and other challengers in the primary. He said he wants to see a boost for local economies. He’d like to see an easier way for people to get occupational licenses, start small businesses and help them. In turn, that would lead to people staying in the area for work, instead of commuting to other cities.

“We’ve lost so many small businesses, and those are the backbone of the economy, so I would want less taxes, less regulations so that our businesses can grow and our people can grow with them,” he said.

## Building connections across years and party lines

Despite the fact that current legislators would be twice or three times their age, all of the under 25 candidates said they're willing to find common ground and reach across the aisles and ages. Swearingen said everyone has something to contribute and working together will be key. He's looking forward to working with different party identities.

Swearingen said he has noticed that over the course of American history elected officials have gone from being statesmen – dedicated to the will of the people and the betterment of the state and country – to being politicians, willing to say or do anything to stay in office. Politics are more divisive and toxic, and their generation is tired of it, he said.

Like his fellow candidates though, Swearingen said he understands that when politics are divided, nothing gets done. It takes fresh eyes to solve problems, he said.

“I think once we recognize that we have more in common than we do differences, that's when we can really start to have a government that works for us,” he said, “and I think that the younger generation is more willing to acknowledge that we need to change somewhat.”

## Barriers candidates face

All candidates will face some barriers their first time out, but Gen Z candidates are likely to have more barriers than older candidates who are typically more established, according to a Tufts University study. About 59% of 19 to 25 year olds expressed concern about losing income or work while running for office, while only 41% of candidates ages 62 and over worry about loss of income, the study said.

Rose State College's Stacey said many young candidates are living paycheck to paycheck after college, along with student loans and other challenges, starting them out at a deficit.

Alonso-Sandoval said fundraising has been challenging because most people his age are either recent college graduates or they're still in school. In his first campaign, he did a lot of door-knocking and connecting with his community. Despite worries about being a younger candidate, he got a surprising response.

“A lot of people were very encouraged that someone young, someone with a fresher perspective wanted to run for office,” he said, acknowledging that many in his generation aren't engaged with politics and that hurts them.

When he was a kid, he couldn't imagine running for office because he didn't see legislators that looked like him. He soon realized people like him belong in places such as the Capitol because of decisions that will impact the rest of their lives.

"It's not common that you see a young Latino engineer running for office, especially in a state like Oklahoma," he said.

Young people 19 to 25 years old reported they are much less likely to feel qualified to hold elected office, and they often receive less explicit encouragement to run for office compared to older generations, the Tufts study said.

Stacey added: "The older generations are going to kind of automatically assume that a young kid is not going to have the kind of life experience or perhaps the education that they need to be passing laws that older generation[s] (are) going to live by."

Pae said life experience doesn't really count though.

"It's more like people need a willingness to work hard, a positive attitude and they want to give back to their community," he said. "That's all the life experience you need, whether you're 25 or 55 or 75. I think anyone and everyone should be able to jump into the arena and contribute to this process."

## **Moving past the barricades**

Carter Rogers was ultimately successful in overcoming the objections to his placement on the ballot.

Incumbent Luttrell had alleged that Rogers "failed to re-register as a voter in Oklahoma since his return to the state."

Rogers first registered to vote in Oklahoma in 2020. Later that year, he moved to Colorado for college and registered there. After moving home, he checked his voter registration, found it was still in effect, and notified Colorado to cancel his registration in that state.

No evidence was presented to the election board that it had ever received information about Rogers' brief Colorado registration. The board said since his original voter registration was not cancelled, he could remain on the ballot.

Despite the nerve-wracking process at times, Rogers didn't let the hearing stop him from campaigning. He doesn't hold hard feelings toward Luttrell for the challenge, although the

move did seem a little political, he said. The two shook hands and wished each other luck after the ordeal.

“I think it’ll be fun to see what a 70-year-old GOP incumbent can put up against a young 22-year-old looking to unseat him,” he said.