

5-2024

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Lipscomb, Valerie Barnes, "Performing Presidential Age: "It's about How Old Your Ideas Are"" (2024).
English Sarasota Manatee Campus Faculty Publications. 30.
https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/eng_facpub_sm/30

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Performing Presidential Age: “It’s about how old your ideas are”

Valerie Barnes Lipscomb

During a February surprise appearance on *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, President Joe Biden whipped out his trademark aviator sunglasses and traded quips with Meyers about a supposed conspiracy with Taylor Swift, much to the delight of the younger live audience. The next day, reviews were mixed about whether the president was trying too hard or did in fact manage to look hipper. To look younger. While US presidential nominees have been consciously performing their campaigns for decades, during this cycle, considering age as a performance has been especially prominent. Commentators and critics have specifically addressed the careful staging of persona that is central to presidential politics but is not always acknowledged as such. Numerous media analysts, for example, claimed that Biden desperately needed to appear energetic and cognitively sharp during his [2024 State of the Union address](#), and the consensus was that he nailed the performance. As *Time* critic Philip Elliott put it, “Ultimately, Americans select their candidates not on the skills required to do the job, but rather on how they perform when the cameras are turned on and the set pieces put in motion.” Since the rematch between Biden and Trump became a certainty, I have been drawn to the contrasts between the consistent attention to the performance of age for each candidate, and the inconsistent conclusions based on the performativity of age for Biden and Trump.

One explanatory note because this is an open-access journal that attracts readers outside academia: since the adjective *performative* has entered the general lexicon, it has acquired an additional meaning. As always, the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains the etymology well. In popular culture, performative often describes something that “is done or expressed for the sake of appearance, esp. to impress others or to improve one’s own image (typically with the implication of insincere intent or superficial impact).” The *OED* dates this usage to 1996, with additional examples listed more recently. The original meaning used in

linguistics and philosophy, which the *OED* dates to 1922, is the foundation for scholars' analyzing age as performative: "an utterance that effects an action by being spoken or by means of which the speaker performs a particular act." Adapting from Judith Butler's positing of gender as performative, age-studies scholars "contend that each individual constantly performs actions associated with a chronological age, and that these repeated performances constitute a perceived reality of age for the subject as well as for those who interact with the subject" (Lipscomb). We define *performativity* as focusing more on unconscious, repetitive behavior, while we tend to use the term *performance* to describe choices made more consciously. The academic terms thus do not carry the negative connotations that now burden the popular definition of *performative*.

Biden's State of the Union performance was seen as fiery enough to demonstrate continued vitality, and his ability to respond in the moment—i.e., his addition of improvised barbs to the scripted remarks—drew praise for demonstrating that he still can think on his feet. He jokingly confronted the issue of age, then quickly noted that Trump is in his age group while contrasting their visions: "Other people my age see it differently." As others participating in this forum also point out, Trump is in the same age group but less often branded as being too old to be president. There seems to be little or no media anticipation directed toward performance of Trump's age when he speaks in public. Instead, the coverage of his appearances has highlighted that Trump has regularly imitated/performed President Biden, mockingly portraying supposed age-related confusion: "Where am I?" he mumbles, turning away from and around the podium with a stiff gait and flat affect. Unsurprisingly, this elicits a rousing laugh from his supporters. [He also has mocked Biden](#) for misidentifying the town or state where he is appearing.

However, the more substantive critiques of the two candidates involve age performativity rather than performance. It certainly was a conscious fitness performance when Biden embarked on a bicycle ride during his vacation last summer because the media were invited to cover it minute by minute. But one of the numerous memes (Fig. 1) contrasting Biden with Trump uses photos of Biden riding a bicycle and Trump riding on a golf cart to emphasize the

performativity of physical fitness more than the staged act of public exercise.



Figure 1. Posted on Facebook by “Occupy Democrats,” among others, in September 2023

In the two sets of contrasting photos labeled “There’s old and then there’s old” (Fig. 2), Biden appears active and healthy, while Trump appears sedentary and past the Body Mass Index obesity threshold. This points to a valid concern about presidential health. According to the [Centers for Disease Control](#),

“Adults with obesity have higher risks for stroke, many types of cancer, premature death, and mental illness such as clinical depression and anxiety.” Rather than addressing chronological age, the meme focuses on the extent to which the public might be able to judge the candidates’ physiological ages based on apparent traits and repeated behaviors. Even more important is acknowledging that, fairly or not, people do regularly make those judgments. Unfairly, some voters judge Biden as cognitively impaired when he is dealing with a longtime stutter. It is unfair that Trump also has misspoken about which town he is in and has fallen asleep repeatedly during a trial without drawing the same kind of ageist criticism as “Sleepy Joe.” Voters often do not reach fair or logical conclusions.

The media has at least noticed and reported that Trump largely evades the age-related stereotypes and judgments leveled at Biden. I agree with previous contributors to this forum about the reasons behind that evasion. Our culture tends to view age 80 as having crossed into the last category of age, the one ending only in death. As close as Trump is, he isn’t there yet. We have other hard-and-fast, no-return thresholds in the US, such as age 18 to vote, so we are accustomed to thinking that one day you are not old enough, and the next day you are. Legal age is performative—the act of turning 65 makes you eligible for Medicare, when the day before, you were not. Although it is illogical to judge Biden as having fallen into an abyss for passing 80, such an age judgment has cultural precedents. Trump’s campaign capitalized on this kind of categorization by posting a parodic ad portraying the White House as a care home. “White House Senior Living, where residents feel like presidents,” the narrator says. The parody ought to catch Trump in the same net, because he is fewer than four years younger than Biden, but it relegates Biden to the oldest old while staying silent about Trump, attempting to cast him as performatively younger.

There's old and then there's old.



Figure 2. Posted in December 2023 on www.quora.com

The campaigns are increasingly composed of such clips, snips, and sound bites, from which voters draw conclusions about performative age. Campaign ads long have tried to sway voters in a minute or less, and the rise of social media has not lengthened the performance. According to Statista's latest statistics (for a period in 2023) about TikTok, "Huge accounts, which presented over 25,001 views, produced content with a duration of around 50 seconds on average as of the examined period" (Ceci).

These brief iterations tend to show Trump as belligerent, rebellious,

disruptive—traits that often are associated with youth. He aims that rebellion toward Biden, evoking the familiar script of a younger generation's struggle against the older. Conversely, Biden is shown as affable, reasonable, collaborative, closer to a grandfatherly stereotype. Snips that show Trump's bluster vs. Biden's slower-paced delivery can lead viewers to conclude that Biden no longer possesses the mental acuity to analyze a situation and make a difficult decision quickly, an essential presidential qualification. Ironically, Trump's performance of individualistic self-reliance should be more of a red flag if anyone is concerned that the candidates are cognitively "too old for the job." A reasonable and collaborative president experiencing cognitive decline would be more likely to rely on a trusted team of experts; a maverick could court danger by ignoring his advisors.

I am aware that in examining performance and performativity, I have been drawing examples from mainstream media coverage, internet ads, YouTube clips, and social media posts, as if they all carry equal weight. When I was at the beginning of my career, editing a small newspaper, this choice would have appalled me. My training held that print news was the gold standard of information about candidates: thoroughly researched, professionally reported, and rigorously edited. A story had to pass muster with several journalism professionals to be deemed ready for the public, and network television news used a condensed version of the same process. The advent of cable news removed even more of that time for research and editing; stories aired quickly and were updated as they developed. As news networks adopted a 24/7 format, the lines between reporting the news and analyzing it blurred. Anchors evolved into hosts, who gave a headline and then filled airtime with speculation. Social media completed the democratization (and some would argue, the demise) of the news media: anyone could report, comment, and transmit. Everyone can be a content-creator. Now, a random one-minute TikTok about a candidate can go viral and have as much effect on public opinion as a print series resulting from six months of investigation by dozens of reporters. One iteration of a candidate's performative age can be extracted as constituting the whole of that candidate, when age instead is composed of repeated iterations, each one

changing slightly as the individual ages minute by minute, day by day.

So that means Biden's appearance on *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, especially when clipped and shared, could do as much as his State of the Union address to bolster his claims of not being too old for the job. While the State of the Union is a set piece of the presidency, Biden is only the second sitting president to visit a late-night talk show, taking a page from Barack Obama's playbook. CNN commentators noted that Biden's humor appealed to Meyers's younger audience and showed [a clip](#) of these comments he offered about his age: "Number one, you gotta take a look at the other guy. He's about as old as I am, but he can't remember his wife's name. Number two, it's about how old your ideas are. Look, I mean, this is a guy who wants to take us back." Biden performed being a president who is committed to continue moving the nation forward. Let us hope that commitment will be performative as well as a performance.

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