

Age is a sore spot for Joe Biden. Here's why Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump don't face the same scrutiny



Rachel Looker

USA TODAY

Published 5:01 a.m. ET Dec. 5, 2023 | Updated 11:54 a.m. ET Dec. 5, 2023

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders banged his gavel and threw his arms in the air as Oklahoma Sen. Markwayne Mullin, a Republican, invited International Brotherhood of Teamsters President Sean O'Brien to fight during a Senate committee hearing three weeks ago.

"Hold it! Stop it! No, no, sit down! You're a United States senator," Sanders yelled, later adding: "This is a hearing and God knows the American people have enough contempt for Congress. Let's not make it worse."

It's a look that stays true to the Vermont independent's image among Americans – an animated, progressive firebrand with a strong appeal to young voters – the kind of voters who recent polling indicates may not be as interested in backing President Joe Biden as they were in 2020. One November NBC News poll found Biden's approval rating among 18-34 year olds dropped to 31% from 46% two months prior.

For Biden, who recently turned 81 and is the oldest president in U.S. history, age is a concern for voters heading into next year's election. In a USA TODAY poll released in June, 37% of Democrats and Independents said Biden's age makes them less likely to vote for him.

With lawmakers freezing during press conferences and forgetting how to vote on defense funding, age has become top of mind for many voters. But is it a sole determining factor when deciding who to support?

One bloc of voters sees age as a secondary concern they are willing to look past ahead of the 2024 election, instead prioritizing a candidate's policy positions and track record.

“I don’t give a damn about the age,” Jeremy Lasko, 36, of Lehigh Acres, Florida, told USA TODAY. “Age does not scare me. The policy that anyone makes does scare me.”

It's a message echoed by the Biden campaign.

"When voters go to the ballot box next year, they'll cast their votes based on a simple question: Who is delivering for Americans and their families on the issues that matter to them," Daniel Wessel, a spokesperson for the Biden campaign, told USA TODAY in a statement. "President Joe Biden is, while Donald Trump and the rest of the MAGA extremists are actively looking to make working people's lives harder."

Yet the issue of age for Biden becomes evident when looking at how other older lawmakers – like 82-year-old Sanders and former President Donald Trump, 77, who is cruising toward a 2024 rematch with Biden – are perceived by the public. Experts told USA TODAY age does not crop up in the same ways for other older lawmakers as it does for Biden.

“We are seeing the effects of ageism of looking at Biden – looking at him as an older person with the effects of aging – when we’re not doing the same thing to Sanders and Trump,” Janie Steckenrider, a political gerontology expert at Loyola Marymount University, said.

Do voters acknowledge other candidates' ages?

Sanders, who is one year older than Biden, is one example of a politician where questions over his age have not been spotlighted in the same way.

Lasko is a registered independent who supported Sanders' presidential bids in 2016 and 2020.

His decision to support a political candidate has less to do with their age and more to do with where they stand on certain issues.

"Youth does not make you better nor does age for wisdom," Lasko, who works for a roofing company, said. "Whether you're here to help your fellow man is what the biggest concern is."

Someone like Sanders, Lasko said, has consistently been known as a fierce advocate for health care and union rights.

Jonathan Yardley, 55, a Barrington, New Hampshire resident who voted for Sanders in his 2016 and 2020 primary bids, told USA TODAY he did not consider Sanders' age in those elections, only when the the former presidential candidate suffered from a heart attack.

"I've never considered Bernie to show his age," he said.

But when comparing Biden to a lawmaker like Sanders, Yardley said Sanders comes across much younger.

"I have seen instances of him (Biden) just being very confused where I haven't seen Bernie act in that way at all," Yardley said, referencing moments where Biden has mumbled during a speech or stumbled on stage.

Does age matter to voters?

Loyola Marymount University's Janie Steckenrider said there has been more of a focus placed on age within the last year after Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., had several episodes of freezing and Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., became confused during votes.

"I think that brought the realities of age to top of mind," Steckenrider said.

It's top of mind for Jennifer Sexton of Edinburg, Texas. She said the ages of Biden – as well as Trump – concern her. The 52-year-old professor said she is concerned that Biden could die during the campaign, leaving the Democratic party without a frontrunner.

Someone like Sanders, who Sexton backed in the last two Democratic primaries, seems much younger, she said. But regardless of age, Sexton said she is looking at a candidate's policy stances and would consider voting for a third-party candidate who champions environmental issues.

David Bell of Reno, Nevada, voted for Biden in 2020 and is feeling less enthusiastic about backing him for a second time over concerns that he is too old.

Bell, 34, said he is happy with Biden's progress as president, but wishes the president focused more on charting a path forward for the next generation of Democratic leaders.

"When it comes to vice presidential choice, Cabinet choices, I don't think there's anyone who I can see as a rising star within his administration and that's my biggest issue overall," he said.

Bell, who works in logistics, said age isn't the sole deciding factor to determine who he will vote for, but emphasized he worries about it affecting a person's ability to lead and make decisions at the presidential level.

"It becomes a secondary concern for me," he said. "It's not the number one thing that I look at or measure my candidates on."

Others, like Yardley, said his concerns over Biden as the Democratic nominee have less to do with the president's age, and more to do with polling from last month that shows Trump surpassing Biden.

"I don't think age is a large factor for me," Yardley said.

Donald Schepis, 28, who works as a creative producer for a gaming company, said he views age and policy positions as going hand in hand.

"The way I complain about it is, 'Oh, I have to go vote for another old man.' But I don't care if I'm voting for an old man if they've actually kept up and are a modern progressive," the Phoenix, Arizona Democrat said, adding that he plans to vote for Biden next year but is "not looking forward to voting for another old guy."

But ultimately, Schepis said he weighs a candidate's policy and position over their age.

Ageism and ableism

Ageism and ableism factor into any comparison when looking at the ages of elected officials, according to Fernando Torres-Gil, the director of UCLA's Center for Policy Research on Aging.

"We still have a relatively ageist and ableist society where if you look old and act disabled, it creates a more negative impression," he said.

The superficial nature of how one appears to others can influence how they are seen in the public eye, he said.

"I think it has a lot to do just with style and personality – how you are perceived," Torres-

Gil said.

Steckenrider also pointed to an ageist society, saying Biden is exhibiting normal aging behavior that often gets misconstrued as signs of a larger problem, like dementia.

Once someone starts to demonstrate characteristics associated with age, that becomes the focus and people jump to other assumptions, Steckenrider said. And with Biden constantly in the public eye as president, his every move is monitored compared to other political figures who don't receive the same attention.

“Those kinds of things are what people are seeing – not necessarily listening to him,” she said. “Biden has never been that same personality as Sanders. He’s always been much calmer and he hasn’t been a firebrand, so in much part it’s just the presentation of their personalities and their traits.”

Thomas Jankowski, an adjunct professor of gerontology and political science at Wayne State University, said Sanders appears more energetic and vigorous. He is energized, and speaks with a loud Brooklyn accent. Biden has a quieter voice and occasionally stumbles when speaking because of a stutter.

“I think it triggers some age-related biases on the part of some people because he sounds like he mumbles a little bit and I think people attribute that to age,” Jankowski said.

Jankowski said Trump has similar advantages to Sanders in the ways he carries himself and speaks.

“People interpret those things as signs of youth,” he said. “It may be very similar in that people don’t see Trump as being as old as Biden just like they didn’t see Bernie Sanders being as old as Biden is.”

Sanders defends Biden's age

Sanders himself defended Biden’s age in August, telling NBC’s “Meet the Press” that there are “broader issues” than just a candidate's age.

“When people look at a candidate, whether he’s Joe Biden, or Trump, or Bernie Sanders, anybody else, they have to evaluate a whole lot of factors,” Sanders said.

The focus instead should be on what a candidate stands for, the Vermont senator said.

The 82-year-old senator has made it clear he has no intentions on running again and previously endorsed Biden's reelection.

Sanders is seeking to unite progressives behind the president ahead of the 2024 election. He praised Biden's economic policies earlier this year in New Hampshire, a state where Biden will not appear on the primary ballot due to a conflict with the Democratic National Committee over the primary's timing.

"I think that we have got to bring the entire progressive community (to) defeat Trump or whoever the Republican nominee will be," Sanders said on CNN's "State of the Union."

Biden defended his own age on MSNBC earlier this year, saying he has "acquired a hell of a lot of wisdom" throughout his career.

He has also used humor when confronting his age, joking over the summer to a crowd of reproductive rights activists that he is 198 years old. Most recently, he joked about his age in an Instagram post for his 81st birthday.

"Turns out on your 146th birthday, you run out of space for candles," Biden wrote.

Featured Weekly Ad
