

70-plus seems the new 50 for male politicians, but they're threatening the world order

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[Joe Biden is turning 80](#) soon. Russia's [Vladimir Putin is 70](#); India's [Narendra Modi is 72](#), while China's [Xi Jinping at 69](#) is the youngest of

the rulers of the major world powers.

None are planning to retire.

Brazil just elected a 77-year-old as its new president, while Israel's incoming prime minister is 73. As [younger men](#), both Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Benjamin Netanyahu [held power previously](#). [Donald Trump, at age 76](#), is reportedly about to announce that [he will seek the American presidency a second time](#) in 2024.

One reason for the gerontocracy is that those who assumed power at younger ages in non-[democratic countries](#) have amended constitutions and rules to allow unlimited terms of office. In Russia, Putin has ruled uninterrupted for 23 years, while in China, Xi has ensured unlimited years of rule for himself.

In democratic countries, older politicians draw on decades of political capital and alliances. Biden's success in running for president was partly due to the fact that he convinced voters that his 36 years as senator and eight years as vice-president would benefit America. [The surprisingly strong performance of Democrats](#) in the mid-term elections may suggest he has a point.

Like Biden, older leaders often promise continuity and stability. In a world beset with daunting problems—from climate change to pandemics and inflation—a capable leader, particularly of a major power, is often seen by citizens as someone who has a track record. Those with many years of political experience argue they are best placed to deal with what lies ahead.

Challenges faced by novices

The sorry tale of Liz Truss, Britain's prime minister for 44 days earlier

this year, shows how quickly and furiously the [business and political establishment can turn on a novice leader](#).

Curiously, western Europe, the region with the largest proportion of older citizens ([more than a fifth of western Europeans are over age 65](#)), has the youngest leaders. France's Emmanuel Macron, in his second term, [is 44](#), while the United Kingdom's [Rishi Sunak is 42](#). German Chancellor [Olaf Scholz at 64](#) is the oldest leader of a major European country.

The phenomenon of younger leaders but a graying population in Europe is due to some extent to the unique politics of many countries in the region. Nearly all European nations have a multitude of political parties, meaning coalition governments are the norm.

Other countries, like the U.K., have party rules that make it relatively easy to replace leaders. Under such conditions, outcomes in political leadership races are less predictable, and there's more turnover. Britain has had [five prime ministers in the past six years](#), while [Italy has had four](#).

Women are largely absent among world leaders. The few women who have recently reached the pinnacle of political power have done so early in their careers. [Giorgia Meloni, the new prime minister of Italy, is 45](#) while [Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand is 42](#). [Sanna Marin, the prime minister of Finland, turns 37 soon](#).

Working longer

Around the world people are living longer and healthier lives than ever before in human history, [and in many cases working longer](#). This is good news, but there are concerns about elderly and long-serving leaders.

They may be out of touch with the younger generations they need to represent. Solutions to policy conundrums that worked for them decades ago might no longer apply now or in the future.

Their attitudes and perspectives may become conservative or inflexible. [Unlike Finland's Marin](#), they probably don't have children in kindergarten and so don't see how policy plays out in real life.

Transitions from one leader to another are among [the most dangerous times](#) in the political life of a nation, whether they're democracies or authoritarian regimes. The Capitol Hill riots in the United States during the [last days of Trump's infamous presidency](#) are a reminder of how even in the "world's greatest democracy," long-established rules about the transfer of power can quickly be undermined.

But when the same person dominates public life in a nation for a long time, transitions are bound to be even more difficult. This is especially worrying in a large and powerful country since internal volatility can quickly have dramatic, and unpredictable, international repercussions.

Long-term rulers rarely prepare a succession plan, if only because doing so jeopardizes their grip on power.

But without a succession strategy and strong institutions that support a peaceful transition to the next leader, the aging leaders of the world's superpowers can represent a serious threat to the global order.

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