

Polarizing Uses of Older Age: Introducing the Forum “Too Old for the Job?”

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Staying on top of the news cycle in a presidential campaign as heated as the 2024 US election year is almost impossible.¹ Whatever the consequences of the first TV debate in June 2024 may be, one fact seems certain: “Age has loomed over the 2024 campaign,” Kellen Browning from *The New York Times* summarizes on the morning after the debate. To clarify, Browning is speaking, of course, about *older* age, and with it all of the prejudices, stereotypes, and realities that older age carries and that have come to bear down on the contenders. My emphasis on *older* age is by no means obvious: More recently, it has been the *youth* of heads of states like Finland’s Sanna Marin and New Zealand’s Jacinda Ardern (aged thirty-four and thirty-seven when taking office, respectively), which has preoccupied journalists and commentators around the world.² In contrast, a dominant focus for commentators on the current US election is that, if re-elected, Joe Biden (eighty-one) would be the oldest president in office.³ While such a superlative could easily feed into the myth of US American exceptionalism, *this* type of being exceptional fails to evoke the sense of American pride and national unity that other US American social imaginaries and “collective representations” tend to generate (Smith vii). Quite the opposite is happening: the nation seems more and more divided over the exceptionally advanced age of the candidates.

The candidates’ ages seem particularly relevant not least because the USA is

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² For an overview of the youngest heads of state in 2022, see <https://www.citizen.digital/news/the-youngest-heads-of-state-in-the-world-n297558>.

³ Eighty-two is by no means the oldest age for a world leader to be in power. For example, Paul Biya, born in 1933, is the president of Cameroon.

a nation that has prided itself for being a *young* nation. In other words, for the New England Puritans, America exuded newness and innocence and was “happily bereft” of the burden of ancestry and the stuffy ways of life in the so-called Old World, which the seventeenth-century colonizers left for the adventure of the New World and a Promised Land (Lewis 1955; see [Wohlmann and Applewhite](#) in this forum). With the oldest presidential candidates to date (Joe Biden and Donald Trump) running—again—to become the chief representative of that allegedly young nation, it seems as if self-image (read myth) and reality have become polar opposites, representing a political chasm that runs deeper than debates over age and aging. That age, particularly *perceived* age, has taken center stage in the public opinion, is, from an age studies perspective, both a blessing and a curse: it puts age and ageism on the political map in an arguably unprecedented way;⁴ it also reminds us how much work there is still to do for scholars and activists in the field.

The Forum in Issue 8 of *Age, Culture, Humanities* is dedicated to this timely topic. With the title “Too Old for the Job? The 2024 US American Presidential Elections,” we invited distinguished colleagues from the USA, Canada, and Denmark to contribute short comments and reflections. We were delighted that eight of them accepted despite the short deadline. On receiving their contributions and publishing them in instalments from mid-April to mid-July 2024, three unexpected observations dawned on us: For one, even though we did not ask for abstracts or outlines and thus had no opportunity to steer the contributions, there are surprisingly few overlaps. The most noticeable repetition is, perhaps, Special Counsel Robert K. Hur’s report, which several contributors comment on as one of the many incidents that—negatively—contributed to Biden’s perceived capacity ([Applewhite](#), [Brøndal](#), [de Medeiros](#), [Gullette](#)). Other repetitions relate to insightful comparisons that our contributors made to other, older US American politicians whose age has come into focus—Dianne Feinstein, Nancy Pelosi, Mitch McConnell, Bernie Sanders—and who provide rich examples for examining similarities and

⁴ At a closer look, however, as the contributions by Stephen Katz and Jørn Brøndal remind us, the age of candidates has also been a major topic in the past with regard to John F. Kennedy, for example.

differences when politicians are accused of being “too old for the job” ([Applewhite](#), [Brøndal](#), [Gullette](#), [Port](#)).

A second aspect was unexpected, at least for a journal firmly based in the humanities: almost all of the essays rely on statistics, surveys, and polls and foreground numbers and objective facts to substantiate their observations. This may be the normal “language” of election discourse. It may also be an attempt to counter the onslaught of fake news and outright lies.⁵ We also observed a predominant focus on material collected from social media and other interactive platforms. In analyzing memes and video clips from *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *TikTok* as well as *New Yorker* covers and reader comments to *New York Times* articles, our contributors have ventured into territories that we have, as a journal, not fully addressed so far.

Thirdly, one word turned up in several contributions—polarization—which is not that surprising: As a buzzword in the public discourse and in political and social sciences research since at least the 1990s, it sound almost like a truism⁶ that we live in particularly polarized times and that US democracy is in particular danger to succumb to increasingly polarizing tendencies that not only alienate people—even family members—from each other but also pose a risk to democracy itself. In this introduction, I want to expand on these polarizing tendencies to ask: What is the role of age in the context of polarization?

A POLARIZED AGE

To answer this question, a definition of this frequently used term is helpful. Simply put, polarization is “the simultaneous presence of opposing or conflicting principles, tendencies, or points of view” (Fiorina and Abrams 566). It can describe both a state and a process: When a *polarized* debate is invoked, the term foregrounds how far apart the opposing opinions lie, whereas *polarizing* tendencies contain a temporal dimension that lends itself to trend analyses and

⁵ Of course, as Aagje Swinnen reminds me, some of the finest and most impactful scholarship in the field, namely Katz’ writing on alarmist demography and Woodward’s analyses on statistical panic, exemplify that many excellent humanities scholars in age studies have been interpreting numbers long before this years’ election.

⁶ This view has been contested by researchers like Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams, who consider polarization a popular narrative and who argue that its truth-value does not hold up under closer scrutiny.

foregrounds factors that increase (or decrease) polarization over time (DiMaggio P, Evans J, Bryson 693). Researchers also emphasize the affective dimension of polarization, suggesting that a “binary division of society into antagonistic political camps” does not only concern political issues and ideologies (Roberts 681), but also people’s emotions. And those emotions are, for the most part, negative affects, such as indignation, resentment, contempt, and spite. However, polarization also entails comfort and reassurance because a world that is clearly divided into good and evil affords moral certainty, and this makes polarization affectively appealing (Coleman 19). In addition to the psychology behind polarization, researchers have examined by which means and under which conditions a conflict is expressed and, potentially, exacerbated. Inflammatory language and derogatory humor, obviously, fuel the affective side of a polarizing discourse (Völz and Freischläger). Populism, too, amplifies polarization because a populist worldview reinforces a sense of “the people” versus “the establishment” and “Us” versus “Them” (Roberts 682). Moreover, the growing prominence of new media channels over “old” or legacy media is known to produce new phenomena, such as “context collapse,” which allows for information to be stripped of its original context (and context-contingent meaning) to be widely disseminated in other contexts (e.g., by retweeting or through memes), thereby enabling misinformation, a sense of paranoia or the spread of conspiracy theories—all of which can further polarize a debate (Finlayson 40-41).

Campaigns tend to be breeding grounds for polarized subject matters and polarizing discourses, and this year’s election is no different. But how did the candidates’ age become a polarizing factor? With an age difference of merely 3.5 years, aren’t Biden and Trump more or less the *same* age? How is it possible that a non-existing age “gap” is used to signify (and increase) a very real, political and ideological gap between the candidates?

In age studies, age is considered a malleable category. There are, as [Kathleen Woodward](#) summarizes in her contribution, “many other modalities and meanings related to one’s age (among them, biological age, social age, psychological age, legal age, cultural age, and statistical age)” (3). How old

someone may *appear* is a matter of how they “do their age,” and this age performance may be at odds with chronology (see [Lipscomb](#)’s forum essay). In this sense, the comments (and jokes) about how agile or frail Biden or Trump are perceived are reminiscent of the 1961 Kennedy/Nixon TV debate, as [Stephen Katz](#)’s contribution suggests, when the candidates’ numeric age difference, too, was negligible (five years). In addition to this variety of aspects, age also intersects with other social categories such as gender, race, class, and disability, so that the meanings of age are also and always contingent. But even within one dimension, such as the cultural meanings of older age, several and even mutually exclusive associations can be activated. For example, for some, older age implies gains and growth (e.g., in knowledge, authority, happiness); for others, it stands for inevitable decline and loss of those same attributes. These complex dimensions of age suggest that older age can, under certain circumstances, be understood as a container or form rather than a fixed content or predetermined meaning. And this feature might contribute to what makes older age so “usable” in polarizing discourses such as the 2024 US American campaign.

THREE EXAMPLES OF POLARIZING USES OF AGE

Kathleen Woodward’s contribution to this forum illustrates how this use of age may unfold. Woodward draws an insightful parallel between the two older presidential candidates and her own considerations about whether to run, once more, for the position of director of the Simpson Center for the Humanities at her university. Her thoughts about retirement age, appropriateness, and speculations about the future and risks shed light on “a phobic number, the decisive marker for being on the precipice of decline,” which is, for her, eighty. To Woodward, age eighty symbolizes a dividing line between the so-called “third age” and the “fourth age” (or the “young old” and the “old old”).⁷ This line functions as an imaginary frontier between all that is good about older age

⁷ This distinction, coined by Peter Laslett in the late 1980s and subsequently problematized by age scholars, may occur well before or after age 80. In this sense, it is a line that is, in reality, highly movable and individually contingent. In the 2024 campaign, however, it seems to consolidate at age 80.

and all that is bad about it (Gilleard and Higgs 2). In other words, there is gradual but mild and manageable decline on the one hand and the ravages and “ignominy” of “deep old age” on the other (Gilleard and Higgs 2). This frontier seems to be invoked in the 2024 campaign as well: because Biden has crossed the eighty-year line into a territory of risk or pre-risk,⁸ people may project onto Biden their own feelings of anxiety and risk about the fourth age. Therefore, even though Biden and Trump are numerically very close in age, Trump greatly benefits from being on the other side of that dividing line and from being able to imaginatively distance himself from the frontier of the “fourth age.” Trump also knows how to inhabit the required frontier mentality of heroic, boisterous, “virile masculinity” ([Port](#)) that feeds into American national exceptionalism, and, in doing so, he manages to make the most of this obviously temporary and finite state of being seventy-eight years old. In this context, eighty is more than a number.⁹ It has come to signify a polarized state and thus “the simultaneous presence of opposing or conflicting . . . points of view” about what older age may mean, sharply divided by an eighty-year mark (Fiorina and Abrams 566).

Ageism, too, plays a crucial role in how the debates around the election have become increasingly polarizing, if not even toxic. As social psychologist Peter T. Coleman suggests, there is polarization and there is toxic polarization. The latter, he argues, is influenced by “attractors” which are common patterns that cement chronic habits, addiction, and abusive relationships and that lead to people being stuck (15). Ageism relies on patterns, too, as it draws on stereotypes, clichés, and other predetermined or “stuck” ways of thinking about people of a certain age. What makes a polarized discussion toxic, Coleman maintains, is our “confirmation bias,” which is a tendency to unconsciously select information that reinforces our preexisting views (29-30). In other words, if we have internalized ageist views, we are likely to focus on examples that confirm this bias. Thus, strong views on Trump or Biden combined with internalized ageism reinforces a “feedback loop” that increases polarized attitudes (30). In the case of the 2024 election, this “vicious cycle” (29) implies

⁸ The risk that Biden encounters at the eighty-year frontier is markedly different from the original US American frontier imaginary which sees in risk an opportunity for adventure and promise.

⁹ Of course, eighty is never just a number.

that people who are critical of or concerned about Biden's fitness for another term see their doubts confirmed via their own unconsciously selective perception marked by an internalized ageism. The fact that much of the information we consume today is also purposefully selective through the mediated forms in which that information is conveyed, further exacerbates the vicious cycle. These mutually reinforcing processes may also explain why the witty rebuttals from Biden's camp haven't really reversed the public discourse in which age seems to be a bigger issue for Biden than for Trump (for a discussion of such rebuttals via memes, see for example [Valerie Lipscomb](#)'s contribution). To summarize, ageism is a pre-existing phenomenon that further escalates the polarizing tendencies that have already been set in motion.

My last example moves from the age "gap" between the two contenders to the age gap among the voters. After all, there is also a sharp (alleged) binary in the electorate, namely between younger and older voters. Younger voters tend to be disinclined from voting in 2024 because the candidates are deemed "old and awful," [Cynthia Port](#) has learned from her students (1). The language around younger voters can be misleading because it suggests that "the young" are a sharply defined group of people. Yet the only sharp line we can actually draw is with regard to the age of the youngest voters, namely those who just qualify with their legal voting age, which is 18 years in the US. But at which age is a voter *no longer* considered "young" and who, actually, are these "young voters"? And doesn't this divide of "young" versus "old" further fuel polarizing tendencies? To [Margaret Morganroth Gullette](#), this is clearly the case. She identifies a new ageism, "a renewed bias against old age and disability," that has sprung up from the years of the pandemic when "desperate attitudes and feelings around Youth and Age" split the population into an allegedly resilient group and one that is indeed frail, at risk and in need of extra protection. This partly imagined divide also had very real consequences, which are demonstrated by the disproportionate Covid mortality rates of people over sixty-five ([Gullette](#)). In short, the binary construction of a "young" versus an "old" population forges a misleading sense of polarization because it emphasizes assumed differences and stark divides rather than real intersections and

similarities.

Against this complicated background, what might this forum achieve? First, it makes usable the knowledge generated from decades of age studies research and applies it to an election that has already attracted global attention and concern. The contributions also remind us of the continued significance of pointing out and being aware of openly blunt and covertly internalized ageism and its toxic consequences that do not only affect older people as a group but also feed into the viscous reinforcing cycles that determine how people talk with each other (or no longer do so). And thirdly, the comparative analyses broaden our understanding and offer perspectives that reach beyond the (too often) sensationalist and apocalyptic analyses of the here and now.

OVERVIEW

The forum starts with **Ashton Applewhite**, who liked the idea of an interview about the topic and who discusses, among many other crucial topics, the intersections of ageism and ableism. The result is available in two versions: as a transcribed text and (a first for *ACH*) as an audio file. **Kathleen Woodward** interweaves her personal reflections on retirement with observations about internalized ageism and the toxic feelings of pre-risk in the election debate. **Margaret Morganroth Gullette** links the palpable ageism in the presidential campaign with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Valerie Barnes Lipscomb** focuses on age performance and age performativity in her discussion of, among others, two memes about Biden's and Trump's age that went viral. **Kate de Medeiros** tackles the many accusations of cognitive decline that the candidates have to counter, accusations that are built on ageist stereotypes that problematically feed into social stigmas and fears with a broader social relevance. **Jørn Brøndal** walks us through US American history from the Framers of the Constitution to today, and highlights how older age was problematized in the context of momentous political decisions. **Stephen Katz**'s contribution contains two sections: a short essay that traces his personal observations on the US American politics as a Canadian citizen, and an interview he conducted via email with the late **W. Andrew Achenbaum**, in

which they discuss, among others, the intersections of ageism with other social divisions and inequalities. Finally, **Cynthia Port** foregrounds the “youth vote” and explores how researchers have tried to analyze voting behaviors across generations.

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