

# Older Voters and Age Bias in Presidential Elections

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*In February 2008, a Pew Research poll found that older adults had concerns about 71-year-old presidential candidate John McCain's age – more so than did younger adults. By October, a higher percentage of younger adults expressed concern about McCain's age, but the percentage of the 65+ population expressing concern that McCain was “too old” to be president was still at 35% -- as high as it was for Bob Dole at this point in the 1996 election when he ran for president at age 72. This paper explores reasons behind why older adults have concerns about an older presidential candidate's age, how this has been reflected in previous elections, and why the older voter tends to support older candidates despite concerns about age. As the U.S. population ages, understanding voter trends based on age will become a more important factor for candidates.*

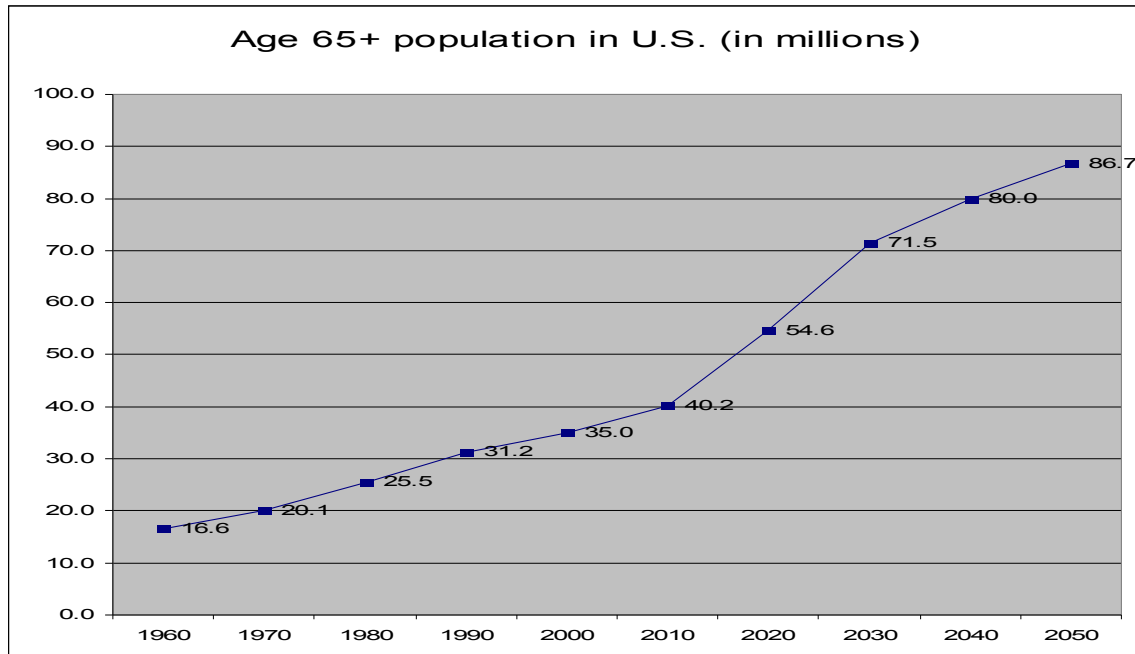
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## Introduction

Older voters (65+) have traditionally expressed more concern over the age of older presidential candidates than younger voters, yet still tend to vote for the older candidate. As the Baby Boomer generation is about to fall into this older demographic in record numbers, the significance of this reality and the recent emerging changes in older voter preferences casts new light on future trends in presidential elections. This paper asserts that older voters express more apprehension over an older candidate's age because they have personal knowledge of the physical limitations and hardships that come with age. Additionally, older voters hold their own engrained negative stereotypes toward age based on classic myths of the elderly from previous generations. However, despite these reservations, older candidates are still valued for experience as well as stability, and coincidentally, older candidates in recent presidential elections have held more conservative social views that commonly reflect those of seniors, resulting in widespread support by older voters.

### Current and Future Importance of Older Voters

Not only have older Americans remained a large voting demographic, they consistently vote in higher percentages than any other age group (United Press International 2008). They are also growing at a faster rate than ever before. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that the age 65+ population is expected to double in size within the next 25 years to some 72 million people and grow to over 86 million by 2050.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

While this age shift in the American population will dramatically influence the course of future elections, even the present impact of older voters cannot be overstated. The remarkable closeness of recent presidential elections and with the Electoral College’s “winner-take-all” (exceptions of Maine and Nebraska) state-by-state contests, crucial swing states have played a paramount role in presidential elections. Notably Florida, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia – three states with the highest proportion of residents 65 and above – are all highly contested battleground states in the 2008 presidential election. The impact that older voters have in election outcomes will grow dramatically as the Boomer generation creates an upward age shift in the American population. Understanding their voting preferences and trends is vital to the viability of any future presidential candidate’s chance at electoral success.

### Older Voters Concerned Over Older Presidential Candidates

A Pew Research poll conducted in February 2008 showed 26% of voters thought Republican presidential candidate John McCain was “too old” to be president, and that number jumped to 32% when they were informed of McCain’s age of 71 at the time of the poll (72 by inauguration). This echoes nearly identical results to a Gallup poll of the same question conducted in March 1996 regarding then Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole, who would have been 73 upon taking office.

More striking, the February 2008 Pew poll showed that the oldest age group surveyed (65+) were the mostly likely to say McCain was too old. While 30% of older voters said McCain was too old for the presidency, this rose to 40% when they were informed of his actual age. Younger voters (18-34) showed the least concern over McCain's age with only 18% initially thinking he was too old, rising to only 24% when informed of his age (Pew Research Center 2008a, 11).

These survey numbers clearly indicate that older voters were much more troubled over the age of older candidates than younger voters, and this can be contributed to a couple of reasons. One, older voters have firsthand experience of the difficulties that come with aging and project them on the older candidate, and two, their own perception of aging still reflects classic notions and myths as they remember from previous elder generations and media stereotypes.

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Polls taken during the 1996 presidential election campaign found that the older the voter, the more likely he or she was to believe that Bob Dole's age would be an obstacle.

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For older individuals, the impact of aging is often internalized as physical, medical, and even mental hardships that occur and compound upon one another. The degree to which these elements limit one's abilities varies greatly as he or she ages, but inevitably aging will bring about some form of decline in functioning. For many older Americans, these difficulties are a constant reminder of the reality of aging. This intimate knowledge of the hurdles that aging produces may cause older voters question the capabilities of an older candidate to endure the rigors of the presidency.

In looking at this factor in relevance to the then 73-year-old Bob Dole's unsuccessful 1996 Presidential campaign, CNN polling director Keating Holland said, "For younger voters, age is an abstraction. For senior citizens, old age is a reality. In 1996 that difference hurt Dole with senior citizens, but didn't seem to matter to voters under 30" (Silverleib 2008). To bolster this argument, an article in *Political Science Quarterly*, which used a regression analysis of seven CBS/*New York Times* polls taken during the 1996 presidential election, found that throughout the election season, the older the voter, the more likely he or she was to believe that Dole's age would hinder him. Ultimately this led to the conclusion that "older Americans did indeed project on Dole their own experience with health and the problems of aging" (Abrams and Brody 1998). In other words, since older voters projected their own negative age-related issues on older candidates, aged presidential office seekers are seen by them as handicapped in executing the mentally and physically draining job of president.

This same phenomenon was further expressed by campaign operatives like Q. Whitfield Ayres, a pollster for Lamar Alexander 1996 Presidential campaign, who argued, “Senior citizens are most likely to suggest that age affects energy and vigor because they’ve felt it in a very personal way” (Sack 1996). This has also been expressed on a more personal level through anecdotal statements made by many older Americans. One such comment was by 73-year-old Virginia Bailey, a retired administrative assistant, who declared, “I’m not as sharp as I was 10 years ago, and I’m sure (McCain) isn’t either – even though he wouldn’t admit it” (Associated Press 2008). All this evidence reiterates the conclusion that older voters can tangibly grasp the difficulties of aging and inherently cast doubt upon an older candidate’s suitability for the intense rigors of presidential office in a way foreign to young voters.

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Virginia Bailey, age 73

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Older Americans also have concerns over an older presidential candidate’s competency to do the job because of their own perceptions of aging. As advancements in medicine and healthcare have improved, so has the length and quality of life for older Americans. However, the perception of the “elderly” fails to keep up with modern medical advancements. While older adults see themselves as far from old, their concepts of old age still remain influenced by their view of the elderly from previous generations and media age bias. The classic perception of the elderly as frail, feeble, and dependent upon others still permeates the mind of the current generation of older Americans. In fact “old people tend to associate old age with residents of nursing homes” (Bradley and Longino 2001, 18).

In spite of these strong misconceptions of the elderly, study after study has found that older adults rarely associate themselves as feeling as old as they are and avoid categorizing themselves as old. However, the entrenched image of old age still harkens back to classic media images and thoughts of their own experiences with elderly people from their youth. These perceptions have slowly been dismantled with modern medical advances, and it seems the massive age demographic shift destined to occur with the Baby Boom population will largely reinvent old age, but these stereotypical images still cast a shadow in the minds of older voters over the abilities of older presidential candidates.

### **Older Voters Still Vote For the Older Candidate**

Even though older voters have the greatest concern over the age of older candidates, these voters more often support the older candidates. In the presidential campaign between the 47-year-old Democratic candidate Barack Obama and Republican candidate John McCain, as of June 15, 2008, voters age 65 and older supported McCain over Obama by eight points, according to a CNN/Opinion Research Corp. poll. The Gallup

weekly tracking poll leading up to the August 2008 Democratic convention showed McCain continuing to maintain a lead of seven to eight points in the 65+ age group of registered voters. The strength McCain has had among older voters during much of the campaign can be attributed to a couple of factors. First, older candidates generally have greater experience in preparation for the presidency – and McCain’s experience was certainly considered one of his strengths among voters, and this particularly resonates with older Americans. Second, in every recent presidential election, the older candidate happened to be the more ideologically conservative candidate, and studies have shown that older adults tend to vote for the more conservative candidate (Kohut 2008).

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Experience is typically important to older voters who understand first-hand the wisdom gained from life experiences. McCain’s four terms in the Senate and two in the House of Representatives trump his younger rival’s experience with four years in the Senate and three terms as a state legislator. According to a *USA Today*/Gallup Poll from February 2008, “McCain’s experience is a significant advantage for him, at least at the moment: 70% said he has the experience necessary to be a good president, 46% say that of Obama” (Page 2008).

This experience, as well as a degree of stability and familiarity, strikes a cord with older voters. Allen Saxe, a political scientist from the University of Texas, said that seniors will probably go for McCain because, “generally speaking, they prefer a ‘known’ to an ‘unknown.’ They don’t like change” (United Press International 2008). This seemingly held true in the 2008 Democratic primary race between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. While admittedly other factors were also at play, Clinton, who was the more experienced and better-known candidate, defeated Obama in the over-65 group hands down. In fact, “the data from Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International shows the Former First Lady winning older voters in dramatic fashion in 47 states, often by double digit leads” (Jennings 2008). The experience and familiarity questions certainly lent to Clinton’s favor with older voters in the primaries, and poll after poll showed that voters considered McCain much more experienced than his opponent Barack Obama, and many older voters seek experience and familiarity qualities for comfort and stability.

Older voters also historically hold more conservative views most notably on social issues. Polls have found that a higher percentage of older adults than younger adults feel that certain issues such as equal rights, immigration, interracial dating, and same-sex marriage threaten traditional values. In all recent elections with a notable age gap between the two major party candidates (Reagan vs. Mondale 1984, Bush vs. Clinton 1992, Clinton vs.

Dole 1996, and McCain vs. Obama 2008), the much older candidate has been the socially conservative one, and older Americans generally have supported the older candidate in spite of age concerns.

### **Reason for the Recent Shift in Age Bias of Older Voters**

The staggering shift in data between the February 2008 and June 2008 Pew Survey may have been due to the narrowing of candidates on the Republican side. While the age issue is a very important one due to the Electoral College and large elder populations in major battleground states, the fact remains that it is a secondary issue dependent upon other more influential factors for voters.

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To further explore this, look at the party affiliations of the voters with age concerns and how their opinions changed from February to June. The percentage of Democrats that felt McCain was too old to be president changed by only one point between February and June 2008, while both Republicans and Independents displayed sizeable declines of 7% and 8% respectively (Pew Research Center 2008b, 45). Since Democrats, who tend to skew younger, are overwhelming in support of the younger Democratic candidates, they likely looked to McCain's age as a weakness in large part because he was an opponent to their primary choice for president based on other more influential factors (party affiliation, ideology, issue stances, etc.). Republicans and Independents, on the other hand, had their choice of personally acceptable candidates based on those influential factors become more limited through the progression of the Republican primaries. When the first Pew survey was conducted, Mike Huckabee was still an active Republican candidate while the other major Republican rival to McCain, Mitt Romney, had just ceased his campaign. The considerable amount of supporters Romney had gathered were most likely still reeling from his election defeat when the survey was taken, reluctant so soon after defeat to embrace another candidate. These supporters of both the 52-year-old Huckabee and 61-year-old Romney probably viewed 71-year-old McCain as too old, in large part because he was an opponent to their first candidate of choice. By June when the next Pew survey took place, Huckabee and Romney supporters mostly fell in support of McCain, the closest candidate to their preferences based on party affiliation, ideology, and issue stances. These new supporters likely cast aside the notion of McCain as too old because now he was in their judgment the best candidate remaining for president.

### **Conclusion**

The fact that older voters are more concerned about the age of older candidates is an important issue that will become more prevalent in upcoming elections as the percentage of older American voters increases. While the hardships of aging are being mitigated

with advancements in medicine and lifestyle, as well as a state benefit system that offers some assistance to older adults, many seniors still continue to confront their own difficulties with aging. As a result, they relate those hindrances with the potential struggles that could confront an older president. Additionally, older voters commonly perceive themselves as younger than their chronological age; however they still hold many stereotypes about aging that have been long instilled through common myths and mistruths about the elderly. Through personal experience with the previous less-fortunate elder generations that lacked modern medicine and pop culture that bolstered media bias toward age, older voters are subsequently positioned to have apprehensions about senior candidates.

Yet in spite of all this concern over age, older voters still tend to vote for the older candidate and feel the older candidate represents experience and stability. Additionally, older voters frequently hold more conservative social opinions, and all recent notably older candidates have happened to represent more conservative social policies. Therefore, recent coincidentally older candidates have still attracted older voters with age concerns, based on partisan social views. Although the Pew surveys showed a dramatic drop in concern over McCain's age, this is seemingly due to the narrowing of Republican candidates, leaving McCain as the sole Republican candidate and the one who was seen as the most acceptable candidate politically for many older Republican and Independent voters based primarily on party affiliation and ideology.

As the U.S. population undergoes an aging boom, understanding the voting trends of older voters will become increasingly important to help predict future election outcomes. While older voters are concerned about the age of older presidential candidates, medical advancements and an emerging new image of Boomers as seniors will likely help lessen negative age stereotypes, while qualities such as experience can and will be touted to win over the crucial older voter demographic.

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