

Statisticians Get Involved in Public Office

More than 70 scientists, engineers, and students gathered at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, on May 10 to participate in a workshop showing effective strategies for becoming elected to political office. To increase evidence-based decisionmaking in public policy, more scientists, engineers, and statisticians are getting involved in politics on a local and national scale—including ASA members. Why would statisticians want to be involved in politics? To find out, we asked some of our members in public office.



Chris Franklin

Profession: Senior lecturer and honors professor in statistics at the University of Georgia. I have finished my 28th year as a university faculty member. I am also the current chief reader of AP Statistics for College Board.

Area of Science: Statistics

Public Office: Chair, Oconee County Board of Education, Watkinsville, Georgia



Franklin

How long have you been on the County Board of Education in Watkinsville?

Since 1999. From January 2001 to December 2001, I served as vice chair of the board. Since January 2002, I have served and continue to serve as chair. So, I'm in my 10th year as a board member.

Why did you want to be a part of the Oconee County Board of Education?

I strongly believe in serving my community. I felt that my background in education would allow me to contribute to my county school system. I am also the mother of two boys. My older son (now a third-year student at UGA) went through my school system from K–12. My youngest son will begin 8th grade this fall.

How did you campaign? I have been blessed to be unopposed each time I ran. However, I still attended political forums so the voters could hear my views.

What is the hardest part of your political life? The time it takes away from my family! Also, juggling the time commitment of the school board with my professional responsibilities.

How does your statistical training affect your political decisions? Whenever possible, my decisions are data based. I feel this is a major contribution I have brought to the school board—helping my colleagues and school administrators understand the importance of making decisions based on data, not what feels good.

Do you believe you get more or less respect because of your science background? I feel my math and statistical background has brought me much respect.

What advice would you offer a fellow statistician who is considering running for office? This experience of serving on the school board has been one of my most rewarding. It's challenging and hard work; however, I believe I have been able to make a positive difference and impact. One of the initiatives I'm most proud of is supporting a teacher induction program with all local funds. This program provides system support to all our new

first- and second-year teachers. Our retention percentages have stayed in the 90% range since beginning the program in 2002. The school system won a national award in 2007 for this program. We have now expanded the program to mentoring new administrators and providing guidance to aspiring administrators. Serving on the school board also placed me in a position that allowed me to work at the state educational level in Georgia with the revision of our state mathematics standards. I was an advisor to the math committee writing the new standards, and we now have a significant amount of data analysis (based on the pre-K–12 GAISE framework) at the K–12 level in our Georgia math standards.

Jerry Moreno

Profession: Professor

Area of Science: Statistics and mathematics

Public Office: School Board for Kenston Local School District, Geauga County, Ohio, since December 1988



Moreno

Why did you want to be a member of the School Board for Kenston Local School District?

My life is in education, so it was natural to want to serve on a school board. I think the composition of a school board should be balanced across professions, including at least one educator in the five positions. Ours were all business people, so when the opportunity arose to fill a vacancy, I applied and, surprisingly, was chosen.

How did you campaign? My appointment was for 13 months to fill the vacancy. I have run five successful four-year terms thereafter.

What is the hardest part of your political life? As you might imagine, seldom is a school issue clear cut. On issues from the public, both sides invariably remind you that they are taxpayers, etc. Whatever my position on an issue turns out to be, it is always on the side of what is best for our children.

How does your statistical training affect your political decisions? Statistics and mathematics teach you how to make logical decisions. The statistical process of asking a question, collecting appropriate data, analyzing the data, and arriving at a conclusion is applicable and invaluable to solving problems, whether in one's profession, school issues, or in everyday life. The data are seldom numerical, but the process works, nonetheless.

Do you believe you get more or less respect because of your science background? I'm not sure how much respect school board members get, period. I would like to think that

because I am an educator and a statistician people respect my views, but you would have to ask them.

What advice would you offer a fellow statistician who is considering running for office? Don't run if you have a hidden agenda. Don't run if you can't take criticism. Don't run if you want to micromanage the system. Your job is to hire competent administrators to run the district, to evaluate the superintendent and treasurer, and to keep the district fiscally sound. Do run if you have a genuine interest in education. Your background in decisionmaking will serve you well.

James L. Rosenberger

Profession: Statistician (professor of statistics, Penn State University)

Area of Science: Statistical science

Public Office: Member, Borough Council, State College, Pennsylvania

How long have you been a member of the Borough Council? Five months. I took office in January 2008.

Why did you want to be a part of the council? I wanted to offer my experience to maintain and improve our community, which I have lived in for 31 years.

How did you campaign? I attended a few neighborhood teas, handed out cards stating my priorities and values, emailed a letter to several lists of neighborhood associations, participated in TV and newspaper interviews, and ran about four ads in the newspaper the week before the election.

What is the hardest part of your political life? Keeping up with the many reports and documents one needs to read to understand the background of the issues that come before us for a vote.

How does your statistical training affect your political decisions? My background is very helpful for absorbing and understanding the flood of data, both financial and survey, that is available on every issue.

Do you believe you get more or less respect because of your science background? I find my background is highly respected.

What advice would you offer a fellow statistician who is considering running for office? I think we as a profession should take more opportunities to offer our skills and expertise for the good of our communities and society. Talk to your local political committees and see where they think you could be most helpful. I think you would be welcomed to the table.



Rosenberger

Jeff Witmer

Profession: Professor of mathematics and acting dean of arts and sciences until July 1, 2008, at Oberlin College

Area of Science: Statistics! Bayesian decision theory and statistics education, to be more specific.

Public Office: Member, Board of Education of the Oberlin, Ohio, City School District

How long have you been part of the board of education? I served for eight years (1996–2003, including board president in 2000 and 2001).

Why did you want to be part of the board of education? I hoped to improve the functioning of the board and, in so doing, to help students.

How did you campaign? I did almost no campaigning. A few friends wrote letters to the local newspaper on my behalf.

What is the hardest part of your political life? The hardest thing for me was probably dealing with parents who were disappointed or angry when the board made an unpopular decision.

How does your statistical training affect your political decisions? I am accustomed to working with clients from varying fields, so I appreciate how different people see things differently.

Do you believe you get more or less respect because of your science background? More, I hope!

What advice would you offer a fellow statistician who is considering running for office? Be honest. Be fair. Even if unreasonable.

For information about the workshop, visit <http://elections.sefora.org>. If you have suggestions for future workshops on science policy issues, contact Steve Pierson, ASA director of science policy, at pierson@amstat.org. ■



Witmer