

The Washington Gerontocracy

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In a declining society, the images of an aging leadership can come to embody a general sense of withering and decay. In Moscow, the late nineteen-seventies and early eighties was the era known as *zastoi*, the time of stagnation. Leonid Brezhnev, the Communist Party's longtime General Secretary until his death, in 1982, suffered from arteriosclerosis and an alarming dependence on sleeping pills; ordinary Soviets, in the privacy of their kitchens, mocked his inability to speak a clear sentence. Brezhnev's successor, Yuri Andropov, was stricken by kidney failure shortly after taking office and lasted fifteen months.

Is the United States in the midst of its own *zastoi*? Are we a teetering democracy of gerontocrats? The polls show that much of the American electorate fears just that. Cautionary tales abound: Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, age eighty-one, standing frozen before the cameras, unable to speak, evidently suffering the aftereffects of a fall; Senator Dianne Feinstein, age ninety, evidently confused in hearings and interviews.

Joe Biden—in part because of the immense divisions in American politics, in part because of his failure to match the proficiency of his Administration with an inspiring fluency at the microphone—is struggling. If Biden, who will be eighty-one in November, were ten or fifteen years younger, he might well have a clear glide path to reelection. But he is not, and he does not. According to a CBS News/YouGov poll released last week, only thirty-four per cent of registered voters believe that Biden would complete a second term; the number for Donald Trump, who is just three years younger, is fifty-five per cent.

The logic for Biden's reelection bid is plain. He emerged from a highly competitive Democratic field in 2020 and went on to beat Trump, who now faces an array of indictments. As President, Biden can claim significant successes: jobs created; inflation diminished; a pandemic under control; the passage of major environmental and infrastructure legislation; the mobilization of NATO to defend Ukraine. He should be capable of defeating Trump again and of making further gains on many more issues.

Nonetheless, many Democrats dream of another option. Recently, David Ignatius, a columnist for the Washington Post, joined the ranks of concerned voices calling on Biden to step aside. Others have called for younger candidates to join the race.

Then, there's the "compared with what?" factor. Trump's general malevolence sometimes obscures his incoherence. Trump recently made an appearance in which—even as he was calling Biden "cognitively impaired"—he suggested that we were headed toward "World War Two." He also seemed to suggest that he had beaten Barack Obama in 2016, and was leading him now in the polls. Yet somehow Trump's bile reads to his supporters as vitality.

A double standard? No doubt. But the prospect of a Presidential election as a contest of the ancients is not a heartening one, and the anxieties it provokes cannot be dismissed as ageism. What are younger people, especially, to make of a political culture in which incumbents cling so tenaciously to their seats? The median age for senators is now around sixty-five.

And yet voting is often a matter of choosing among highly constrained choices. Unlike the Eastern Bloc gerontocracies of the *zastoi* era, there's nothing ossified about this Administration's approach to politics. In the 2020 primaries, Democratic voters picked Biden by a sizable margin; he has not, amazingly enough, grown any younger since. The real menace isn't posed by an elderly pol intent on protecting and renewing a democratic republic; it's posed by a chaos agent who fomented insurrection and promises to return America to a state of misery.