

It's Not Just About Age Anymore: The Unpardonable Sin of Forgetfulness Within and Beyond the 2024 U.S. Elections

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The U.S. presidential elections have been the site of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and ageism among other problematic issues. While the 2024 U.S. presidential election continues to be fraught with numerous “isms” and accusations, the focus in this essay is on a new and powerful discrediting tactic: the whisper of cognitive decline. Accusations of cognitive decline not only cast doubt on a politician’s ability to think and act clearly—an unpardonable sin in leadership¹—but also builds on ageist stereotypes that make such accusations seem credible despite evidence. Ultimately, I argue that because Donald Trump and Joe Biden are wealthy, white, educated men of roughly similar ages, seventy-seven and eighty-one respectively, targeting their cognitive status feeds into social stigmas and fears that are difficult to counter and that, unfortunately, the harm caused by this new level of attack negatively affects older people and people living with neurocognitive disorders.

As mentioned, although ageism, sexism (see Shawn J. Parry-Giles), and

¹ Drawn loosely from the well-known concept explored by Puritan theologians (Bradshaw) and later by novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, the notion of the unpardonable sin describes an action or condition so egregious that salvation is not possible. Alleging cognitive decline is meant to create a stigmatized spoiled identity among voters from which there is no redemption.

racism² have figured prominently in several presidential elections, I will limit my focus to ageism and what I'm calling "cognitism" or discrimination against someone based on presumed cognitive status, highlighting a rhetorical shift over the last forty years from questioning chronological age to alleging cognitive decline. I start with the famous 1984 presidential debate between Ronald Reagan (age seventy-three) and Walter Mondale (age fifty-six). Reagan was asked the following by Henry Trehwitt, diplomatic correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun*:

Trehwitt. Mr. President, I want to raise an issue that I think has been lurking out there for 2 or 3 weeks and cast it specifically in national security terms. You already are the oldest President in history. And some of your staff say you were tired after your most recent encounter with Mr. Mondale. I recall yet that President Kennedy had to go for days on end with very little sleep during the Cuban missile crisis. Is there any doubt in your mind that you would be able to function in such circumstances?

Reagan. Not at all, Mr. Trehwitt, and 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. [Laughter and applause] If I still have time, I might add, Mr. Trehwitt, I might add that it was Seneca or it was Cicero, I don't know which, that said, "If it was not for the elders correcting the mistakes of the young, there would be no state." (Reagan Library 14)

Here, Trehwitt suggests that national security would be compromised by Reagan's age, not because of cognition per se but because of declining stamina with age. Trehwitt stresses "security" at issue, something that later opponents will draw on as well. In 1994, six years after leaving office, Reagan, a person well known for public gaffs throughout his career, much like current President Joe Biden, announced he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease (Reagan). This led to great (and continued) speculation about whether he served as president with

² For a more in-depth look at racism and sexism within the U.S. political system, see Enid Lynette Logan's *"At This Defining Moment:" Barack Obama's Presidential Candidacy and the New Politics of Race* (2011); Bettina Spencer's "Impact of Racism and Sexism in the 2008-2020 US Presidential Elections." in *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* (2021); and Kevin Banda and Erin C. Cassese's "Hostile Sexism, Racial Resentment, and Political Mobilization." in *Political Behavior*, (2021).

diminished cognitive capacity and is the cause often cited for current concern about candidates' cognition based on age (Ranganath).

In the 2008 race between John McCain and Barack Obama, candidate age again became an issue. In a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, author Ezra Klein noted that the twenty-five-year age gap between McCain (age seventy-one) and Barack Obama (forty-six) was the biggest in history (Klein). He added:

Many see the 25-year age gap as McCain's greatest vulnerability. It's what Obama is not so subtly reminding you of when he calls this election a choice between 'the past and the future.' It's why there's a website called ThingsYoungerThanMcCain.com (among the entries are Mt. Rushmore, the polio vaccine, chocolate chip cookies, Cobb salad, and the ballpoint pen.) It also explains why the McCain campaign hosted that viewing of McCain's medical records.

In this example, the ageist criticism toward McCain focused on his health and his perceived lack of social relevance, not his cognition, or at least not directly. In another example, *Politico's* Bud Jackson also highlighted McCain's age (not cognitive status), writing: "I would be more comfortable with the wisdom³ of our nation's voters if the media did a better job educating them about John McCain's age as a legitimate issue in this year's presidential election." Notably, [the photo accompanying the article](#) was a tight close-up of McCain's face (lips to forehead) showing a bandaged nose and yellow bruising around his eye and nose, despite there being no mention of an injury in the article or in the photo caption.⁴ Jackson does mention, "If elected, McCain would be inaugurated as our president at the age of 72, making him the oldest person ever elected. At his age, he's too old to legally pilot a commercial airplane but not too old to sign orders sending military planes into combat" (Jackson). Here, Jackson questions national security should McCain win, suggesting that while airline pilots are

³ An interesting word choice given that wisdom is often applied to people in later life. The writer may have been trying to appeal to older voters and avoid alienating them.

⁴ The photo caption reads: "Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's recent illness underscores concerns about the age of Sen. John McCain, who has twice battled melanoma."

removed at a certain age because they are a known risk to passenger safety, a potential president like McCain would place the country at much greater risk through poor decision making presumably based on age alone.⁵ Again, a link between age and national security is made.

If we fast forward to 2016, age seemed downplayed between Hilary Clinton (sixty-eight) and Trump (seventy), possibly because of their similar ages, although Trump did push an agenda suggesting that Clinton was experiencing health difficulties, a claim that was never fully substantiated (Healy). Later, two years into his presidency, Donald Trump embraced a “cognitive competence” approach by boasting about having “aced” the Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA) a part of his overall medical exam in 2018 (Haberman). In doing so, he questioned whether his likely opponent, Joe Biden, was cognitively fit.⁶

Although candidate age is still an issue in the 2024 elections, cognitive competence rather than age alone has taken precedence for both candidates. Cries about Biden’s cognitive state have been furthered by Special Counsel Robert Hur’s report regarding Biden’s unauthorized possession of classified documents. Hur writes:

We have also considered that, at trial, Mr. Biden would likely present himself to a jury, as he did during our interview of him, as a sympathetic, well-meaning elderly man with a poor memory. Based on our direct interactions with and observations of him, he is someone for whom many jurors will want to identify reasonable doubt. It would be difficult to convince a jury that they should convict him—by then a former president well into his eighties—of a serious felony that requires a mental state of willfulness. (6)

⁵ It is worth noting that although research on airline pilots has found that increasing age predicts slower initial reaction times compared to younger pilots, older pilots’ experience led to better decision making (Taylor et al.).

⁶ An unintended side effect of such boasting was public interest in the MoCA itself, which resulted in news articles that printed contents or enabled readers to take it themselves, which in turn can contribute to a learning effect or reduction of the MoCA’s effectiveness as a screening tool (Hagbayan 1286).

Throughout the report, Hur notes lapses in Biden's memory related to how he obtained various classified documents, whether he recalled returning documents to the National Archives, what he told his ghostwriter about the documents, and other details. Interestingly, although seldom mentioned, are the memory lapses that others in the case had as well. For example, Hur notes that neither Biden, Biden's sister, ghost writer Mark Zwonitzer, nor various staff members across institutions had clear recollections of the documents' custody of care, although Biden is the one depicted as forgetful and somewhat confused. Such characterization of an older person is common. As researchers Amy Cuddy and Susan Fisk found in their cross-cultural research on old age stereotypes, older people in several countries are typically viewed as incompetent but warm, or doddering but dear. Hur's use of the term "elderly" also emphasizes weakness, functioning much like the close-up of John McCain's injured face mentioned earlier.

As neurologists remind us, everyone forgets, and forgetfulness with age is normal, not an indicator of dementia. Charan Ranganath writes:

Generally, memory functions begin to decline in our 30s and continue to fade into old age. However, age in and of itself doesn't indicate the presence of memory deficits that would affect an individual's ability to perform in a demanding leadership role. And an apparent memory lapse may or may not be consequential, depending on the reasons it occurred.

Yet, questions about Biden's cognition continue.

On the Trump side, an increasing number of experts are suggesting that he is currently living with dementia (Phillips). For example, a March 2024 article in *Newsweek* quotes several psychiatrists who claim that Trump is not forgetful, which is not a clear indicator of dementia as mentioned earlier, but rather confuses reality and changes the meaning of sentences midstream, which can be indicators of dementia. Reporter Aleks Phillips writes:

John Gartner, a psychologist and former professor at Johns Hopkins

University Medical School, has defended Biden's forgetfulness as a natural sign of his age, but authored a petition that argues Trump is "showing unmistakable signs strongly suggesting dementia." He wrote at the start of March that the former president showed "progressive deterioration in memory, thinking, ability to use language, behavior, and both gross and fine motor skills," adding that he felt "an ethical obligation to warn the public, and urge the media to cover this national emergency."

Other specialists and professionals are also quoted in the article, supporting the dementia claim.

Whether Biden, Trump, or both have cognitive decline is not in my purview or training. My purpose is not to support or refute claims for either candidate but rather to point out that cognition is now the center of the campaign. As previously mentioned, linking common forgetfulness or other linguistic errors to more serious cognitive decline without a formal assessment not only affects candidates themselves, but also older people in general through social stigmatization, undermining their creditability, feeding into ageist stereotypes, and potentially worsening their memory performance. Social stigmatization, a type of public disapproval of a person or groups based on an attribute such as memory loss, can lead to devaluation and exclusion from social participation (Rewerska-Juško and Rejdak). As mentioned earlier, confusion and forgetfulness are common (and incorrect) stereotypes about older people which contribute to ageism. Subjective memory, which describes people's perceptions about their own memory rather than their actual memory performance, has been shown to decline with increases in societal ageism (Sublet & Biscotti). Therefore, the public scrutiny of the cognitive abilities of the two leading presidential contenders has consequences beyond the election. Discrediting through the suggestion of decline actively contributes to discrimination of older people and people living with a type of neurocognitive disorder, regardless of their age.

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