

US politics & policy

Mitch McConnell's 'sandbag' moment stokes anxiety over US gerontocracy

Minority leader's health scare sparks debate as 80-year-old Joe Biden campaigns for second term



The US Senate's top Republican, Mitch McConnell, centre, is helped by other senators after the 81-year-old GOP leader froze at the microphones at a press conference © AP

Lauren Fedor in Washington JULY 29 2023

When [Mitch McConnell](#), the Senate's top Republican, froze mid-sentence while speaking to reporters on Capitol Hill this week, the silence was deafening.

"Are you good, Mitch?" asked Iowa senator Joni Ernst, after 30 speechless seconds. Wyoming senator John Barrasso took McConnell's arm. "Mitch? Anything else you want to say?" he said in a whisper caught on camera. "Or should we just go back to your office?"

McConnell, 81, left, but returned a few minutes afterwards to say he was "fine". Later, he told reporters US President [Joe Biden](#) had called to check on him.

"I told him I got sandbagged," McConnell said, repeating the phrase Biden used after tripping on a sandbag following a speech at the Air Force Academy last month.

Both men tried to make light of their situations. But the episode has raised anew longstanding uncomfortable questions about the age and frailty of lawmakers in Washington, where so many influential [politicians](#) are octogenarians.

McConnell, who had a lengthy absence from the Senate this year after suffering a fall at an event at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in Washington, is far from the US Senate's oldest member. That title belongs to Dianne Feinstein, the 90-year-old California

Democrat. Chuck Grassley, the Republican senior senator from Iowa, is 89.

Feinstein's age has been a particular cause for consternation after the Democratic lawmaker was also absent from Congress for an extended period following a bout of shingles. She has appeared strikingly frail since returning to Capitol Hill and doubts over her cognitive abilities linger.

This week, she looked confused about what to do during a committee hearing, until a Democratic colleague, Patty Murray of Washington, instructed her to "just say aye".

Meanwhile, at 80 years old, [Biden](#) has set the record for the oldest person elected US president. He will be 86 at the end of his second four-year term if he wins re-election.

Biden's age and insinuations about his mental acuity have become a regular theme in Republican attacks on the president, especially on social media, even though the party's frontrunner [Donald Trump](#) is just three years younger than the president.

In a Harvard Caps/Harris poll of about 2,000 registered voters this month 68 per cent — including 43 per cent of Democrats — thought Biden was "showing he is too old to be president", up from 66 per cent in June.

Larry Sabato, founder of the University of Virginia Center for Politics, said Biden's age would "of course" be a factor as voters weighed their options in 2024. "How could it not be?"

The president's allies have tried to pitch his age as an asset, betting voters will reward him for decades of experience at the top of government, first as a senator and later as vice-president and president.

Analysts say the strategy could bear fruit.

Sabato said: "We do value seniority, and we value people's experience. Sometimes it makes more sense to elect someone who actually knows what they are doing, and knows where the levers of power are and where the bodies are buried."

But he cautioned that ultimately, Biden's age and experience were unlikely to shift dramatically his levels of support, either positively or negatively, in next year's general election.

"In the end, when people vote for president, after their party ID, which determines 90 per cent of the vote, they consider the big things: the state of the economy, war and peace, scandal."

Doug Heye, a veteran Republican strategist and longtime senior aide to Republicans on Capitol Hill, agreed, noting US voters on both sides of the political aisle have gone out of their way to pick older presidential candidates in recent election cycles.

“Who was Donald [Trump](#) running against? A lot of people who were younger than him. Who was Joe Biden running against? A lot of people who were younger than him,” Heye said.

Trump is leading a crowded field of Republicans, including some who are many decades his junior, in the race to take on Biden at the ballot box next year.

“Ultimately, campaigns are about one person versus another,” Heye added. “Their age will be factored into that. But that is one of many factors.”

On Capitol Hill, McConnell and his allies have swiftly moved to squash suggestions that he is planning to step down any time soon. The Kentucky senator's six-year term is due to end in 2026.

“Leader McConnell appreciates the continued support of his colleagues, and plans to serve his full term in the job they overwhelmingly elected him to do,” a McConnell spokesperson said.

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