

# Geriatric Politics and the American Presidential Election

*Stephen Katz with W. Andrew Achenbaum*

When Anita Wohlmann and Aagje Swinnen invited me to write a commentary on age and ageism in the upcoming 2024 American presidential election, I was entranced by the idea. As a Canadian, I have watched with fascination the dramas of American elections from the front row of our international border, beginning with the 1960 debates between Democrat John F. Kennedy and Republican Richard M. Nixon, the first on TV. Both were experienced politicians. Kennedy was a senator and Nixon had been Vice President under Dwight Eisenhower for eight years, thus expected to be debate winner and next President. But TV was not kind to him. Kennedy appeared fit, handsome, charismatic, camera-friendly, and most importantly, much younger than Nixon, who was awkward, uncomfortable, hesitant, and sweaty (also recovering from a knee injury). Both were in their forties, Nixon only five years older than Kennedy (see Kraus, 1977).

After a close election, Kennedy won on November 8, 1960. He was the youngest elected president in US history and the first to be born in the twentieth century. He was smart (Harvard educated), stylish (the first president not to wear a hat), courageous (war hero), and for the nascent boomer generation, *our* president, to whom growing younger generations looked up adoringly with optimistic faith in his postwar world leadership. In comparison, Kennedy's Communist foe at the time, Russian President Nikita Khrushchev with his thinning hair, ill-fitting suits, and poor teeth, at age sixty-six was made to look like an old sclerotic clod.

Unfortunately, on November 22, 1963, while riding through Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Kennedy was assassinated. I was in my grade school class when our school principal told us the news. We were all in tears as we were let out of class early. But in its short tenure, the Kennedy presidency put age on the political agenda as television quickly became a powerful force in American electoral outcomes, twisting the semiotics of a youthful president

into the myth of America as a “new land.” When Lyndon B. Johnson—Kennedy’s Vice President—took over in 1963 at the age of fifty-five, he seemed so much older in comparison, and distant from the youth movements sweeping America.

Since that time, presidents of various ages have come and gone, including Nixon himself in 1969, with Ronald Reagan being the oldest, taking office at the age of sixty-nine in 1981 and winning two terms. But, again, appearances can be deceiving and Reagan learned helpful tricks from his Hollywood acting years on how to look, speak, and dress in ways that conveyed both youthful energy and timeless conservative values. When Reagan made his Alzheimer’s Disease public in 1994, despite becoming the face for de-stigmatizing the disease, Americans also wondered if he was cognitively impaired during his presidency and maybe ‘too old’ even then (Nancy Reagan made known her caregiving difficulties until her husband’s death in 2004 at 93). Throughout the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the partisan swings between the Democrats and Republicans were increasingly aligned to the semiotics of age. By the 2016 election, in retrospect, the older Republican Bushes (George Sr and Jr) were characterized as backward and confused while the younger Democrats Bill Clinton and Barack Obama as imaginative and savvy.

But the 2016 election was a radically different scenario, since Hillary Clinton (sixty-eight) and Donald Trump (seventy) were close in age. Both parties had fielded older candidates and questions arose about their health and stamina: Could they manage the demands of a presidential campaign, let alone the presidency? While Trump’s disturbing performances of Mussolini-like virility seemed to hide his age, speculation remains as to the Democratic party’s wisdom in offering up an older (and female) Clinton. Clinton went on to win the popular vote, but the electoral majority went to Trump. Ageism and sexism had added to the Republican malignment of Clinton as corrupt and “liberal.”

The 2020 election brought age more sharply to public consciousness with the pro-Trump Republicans gorging on ageist stereotypes to throw at “sleepy” Joe Biden, but they still lost. Which brings us to now, when geriatric politics are a central issue for the 2024 election. Joe Biden at eighty-one, is the oldest president in US history and set to re-battle Donald Trump, aged seventy-seven. The media are having a field day. As Kathy

Woodward says [in this issue](#), Biden “has been aged by the media” (Woodward 5). Testy Bill Maher (2024) referred to Biden as “cadaver-like” and about to become “Ruth Bader Biden,” in reference to his opinion that Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg (who died in 2020 at eighty-seven) stayed in her position far too long while in poor health, thus making a Trump Republican appointment inevitable. And Jon Stewart joked that the 2024 election will be branded as “Indecision 2024: Electile Dysfunction” and “Indecision 2024: Antiques Roadshow,” since there are “two candidates who are chronologically outside the norm of anyone who has run for the presidency in the history of this country.”

For the candidates, every mishap in inflection, gait, focus, memory, consistency, gesture, grooming, hearing, or other “slips” have become finely parsed indications of age-related decline or at least the risk of it. For Biden, being older than eighty also justifies commentators claiming that he is not only old but *way too old*. Further, “Biden’s longevity in public office means that, unlike Trump, he can appear as an embodiment of the gerontocracy that Americans do not want but have ended up with anyway” (O’Toole 2). While Trump is certainly the worst choice for president, somehow, he seems less old. He is not yet eighty and his frequent cognitive bloopers are credited to his vitriol, psychopathy, irrationality, and narcissism, rather than old age.<sup>1</sup> As Margaret Gullette [in this issue](#) notes, Trump’s “bulk” and “boisterous voice” (4) compared to Biden’s slow and less animated presentation of self, symbolize age in different ways.

Could neither political party manage to find, amongst their ranks, a popular *younger* candidate to take on the country’s leadership? Biden’s supporters argue that his age is not relevant in light of his devotion to public service since 1972, fair sense of justice, international respect, and economic and policy accomplishments. But others worry that Biden’s age compromises the election itself, that voters will see him as untrustworthy and out of touch with younger generations. They hesitate to have an old codger representing the most powerful nation in the world and the small mishaps of today blow up into a comedy of costly errors in the years ahead. Meanwhile Republicans, unapologetic for their racism and sexism, also fear that if Biden wins but has to step down or dies or just becomes too addled

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<sup>1</sup> Some mental health experts claim that Trump exhibits the signs of dementia (Phillips, 2024) although most agree that Biden is experiencing age-related cognitive decline

by age while president, Vice President Kamala Harris, a Democratic woman of color, would take over.

Geriatric politics are unfortunately diverting the nation's attention away from looming problems such as women's reproductive rights (more than twenty states now restrict abortions) and the survival of legal safeguards. And if Trump is elected, what will happen to Medicare and Social Security, immigration, American commitments to NATO and climate-change accords, and democratic struggle around the world? There is much to worry about besides age, but age is also part of it.

To further discuss these questions, I turned to W. Andrew Achenbaum (Andy), who was the leading historian on aging in America and keen empathetic observer of daily life across The United States. I sadly use the past tense because Andy died on April 29 of this year. He was a good friend, generous mentor, soulful explorer, and architect of the critical work we now do in aging studies. There was a service for Andy in Houston, but other memorial plans to honor him are in circulation. Andy and I had regular conversations about aging, caregiving, spirituality, and politics and had enjoyed working together on a publication on aging and masculinity (Katz et al., 2022). As retired academics in our seventies, we looked forward to life's next adventures, but as a resident of Texas Andy was outraged at his Republican state's inhumanity, corruption, racism, and violence and was planning on leaving Texas along with his beloved partner, Barbara Lewis, to live out his last years in a more peaceful, just, and hospitable place. His last writings (2023a, 2023b, 2024) reveal a man with great insight reflecting on his legacy and what it offered to future generations.

Just before Andy died, I posed a couple of conversational questions to him about age and ageism in the 2024 election and its threats to American democracy. My edited version of his responses is below.

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**Stephen Katz (SK)** Why does age matter so much in this presidential 2024 election? Don't we have a good sense by now of what Biden and Trump will each do in another term of office? Isn't this more important

than their advancing age?

**Andy Achenbaum (AA)** Ageism brackets the 2024 election. It is a prejudice, pervasive in America, that conjoins aging with decline and obsolescence. But how long will rich, white elders oversee a gerontocracy in Washington? Baby Boomers remember when Dwight Eisenhower, a 70-year-old heart attack survivor passed the baton in 1961 to John F. Kennedy (age forty-three). Now we wonder whether comparable vigor and vision lie within the two parties. Are there no viable candidates under fifty? Is the current distemper—a we/they malaise which Christian nationalists stoke—exacerbated by invidiously nostalgic images of the good old days when middle-Americans flourished in prosperity and abundance? Or does ageism drive off the need to address and remedy American intersectional divisions based on racism, sexism, ableism, antisemitism, xenophobia, and homophobia? These corrosive factors deepen well-documented disparities based on class, education, wealth, and income with far greater impact than pleas to valorize youth.

**SK** In the history of American presidents, do you recall other instances where age or ageism played a role in elections or is this something new? Is William Henry Harrison, the oldest US president to date before Reagan, a lesson in not electing an older man, since he died (in office) less than a month after being elected in 1841?

**AA** Actually, Harrison's sudden death was less newsworthy than was George Washington's decision to retire after two terms as president (1796 at age sixty-four). The lesson there is that the Founding Fathers wisely feared potential dictatorships lead by over-empowered elders. While ageism is underscoring two older men's physical deficits and cognitive deficiencies in the forthcoming election, the greater threat in and to America has always been the rise of dictatorships and autocracy. We now see that autocratic Hungary, for example, is a model that impresses Trump (along with other

“strong man” nations) as well as millions of American citizens. Increasingly unable to address climate change, stagnant political economies, and disillusionment, corrupt leaders here and abroad make promises that serve their self-interests. Joe Biden condemns this trend and speaks to this core problem of democratic struggle at the soul of America, but Donald Trump the “outlaw” wants dictatorial powers. Soon voters will be deciding which of these radically different visions should prevail after these older men die, even if polls repeatedly indicate that the advanced ages of these (quite old) men distress millions of American citizens who may choose not to vote at all in November.

**SK** What do you think of the relationship in this election between ageism and other social divisions, inequalities, and generational relations? Do they exacerbate or modify each other? And what if both candidates were women, of approximate or different ages?

**AA** Racism, sexism, and nativism have always permeated the American creed and defaced its vaunted dreams of equality and upward mobility. Whites’ legacy of enslaving Blacks followed by raping and lynching them under Jim Crow largely accounts for racial wealth gaps and discriminatory treatment today. The Founding Fathers ignored Abigail Adams’ plea to “remember the ladies” and women did not get to vote until a century ago; they still strive for rights to control their bodies and fight for parity under glass ceilings. Today’s “border crises” have nativist precedents. But ageism has a less straightforward history in its structuring of social inequalities as Americans have long valorized young blood, but their desire for renewal did not hinge on rejuvenation. To advance, white men of property and standing relied on the substantial experiences of elders as farmers, domestic managers, and political leaders. Yet we bemoan a gerontocracy, a polity wherein elders forego ‘normal’ retirements and survive long enough to control Congress.

Generational differences are also important. In most U.S. presidential

elections, rival candidates have been younger but close in age, even between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960, although anomalies exist. Ronald Reagan derided Mondale's youthful inexperience. A plurality of voters under thirty casts ballots for younger rivals in seven of the past eleven elections. Obama's youth (and race) mattered more than his modest record of public service. Pundits are claiming that neither senile Trump nor stuttering Biden embodies the best choices and again both are cast as aligned to the kind of rich, white, and out-of-touch gerontocracy that younger generations are resenting.

As for women presidential candidates, sexism combined with ageism were factors in the Republican besmirching of Hillary Clinton's image in 2016. The key person sidelined now is Vice President Kamala Harris, who has more credibility as an elected official than Hillary Clinton. However, the cynic in me thinks that sexism (and in Harris' case racism) would outweigh ageism if the 2024 candidates were both women.

**SK** The Democratic media can do very little to make Joe Biden look or act "younger," but they could aggressively promote his age-positive strengths of integrity, compassion, wisdom, and worldliness, especially when compared to Trump's record. Then again, Trump seems to have captured, with his delusional narrative, the story of America's "great" but now lost (or stolen) past, which he is hellbent to revive. Does this narrative strike a chord with older voters, even those who recognize themselves in Biden and know that Trump's slogan "make America great again" is code for white male supremacy, Christian nationalism, and anti-government "states rights"?

**AA** Donald Trump increasingly ends his vitriolic, violence-inciting speeches with messianic appeals that evoke jeremiads uttered in religious revivals. It is a shrewd tact: he can persuade devout Christian nationalists, including older ones, to stand up for an Orange Jesus. White evangelicals represent less than fifteen percent of the American population, but they

constituted roughly twenty-five percent of the 2020 electorate and gave Trump nearly seventy-five percent of their votes. The United States once was an outlier, more religious than any other advanced-industrial nation. Today it ranks, astoundingly, among the 12th least religious polity. Trump also fills a recent and impressive cultural void among those older voters in his “base” who resent losses in their lives which they think are caused by American secular values, immigrants, “special interest” groups, the anti-gun lobby, etc. As for Biden, unfortunately, political consultants and journalists rarely ascribe his legislative and global initiatives to age-accumulated experience. Instead, they invoke false equivalences as Trump foresees bloodbaths if not re-elected.

But a second fundamental cultural turn has been a decline in trust in institutional values and leaders. A ‘vital center’ once bound postwar affluent Americans together. Following nearly forty years of disillusionment and unraveling, COVID laid bare millions of Americans’ distrust of science and expertise. Pollsters report decades-long decline in respect for clergy and academics alike. This results in tough sledding for Joe Biden, an institutionalist who upends Reaganomics. Such a turn is in Trump’s favor as he wins support from those marginalized albeit perfervid pockets of adherents who pray that his reelection, again, ushers a return to the “good old days” (even if they never had nor remembered them as such).

Generational gaps resulting from secularization and polarization will determine the 2024 election. Ageism may appear to be the *cri de coeur*, but it hardly masks the disdain for both these older men across the political spectrum. However, as Baby Boomers die off—those who both vote for and against someone like Donald Trump—it will be emerging generations who take center stage. They will have to reconfigure what matters as new promises and paradoxes arise in an aging American society no longer the regnant empire. On the one hand, it is a shame that much needed social reform and renewal today are thwarted by the ways in which generational conflicts since the 1960s have been distorted to generate age-based stereotypes that overlay other and more pressing polarizing conditions. But,



on the other hand, we face in 2024 the greatest electoral challenge of trust yet in an old President and all the ambivalence about aging itself that emerges with him.

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**W. Andrew (Andy) Achenbaum** was Professor Emeritus, University of Houston, known for his groundbreaking contributions to shaping the field of gerontology with his many books and articles on the American history of aging, social security, and advocacy. Andy's determined commitment to building interdisciplinary collaboration between the health sciences, public policy and the humanities was constant throughout his career. His later work on compassion and spiritual matters of growing older filled a void in aging studies. Andy also served in important advisory and leadership roles at the University of Michigan and Houston. Leaving behind a remarkable legacy, he died April 29, 2024, at 77.