

What “Too Old” Really Means in the COVID Era

Margaret Morganroth Gullette

Everyone who has noticed the ageism in US Presidential politics has an opinion as to (1) whether the incumbent Joe Biden is indeed “too old” and/or (2) how best to rebut the Republican-leaning accusation. What is entirely missing from the discussion is whether there is a context larger than a single election, in which the keyword is *the new ageism*, a renewed bias against old age and disability. Lurking in the background still are the COVID deaths of 1.2 million Americans; and even more salient, public knowledge that a staggering percentage of them were over sixty-five: over 80% in 2020 (Tejada-Vera and Kramarow) and 92% in 2022 (Kekatos).

Many people would like to forget the frightening time before the vaccine, when streets were empty and ambulances howled, when hospital corridors overflowed and funeral homes and morgues could not manage the numbers of the dead, when people in nursing facilities and hospitals died in catastrophic numbers, of air hunger—when no scientist could tell us whether the pandemic would ever end. Amid the chaos, the irrationality, the fear, and the grief, being young and apparently immune to disease was the only prize worth having. Being old was simply an evil that the unlucky had to suffer. An existing chasm had widened.

We still live in the COVID Era. We recognize other holdovers from that time: Long COVID, anti-science sentiment, children dropping behind in education, grief. But many Americans who survived appear to have successfully forgotten their desperate attitudes and feelings around Youth and Age. Oblivion is a grave mistake. A bias not squarely faced falls deep into the

unseen recesses and dismal pouches of the national psyche. In the COVID Era, the aftermath of hidden ageism has distorted our election and a great deal more.

I: Ageism in US Presidential Politics, 2023-2024

In February 2024, a US special counsel, Robert J. Hur, when recommending that charges be dismissed against President Joe Biden for his alleged mishandling of classified documents, released an inappropriate comment on Biden's mental acuity. Hur's report concluded that 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" (Doherty and Thompson). Leave aside the condescension. The word "elderly" alone is disparaging in social usage and may be experienced as hurtful to those who feel targeted. Even those rebutting the Hur description scrupulously quoted the slur again. And again.

The rebuttals were forceful. David Moyer, writing in *Huffpost*, announced, "Robert Hur Admits Telling Biden He Seemed to Have 'Photographic Recall'." On *Vox*, another rebuttal, by Andrew Prokop, appeared under the headline, "Robert Hur's report exaggerated Biden's memory issues." In a Congressional hearing, CNN reported, Representative Adam Schiff (Democrat of California) charged that Hur, a registered Republican, had to know that his generalization would be used to demean Biden in his run for re-election. In terms of the rules for special counsels, "You don't gratuitously add language that you know will be used in a political campaign [...] That was a political choice. That was the wrong choice."

Age, used as a stereotype of decline and as a prejudice against those shown as disabled, had already threatened to play an outsized role in behavior (voting) in a consequential election. "Gerontocracy" had become a negative



keyword. The October 2, 2023 cover of the influential *New Yorker* depicted four politicians in “The Race for Office”: Trump and Republican Mitch McConnell, Democrat Nancy Pelosi and Biden—all on walkers.¹ “In a declining society, the images of an aging leadership can come to embody a general sense of withering and decay,” editor David Remnick told his million subscribers, trying to head off potential critiques of his magazine’s

overt ageist ableism as a “caricaturist’s dream.” October 2 happened to be Ageism Awareness Day. When Senator Dianne Feinstein, then age ninety, was said to need inordinate help from her aides, the tack was about *general* withering and decay in high places. But the only two powerful women charged with being *too old* soon evaded ageist/ableist contumely. Feinstein, a once-revered figure, did it by dying. Pelosi, Speaker of the House, stepped aside when the House of Representatives went Republican in 2022, as did two other octogenarians, replaced by Democrats aged 43 to 59. With gender thus eliminated, a “new generation of leadership” tightened the age focus on the two male presidential candidates.

Age in one particular form—represented as cognitive disability—might be construed as having a positive side, in that this country may thus learn more in general about cognitive impairment, Alzheimer’s, and other “dementias.” Sudhaker in *Today* quoted a scientific judgment that the National Institutes of Health must believe is not known to the general public: “The NIH emphasized that dementia is ‘not a normal part of aging,’ as many people live

¹ The American Society on Aging published several critiques of the cover, including my own. “Generations on Further Cluelessness in the Media,” *Asaging.org*, November 1, 2023. <https://generations.asaging.org/further-cluelessness-media>

to their 90s and beyond without any signs of it.” But can learned generalizations based on data be made to matter when the focus is on two particular candidates rather than, say, older adults in general?

The question of former president Donald Trump’s mental acuity has not been neglected.² On January 26 2024 US News listed many times when Trump has “confused who is the current president, identified his former ambassador to the United Nations [Nikki Haley, then running against him] as the former speaker [of the House, who] he said was responsible for security at the Capitol, mispronounced simple words, gone off on curious tangents about magnets being ruined by water . . . and has made such incoherent remarks as, “We are an institute in a powerful death penalty” (Milligan). The subtitle ran, “Questions about the mental acuity of both Joe Biden and Donald Trump have been an issue. But until recently, most of them have been directed at the incumbent president.”

Perhaps as a result of the imbalance, an ABC/Washington Post poll (quoted in US News by Susan Milligan) found that “47% of voters nationally think Trump has the mental sharpness to serve effectively as president, compared to 28% who have that confidence in Biden.” In a November 2023 Marquette Law School national poll, asking whether Biden and Trump are “too old to be president,” a 57 percent majority said this describes Biden “very well” compared with 23 percent for Trump (Parker and Diamond). The physiques of the two men may influence those perceptions. Trump’s bulk may read to his fans as imposing rather than bullying or unhealthy. Biden is athletic and has vocal energy, but his slow gait may seem to go with his white hair, whereas Trump (who was dark and balding in midlife photos) has a highly gelled blond comb-over and a boisterous voice.

²The most thorough analysis of his lesser command of vocabulary came in 2017, from Sharon Begley writing in [Stat News](#), comparing his speaking style in interviews to similar utterances decades earlier.

The election is still months away as I write, but for now the verbal warfare is asymmetric. There is also an unconscious way in which Biden's exact age matters, which I will argue in a minute. One obvious reason for the asymmetry is that Biden Democrats worry publicly about Biden's age more than Republicans do about Trump's. Moreover, the government that Biden leads tries to be nonpartisan. Merrick Garland, head of the Department of Justice, had chosen Hur, a Republican, as special counsel. Hur knew that Garland had promised to release the entire transcript unredacted. Garland wanted to look as if he was not retaliating for unprecedented Republican partisanship: when he was President Barack Obama's candidate for the Supreme Court, the Republicans had unfairly flouted the president by delaying Garland's nomination for a year, waiting to see if Trump won the election and could choose his own justice. The mainstream media try to be even-handed. The Republicans at this stage, as Trump's Party, do not try.

The *Atlantic* argues that attacks on Trump's mentality "don't land" because he has long "sounded unhinged" (Coppins). Fintan O'Toole, an Irish political historian and cultural commentator on US politics, believes that Trump's public persona is a canny invention. It appears to hide the malevolence of his authoritarian, racist, xenophobic, policies.

"In a dumb show that Trump has been playing out in his speeches in recent months," Fintan O'Toole notices, Trump mimics Joe Biden. Trump admits it: "I do the imitation where Biden can't find his way off the stage," and then he does. Trump's nickname for the President of the United States is "Sleepy Joe." O'Toole explains how this dumb show involves Trump's base in the game. "Populist politics exploits the doubleness of comedy—the way that 'only a joke' can so easily become 'no joke'—to create a relationship of active connivance between the leader and his followers in which everything is permissible because nothing is serious." "Trump brings all this comic

doubleness. . . to bear on the authoritarian persona of the caudillo, the duce, the strongman savior.”

II: “Feeling Older” in the COVID Era

A February cartoon in *The New Yorker* called “Complaints about 2024 (So Far)” starts with a man saying “Everybody feels older than in other years.” Feeling older has not been a good thing. Science, or more exactly, the medical model of aging, has long played an outsized role in making growing older seem so debased a decline. But now it’s worse. The historical time period I call “the COVID Era,” starting in March 2020, degraded Americans’ sense of the value of age, limited respect for aging-into-old age, and made aging past certain particular ages frightening.

That is the kernel of truth in this silly joke (also by Barry Blitt), which I report as a result of working for years on a forthcoming book called *American Eldercide*. The earliest, disproportionate deaths from COVID were of people in nursing facilities; the catastrophic mortality made those places seem like “death pits” (as they were called in a *New York Times*’ headline quoting former Lt. Governor of New York state, Betsy McCaughey) for people of advanced age or disability. Terror grew around being old-and-liable-to-die (Stockman et al). (*Death salience* is what scholars dryly call this congeries of fears and avoidances.) Being old meant “no help for it, they are just gonna die.” “Futility” is the name, in medical diagnosis, for that belief.

The feelings of fear and the attitudes of avoidance rapidly expanded from nursing-facility residents to all people over 65. An intense, data-driven, scientific and discursive focus resonated around the age of sixty-five. It no longer merely signaled retirement and getting Social Security. It meant heightened risk of dying. At a time when an unthinkable million Americans had died, three-quarters were over sixty-five. Sixty-five is still represented as a

death-marker—as US News shows graphically (Smith Shoenwalder).

Another age, even more terrifying in the data, was 85. Eighty-five was the age at which people were likeliest to die from COVID. In August of 2020, Dana Sparks, writing for the Mayo Clinic, reported, “The risk of developing dangerous symptoms increases with age, with those who are age 85 and older at the highest risk of serious symptoms.” In a CDC data brief, Betzaida Tejada-Vera and Ellen A. Kramarow reported at the end of 2020, that the death rate for adults aged 85 and over was 2.8 times higher than the rate for those aged 75–84.

“Eighty is the new sixty” had been a sprightly meme in the age of Longevity, when US life expectancy had been rising yearly. But COVID deaths caused longevity to drop in 2020, and then again in 2021. A major source of pride in being American was diminished. With it went one of the intangible supports for pride in growing old, or for turning eighty.

Dementia data (prevalence, effects), often provided by the Alzheimer’s Association in order to raise funds for research, links later life to what has become the most dreaded of late-life diseases, overtaking cancer (Cutler). According to the NIH (Sudhakar), about one-third of people 85 and older have some form of dementia. (It isn’t said that two-thirds, of course, do not.) Eighty-five could seem the end of the race. If that is the superstition-laden age, then Trump benefits for now by being *only* in his seventies (at 77). Meanwhile, by the end of Biden’s second term, we are told (too often, including by the *New York Times* in a headline), he would be eighty-six (Moyer). *Slate*’s headline made this risk even more pointed: “How Long Will Biden Likely Live? We Asked Some Experts” (Nirijana Rajalakshmi).

No doubt, this culture of feeling—the links between 65 and 85 and dying, using “old” as a pejorative—reeks of superstition. No one knows for how long the tremulous associations will last. For younger Americans, *both*

candidates are “too old.” *TikTok* has long been ageist, fed by people for whom any age over forty may seem old, and by algorithms that keep a biased thread recurring. Will the aging late-night comics who do political satire (Colbert, Jon Stewart, whose young audiences laugh at their ageist remarks), keep COVID-Era ageism and ableism alive?

No doubt, ageism is an unworthy distraction in so pivotal an election, with dictatorship and the end of Social Security as prospects the Republican candidate has already announced. Will “mental acuity” resound six months hence? Republican surrogates will try to keep all the negatives around Biden’s age alive. But there may be another crisis that only a sitting president can handle. On the one hand we have a healthy incumbent with a humorous, friendly, even soothing paternal presence and many recent accomplishments in economics and policy. On the other, a former president who incited an insurrection with lies about his 2020 election defeat, has been charged with 91 separate felony indictments and was convicted of committing fraud and sexual assault. Other questions will be whether democracy, reproductive rights, and similar values matter to more voters than the fearful salience of age.

Meanwhile, what we see right now in a bizarre political race is that a latent fear of old age and a new presumption of risk chained to various heavily-laden numbers in human chronology underlie other cultural phenomena and lend even serious political debates a frightening and not entirely conscious force.

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