

# American gerontocracy may be shutting out young candidates, ignoring the problems of youth

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Leaders in the U.S. are getting older. For example, politicians in the House of Representatives are 20 years older than the average voter, and the country's 80-year-old President may stand for re-election. According to research from the University of Gothenburg, there is a risk that

younger voters will become disinterested in democracy in the U.S. because it is so difficult for younger candidates to get elected.

People under the age of 30 constitute half of the world's population. Previous research has shown that only 2% of those with a seat in a legislative assembly are under 30 years old.

"The relative absence of young adults in politics could contribute to what we call the vicious cycle of political alienation among the young. It is marked by low numbers of [younger people](#) in parliaments, low voter turnouts and political disenchantment—factors that tend to feed and amplify each other," explains Aksel Sundström, political scientist.

The under-representation of young adults is a major problem in the U.S. In 2023, many of the most influential American politicians are significantly older than their voters. President Joe Biden has turned 80 and is the oldest president in U.S. history; the Senate's minority leader Mitch McConnell will be 81 soon and Donald Trump, who has declared his intention to run for president again, will turn 78 during the [election campaign](#) of 2024.

"For example, the average age of members of the House of Representatives in office from 2020 to 2022 was 58 years old, which is about 20 years older than the average American. And the age gap between voters and candidates has increased. Between 1981 and 2021, the average age of candidates rose by ten years."

## **Few younger people nominated**

It was previously unknown where exactly in the process young candidates disappeared from American elections. Consequently, Aksel Sundström and Daniel Stockemer, professor of political science at the University of Ottawa, set out to jointly study the nomination of

candidates, the selection of candidates in the primaries, and the age of the candidates who won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2020. Their analysis was based on 1,661 candidates.

"Both Democrats and Republicans nominated a relatively small percentage of younger people in favor of middle-aged candidates. The average age of the selected candidates was 51.5 years. Only about 11% of all the candidates were aged 35 or younger."

In election campaigns, the younger candidates fared worse than the older candidates. The average age of the winners of primaries was 54, and the age of those who were ultimately elected to the House of Representatives was 58 on average.

"We see a strong connection between age and what we call election capital. This includes experience of previous elections and politics, support from the parties and being able to fund their campaigns. The parties often place younger candidates in electoral districts where they have little chance of winning, and this is problematic."

## **Advanced age of leaders considered problematic**

American voters do not actually prefer older candidates. Instead, older candidates are just the ones with more resources and they get to run in more winnable electoral districts than younger ones, often in districts where they have already been elected. Surveys in the U.S. indicate that Americans have nothing against younger candidates.

"According to a September 2022 poll by CBS News, 47% responded that politics would improve if there were more younger people in politics. Another survey in the U.S. indicated that 9 out of 10 Americans feel that 75 should be the maximum age for serving as President."

## A global problem for democracy

Aksel Sundström and Daniel Stockemer have also studied the problem of the underrepresentation of younger people in democratically elected legislative assemblies globally, which they talk about in a new book. The book is the first to analyze the phenomenon and explains why younger people are more successful in winning seats in certain countries and within certain parties. The researchers point to a couple of factors that could lead to better representation of the young in positions of power. In many countries, including the U.S., there are specific age thresholds for adults who can run for elections.

"In the U.S., that threshold is 25 for the House of Representatives and 30 for the Senate. In our opinion, these antiquated and arbitrary rules regarding age violate democratic principles. Ultimately, the message turns out to be that younger people are not welcome to participate in politics. Sweden is one of the very few examples of countries where younger people actually have a high presence in our Riksdag, our parliament," Aksel Sundström explains.

Related research is published in *Electoral Studies*.

**More information:** Daniel Stockemer et al, Young adults' underrepresentation in elections to the U.S. House of Representatives, *Electoral Studies* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102554](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102554)

Youth without Representation: The Absence of Young Adults in Parliaments, Cabinets, and Candidacies. University of Michigan Press, 2022, [www.fulcrum.org/ebooks/vq27zr0 ... 7/download?locale=en](http://www.fulcrum.org/ebooks/vq27zr0...7/download?locale=en)

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