

# Ageism in Politics: Can an “Older Adult” Be the President of the USA?

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## Abstract

In the upcoming 2024 U.S. presidential election, it is possible that an individual from the older adult population (e.g., Mr. Biden or Mr. Trump) may be elected the president of this country. This possibility has prompted some political opponents and members of the media to insert in the mind of potential voters that they should be very careful electing a president who is “too old” to serve in this very complex role, thus reinforcing the negative impact of ageism in this context. The central argument is that the “ageism” factor in the current U.S. political scenario appears to be an attack on someone wishing to be the president of this country, but that the same factor appears to be irrelevant in the case of individuals currently serving or wanting to serve in the U.S. Senate or in the House of Representatives. This argument is supported with a sample of congress men and women ranging in age from 77 to 90 years and currently serving in the 118<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress.

## Keywords

Ageism, Ageist Messages, Discrimination, Chronic Physical and Mental Conditions, Politics, Stereotypes

## 1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) defines ageism in terms of “the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age”. Another definition is provided by Weir (2023), namely, “ageism... [is] discrimination against older people because of negative and inaccurate stereotypes-and it’s so ingrained in our culture that we often don’t even notice” (p. 38). A similar definition is provided by Allen, Solway, Kirch., Singer, Kullgren, Moïse, & Malani (2022a) with emphasis on people’s discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes towards older adults and ag-

ing processes.

According to the WHO (2021), 50% of the world is ageist against older individuals, and particularly against the so-called “elderly” or “older adults” (generally 65 years and older). With the exception of members in the current United States 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, many older adults in the general population in this country are at higher risk of being considered unproductive in the community, precisely because they are “too old” to be productive, despite the fact that they are still making “important contributions in the workforce” (Weir, 2023: p. 40) such as, for example, teaching in academic settings, investigating complex issue in science, publishing articles and books, as well as many in the general community working in banks, airports, hotels, retail stores, restaurants, etc. During an interview Weir (2023) conducted with Becca Levy, professor of epidemiology at Yale School of Public Health, Levy reported to Weir that during her review of the literature for one of her books she “found information that not only contradicted the negative stereotype [against older adults] but also *highlighted a strength* that comes with aging” (pp. 38-39, italics added). For example, regarding the “stereotype that people become less creative as they get older... Levy found a host of examples of artists and musicians who became more creative and more generative later in life” (p. 39). Another example, supporting Levy’s report, is that all congress men and women at the age of 65 and older in the U.S. 118<sup>th</sup> Congress are also very creative, but not particularly affected by the “ageism” factor each time they decide to return to the U.S. Congress for another term.

Ageism not only can be used to discriminate against the elderly across many areas in society (e.g., job-seeking behavior, housing, banking, health care) but this phenomenon is also associated with the development of chronic physical and mental health conditions in older adults (Allen, 2016; Allen, Solway, Kirch, Singer, Kullgren, Moïse, & Malani, 2022a; Paniagua, 2014). For example, Allen et al. (2022a) conducted a cross-sectional study with 2035 adults ages 50 to 80, including a sample of men and women from Black, Hispanic, and White communities. With the help of the *Everyday Ageism Scale* (Allen, Solway, Kirch, Singer, Kullgren, & Malani, 2022b), participants were instructed to report the negative impact of three forms of ageism in their routine day-to-day interactions in their community, namely, *ageist messages* (e.g., “I hear, see, or read jokes about old age, aging, or older adults”, see Allen et al., 2022a, Figure 1), *ageism in interpersonal interactions* (e.g., “People assume I have difficulty with cell phones and computers”, Allen et al., Figure 1), and *internalized ageism* (e.g., an older adult believes that “having health problems is part of getting old”, Allen et al, Figure 1). Allen et al. (2022a) measured four negative health outcomes, namely, fair or poor physical health, chronic health conditions (e.g., hypertension, heart disease or attack, stroke, cancer), fair or poor mental health, and depressive symptoms. Allen et al. (2022a) found that “higher levels of everyday ageism were [significantly] associated with increased risk of all 4 negative physi-

cal and mental health outcomes” (p. 1). At this moment, however, we do not have empirical results confirming the negative impact of these three forms of ageism on the physical and mental health of 65 years and older Senators and House of Representatives in the U.S. 118<sup>th</sup> Congress.

A review of the literature conducted by Paniagua (2014) found that “older adults from any racial or ethnic background may seek mental health services because of their experience with ageism” (p. 318). In this context, the assumption is that the individual becomes very depressed or anxious because of the negative impact of ageism. In other words, a person 65 years old or older may develop symptoms for anxiety and major depressive disorder in the DSM-5-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) because he or she is not able to deal with the negative impact of ageism during day-to-day social contacts in the community enforcing this type of discriminatory behavior against the elderly. This finding has been widely confirmed in the case of individuals experiencing ageism in the general population, but it lacks confirmation in the case of *older adults* currently serving in the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, in the sense that all such members appear to be mentally healthy. [The office of Senator John Fetterman, D-Pa, announced that Mr. Fetterman checked himself into a hospital to receive treatment for clinical depression, but Mr. Fetterman is 53 years old and thus below the age generally considered in the “elderly” or “older adult” category].

In the past several months, some members of the media and political opponents keep reminding potential voters about the possibility that the 2024 presidential election could lead to the election of a president who is “too old” or in the “elderly” category, so far including President Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. (80 years old) and former President Donald J. Trump (77 years old). That reminding, however, does not alert potential 2024 voters to also consider whether the candidate wishing to be the president of the United States in 2024 could be affected by one or more of the health outcomes reported by Allen et al. (2022a) (see also Allen, 2016). The reason for the absence of that alert is that it is very difficult to attack a candidate based on health problems when he or she appears very healthy to voters. In this context, the main objective of that reminding is to alert voters that they should not select an “older adult” during the 2024 presidential election, because the age of the candidate is the most important variable to consider in this context. This alert suggests an emphasis on the “ageism” factor, which is the main topic in the next section.

## 2. Ageism in Politics

In the case of Mr. Biden, there has been an avalanche of ageist arguments based on the fact that he will be too old (82 years old) to be re-elected in 2024 for a second term. These arguments are associated with the first instance of ageism studied by Allen et al. (2022a), namely, *ageist messages*. For example, according to Goldberg (2022) “Biden is too old to be president again”, and the following year she wrote: “while Biden was able to campaign virtually in 2020, in 2024 we

will almost certainly be back to a grueling real-world campaign schedule, which he would have to power through while running the country. It's a herculean task for a 60-year-old and a near *impossible one for an octogenarian* [80 years old, like Mr. Biden]" (Goldberg, 2023, italics added). Two letters were sent to the *New York Times* supporting Goldberg's (2023) ageist message. In the first letter, Alexander (2023) wrote: "I am 84 years old. I think President Biden is an excellent president, but I do not want him to run for re-election. If he does, I will vote for a younger candidate in the primary" (italics added). In the second letter, Goetz (2023) agreed "with Michelle Goldberg (2023) that President Biden has had a many great accomplishments as president but that *his age should preclude him* from running again" (italics added). The content of both letters are example of ageist messages in politics.

Karl Rove said on *Fox News Digital*: "I do not think Biden will ultimately be a candidate. The country is not going to be excited about an *82-year-old who's struggling*" (Slacik, 2022, italics added). Dean Phillips, Rep. Democrat, said to Politico: "He's [Biden] a president of great competence and success, I admire the heck out of President Biden... And if he were 15 - 20 years younger it would be a no-brainer to nominate him, but *considering his age* it's absurd we're not promoting competition but trying to extinguish it" (Martin, 2023, italics added). In addition, during the Republican response to the State of the Union address by President Biden on Tuesday, February 7, 2023, Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders said "President Biden and I don't have a lot in common... At 40 I'm the youngest governor in the country, and at 80 he's the oldest president in American history". As observed by McIntire (2023), Gov. Sanders' emphasis on the age gap between her and Mr. Biden is an example of Republican leaders trying "to cast Biden as too old for another White House term in the 2024 campaign". Mr. Rove's, Rep. Phillips', and Gov. Sanders' remarks are, again, example of ageism in politics.

In the case of Mr. Trump, he is also already under attack by the "ageism" factor. For example, Kass (n.d.) not only believes that "Joe Biden is too old to run for reelection" but "like Biden, Donald Trump is [also] too old for another term in the White House". Suci (2023) entitled his article: "Donald Trump: Too old to be president again?" Suci concluded that, because Trump will be too old if he is reelected in 2024, "perhaps the country would be better if... Trump spends his days on the golf course [instead of returning to the White House in 2024]". These are, again, examples of ageist messages in politics.

In a survey of 1516 U.S. adults conducted by Yahoo from February 23 - 27, Romano (2023) reported that after participants were informed that "Joe Biden would be 82 at the start of his second term and 86 at the end of it... 68% of registered voters and 71% of independents *say the president is too old for another term*". Romano also reported that about "46% of independents (and 45% of all registered voters) *say the same when told Trump would be 78 at the start of his second term and 82 at the end of it*" (italics added). These results are example of

the potential impact of the “ageism” factor on either Mr. Biden’s or Mr. Trump’s intention to seek the U.S. presidency in 2024.

It is also important to observe that in a recent poll conducted by *YouGov* asking Americans “whether they think there should be a maximum age limit for elected officials [including the president of the U.S., U.S. Senators and U.S. House members], and if so, what it should be... More than half (58%) of Americans say that there should be a maximum age limit, while 21% say there should not be. Republicans (64%) are slightly more likely than Democrats (57%) and Independents (60%) to say there should be a maximum age requirement” (Orth, 2022). In addition, regarding the maximum age limit the same *YouGov* poll found that “one quarter (24%) say it should be 60 years old, 39% say it should be 70, 23% say it should be 80, and 5% say it should be 90” (Orth, 2022). With the exception of the 21% rejecting a maximum age limit, the others results are not only against the U.S. Constitution in the present context, but they are also additional example of ageism in politics.

Although the issue of ageism became more visible in U.S. politics with the expectation that voters may elect in the 2024 national election someone in the “elderly” category to serve as the president of this country (e.g., Mr. Biden or Mr. Trump, see Cole, 2021), many examples are available with individuals in that category serving in the current U.S. Congress but in which *ageism does not appear* to be a concern. For example, **Table 1** shows a sample of ten members in the U.S. Senate who are either at the same age of President Biden (11/20/1942, age 80) and Former President Trump (June 14, 1946, age 77) or older than them. **Table 1** shows two important facts. First, all individuals listed in the table have been re-elected many times in the U.S. Senate. Second, several of those individuals now serving in the U.S. Senate were actually initially elected to serve in the House of Representatives several years before they became Senators. For example, Mr. Charles E. Grassley was elected to serve in the House in 1975 and six years later (1981) he was elected Senator, and re-elected Senator several times since 1981, despite the fact that he is an “older adult”. Therefore, Mr. Grassley has been a member of the U.S. Congress for the past 48 years, but Republican voters in the state of Iowa had never emphasized the “ageism” factor to prevent Mr. Grassley from serving all those years in the U.S. Congress. In addition, so far we are lacking an empirical study showing that any of the Senators in **Table 1** has experienced one or more of the above three forms of ageism (e.g., ageism messages) and their association with increased risks for the development of one or more of the four negative physical (e.g., chronic health conditions) and mental health (e.g., depression) outcomes in the study by Allen et al. (2022a).

**Table 2** shows a sample of 26 members in the U.S. House of Representatives who are either at the same age of President Biden or Former President Trump, or older. Similar to **Table 1**, **Table 2** shows that all individuals listed in that table have been re-elected many times to continuing serving in the House of Representatives, and without voters in their state using the “ageism” factor to prevent

them to continuing serving. Therefore, House members in **Table 2** continue making significant contributions to society despite the fact that they may be considered “too old” in the mind of people emphasizing the “ageism” factor in the political context. In addition, we are also lacking an empirical study demonstrating that any of the members in the House of Representatives included in **Table 2** has experienced any of the three forms of ageism discussed above and their association with increased risks for the development of negative physical and mental health outcomes in the study by [Allen et al. \(2022a\)](#).

### 3. Discussion

Despite the fact that the age of individuals in **Table 1** and **Table 2** ranges from 77 years to 90 years, they are still currently serving in the 118<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress without people questioning their capacity (based on ageism) to be productive. For example, in addition to Mr. Grassley (89 years old, **Table 1**) re-elected several times in the U.S. Congress, Mr. Steny H. Hoyer and Mr. Harold Rogers were initially elected to the House in 1981 at the age of 42 and 44 years, respectively, but they are still serving in the U.S. Congress at the age of 84 (Mr. Hoyer, **Table 2**) and 85 (Mr. Rogers, **Table 2**) following several re-elections to the same position over the past 40 years. Additional examples can be derived by analyzing the summary of the 118<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress provided by [Stowe \(2023\)](#) and [Congress.Gov \(n.d.\)](#).

**Table 1.** A sample of members in the U.S. senate (N = 10) 77 - 90 years old<sup>1</sup>.

State	Name	Date of Birth	Age	Elected to Senate	Party
Massachusetts	Edward J. Markey	7/11/46	77	2013 <sup>2</sup>	D
Connecticut	Richard Blumenthal	2/13/46	77	2011	D
Illinois	Richard J. Durbin	11/21/44	78	1997 <sup>3</sup>	D
Maine	Angus S. King Jr	3/31/44	79	2013	I
Maryland	Benjamin L. Cardin	10/5/43	79	2007 <sup>4</sup>	D
Idaho	James E. Risch	5/3/43	80	2009	R
Kentucky	Mitch McConnell	2/20/42	81	1985	R
Vermont	Bernard Sanders	9/8/41	81	2007 <sup>5</sup>	I
Iowa	Charles E. Grassley	9/17/33	89	1981 <sup>6</sup>	R
California	Dianne Feinstein	6/22/33	90	1992	D

D = Democratic, I = Independent, R = Republican; <sup>1</sup>President Biden, 11/20/42, age 80; Former President Trump, 6/14/46, age 77; <sup>2</sup>Mr. Markey served in the House from 1977-2013, then was elected Senator in 2013; <sup>3</sup>Mr. Durbin served in the House from 1983 until 1997, then was elected Senator in 1997; <sup>4</sup>Mr. Cardin served in the House from 1987 until 2007, then was elected Senator in 2007; <sup>5</sup>Mr. Sanders served in the House from 1991 until 2007, then was elected Senator in 2007; <sup>6</sup>Mr. Grassley served in the House from 1975 until 1981, then was elected Senator in 1981.

**Table 2.** A sample of members in the house of representatives (N = 26) 77 - 86 years old<sup>1</sup>.

State	Name	Date of Birth	Age	Elected to House	Party
North Carolina	Alma S. Adams	5/27/1946	77	2014	D
Ohio	Marcy Kaptur	6/17/46	77	1983	D
California	Barbara Lee	7/16/46	77	1997	D
Maryland	C. A. Dutch Ruppersberger	1/31/46	77	2003	D
Indiana	James R. Baird	6/4/45	78	2019	R
Georgia	David Scott	6/27/45	78	2003	D
California	John Garamendi	1/24/45	78	2009	D
New Jersey	Bonnie Watson Coleman	2/6/45	78	2015	D
Missouri	Emanuel Cleaver II	10/26/44	78	2005	D
California	Doris O. Matsui	9/25/44	78	2005	D
Illinois	Janice D. Schakowsky	5/26/44	79	1999	D
North Carolina	Virginia Foxx	6/29/43	80	2005	R
Connecticut	Rosa L. DeLauro	3/2/43	80	1991	D
Texas	Kay Granger	1/18/43	80	1997	R
California	Anna G. Eshoo	12/13/42	80	1993	D
Florida	Frederica S. Wilson	11/5/42	80	2011	D
Texas	John R. Carter	11/6/41	81	2003	R
Illinois	Danny K. Davis	9/6/41	81	1997	D
South Carolina	James E. Clyburn	7/21/40	82	1993	D
California	Nancy Pelosi	3/26/40	83	1987	D
Maryland	Steny H. Hoyer	6/14/39	84	1981	D
California	Maxine Waters	8/15/38	84	1991	D
Kentucky	Harold Rogers	12/31/37	85	1981	R
DC	Eleonor Holmes Norton	6/13/37	86	1991	D
New Jersey	Bill Pascrell Jr	1/25/37	86	1997	D
California	Grace F. Napolitano	12/4/36	86	1999	D

D = Democratic, R = Republican, DC = District of Columbia. <sup>1</sup>President Biden, 11/20/42, age 80; Former President Trump, 6/14/46, age 77.

It appears, therefore, that in the current political context ageism is a discriminatory attack against someone who is “too old” to be the president of the United States (e.g., President Biden and Former President Trump), but it is acceptable if the same person is “too old” but only wants to be a member of the U.S. Congress (e.g., see [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#)). In this situation, the answer in the title of this commentary is “No”, but only if the “ageism” factor is at the center of the answer. The answer, however, will be “Yes” if the U.S. Constitution is considered in the present context, in the sense that ageism is not a critical variable in this document simply because it does not establish a maximum age for someone to be a candidate for the presidency of the United States (the minimal age is 35 years old). For this reason, regardless of their advanced age in the case of President Biden and Former President Trump they are both constitutionally ready to be the President of the United States in 2024, except that they may have to “fight” against the “ageism” factor or “ageist messages” their political opponents and some members of the media continue inserting in the mind of potential voters (regardless of party affiliation or independent status) in 2024.

Does the issue of ageism negatively influence the stability of American politics? The answer to this question depends on the targeted political sector impacted by ageism messages promoted by some members of the media and political opponents. This article showed that ageism has not yet negatively impacted on the re-election of U.S. Senators and House of representatives classified in the “older adults” category (see [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#)). The reason for this observation is that members of the media and political opponents have not yet put in the mind of voters the assumed damaging effects of ageism in the case of Senators and House of Representatives each time they want to be re-elected. When the political target, however, is someone in that category wanting to be the President of the United States, ageism messages are not only discrimination against older adults, but they are also more likely to negatively impact the stability of American politics, for one important reason, namely, rejecting the best candidate simply because he or she is “too old” but electing a candidate *who is not considered* “too old” but with substantially lower qualifications to serve in that position.

[Law \(2021\)](#) observed that “given the awesome power of the presidency, it’s understandable that people may be concerned about a President’s cognitive [and physical] well-being”, and this observation is particularly important to consider in the case of an older adult seeking the presidency of a given country (e.g., Mr. Biden and Mr. Trump). Therefore, in this context it may be permissible to argue that the “ageism” factor is justified. Research with emphasis on aging clearly show that as people get older, they are more at risk to experience severe physical and mental/cognitive problems ([National Institute on Aging, n.d.](#)). But the “ageism” factor becomes a discriminatory situation against older adults when it is used to prevent them from fulfilling a given job because they are “too old” and not because they are experiencing severe health problems associated with the



aging process.

In conclusion, although it is permissible to assume that getting older may impact the ability of an elderly individual to appropriately function in a given official role (e.g., U.S. Senator or President), this assumption is only valid in the presence of a chronic physical or mental condition which prevents that individual from performing the tasks expected by the community. The contrary of this observation is, indeed, the central tenet of ageism, namely, assuming that the individual cannot perform a given task because he or she is “too old”, despite the fact that the individual is physically and mentally healthy and with sufficient prior experience to perform the task. Senator Bernard Sanders said on CBS’ *Face the Nation*: “We are fighting racism, we’re fighting sexism, we are fighting homophobia. I think we should also be fighting ageism [and ageist messages]” (Alic, 2023). I agree.

### Author Biography

Freddy A. Paniagua received his Ph.D. from the University of Kansas, and his postdoctoral degree from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. He is a retired, tenured professor from the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and currently adjunct professor, University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) at Galveston, USA, and Honorary Professor, School of Psychology, Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo, República Dominicana. He is Fellow with Life Status membership in the American Psychological Association (APA). He has authored over 50 articles in peer-reviewed journals, seven scholarly books, and two fiction books.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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