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The race for the White House, between age comparisons and teleprompter

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Given that 81-year-old Democrat Joe Biden has taken himself out of the US presidential race, attention over the age issue has turned more sharply towards 78-year-old Republican Donald Trump. At that age he is somewhat older than an earlier presidential

candidate for re-election with an advanced age issue: Ronald Reagan.

In 1984, when Reagan stood for re-election – and won his second mandate – he was 73 and his Democratic party opponent, Walter Mondale, was 56. Much was said then about the age differential between the two candidates. Then, in a televised debate, Reagan put the issue at rest by stating, tongue in cheek, that he would not hold his opponent's young age against him, triggering smiles and laughter from Mondale and the audience.

Comparing the experiences of 1984 and 2024, the election day Reagan-Trump age differential is only five years.

A comparison between the older candidate's age with that of his opponent, then and now, reveals that in the Reagan-Mondale election the age differential between the two was 17 years. In 2024, 78-year-old Donald Trump will face 60-year-old Kamala Harris, with the age differential being 18 years – a mere one-year difference compared with the election 40 years ago.

As a coincidence, birthyear wise, Trump and Harris represent the beginning and the end of the baby-boomers: Trump was born in 1946 and Harris in 1964, the first and the last years of that famed generation.

For sure, in elections what really matters is not a candidate's age per se, but the experience, vitality, cognizance, and engagement of the individual. Senescent Joe Biden was urged to step aside by several well-seasoned Democratic party politicians, including former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, who is still in Congress and is sharp as a tack at age 84, three years older than Biden.

Senescence has no starting age. However, sometimes people give evidence at an earlier stage in their lives that their mental capacities may no longer be up to snuff. An observation noted by this writer is that while Biden has relied heavily on teleprompters to communicate with the world at large – and stumbled miserably speaking without it – Vice President Kamala Harris, who will turn 60 in October, since being nominated for the presidency also has communicated with the exclusive use of a teleprompter while speaking publicly – and only at large rallies.

Journalists have dubbed Harris' occasional unscripted remarks as “word salads” underscoring how inarticulate she appears to be. So far she has avoided all one-on-one formal interviews, although she has agreed to eventually debate her opponent Trump. The latter instead has organized news conferences on his own, accepted every invitation to speak from an unfriendly convention of black journalists to a long-winded, wide-ranging conversation with the visionary businessman Elon Musk, age 53.

The similarities between the Democratic party campaigns of 2020 and today are striking. Four years ago the senescent Biden was “kept in the basement” of his home and away from the press while delivering occasional speeches with the use of a teleprompter. Pre-Democratic party convention (August 19-22), Harris has followed a similar pattern.

A word about the ages of the vice-presidential candidates: Republican JD Vance, Senator from Ohio, is 40 whereas his Democratic opponent Tim Walz, Governor of Minnesota, is 60 – and only six months older than Harris, although he appears much older than his running mate. The 20-year reverse gap between the two offsets the almost similar distance between the presidential candidates.

On the matter of ages, Harris and her supporters cannot use the age differential argument against Trump given that, until July of this year, she had been running for re-election as vice president on a ticket with Joe Biden who is 81 and thus an even older person than Trump.

While on the topic of presidential ages, an interesting footnote needs to be appended: On October 1 the ailing former President Jimmy Carter will celebrate his 100th birthday. He is the longest-lived president in American history. Carter has indicated that he hopes to live long enough to vote for (who else?) Kamala Harris.

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