

PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH AND DEMOCRACY: JOHN WILSON, KANSAN WITH CANDOR

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Dedicated to his community, John Wilson considers electoral office to be a “national extension of public service”, hence, a natural progressive step for this committed public servant. With optimism and forthrightness, at the young age of 25, Wilson is boldly running for State Representative of Kansas against Tom Sloane, a fourteen year incumbent. A native of the Midwest, John spent most of his childhood in Lawton, Oklahoma and later attended the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas where he presently resides. Despite his young age, John has worked for numerous reputable organizations and programs such as the Harvard National Campaign for Civic and Political Engagement, the Center for Community Outreach at the University of Kansas, and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (a partnership between the William J. Clinton Foundation and the American Heart Association).

An advocate for clean energy, John was motivated to run for office by his dismay at Lawrence's currently coal-dominated energy plan and apparent need for health care and education reform. The personable young professional sought to craft a comprehensive, sustainable energy policy and improved education and health care programs in order to address, as opposed to inherit these issues in the future. “We are facing problems right now in this state that not only immediately impact us...they also have the potential to impact people my age and younger. Why sit around and wait to inherit those problems when we can do something more preventative?”. The political hopeful does not think that his “age is an issue”, but rather, sees his youth “as an advantage”. Since individuals, not special interest groups fund his campaign, he is “willing to listen to all stakeholders” instead of focusing on the needs of only certain groups, which pigeon-holes some senior campaigners. Wilson also recognizes that his age affords him the energy to walk door-to-door to listen to constituents' concerns in person.

Although he agrees that American youth today are sufficiently involved in political and social affairs, John admits that there is still room for further involvement. His work at the Alliance proved to him that young people are passionate about community service. The Internet and technology, the Kansan believes, have “allowed youth to learn more and become more deeply involved in both domestic and international causes...since online marketing trends appeal to young people”. Wilson credits technological advancements with “increasing communication as well as creating new ways to introduce ideas”. The forthcoming “silver tsunami” (impending rush of retiring baby boomers), John foresees, will create many opportunities for youth involvement. Through national programs that would grant loan forgiveness to youth in exchange for their service in Peacecorps, Americorps, the Army, and other such service-oriented organizations, public service can be encouraged, thereby filling the gaps that the baby boomers will leave behind, according to Wilson.

Concerning the issue of voting, John believes that more can be done to make voting more accessible to accommodate people who hold hourly paid jobs, as well as to encourage communities to vote more broadly. He attributes voter apathy to “cynicism about the political process and system, worries about 'big money', and distrust in media outlets”. Election

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reform, but more importantly, “early education for civic engagement through increased funding for special programs” can reduce voter apathy, in Wilson's opinion.

With regards to current issues such as the recent financial bailout in the United States, the U.S.-led military presence in Iraq, and renewable energy, the candidate offered his frank insight. Wilson maintains that the government has to somewhat regulate the financial sector given the “interconnectivity of the public and private sectors”. A proponent of wind development and other such diversified energy sources in Kansas, Wilson envisions developments such as solar energy in the Southwest part of the country. The political novice fully supports an open, honest, and serious debate regarding energy issues and the aggressive development of renewable energy plans, including the implementation of building standards and codes. He points not only to the need for reform of national energy and climate change policies, but also the need for improvement of the image of the United States abroad. In reference to the invasion/liberalization debate concerning the United States' involvement in Iraq, Wilson reveals that the issue is a particularly personal one for him since his brother and cousins served in Iraq and because he grew up in a military community. “I would like to believe that there was faulty intelligence from the start. I am an optimist and choose not to believe this was done with malicious intent”. Nevertheless, the Midwesterner attests that an unnecessary amount of money has been invested and “too many lives have been lost”. He also contends that the United States' “extent of involvement has not done good for our image in Middle Eastern countries”.

Though “our recent foreign policy has tarnished”, it can be mended, according to Wilson. The candidate has strong faith in a vital principle of democracy, individuals having the right to choose their leaders. Nonetheless, “the spread of democracy should not be done by force, rather, through leadership by example”. Insofar as how America is viewed in the world today, Wilson makes a distinction between the American government and businesses and the average American citizen and community groups. Portraying Americans' charity, John explains, “the tsunami and other humanitarian disasters have shown the compassion and willingness of the American people to give their resources, and this aspect of America doesn't get heard enough”.

As far as his future, the young politician is forward-looking and ambitious. In ten years, he envisions himself continuing to work in the service of communities or people in some way. Wilson recognizes that his ability to connect with people and understand their perspectives is of value in such work. Self-declaringly “impatient about” his “desires and ideas”, this energetic activist's refreshing zeal for service and undaunted attempt to claim a seat in Topeka despite his young age and seasoned opponent should be applauded. In a country that is seemingly experiencing a surge of political interest amongst its youth, John Wilson's candidacy represents young people who are not only committed to their ideas, but motivated to turn their ideas into action.