

THW set maximum age limits for elected office.

The Case for Age Limits in American Politics

Esquire, By Jack Holmes, July 20, 2022

The FAA mandates that pilots retire at 65. Their colleagues in air-traffic control are out at 56, though they can get exceptions to work until they're 61. Most police departments show employees the door in their 60s. At white-shoe law firms, partners are often pointed to the exit sign by age 68. Foreign-service employees at the State Department are out at 65. Mandatory retirements are mostly [forbidden] in the United States. But there are some professions with such intense physical and mental demands, that require such high-stakes decision-making and mental acuity, that we've decided they're just different.

There's been a minimum age limit to hold various federal offices for centuries. For the House of Representatives, it's 25. For the Senate, it's 30. For the presidency, it's 35. This doesn't mean that no one under age 25 could ever serve competently in the House, or that everyone over 25 belongs there. After all, the current age requirement failed to keep out Madison Cawthorn, now 27.

Really, though, these are all arbitrary numbers, set by the Founders in a far different time. The average age among signers of the Declaration of Independence was 44. Jefferson was 33. He, John Adams, and George Washington all left office at 65. In the current Senate, the oldest in history, 65 is fairly spritely—a bit above the median of 64. Twenty-seven members are in their 70s, and seven are in their 80s. The Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, is 82. Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader in the Senate, is 80. The president of the United States, Joe Biden, is turning 80 in November. The median age of an American person is 38.

In April, two U. S. senators who've served with Dianne Feinstein for years told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that sometimes she does not fully recognize them. They were joined by two other senators in questioning, anonymously, whether the 89-year-old Feinstein is still fit to fulfill her duties representing the nearly 40 million people of California. Her aides have reported that she sometimes forgets things they just briefed her on—or that the briefing happened at all. At a 2020 hearing with then Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey, Feinstein asked him the exact same question twice, as though she had no idea she'd just asked it. At the time, she was the ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, a perch from which she helped oversee confirmation hearings for Supreme Court justices who will adjudicate American law for decades after she's gone.

Feinstein is an extreme example. But a large volume of research on cognitive decline and aging is clear that by your 70s, and particularly your late 70s, you are likely to experience some significant decline in your memory and reasoning capabilities. We've made huge advances in medical science to keep human bodies functioning longer. Have we made the advances to match when it comes to the functioning of human minds?

House and Senate committees regularly hold hearings with Silicon Valley CEOs, nominally on the issue of Big Tech monopolies and what must be done about them. There you can find senators using their five minutes to ask Mark Zuckerberg how he makes money when people don't pay for his service—"Senator, we run ads"—or how they can stop getting ads for chocolate. Sixty-seven-year-old Lindsey Graham, a spring chicken for this bunch, was bragging as recently as 2015 that he had never sent an email. These are the people who are going to repeal Section 230 and craft legislation to replace it? At what point are folks who've spent most of their lives ordering from the Sears catalog unfit to regulate Amazon? And it's not just tech. When the Supreme Court tossed *Roe v. Wade*, the number-three House Democrat, Jim Clyburn, 82, said the decision was "a little anticlimactic" and that he hoped to find "the extent to which we can move legislatively to respond." Not exactly channeling the fury of the young women who form a vital part of the Democratic base.

There is value in having experienced legislators around. This is actually one of the primary arguments against (age-agnostic) term limits, a policy that in theory would cut down on corruption and cronyism by removing entrenched power players. In practice, though, term limits can enhance the power of lobbyists and industry insiders, who become the only force in the policy-making process that remains constant over years and decades as more inexperienced lawmakers cycle in and out. Term limits alone would also not necessarily prevent the phenomenon of 90-year-old senators. And by the way, state political machines are often quite happy with gerontocrats running for as long as they like. It raises the probability that they'll leave office mid-term, at which point their governors would appoint a replacement—who, in turn, will not forget the gesture when they run with an incumbent's advantage the next cycle.

Not that everyone on the older side is unfit. Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts, 76, defeated young upstart Joe Kennedy III in a 2020 primary in part by harnessing the energy of youth climate activists. Elizabeth Warren, Mitch McConnell, and Nancy Pelosi are all still, whatever you think of their politics, formidable. Grassley has authored a bill to take on monopolization in the meatpacking industry that's won praise from experts and across the aisle. Bernie Sanders transformed American politics when he ran for president in 2016, at age 74. In a different political culture, though, could he have become a national figure earlier in his career—and his life? How much does an entrenched class of older political power players discourage younger people from getting into the game? Taking a hard look at our gerontocracy can be a demoralizing experience. It's difficult to dispute that Joe Biden at 79 is not the same Joe Biden who danced circles around Paul Ryan at a vice-presidential debate in 2012. Does this mean he is unfit to serve? So far, it doesn't appear so. Though in July, *The New York Times* reported that a Biden aide deemed ten days of international travel "crazy" for the aging president. And his approval ratings among younger Americans have sunk into the toilet. Maybe it's inflation, or maybe it's that he's conspicuously old, struggling through speeches and even to move around the podium. It's hard to see a bold future when the present looks like the past. Or maybe it's that after years of his party describing the climate crisis as an existential threat to human civilization as we know it, the Democrats have so far mostly just secured some funding for electric-vehicle chargers.

Are these the kinds of results we'd get if the country were run by the generations that will experience far worse fires and floods and drought? I'm willing to find out. It's not that older folks, who make up a significant chunk of the American population, shouldn't be properly represented in the halls of power. It's that they're way overrepresented, and it is bending the trajectory of our national life. The American story has been crowded out by the story of the baby-boomer generation.

In China, the Communist-party leadership is usually out at 68, though Xi Jinping blew right through that. The benefits of being President for Life. We'd like to think we do things differently over here, not least because we've long prided ourselves on the dynamism of democratic life as compared with our totalitarian frenemies. By the time Gorbachev took the reins amid the Soviet Union's steep decline in the mid-to-late 1980s, the Politburo was going stale, staffed with apparatchiks of such advanced age that it became a target of derision in the West. It's not hard to see why: An aging governing class calcifies decision-making and makes a country less nimble and forward-looking. Let's avoid the same fate and not merely encourage our elder leaders to retire. Let's require it. Call it ageism if you want, but let's get ourselves a maximum to go with our minimum: Once you turn 80, you can't run for public office anymore. Go spend some more time with the grandkids—it's the law.

Should there be an age limit to hold elected office?

National Public Radio August 9, 2023

NPR's Steve Inskeep talks to public health professor S. Jay Olshansky at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who has studied the longevity of every U.S. president.

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

Two recent incidents in the U.S. Senate called attention to some senators' age. Republican Mitch McConnell froze in mid-sentence during a news conference before a colleague led him away. Democrat Dianne Feinstein hesitated during a committee meeting. And you can hear in this audio an aide instructing her to vote aye.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED CLERK: Senator Feinstein?

DIANNE FEINSTEIN: Um.

PATTY MURRAY: You say aye.

FEINSTEIN: Pardon me?

MURRAY: Aye.

FEINSTEIN: Yeah.

MURRAY: Just say aye.

FEINSTEIN: I would like to support a yes vote on this.

INSKEEP: All this happens as the president runs for reelection. He'll be 82 next year, and his leading Republican rival will be 78. We've called on S. Jay Olshansky, who's a professor of public health at the University of Illinois at Chicago who studies aging. And he's analyzed the longevity of U.S. presidents all the way back to George Washington. Welcome, sir.

S JAY OLSHANSKY: Thanks for having me.

INSKEEP: What have you thought about as people have questioned the age of some of our national leaders?

OLSHANSKY: Well, we really shouldn't be using age as the primary barometer to evaluate individuals for

president. Look, if we're going to do that, we might as well use weight as well. No, not not a good idea.

INSKEEP: Explain what you mean by that.

OLSHANSKY: Well, look, the - I'm not going to sugarcoat aging. There's no question that the older we get, the higher the risk of things going wrong. But there's plenty of people that make it out to older ages perfectly healthy in mind and body, but certainly in mind and perfectly capable of being president. And I don't know how you would actually put some sort of age barometer. How would you determine what the proper number is? It's just simply age discrimination if you try to do something like that.

INSKEEP: So if you said, well, you should retire at 65 or no one should be president after the age of 70 - if somebody said something like that, you'd say there's no reason for that at all.

OLSHANSKY: Absolutely not. Like, I said, the - you know, some of the - some individuals make it out to older ages perfectly healthy. Some are at younger ages and not healthy. So how many times you've traveled around the sun is probably not the best barometer of whether or not somebody should be president. And look, if you're going to use age as the primary factor, you're never going to vote for somebody over the age of 40.

INSKEEP: You know, as we're talking, cable television is on, and there's an anti-Joe Biden ad of some kind that just showed a bunch of shots of him stumbling and so forth. So clearly, people have made this part of the conversation. But are you saying there's a difference between someone's biological age and, say, their cognitive age?

OLSHANSKY: Yes. Look, this is well known in the world of aging, in the world of aging science, that chronological age is not a good barometer of biological age. You can get people out to into their 80s and 90s that can operate at levels that are 10, 20, 30 years younger than their chronological age. And the reverse is also true. People can be in their 40s and 50s and operate at the level of somebody who's much, much older. We've looked at the medical records of Biden and Trump and discovered that they are both exhibiting attributes that are associated with superagers, individuals that make it out very healthy and cognitively intact.

INSKEEP: Now, that's really interesting because critics of both men will focus on signs of dementia and so forth. You said superagers. What is a superager?

OLSHANSKY: These are individuals that make it out past the age of 80 that are functioning at a cognitive level that is often decades younger than their chronological age. It just tells you that we age, we grow old, we senesce at different rates. So you cannot look at all people that are over the age of 80, for example, and assume that they're all going to operate the same way. You know, it doesn't work that way. There's a lot of variability that exists, and Biden has exhibited plenty of attributes associated with being a superager.

INSKEEP: OK, so we've got to take a case by case and not just by a number. S. Jay Olshansky of the University of Illinois, Chicago. Thank you so much.

OLSHANSKY: Thank you.

The Effects of the Seniority System on How Congress Works

ThoughtCo.com, By Kathy Gill, Updated on May 30, 2019

How Power Is Amassed in Congress

The term "seniority system" is used to describe the practice of granting special perks and privileges to members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives who have served the longest. The seniority system has been the target of numerous reform initiatives over the years, all of which have failed to prevent the most senior members of Congress from amassing tremendous power.

Senior Member Privileges

Members with seniority are allowed to choose their own offices and committee assignments. The latter is one of the most important privileges a member of Congress can earn because committees are where most of the important legislative work actually happens, not on the floor of the House and Senate.

Members with a longer term of service on a committee are also assumed to be senior, and therefore they have more power within the committee. Seniority is also usually, but not always, considered when each party awards committee chairmanships, the most powerful position on a committee.

History of the Seniority System

The seniority system in Congress dates back to 1911 and a revolt against House Speaker Joseph Cannon, writes Robert E. Dewhirst in his "Encyclopedia of the United States Congress." A seniority system of sorts was already in place, but Cannon nonetheless wielded tremendous power, controlling nearly every aspect governing which bills would be introduced in the House.

Leading a reform coalition of 42 fellow Republicans, Nebraska representative George Norris introduced a resolution that would remove the Speaker from the Rules Committee, effectively stripping him of all power. Once adopted, the seniority system allowed members of the House to advance and win committee assignments even if the leadership of

their party opposed them.

Effects of the Seniority System

Congress members favor the seniority system because it is seen as a nonpartisan method for selecting committee chairmen, as opposed to a system that employs patronage, cronyism, and favoritism. “It is not that Congress loves seniority more,” a former House member from Arizona, Stewart Udall, once said, “but the alternatives less.”

The seniority system enhances the power of the committee chairs (limited to six years since 1995) because they are no longer beholden to the interests of party leaders. Because of the nature of the terms of office, seniority is more important in the Senate (where the terms are for six years), than in the House of Representatives (where the terms are for only two years).

Some of the most powerful leadership positions—speaker of the House and majority leader—are elected positions and therefore somewhat immune to the seniority system.

Seniority also refers to a legislator's social standing in Washington, D.C. The longer a member has served, the better his office location and the more likely he or she will be invited to important parties and other get-togethers. Since there are no term limits for members of Congress, this means members with seniority can, and do, amass great amounts of power and influence.

Criticism of the Seniority System

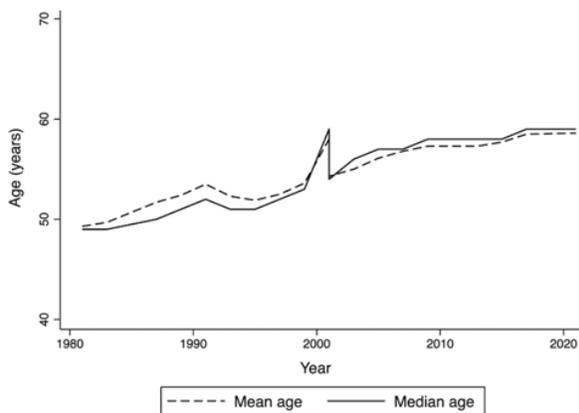
Opponents of the seniority system in Congress say it gives advantage to lawmakers from so-called “safe” districts (in which voters overwhelmingly support one political party or the other) and doesn't necessarily guarantee that the most qualified person will be chair. All it would take to end the seniority system in the Senate, for instance, is a simple majority vote to amend its Rules. Then again, the chances of any member of Congress voting to decrease his or her own is zero to none.

Source: Dewhirst, Robert E. "Encyclopedia of the United States Congress." Facts on File Library of American History, Facts on File, October 1, 2006.

Politicians are getting older – shutting young people out of decision-making around the world

The Conversation, By Aksel Sundström and Daniel Stockemer, January 5, 2023

Figure 1. Age of members in the US House of Representatives



How US politicians are getting older. University of Gothenburg/University of Ottawa, Author provided

US president Joe Biden is clearly frustrated about the focus on his age. In mid-December last year he reportedly vented to allies, saying: “You think I don't know how... old I am?” But, as attention turns to the 2024 election, the prospect of Biden – now 80 years old – running for another term which would last until he is 86, means that this is an issue that is unlikely to go away.

And rightly so – Biden is the oldest US president in history. Taking into account other prominent US politicians such as Donald Trump (who is 76) and Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer (who is 72), the age of American political leaders has become a hotly debated topic.

But it's not just a factor in party leadership. In the legislative term 2020-2022, the average member of the US House of Representatives was about 20 years older than the average citizen. In addition, the age of members in the House have risen for the past four decades (see Figure 1).

Voters seem to think that this is a problem. A September CBS News poll illustrates that Americans voice concern over the lack of youth in politics. Almost 47% state that having more young people in office would make politics better. Moreover, a Reuters/Ipsos poll taken in November 2022 finds that almost nine out of ten Americans support a cutoff of 75 years old for serving as president.

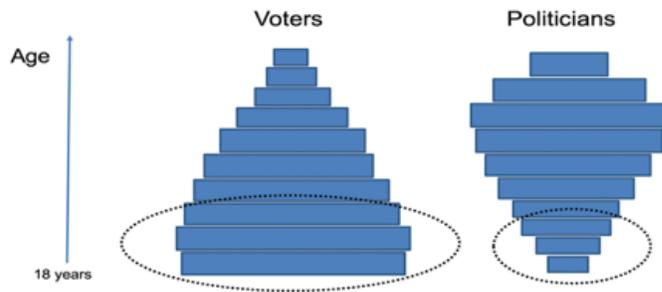
In our new book *Youth without Representation*, we address young adults' under-representation in parliaments and cabinets. We show that young adults – those aged 35 years or below – tend to be scarce among decision-makers. Globally, people 18 to 35 years face an under-representation in legislatures by a factor of three, relative to their share in the population (their share of the electorate is three times bigger than among legislators), and at a factor of ten in cabinets.

We interviewed former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark. Her views summarise several aspects of this

challenge:

I think the old age of legislators is a problem. We have the world's largest generation ever of youth. So if decisions are being made by an age cohort that is decades above that and is not attuned to their perspective I think it's a serious democratic deficit. I used to be of the view that people needed to come into parliaments with some degree of maturity and background. I actually no longer think that. I think a parliament is a place where young people with

Figure 2. The underrepresentation of youth in parliaments across the globe.



Imbalance of ages between politicians and the general public worldwide. University of Gothenburg/University of Ottawa, Author provided

fresh perspectives should be. And I think our political system should accommodate that.

Youth issues not on the agenda

The age discrepancy between leaders and citizens raises essential questions. What explains the underrepresentation of youth in politics – and how can this situation be changed?

The under-representation of young adults in decision-making can mean that issues important to them fall off the agenda – climate change being the most obvious. And their relative absence can contribute to a vicious cycle of alienation, also including low voter turnout and political interest

among youth.

One of the things we found was that young candidates are less likely to succeed in the electoral process, compared to older candidates. This is partly because they are often nominated in races where they have little chances of winning or are designated to low placements on party lists. But while these disadvantages apply to many parties, there is also variation. Across the more than 270 parties in the 52 countries we analysed, we found that newly created parties have generally younger MPs. But as these parties mature, representatives tend to get older as well. Parties with younger leaders tend to have a younger group in the legislature.

A big barrier for young candidates is their lack of experience. But, with selection processes that favour incumbency, there is, all too often, little space for parliamentary turnover. Moreover, many assemblies around the world have a culture of seniority in which youth struggle to be noticed.

Across the 100 countries we studied, we found effects from rules of minimum age requirements for office. Many countries across the globe only allow those above 21, 25 or even 30 years to run (for example the US Senate requires candidates to be at least 30). Not only do these rules hinder youth legally, but also signals who politics is for. We also discovered that countries with proportional representation in their electoral systems, including those in Scandinavia, elect a higher share of young adults.

When looking at cabinets, we find similar patterns. For instance, younger leaders tend to make cabinets younger. We also detect a contagion effect, that is, a young parliament triggers a young cabinet – and this happens regardless of whether cabinet members must be elected MPs or not.

Encouraging youth

What can we do to change the situation? Term limits could be a way to break the incumbency advantage and give youth a chance to claim nomination. Setting the age barrier to run for office at 18 would allow youth to run and send a message that they are welcome in politics. At the organisational level, political parties must work to break the culture of seniority – quotas could be an efficient option, if seriously implemented.

Young people will live the longest with the laws we are adopting now. They should be given the chance to be involved in the decision-making process.

As young conservatives try to get climate on the agenda in 2024, denial takes the spotlight instead

CNN, By [Ella Nilsen](#), Mon August 28, 2023

Note: This article is abridged.

During this week's [Republican primary debate](#) on [Fox News](#), a young voter notably asked about the climate crisis: How would these presidential candidates assuage concerns that the Republican Party "doesn't care" about the

issue...

What followed the question was one of the night’s most chaotic exchanges, demonstrating the challenge some conservatives face in getting climate policy on the 2024 GOP agenda, [even as extreme weather takes its toll](#) on millions of people across the country...

38-year-old Vivek Ramaswamy – notably the youngest candidate on stage – called the “climate change agenda” a “hoax,” an answer that elicited intense boos from the audience.

Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley [age 51] acknowledged its reality but said foreign nations, including India and China, bear larger responsibility for addressing it.

A majority of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents – 55% – say human activity is causing changes to the world’s climate, according to a recent [Washington Post/University of Maryland poll](#). It also found a majority of Americans and Republicans say their area has been impacted by extreme heat in the past five years.

But connecting the dots between climate and extreme weather is proving a more partisan issue. The poll found there are deep divides between Republicans and Democrats on the question of whether human-caused climate change is contributing to extreme weather: just 35% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents said they think climate change is a major factor in extremely hot days, compared with 85% of those who lean Democrat.

Out With the Old, In With the Young

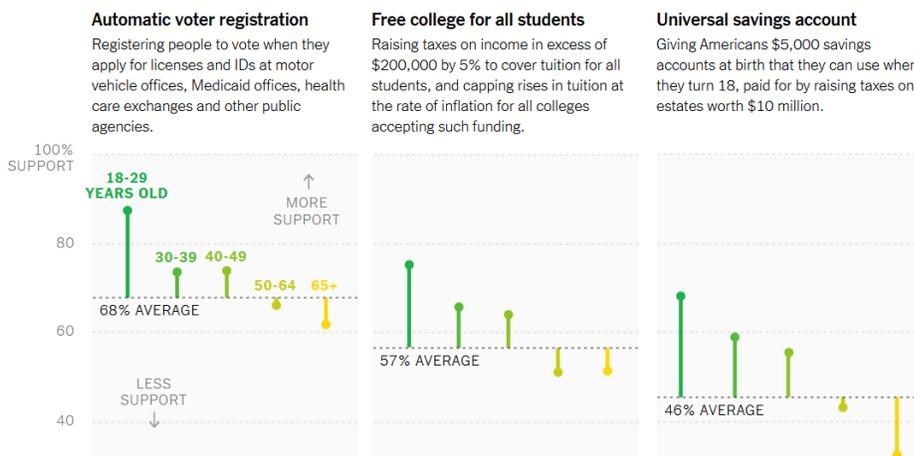
The New York Times, By Astra Taylor, October 18, 2019

October 18, 2019

NOTE: This article has been abridged

...The American electorate is the oldest it’s been since at least 1970 and is graying at a rapid clip, with the well-off

Where Older and Younger Voters Differ



living longer than ever before. By 2034, [according to the Census Bureau](#), the population 65 and older will exceed the population under 18; by 2060 the 65-and-older crowd is projected to have almost doubled. There are some 74 million baby boomers alone, and when election time comes, they turn out in droves. During the 2018 midterms, 64 percent of citizens ages 54 to 72 cast a ballot, compared to 31 percent of eligible voters 29 and under.

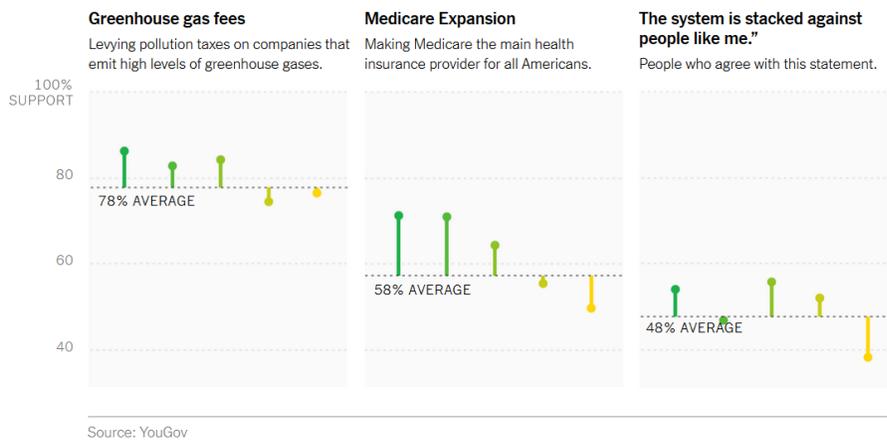
“Money, numbers and power have been inexorably accruing to the aging ‘baby

boomer’ generation for the last few decades,” the political scientist John Seery warned in his 2011 book [“Too Young to Run?”](#) The trends show no signs of slowing. Migration to metropolitan centers by people who tend to be younger and more diverse, along with rural depopulation and aging, will only intensify age-based inequities given the geographic biases of the American electoral system. Call it the coming gerontocracy...

...A profound and growing experiential divide now fuels conflicting outlooks, material interests and political priorities. Not only is the cohort of people born after 1980 much more diverse than that of Americans now entering retirement (nearly 80 percent of Americans over 65 are white, a figure that drops to around 50 percent for people between 6 and 21) they are less well-off compared to their predecessors at the same age. (Given the persistence of racial discrimination, though, diversity and precarity cannot be neatly disentangled.)

Black and indigenous people, white men without property, women and some religious groups were all excluded from America’s original democratic compact. So were young people, though we rarely consider this fact.

In “Too Young to Run?” Professor Seery argues that the Constitution effectively treats young people as second-class citizens by imposing minimum age requirements for elected federal office: 25 for Congress, 30 for the Senate, and 35 for president. The nation’s framers, the youngest of whom was 26, Professor Seery writes, “bequeathed an age



bias unto posterity by which they themselves did not fully abide,” devising rules ensuring that the country would be governed by people more senior than themselves. (The founders no doubt knew a Latin root of the word “senator,” senex, means “old man.”) The geographically based idiosyncrasies of American democracy that the founders put in place compound the problem. On average, ballots cast by older people hold more weight and are less

frequently “wasted” than those of the young. (Wasted votes are those garnered in excess of what a candidate needs to win; in our winner-take-all systems that means anything over 50 percent.) Clustered in sparsely populated states and counties, voters who are older, whiter and wealthier get a boost: Older Americans wield disproportionate sway over the Electoral College, the Senate and a gerrymandered Congress.

...Migration patterns worsen these trends. A growing percentage of young people now dream of city life, but their preferences inadvertently reduce their political clout: “18 percent of rural residents are 65 or older versus 15 percent in suburban and small metro counties and 13 percent in cities,” [the Pew Research Center reported last year](#). Millennials, concentrated in metropolitan areas, [are the predominant generation](#) of potential voters in only 86 congressional districts, while boomer voters predominate in 341. By 2040, 70 percent of Americans [are expected](#) to live in the 15 most populous states; that would mean that 70 percent of America will be represented by only 30 senators.

The environment is one of the critical lines separating the old from the young. Baby boomers may have helped organize the first Earth Day in 1970, but back then ecological disaster was a more distant threat. Today, intimate knowledge of planetary devastation, from hurricanes to forest fires, is distressingly common.

The other critical divide is the economy. The boomers who came of age in the 1950s and ’60s benefited from boom times while millennials and Generation Z have been dogged by the aftermath of the mortgage meltdown, an underwhelming recovery and Gilded Age levels of inequality. One generation enjoyed a comparatively high minimum wage, affordable college tuition and reasonable costs of living; for everyone after, stagnating wages, ballooning student debt and unaffordable housing have become the norm.

“Millennials are less well off than members of earlier generations when they were young,” [a 2018 report by economists from the Federal Reserve Board](#) bluntly states. [Other economists have shown](#) that a household headed by someone born in 1970 has a quarter less income and 40 percent less wealth than one headed by a comparable person born in 1940. In contrast, between 1989 and 2013, only the cohort of families headed by people at least 62 saw an increase in median wealth. Older people are more likely to own property, stocks and other assets — and, consequently, to prefer policies that will keep the values of those assets high. No wonder so many young people have pivoted left, rejecting conventional wisdom about the virtues of unfettered capitalism.

Just as affluence translates into political power, being comparatively precarious creates a disempowering feedback loop. Burdened by student loans, young people are postponing home ownership, marriage and starting families. As a result, they are less likely to feel they have a stake in the communities where they live, which means they are less likely to participate politically and thus have their interests adequately represented. This puts policies overwhelmingly favored by the young at a further disadvantage.

Mitch McConnell’s ‘sandbag’ moment stokes anxiety over US gerontocracy

Financial Times, Lauren Fedor in Washington JULY 29 2023

When Mitch McConnell, the Senate’s top Republican, froze mid-sentence while speaking to reporters on Capitol

Hill this week, the silence was deafening.

Minority leader's health scare sparks debate as 80-year-old Joe Biden campaigns for second term

"Are you good, Mitch?" asked Iowa senator Joni Ernst, after 30 speechless seconds. Wyoming senator John Barrasso took McConnell's arm. "Mitch? Anything else you want to say?" he said in a whisper caught on camera. "Or should we just go back to your office?"

McConnell, 81, left, but returned a few minutes afterwards to say he was "fine". Later, he told reporters US president Joe Biden had called to check on him.

"I told him I got sandbagged," McConnell said, repeating the phrase Biden used after tripping on a sandbag following a speech at the Air Force Academy last month.

Both men tried to make light of their situations. But the episode has raised anew uncomfortable questions about the age and frailty of lawmakers in Washington, where so many influential politicians are octogenarians.

McConnell, who had a lengthy absence from the Senate this year after suffering a fall at an event at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in Washington, is far from the US Senate's oldest member. That title belongs to Dianne Feinstein, the 90-year-old California Democrat. Chuck Grassley, the Republican senior senator from Iowa, is 89.

Feinstein's age has been a particular cause for consternation after the Democratic lawmaker was absent from Congress for an extended period following a bout of shingles. She has appeared strikingly frail since returning to Capitol Hill and doubts over her cognitive abilities linger.

This week, she looked confused about what to do during a committee hearing, until a Democratic colleague, Patty Murray of Washington, instructed her to "just say 'aye'".

Meanwhile, at 80 years old, Biden has set the record for the oldest person elected US president. He will be 86 at the end of his second four-year term if he wins re-election.

Biden's age and insinuations about his mental acuity have become a regular theme in Republican attacks on the president, especially on social media, even though the party's frontrunner Donald Trump is just three years younger than the president.

In a Harvard Caps/Harris poll of about 2,000 registered voters this month 68 per cent — including 43 per cent of Democrats — thought Biden was "showing he is too old to be president", up from 66 per cent in June.

Larry Sabato, founder of the University of Virginia Center for Politics, said Biden's age would "of course" be a factor as voters weighed their options in 2024. "How could it not be?"

The president's allies have tried to pitch his age as an asset, betting voters will reward him for decades of experience at the top of government, first as a senator and later as vice-president and president.

Analysts say the strategy could bear fruit.

Sabato said: "We do value seniority, and we value people's experience. Sometimes it makes more sense to elect someone who actually knows what they are doing, and knows where the levers of power are and where the bodies are buried."

But he cautioned that ultimately, Biden's age and experience were unlikely to shift dramatically his levels of support, either positively or negatively, in next year's general election.

"In the end, when people vote for president, after their party ID, which determines 90 per cent of the vote, they consider the big things: the state of the economy, war and peace, scandal."

Doug Heye, a veteran Republican strategist and longtime senior aide to Republicans on Capitol Hill, agreed, noting US voters on both sides of the political aisle have gone out of their way to pick older presidential candidates in recent election cycles.

"Who was Donald Trump running against? A lot of people who were younger than him. Who was Joe Biden running against? A lot of people who were younger than him," Heye said.

Trump is leading a crowded field of Republicans, including some who are many decades his junior, in the race to take on Biden at the ballot box next year.

"Ultimately, campaigns are about one person versus another," Heye added. "Their age will be factored into that. But that is one of many factors."

On Capitol Hill, McConnell and his allies have swiftly moved to squash suggestions that he is planning to step down any time soon. The Kentucky senator's six-year term is due to end in 2026.

"Leader McConnell appreciates the continued support of his colleagues, and plans to serve his full term in the job they overwhelmingly elected him to do," a McConnell spokesperson said.
