Politicians are getting older, but do voters care? Sort of

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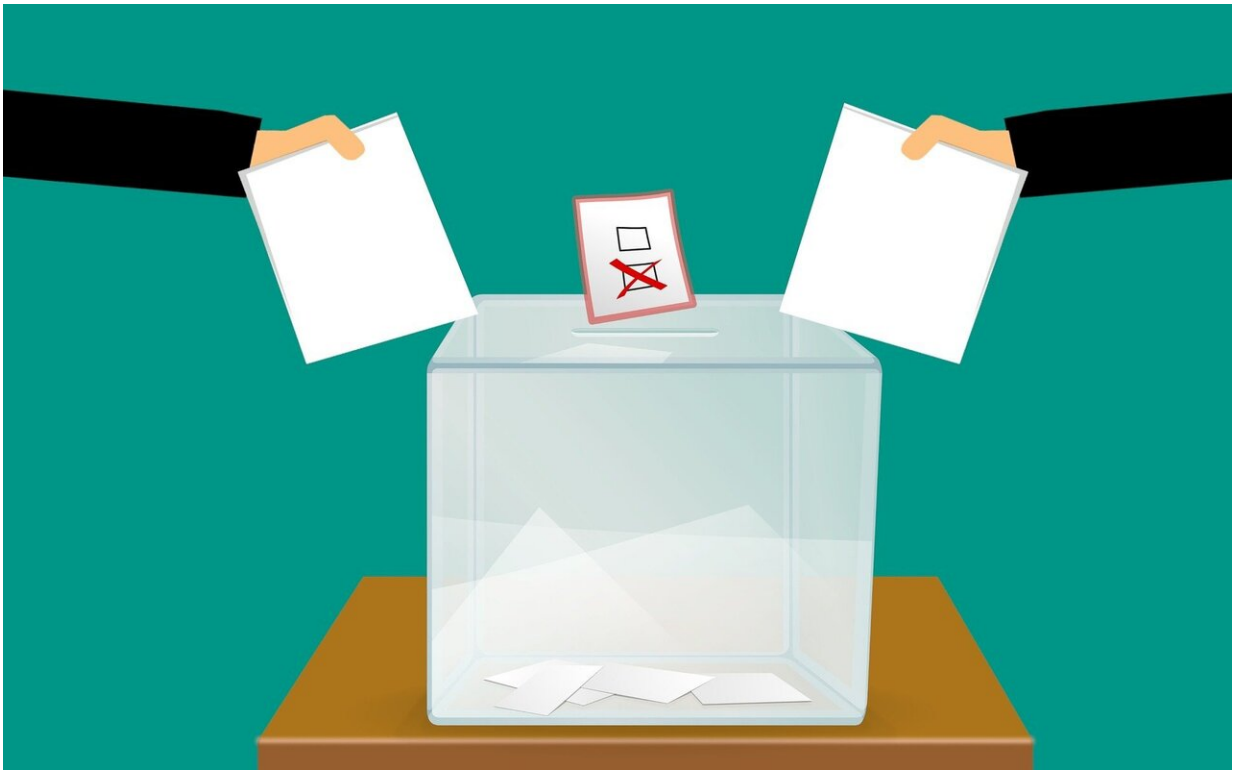

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Good news, Mr. President: A new study from a team of political scientists finds that the age of politicians may not be voters' chief concern when they're deciding who to cast their ballots for.

The results come at a time when Washington is growing grayer: President Joe Biden, for example, is 79 years old, while former President Donald Trump is not far behind at 76. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell is 80, and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi is 82.

The media have taken note: "Like Churchill in the '50s, Biden is just too old to lead his nation," a New York Post columnist declared. Rival newspaper The New York Times ran the headline, "At 79, Biden Is Testing the Boundaries of Age and the Presidency."

All those articles got Damon Roberts at CU Boulder wondering: Could these kinds of ageist attitudes have real impacts on Election Day?

In research published this summer in the journal *Political Behavior*, he and his colleagues decided to find out. The researchers conducted experiments with voters and drew on extensive survey data of Americans living across the country. Their answer was a resounding "not necessarily." Younger voters, the team discovered, have historically disapproved more often of the job that older politicians are doing versus that of their more junior colleagues. But they also seem to be just as willing to vote for older candidates.

"For Biden, that might be a good thing," said Roberts, a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science and lead author of the new study. "People may talk a lot about his age, but these results would suggest that talk might not translate into votes."

Are Boomers OK?

For the study, he and Jennifer Wolak, a political scientist formerly at CU Boulder and now at Michigan State University, drew on survey results from Cooperative Election Studies from 2006 to 2020. This dataset tracks attitudes of American voters in Congressional districts around the

country. After controlling for factors like incumbency and political ideology, the duo found that younger voters do seem to turn up their noses at older members of Congress.

Eighteen year olds, for example, tend to approve of the job performance of their roughly 30-year-old representatives about 60% of the time. That number drops to 54% when representatives reach 80—a possible case of "OK, Boomer" politics in action.

"Older members of Congress tend to see more punishment," Roberts said. "People are less likely to say, 'Hey, I like how they're doing.'"

But the situation might not be that simple: As part of the same research, he and Wolak also conducted an experiment with roughly 1,000 voters online. The team gave this cross-section of America a short vignette describing a hypothetical candidate running for a seat in a state legislature. Not all of the study subjects got the same article: In some cases, they were introduced to a 23-year-old politician. In others, a 50 year old or 77 year old. Study respondents didn't seem to have a preference. They reported roughly equal levels of support for each of the faux-candidates.

Roberts noted that political polarization may be responsible for that disconnect. The major political parties are so worried about losing elections, he said, that they throw resources toward whatever candidates they feel will maximize their chances of winning—gray hairs be damned.

"Elections are becoming higher stakes," he said. "You see both parties sending email messages declaring, 'This is the most important election of your lifetime.' They've been saying that for every election for at least the last decade."

Politics & the brain

The study is the latest in a series by Roberts to explore how politics—and the increasingly polarized political environment in the United States—can shape how humans think.

"I think a lot of political science research looks at how the brain affects politics," he said. "I'm more interested in how politics affects the brain."

In an earlier study published this year in *American Politics Research*, for example, he and his colleagues dipped into the contentious debate around "cancel culture"—a term popular among conservatives who fear that liberals are censoring anyone who doesn't agree with their political ideology. The team probed how these discussions might influence voter attitudes about First Amendment rights. In separate *American Politics Research* research, he and his colleagues looked at how voters perceive politicians based on the stereotypically "masculine" or "feminine" language they use.

The researcher added that he's not immune to the effects of partisan politics, either.

"I sometimes think I'm a bad political scientist," he said. "A lot of the time when I see the news, I just say 'yuck' and push that notification away."

That, at least, is something that Americans from both sides of aisle can agree on.

More information: Damon C. Roberts et al, Do Voters Care about the Age of their Elected Representatives?, *Political Behavior* (2022). DOI: 10.1007/s11109-022-09802-5

James J. Fahey et al, Principled or Partisan? The Effect of Cancel Culture Framings on Support for Free Speech, *American Politics Research* (2022). DOI: 10.1177/1532673X221087601

Damon C. Roberts et al, A Delicate Hand or Two-Fisted Aggression? How Gendered Language Influences Candidate Perceptions, *American Politics Research* (2022). DOI: 10.1177/1532673X211064884