

# ***Obama Effect Inspiring Few to Seek Office***

By JASON HOROWITZ APRIL 13, 2014

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LUDLOW, Mass. — Eric Lesser was shaking hands with diners in a Portuguese restaurant last week when he spotted the owner of Manny’s TV & Appliances. “Oh, I’ve got to get a picture,” Mr. Lesser eagerly said, draping his arm over Manny Rovithis, whose low-budget commercials have run for decades in Western Massachusetts. Mr. Lesser’s giddiness about meeting the local celebrity had not faded when he sat down for lunch.

“Awesome,” he said.

Although Mr. Lesser spent much of the last six years in the company of [President Obama](#) and Washington hotshots, now, as an earnest, hug-prone 29-year-old candidate for the Massachusetts State Senate, he is far more interested in people like Mr. Rovithis. Which is a good thing. Mr. Lesser, a former White House staff member, has returned home on the path Mr. Obama hoped to inspire many of his young supporters to follow when he said, “We are the ones we have been waiting for.”

But if Mr. Lesser, who is on leave from Harvard Law School to run for office, is the face of the promised Obama political generation, he is also one of its few participants. For all the talk about the movement that elected Mr. Obama, the more notable movement of Obama supporters has been away from politics. It appears that few of the young people who voted for him, and even fewer Obama campaign and administration operatives, have decided to run for office. Far more have joined the high-paid consultant ranks.

Unlike John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, who inspired virtual legislatures of politicians and became generational touchstones, Mr. Obama has so far had little such influence. That is all the more remarkable considering he came to office tapping into spirit of volunteerism and community service that pollsters say is widespread and intense among young people. Mr. Obama has come to represent that spirit, but he has failed, pollsters say, to transform it into meaningful engagement in the political process.

“If you were to call it an Obama generation, there was a window,” said John Della Volpe, the director of polling at the Institute of Politics at Harvard University. “That opportunity has been lost.” He said the youth

who came of voting age around the time of the 2008 election have since lost interest in electoral politics, and pointed to a survey he conducted last year among 18- to 29-year-olds. Although 70 percent said they considered community service an honorable endeavor, only 35 percent said the same about running for office.

“We’re seeing the younger cohort is even less connected with him generally, with his policies, as well as politics generally,” Mr. Della Volpe added, referring to Mr. Obama. Sergio Bendixen, who worked as a pollster for Mr. Obama, blamed a social media-addled generation accustomed to instant gratification for the drop-off. After getting swept up by the Obama movement of 2008, he said, “They went on to the next website and then the next click on their computer. I just don’t see the generation as all that ideological or invested in causes for the long run.”

Mr. Lesser, who once worked down the hall from the Oval Office as a special assistant to David Axelrod, Mr. Obama’s former chief strategist, is well aware that he is both an exemplar and exception of the Obama generation.

“If you want to be involved in politics, at a certain point you’ve got to walk the walk,” said Mr. Lesser, who oversaw all the staff and reporter luggage during the 2008 campaign. (“I never lost one bag,” he likes to tell voters. “No one can say Eric Lesser doesn’t deliver.”)

Mr. Lesser admits, however, that it is tempting to watch the new lives of many of his White House peers, among them Mr. Obama’s former chief speechwriter, Jon Favreau, and all the others who have gone into consulting.

“My buddies are posting pictures on Facebook of zooming around Davos,” Mr. Lesser said, though he added that those who had gone that avenue had “missed the point a little bit. I think that if I wanted to get rich, politics wouldn’t have been the route I would have gone down.”

Instead, he spoke about how Mr. Obama’s return to Chicago to run for the Illinois State Senate after graduating from Harvard Law resonated with him. He said his Washington friends supported his decision to go back home, although some, he said, told him it was “lame.”

Mr. Lesser is not entirely alone, and White House officials hopefully point to the scattering of young Obama veterans running for or already holding office around the country. “I expect to see more of them,” Mr. Axelrod said.

By the time Mr. Lesser left the White House in July 2011, he had the grandiose title of director of strategic planning for the White House Council of Economic Advisers. Now he promotes his direct link to

Washington's power brokers as a way to help his district fix broken roads, fight drug use and improve the local economy. On Tuesday evening, he hopes to get some pointers from the president himself at the White House [Passover](#) Seder, which Mr. Lesser first organized and always returns to Washington to help lead.

Mr. Lesser also gets strategic advice from Mr. Axelrod. "I tell him to stay close to home, focus on local communities, talk about it from the bottom up," Mr. Axelrod said. David Plouffe, the senior White House adviser who ran Mr. Obama's 2008 campaign, has counseled Mr. Lesser on field operations. Geoffrey Garin, a prominent Democratic pollster, threw him a fund-raiser. Chris Hughes, a Facebook co-founder who he knew from Harvard and the 2008 Obama race, contributes to his campaign.

Hardly least, the White House political office did not object to his use of the president's image on his fliers. "I started off carrying his bags," it says above the smiling heads of the president and Mr. Lesser. Splashed across their midsections it adds, "I ended up working for his Council of Economic Advisers."

But on the ground, Mr. Lesser seems very much like the handful of other Democrats running in a September primary, just younger. On a recent morning, as he spoke to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers about his grandfather's work as a longshoreman and his father's stint as a union organizer, Mr. Lesser learned that one of the burly 12 men who had come to hear him speak also spelled Eric with a "c."

"Awesome, me too," Mr. Lesser said.

Other times he gamely embraced the oddities of campaigns. In the town of Wilbraham, Mr. Lesser toured FloDesign Inc., a technology firm, and marveled at the work it was doing in biological research, using the ovary cells of a species called the Chinese hamster. Then he stopped to pose with the recipient of an office prize — a "stuffed ovary" that vaguely resembled a stuffed, oval-shaped animal — and which read "ova achievers."

Mr. Lesser then headed to a polling place for a local election, where he encountered Debra Boronski, the Republican nominee whom Mr. Lesser hopes to face in November. She stood alone under a red umbrella.

After exchanging pleasantries, Ms. Boronski looked at him and said, "I see an ambitious young man." The district voted for Mr. Obama, but, she said, preferred Scott Brown, a Republican, who lost his Senate seat in 2012 to Elizabeth Warren, a Democrat. She said that Mr. Lesser's fliers focused on Mr. Obama "kind of shows his naïveté."

Mr. Lesser next drove through Longmeadow, where he and his wife and 9-month-old daughter live with his parents, a doctor and a social worker, in his childhood home. He pointed out his high school, where he served as class president all four years (campaign slogan: “The Lesser of Two Evils”) and formed a coalition to protect the jobs of teachers. Later, after carrying his daughter into a senior center and showing her off at a schmoozing session, he went door to door in Ludlow with an Obama-style app that helped him locate potential supporters. At one house Lucille Nunes, 84, told him she was tutoring a neighbor, Rafaela Fernandes, 12, in reading. As the candidate and voter talked at length about the importance of teachers, the girl came to the door.

“You’ve got a few years to get involved, but you can volunteer,” Mr. Lesser told her. Ms. Nunes then turned to Mr. Lesser and implored, “Got to get these young people involved!”