

# Q&A: What does an aging Congress mean for a much younger nation?

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The United States has the second-oldest legislature in the world in terms of politicians' ages, according to Kevin Munger, the Jeffrey L. Hyde and Sharon D. Hyde and Political Science Board of Visitors Early Career Professor of Political Science at Penn State.

Munger studies gerontocracy, or government rule by [old people](#). Munger

spoke with Penn State News about his book "Generation Gap: Why the Baby Boomers Still Dominate American Politics and Culture" and what having a much older legislature means for a relatively younger nation.

## **Q: Why study gerontocracy, and what does it look like in the United States?**

**Munger:** Age is a fundamental reality of human life, and an important element of how we experience the world. Young people and old people have different concerns, like student loans versus Social Security. And at present, the U.S. has the oldest Senate and second-oldest House (after the previous one!) in its history and the second-oldest legislature in the world. Cambodia's is older, but I'm not a Cambodia scholar so I can't say why. I can, however, explain the situation in the U.S. today.

The median age of voting representatives in the U.S. House is 57.9 years, while that of the Senate is 65.3 years, according to the Pew Research Center. Two-thirds of the House is over 50 years of age.

That number is even larger in the Senate, where only 10 of 100 senators are under 50. The present gerontocratic situation is the result of the conflation of a variety of independent trends—demographic, economic, cultural and political—which have been unfolding for decades. Those trends began with the economic and population booms of the post-World War II (WWII) period and continue to the present.

## **Q: In your book you talk about the generation gap. What is it, and why do Baby Boomers have so much political and cultural sway in America?**

**Munger:** Boomers, born 1946-64, are the largest generation in American history—with approximately 76 million U.S. births, compared

to 55 million for Generation X (1965-80) and 62 million for Millennials (1981-96)—and the only generation officially recognized by the U.S. Census.

The term "Baby Boomers" comes from the dramatic rise in births witnessed in the U.S. following WWII. The three decades post-WWII saw incredible economic growth, and Boomers were well situated to take advantage of new and expanding opportunities. Their demographic heft has been amplified by the favorable economic situation they experienced, as well as their entry into the institutions of political power en masse in their 30s and 40s.

Boomers are the largest contingent in the current Congress, holding nearly one-third of the seats in the House and two-thirds of the seats in the Senate. They also [hold half of the nation's wealth](#) in terms of assets like real estate, equities and retirement pensions, which account for more than Gen Xers and Millennials combined.

Today, in the latter stage of their life cycle, they also hold disproportionate sway as voters and donors, especially in primary elections. In my book, I provide detailed statistics about how each of these historical trends unfolded, and how they have a "multiplicative effect" that produces current Boomer power.

For example, the standard mode of wealth accumulation in the U.S. has historically been buying homes. Boomers were more likely to be able to do this earlier in their life cycle—and were then the beneficiary of the 2008 mortgage bailouts, locking them in homes at interest rates that meant they would not sell them until later in life, depriving Millennials of the same opportunity.

Another example, from the cultural side of things, is the fact that the average age of working movie stars got much older right when the first

Boomers hit retirement age—demonstrating their power as a consumer bloc to drive cultural production.

**Q: There have been two high-profile cases recently where elderly legislators seemed to have cognitive events play out on live TV. How do incidences like these affect American voters' confidence in their elected officials?**

**Munger:** These are symptoms of the larger generational phenomenon I've identified. The youngest Baby Boomers will turn 60 next year, the oldest are almost 80. They hold a large number of seats in both houses of the federal legislature and have all the advantages that incumbency offers, like name recognition and access to large campaign donors.

Many leadership positions in the House and Senate are held by octogenarians, members of the Silent Generation (born before 1946). The associated health trends are a long time developing, and the fact that the cameras were on is simply calling attention to them. Less than 10% of Americans report more than "some" confidence in Congress, according to long-running Gallup surveys.

I cannot imagine the incidences that played out on live TV, affecting senators from each side of the aisle, will increase voter confidence. In fact, we've seen politicians from the senators' own parties call for them to resign due to health concerns.

**Q: What happens when an elderly lawmaker becomes incapable of performing their duties?**

**Munger:** In the U.S. system, nothing—incumbency advantages are

strong, and the lack of party control (like in most parliamentary systems) means that they can continue to win re-election even when well past their prime—especially in gerrymandered House districts. Congress has procedures in place to remove members, but no legislator has ever been expelled for medical reasons. If a lawmaker falls ill and cannot perform their duties, their seat effectively remains vacant until the end of their term, which can last years.

The U.S. Constitution establishes minimum ages for holding office, but currently there are no mandatory retirement ages in place or procedures for determining when a conscious and healthy-looking legislator is incapable of performing their duties.

## **Q: What are the upsides and downsides of having such an older legislative body?**

**Munger:** Generally, human societies tend to respect older people who have accumulated more wisdom—for good reason. They bring decades of knowledge and real-world experience to the job and can serve as mentors to their younger colleagues. When it comes to issues like international relations, you want someone with prior experience and connections in the field to be leading the committee or delegation.

However, in the current situation, when digital technology is reshaping the economy, society and national defense, this accumulated wisdom may be out of date. Younger voters, in particular, seem to be looking for someone who shares their worldview. General wisdom and specific legislative know-how tend to accumulate as people gain experience. But this is in tension with the capacity to represent younger citizens, to understand the problems they face.

Put it this way: was there anyone in the 2010s saying, "Our legislature is

fine now, but I really wish the average politician was older"? There are difficult tradeoffs between youth and experience, and it is important that our society is able to discuss this issue directly.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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