

“Watch Me”: Joe Biden’s Age

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At age eighty-one, Joe Biden is the oldest president in U.S. history. Donald Trump, his predecessor, held the same status during his term in office. When the next chief executive is inaugurated on January 20, 2025, Biden will be eighty-two years old and Trump seventy-eight. Whoever wins will be the oldest president in history. No wonder that age figures prominently in the presidential election campaign of 2024.

Generally speaking, leading U.S. politicians are setting age records by the day, undoubtedly a partial reflection of the overall aging of the U.S. population. An analysis by the website *FiveThirtyEight* of the members of Congress found that in 2023, the average age of U.S. senators had reached an all-time high of 65.3 years, whereas that of the representatives had peaked in 2021 at 58.3 years, to decline slightly to 57.8 years by 2023, still way above the hundred-year low of 48.4 years in 1983 (Skelley).

The Framers of the Constitution worried somewhat about age. They wanted to make sure that leading politicians were not too young. The age requirement for the House of Representatives was set at twenty-five years and that of the Senate—that more prestigious body of elders—at thirty. As James Madison pointed out in *Federalist No. 62*, the “senatorial trust” required a “greater extent of information and stability of character,” and therefore necessitated “that the senator should have reached a period of life most likely to supply these advantages” (Madison 376). Based on Madison’s argument, one can reasonably deduce that the decision to raise the minimum age requirement for the presidency to thirty-five was rooted in the belief that the chief executive should possess an even greater level of experience and wisdom than what was deemed necessary for a senator. Thus far, the youngest president was Theodore Roosevelt who, when he was sworn in on September 14, 1901, upon the assassination of William McKinley, was forty-two years old. The average age of

presidents at their first inauguration is 53.6 years.¹

Of course, it was the age requirement that seventy-three-year-old President Ronald Reagan poked fun at during his re-election campaign in 1984 when in a TV debate with his Democratic rival Walter Mondale, aged fifty-six, he famously said, “I want you to know that also I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience” (“Debate”).

Usually, however, older age has not played any significant part in presidential election campaigns. True, older presidents would have had a harder time employing some of the rhetoric used by some of their younger peers. It would be more problematic for a Biden or a Trump to claim, as did forty-three-year-old John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address in 1961, that “the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans,” or to talk too much about “change,” as Barack Obama did in 2008 at age forty-seven. That being said, it is hardly unreasonable to suggest that, in actual fact, both Trump and Biden offered more “change” whilst presidents than Obama ever did. Trump challenged the constitutional order in an unprecedented manner and even incited a mob to march on Congress on January 6, 2021. Biden proposed an ambitious Build Back Better plan that would have transformed the United States into something approaching an EU welfare state.

Of course, leading politicians may grow too old. Recently, two chilling examples were reported in the news. During a press briefing on Capitol Hill on July 26, 2023, Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, then eighty-one, froze up mid-sentence for about thirty seconds. On August 30, he did it again. Just one day after McConnell’s first mishap, Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein, aged ninety, appeared to have no idea that she was supposed to be casting a vote in the Senate. An advisor whispered, “Say aye.” Instead, the senator went on a short rant about the bill she was supposed to simply vote on. Only when another advisor approached her, did she finally vote. Less than one month later, Senator Feinstein was dead. In February 2024, McConnell announced that he would be stepping down as

¹ The author’s calculation.

Minority Leader after the November elections (*Washington Post*). ([Also see the interview with Ashton Applewhite on Feinstein.](#))

Is Joe Biden too old to serve another term? If he wins—and completes—a second term, he will be eighty-six years old by the time he steps down on January 20, 2029. U.S. Supreme justices have a well-earned reputation for remaining in office for a long time. Of course, they have no term limit. Of the 116 individuals who historically have served on the U.S. Supreme Court, forty-four remained in office for at least twenty years, including fifteen who served for more than thirty years. And yet even among the Supreme Court justices, just four were older than Biden will be in January 2029, when their tenure ended. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. and John Paul Stevens were each aged ninety when they retired in 1932 and 2010, respectively. Roger B. Taney and Ruth Bader Ginsburg were each eighty-seven years old, when they died in office, in 1864 and 2020, respectively. All other Supreme Court justices ended their terms at younger ages than Biden will be in 2029.²

In February 2024, Special Counsel Robert K. Hur, who was investigating Biden’s apparent mishandling of classified documents dating back to his time as senator and vice president, issued a report that while not recommending prosecution of the president characterized him as a “well-meaning elderly man with a poor memory.” The White House and leading Democrats quickly accused Hur of politicizing, and Biden himself angrily retorted, “I’m well-meaning and I’m an elderly man and I know what the hell I’m doing” (Hur; Gersen). Still, the president has sent out signals that are worrisome. Sometimes, quite literally, he stumbles and falls. At his age, such occurrences can potentially have serious physical consequences. Even though Biden, fairly or not, has been characterized as a “gaffe-machine” who overcame a childhood stutter, his gaffes appear to have increased in volume lately. In February 2024, Biden mixed up French President Emmanuel Macron with the deceased former President Francois Mitterand, German Ex-Chancellor Angela Merkel with the likewise deceased Ex-Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. Perhaps even

² My calculations based on my database of the life spans and tenures of Supreme Court justices.

more alarming was Biden's behavior at a fundraiser in New York on September 20, 2023. At this event, he recounted the story of how the ugly and violent Neo-Nazi and Ku Klux Klan rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 originally had motivated him to run for president. Minutes later, he repeated the same tale, almost word for word (Whipple 31; Sanic; Goldmacher, Epstein and Glueck; Shear; Biden).

This is not to say that Trump has not also sent out signals which could imply mental decline. At a rally in Concord, New Hampshire, in January 2024, he ranted about how his Republican rival in the Republican primaries Nikki Haley had turned down 10,000 soldiers during the January 6, 2021, riots. He was obviously confusing Haley with former Speaker Nancy Pelosi—a fact that Haley was quick to point out—and the accusation in and of itself was absurd. In April 2024, during a trial in New York revolving around payments of hush money to adult film actress Stormy Daniels, which potentially could send Trump to jail, the former president—who infamously nicknamed Biden “Sleepy Joe”—appeared to doze off more than once (Wells; Bromwich and McKinley).

Given the immense stress both candidates are under, their mental lapses may be perfectly understandable. Still, their blunders are frequently ascribed to their respective ages. Biden is especially stung by this. Thus, polls generally indicate that the U.S. public worries more about his age than Trump's. A *New York Times*/Siena College opinion survey of registered voters in March 2024 indicated that fully seventy-three percent of them either strongly agreed (forty-seven percent), or somewhat agreed (twenty-six percent), with the statement that Biden “is just too old to be an effective president.” Forty-two percent of the voters had a similar idea about Trump, with half of them strongly agreeing and the other half somewhat agreeing with that proposition (Lerer and Igielnik).

Why didn't Biden simply decide to retire after his first term in office? Originally, this may have been his intention. At a campaign rally in Detroit in March 2020, Biden, then seventy-seven and flanked on stage by three younger Democratic politicians—one of whom was Kamala Harris—characterized himself as a “bridge, not as anything else.” To be sure, that same April on ABC's show *The View*, he did try to turn his age into an asset by suggesting that with

age comes “wisdom and experience that can make things a lot better” (Leibovich; Nagle and Karson). If he originally had had his doubts about running for a second term, he ultimately changed his mind. As Biden biographer Chris Whipple reminds us, President George W. Bush’s former White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card once said, “If anybody tells you they’re leaving the White House voluntarily, they’re probably lying” (300).

Biden can easily claim that he has been a successful—if hardly particularly popular—president in a time of deep political polarization and partisan divide. To be sure, he did not succeed in implementing the full “Build Back Better” program, a six-trillion dollar plan that merits comparison with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society. The plan, as originally conceived, included a “human infrastructure” dimension to turn the United States into something approaching a Western European welfare state (Whipple 181, 292; Pfiffner 835). That did not happen. Still, Biden did sign a 1.9 trillion-dollar COVID-19 aid package. He did sign a bipartisan 1.2 trillion-dollar infrastructure bill into law. He did sign the Inflation Reduction Act with a price tag of 700 billion dollars that not only aimed to reduce prescription drug prices and lower the federal budget deficit but constituted the largest investment in clean energy in world history. He did sign the bipartisan CHIPS and Science Act to increase research in and domestic production of semiconductors. He even signed a modest gun law. He presided over a strengthening of NATO with the inclusion of Finland and Sweden. He signed laws providing aid to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. With the consent of the Senate, he appointed Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first Black female justice on the Supreme Court. Notably, his advisors appeared to view him as a detail-oriented and experienced politician in full control (Whipple 178-179; Pfiffner 824).

Yet the worries remain. Textbooks in political science tell us that in most presidential elections, more citizens cast their vote retrospectively than prospectively. They tend to look back on the previous administration to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of the chief executive. More rarely do they base their vote mostly on complex future issues (Wilson et al. 156-157). The

upcoming presidential election promises to be different. Many voters will be peering into the future. They will be asking whether Joe Biden is up for the job for another four years. In an interview on the TV show *60 Minutes* in September 2022, CBS news anchor Scott Pelley challenged Joe Biden: “Some people ask whether you are fit for the job; and when you hear that, I wonder what you think?” Biden simply answered, “Watch me!” (Biden qtd. in Whipple 300; “President Joe Biden”). Indeed, the whole world is watching. It will continue to do so until November 5, 2024—and possibly beyond.

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