The *Foundation* of American Stagnation

Abstract

In recent years, scholars and pundits have highlighted the emergence of an American gerontocracy, as the age of both elected officials and voters continues to rise at an unparalleled pace. Gerontocracy can negatively affect the quality of a nation's democracy, as it focuses social spending and investment towards senior issues, weakens the relationship between declining representatives and their constituents, locks younger voters out of the political process, and threatens the legitimacy of the government. I compare the dominance of elderly politicians in the United States to the Genetic Dynasty from *Foundation*, the epic science fiction television show on Apple TV, based on the novels by Isaac Asimov. Through their rule of the Galactic Empire over hundreds of years, these cloned emperors face crises of stability and legitimacy not unlike those occurring on present day Earth. *Foundation* offers several insights into America's stagnating politics and renewed period of 21st century malaise, and additionally provides unique parallels to the discipline of political science through its depiction of "psychohistory."

A socially and politically stagnant hegemonic power sits on the brink of collapse, though its ruling elites do not quite grasp this reality. They have grown complacent, holding the levers of power for an unprecedented length of time. Social scientists warn that no empire is permanent, and that the stability, wealth, and peace they have enjoyed may be nearing its end. This premise loosely describes *Foundation*, the Apple TV epic science fiction show based on the series of novels by Isaac Asimov, but can also be mapped back onto the American political landscape of the 21st century.

Over the last four decades, the United States has come to be governed by a gerontocracy, a term meaning rule by leaders who are significantly older than the general population. Our elected officials are growing closer and closer to resembling the Gerousia, a governing body in Ancient Sparta that was restricted to men older than 60 (Magni-Berton and Panel 2021). And while Members of Congress have not yet begun to replace themselves with clones like the imperial rulers known as the Genetic Dynasty in *Foundation*, the data suggest that a broad transformation of the age-related political landscape has occurred since the 1980s. Members of the Silent and Baby Boomer generations have long controlled Congress, the Presidency, the Courts, and both major parties, and the result is a decaying political system in which elites are out of step with their constituents, with the torch rarely (and reluctantly) passing to younger generations.

There are no inherent problems with electing older individuals to office, but as a systemic pattern, gerontocracy can have very real negative externalities. Rule by the elderly can threaten the legitimacy of a political order through (1) disconnects between older politicians and the priorities and needs of younger constituents, and (2) physical and cognitive decline that leads to lapses in or failures of representation. Recent trends in American politics, as well as core components of *Foundation's* central story, elucidate how these problems can undermine a seemingly stable state.

In this article, I explore the connections between the United States' rising gerontocracy and *Foundation's* Genetic Dynasty, and the lessons that we may learn from the fictional clones that govern the galaxy. Through their stranglehold on power and the genetic drift that threatens their well-being, the rulers of this authoritarian empire offer several insights into America's aging pol-

itics and renewed period of 21st century malaise. *Foundation* highlights the limitations of dominance of a political position by a single generation, and demonstrates how this concentration of power can lead to the stagnation, decline, and even destruction of a political order. The show's depiction of "psychohistory," a fictional academic discipline akin to advanced political forecasting, also provides a unique perspective on the relationship between political science, politics, and prediction.

1 Setting the Stage: The Genetic Dynasty and Psychohistory

Foundation depicts a millennia-long saga about the end of an empire and the attempts to stave off decline and preserve humanity in the process. The series is set far into the future, during a time when people have colonized thousands of worlds and scattered among the stars. Most planets are a part of the Galactic Empire[1], a highly centralized authoritarian regime that has been commanded for 400 years by the Genetic Dynasty, a cycling triumvirate of clones of a long dead emperor. Approximately 30 years apart in age, the clones are referred to as Brother Dawn (Cassian Bilton), Brother Day (Lee Pace), and Brother Dusk (Terrence Mann), with the middle brother serving as the primary ruler. While the clones of the Genetic Dynasty have lived and died across the generations, there has been one constant by their side—the Lady Demerzel (Laura Birn). Demerzel is an ageless robot, a secret known only to a select few, as intelligent machines were wiped out in the "Robot Wars" thousands of years earlier.

Though *Foundation* is not entirely linear in its storytelling and crosses centuries over the seasons, the central plot concerns academic Hari Seldon (Jared Harris) and his protege Gaal Dornick (Lou Llobell). Seldon is a "psychohistorian," and through the use of advanced mathematics and probabilistic modeling[2], he claims to be able to accurately predict the future. With a high degree of confidence, Seldon's models suggest the coming end of the Galactic Empire, and a lengthy dark

[1] *Foundation* predates *Star Wars* for the use of this term.

[2] Logistic regression?

age to follow. The Genetic Dynasty attempts to ban psychohistory and sentences Seldon to death for his heretical views, but his predictions appear to come true when a massive terrorist attack devastates the capital planet of Trantor. As Seldon notes, while psychohistory can only predict "societal actions" and "trends," he is "not surprised that [the attack] happened" (*Foundation*, Season 1, Episode 1). As in the United States after September 11, 2001, this incident serves as a profound break with the existing sense of stability and security felt by the political elites in the Empire's core. To prevent Seldon from becoming a martyr, and out of a begrudging acceptance of his statistical forecasting, the Empire sends him into exile. There, Seldon intends to build the Foundation, a repository of human knowledge and culture that he believes will shorten the coming dark age. In addition to covering the creation of the Foundation and Seldon's plans to reshape the future, the series also follows different iterations of the Genetic Dynasty over hundreds of years, as they confront crises of legitimacy, stagnation, and collapse.

Foundation is deeply political in nature, and scholars, public writers, and politicians across the ideological spectrum have previously connected the text to contemporary American politics and economics (Friedersdorf 2011; Kahloon 2021; Krugman 2012; Carter 2021; Douthat 2024). The original novels themselves were loosely based on *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by British historian Edward Gibbon[3], and have been tied to Asimov's own views of American imperialism in the 1940s and 50s (Carter 2021). Despite its prominence to the show, the Genetic Dynasty is not a component of Asimov's *Foundation* series— neither the Empire nor the Emperor are a core focus of the novels. One critic describes the governmental systems in the *Foundation* books as "carefully thought out societies" with "little or no political purpose," with the interest of the novels on the story rather than the systems themselves (Hardesty 1987). The television series, created by David S. Goyer and Josh Friedman, takes significant liberties in its

[3]In a humorous poem titled "The Foundation of SF Success", Asimov wrote:

"So success is not a mystery, just brush up on your history, and borrow day by day.

Take the Empire that was Roman and you'll find it is at home in all the starry Milky Way.

With a drive that's hyperspatial, through the parsecs you will race, you'll find that plotting is a breeze,

With a tiny bit of cribbin' from the works of Edward Gibbon and that Greek, Thycydides" (Asimov 1954).

adaptation, but in many ways repurposes the story to directly comment on the problems facing contemporary American society. One such crisis in American politics is that of an aging and stagnating political establishment, a concept which is explored through the Genetic Dynasty.

Within the show's context, the Genetic Dynasty was established to prevent succession crises and maintain the political dominance of the original Emperor Cleon I. When pressed by Hari Seldon, Brother Dusk notes that "imperial cloning stopped the wars; imperial cloning brought peace" (*Foundation*, Season 1, Episode 1). The Cleons believe their permanence to be integral to the stability of the Galactic Empire, and identify themselves as equivalent to their territory—when other characters speak to any of the brothers, they address them as "Empire." By concentrating power within this small but stable institution, the dynasty is largely able to avert the problems of coups or the need for quasi-democratic institutions that we observe in many real authoritarian states (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Frantz and Stein 2017; Miller 2017). However, the centuries of rule and stability have also contributed to the stagnation that is driving the Empire to its end. Contemporary American politics are marked by a similar struggle between stability and stagnation, and like *Foundation's* Empire, this crisis is partially borne out of our long-ruling leaders.

2 American Gerontocracy

American politicians are among the oldest relative to other western democracies (Bonica and Grumbach 2025), and this disparity has become increasingly prevalent across all branches of government. As of 2026, the average member of the House of Representatives is 58 years old, and the average Senator is 64. These averages have steadily risen since the mid-1980s, when the average MC was around 10 years younger than they are today (see Figure 1). Federal judges are also the oldest they have ever been (averaging 68 years old), and Presidents Biden and Trump both set geriatric age-related records during their terms in office. Biden has the distinction of being both one of the youngest senators ever elected, and one of America's oldest Commanders-in-Chief.

The age distribution in Congress, as shown in Figure 2, is even more striking. In the 119th

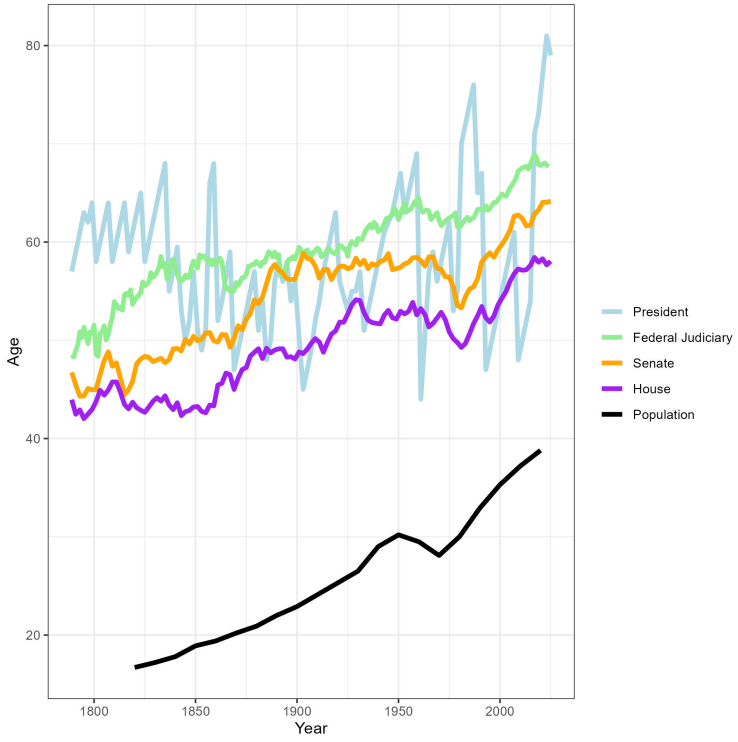


Figure 1: Average Age of Federal Government Officials, 1787-2026

Congress, nearly 30% of the House, and over 50% of the Senate, are above retirement age. While the proportion of elderly people has also increased among the general population since the 1960s, that rate has been significantly eclipsed by the increases in both chambers of Congress.

This phenomena has been driven largely—but not entirely—by the Baby Boomer generation, born in the wake of World War II. Boomers began to achieve political power, as both voters and elected officials, in the 1970s and 1980s, and have been more influential than any other generation in the political process in the years since. As Munger (2022) writes,

> [Boomers] started entering Congress much more quickly than other generations, had the highest and latest peak (when the median Boomer was sixty, the generation controlled 63 per cent of the House), and are sticking around much longer than previous generations (56).

The story of American culture and American institutions has transformed into one of intense stability, largely driven by the permanence of the Baby Boomers. Americans from this generation have been in the driver's seat for a long time, and thanks to improvements in healthcare and social welfare, they have yet to slow down. The Silent Generation has also contributed to the con-

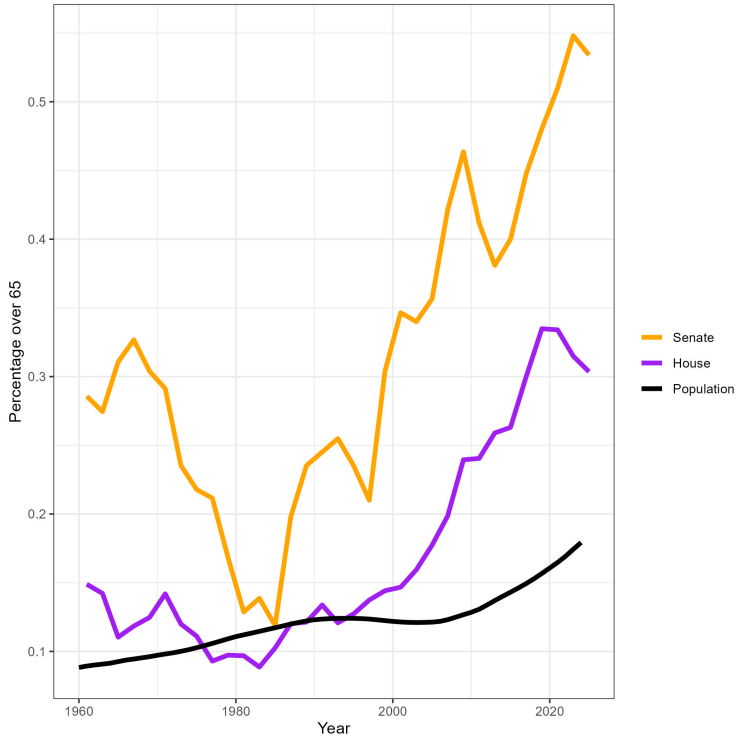


Figure 2: Percent of Congress Over 65 Years Old, 1950-2026

temporary gerontocracy, with party leaders like Nancy Pelosi, Mitch McConnell, and Joe Biden remaining in positions of power for decades.

With the massive size of the Baby Boomer generation, academics have long been aware that the population pyramid of the United States was due to the shift in the early 21st century. Robert Binstock, a political scientist and expert on aging who served as the Director of President Johnson's White House Task Force on Older Americans, predicted the following in a 1974 article:

> In some remote future, beyond the year 2020, the generational cohorts who enter the ranks of the chronologically aged may be sufficiently homogeneous in their political attitudes and attachments to respond to aging-based interest appeals by voting cohesively. But all of the generational cohorts that will reach 65 years of age between now and then have displayed already their political heterogeneity.[4]

Binstock was correct in noting this significant heterogeneity in the voting behavior and partisanship of Baby Boomers. The generation remains intensely divided along partisan lines, and has been nearly split evenly between Democratic and Republican candidates in the last few presidential

[4]Binstock also notes the existence of a 1974 APSA symposium titled "The 1990s and Beyond: A Gerontocracy?"

elections (Hartig et al. 2025). However, it has also become clear that they overwhelmingly support politicians from their own generation (Kurz et al. 2025; Bonica and Grumbach 2025). Beyond their disproportionate support for older elected officials, Baby Boomers turn out to vote at significantly higher rates than younger Americans (Binstock 2000; Gonyea 2024). While merely coincidental, it's hard to ignore that Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump were all born within a few weeks of each other in the summer of 1946.[5] Our discipline may not hold the predictive power of psychohistory, but a linear extrapolation of Figure 2 suggests that in some remote future, beyond the year 2050, Congress may be composed entirely of senior citizens.[6]

Political scientists have studied some of the causes and possible explanations for the emergence of gerontocracy, including the entrenched power of older and more experienced politicians, voter preferences, and an electoral and campaign finance system that disproportionately empowers older voters (Magni-Berton and Panel 2021; Bonica and Grumbach 2025). First-past-the-post, single member districts prevent the rise of any political parties directly targeted to young people, and a lack of competitive House districts ensures that elderly members continue to win reelection (Munger 2022; Atkins and Grant 2024). In non-democratic regimes, some authors suggest that the selectorate may actually prefer to install elderly leaders, as it prevents them from holding onto power for too long (Magni Berton and Panel 2017, 2018).

There is little doubt that contemporary American politicians are significantly older than those in previous generations, even when accounting for an aging population. But does this trend actually threaten the quality of American democracy? Looking towards both empirical research and anecdotal evidence, gerontocracy appears to weaken democratic legitimacy and contribute to a stagnating politics through two main avenues. First, elderly leaders who stay in office for decades

[5]The only non-Baby Boomer to have served as president between 1993 and 2026 is Joe Biden, a member of the *previous* generation.

[6]This "claim" echoes that of a satirical 1997 article by Wuffle et al. on the declining number of deaths in the Senate. The authors write that "the U.S. Senate may offer the solution to mankind's oldest quest, the fountain of youth," and through the extension of a regression trend, claim that "Senators who manage to retain office will be nearly immortal."

can foment distrust among younger voters as they prioritize their own power and the status quo, inhibiting new voices from entering politics and intensifying economic stagnation in the process. Second, as our leaders age, the decline of their bodies and minds can harm the representational relationship between voters and politicians, and call into question whether those we elect are actually in charge or fit to lead. These two issues—an out-of-step ego, and physical decline—are prominent features that similarly threaten the rule and legitimacy of the Genetic Dynasty in *Foundation*. Below, I address each issue in turn, and discuss the ways in which *Foundation's* aging Galactic Empire may help inform America's future.

3 Stagnation in the (Galactic) Empire

3.1 Decades of Rule in the United States

> Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it.
> - Donald Trump, 2016 Republican National Convention Speech

While President Trump's infamous claim is uniquely narcissistic, it echoes across the decision-making process of the countless politicians who continue to run for office well into retirement age. Rebecca Traister notes the same connection in a *New York Magazine* article, writing that elderly officials' "conviction that this is the Worst and Most Dangerous Time is matched by their assuredness that they are uniquely situated to steer us out of it" (Traister 2025). Setting aside the value of experience, the ego that leads elected official to believe they are indispensable to a functioning politics also contributes to a status quo bias that intensifies both economic stagnation and youth disengagement from politics.

There is a substantial literature covering the extent to which older voters and the interests that represent them hold disproportionate sway over political outcomes (i.e., Pratt 1993), and scholars have found similar evidence that elderly elected officials tend to prioritize their attention to senior issues to an outsize degree (Curry and Haydon 2018). These politicians operate on a different time horizon than their younger counterparts, and their bias towards preserving senior benefits can come

at the expense of the rest of the economy. As Atella and Carbonari (2017) argue in an analysis of European democracies, gerontocracy "negatively affects economic growth due to its incapacity to provide sufficient investments in innovation (public and private) and education" (156). Vlandas (2023) coins this as a "gerontomia," in which "electorally viable policies lead to an economy that is reorganised to prioritise the socioeconomic needs of the elderly" (453). This economic configuration generates substantial stagnation, prioritizes low inflation over low unemployment, and under-invests in social programs that would benefit the next generations (Vlandas 2026).

Amid the economic consequences of gerontocracy, members of the Millennial and Gen Z generations have also been systematically underrepresented in political spaces. As fresh voices and new ideas are denied entry into power, younger voters can begin to question the very legitimacy of the democratic system (Runciman 2018; Atkins and Grant 2024; Sundström et al. 2026). Most scholarship agrees that this bias is not a matter of preferences. There is substantial evidence that voters do not necessarily want older politicians (Klofstad et al. 2015; McClean and Ono 2020; Eshima and Smith 2022), and that the increasing seniority of elected officials is driven more by systemic factors than age-related favoritism (McKelvey and Riezman 1992; Bonica and Grumbach 2025).

Over the last few years, the public debate over the country's gerontocratic trends and their consequences have intensified, especially in the wake of Joe Biden's disastrous debate and presidential exit (Heer 2025; Traister 2025). A 2023 Pew Research Poll found that the vast majority of Americans, across party lines, are supportive of age limits for federal elected officials and Supreme Court justices (Gramlich 2023). In a study of tweets related to gerontocracy in the United States, the authors highlight examples from Twitter users that call the country "a dying empire" and that complain of being left "a state with no assets, crumbling infrastructure, collapsed living standards and total stagnation" (Ng and Indran 2023). Gerontocracy contributes to a kind of status quo bias that also exacerbates inequality (Enns et al. 2014), and leads to policy stasis (Hacker et al. 2021).

Even when America's aging elites do voluntarily cede power, their succession often resembles the ascension from one Brother Day to another. Over the last year, both Representative Chuy

Garcia (D-IL) and Senator Steve Daines (R-MT) were heavily criticized for their manner of retirement (Rego 2025; Raju 2026). Through bait-and-switch maneuvering, these MCs waited until moments before the candidate filing deadline to announce they were not running, clearing a path for their anointed heirs to file for candidacy and avoid competitive primary elections. Some members, like the late Gerry Connolly, have even campaigned for their chosen successors from beyond the grave (Solender 2025). Others, often after death, are succeeded by their spouses or children, such as Representatives Gus Bilrakis, Adelita Grijalva, or Julia Letlow (Rubashkin et al. 2023). Some seats have even become hereditary across multiple generations: southern Michigan has been continuously represented in Congress by a genetic dynasty of the Dingell family—Representatives John Dingell Sr., John Dingell Jr., and Debbie Dingell—for nearly 100 years.

3.2 Centuries of Rule in *Foundation*

> I see the value in difference, in the new. You offer nothing new. Just a younger grape... from the same vine, destined for the same old bottle.
> - Professor Hari Seldon to Brother Day (*Foundation*, Season 1, Episode 1)

The stagnation of the Galactic Empire is a throughline across the entirety of *Foundation*, and is personified through the Cleons. While their despotic Empire is not particularly concerned with courting an elderly voting bloc or minimizing inflation, the Genetic Dynasty places a similar emphasis on preserving the status quo to the detriment of future generations.

As opposed to American politicians—not to mention most monarchs and authoritarian rulers—there is a term limit system in the Genetic Dynasty. Each brother is forced to pass the torch every three decades or so, as a new baby is "decanted," Brother Dawn ascends to the central throne, Brother Day retires into Brother Dusk, and the eldest brother is vaporized. This process keeps the face of Empire young, but does not in any substantive or meaningful way provide a voice to a new generation of citizens, as power is merely passed between different iterations of the same man. Congress has not yet instituted a vaporization protocol for its elder statesmen, although it is unlikely that its leadership would approve of the procedure.

Despite the stability that their rule has fostered, the reign of the Genetic Dynasty has also contributed to the Empire's decline. In the first season of *Foundation*, Brother Day visits The Maiden, a moon that serves as the holy site for the popular religion Luminism. At a funeral for the Proxima, similar to the Pope, one of her potential successors, Zephyr Halima (T'Nia Miller), confronts Day. Halima issues the following critique of the Genetic Dynasty as she speaks to the crowd of mourners:

> Some believe the purpose of reincarnation is to ascend to the highest planes of enlightenment. But we know better, don't we? For there is no end to this journey. For our capacity for growth is infinite. Even a soul that appeared holy 400 years ago would not be holy today. This is the Mother's lesson. As the galaxy changes, so must we. We must embrace the value of transformation, of evolution, of difference. The greatest failure of humanity, the greatest sin against the Mother, is stagnation. And so we rejoice, that Proxima Opal's soul will not stagnate and rust into corruption. We rejoice that her soul is not bound to a single, immutable body. We rejoice that her soul is an ever-transformative, evolving soul (*Foundation*, Season 1, Episode 6).

From the perspective of this sect of Luminists—who number trillions across the galaxy—the Genetic Dynasty lack a human soul, and have been perverted into something unnatural through their long, stagnated existence. Brother Day notes the political issues that this belief may engender:

> And if the galaxy comes to believe their leaders are less than, rather than more than themselves, they may cease to follow. We are a glass vessel... spun with a fine hand. If the pressures inside start to swirl and we are not uniform... we may burst (*Foundation*, Season 1, Episode 4).

In many contemporary real world cases, struggling autocracies have turned to hybrid democratic institutions to legitimate their rule with the people (Brownlee 2009; Donno 2013). *Foundation* offers no such institutional solutions, but Brother Day does try to restore his legitimacy with the disillusioned Luminists. He undertakes a difficult religious pilgrimage to prove that he is not guilty of stagnation, and is capable of change. While Day succeeds in walking the Spiral, he subsequently orders Demerzel to assassinate Zephyr Halima to silence her criticism. It is also key to juxtapose Day's public posturing with a line he delivers at the end of the season:

> As a child, I wanted to be better than the Cleons who came before. Smarter, braver, more dazzling in the justice I handed out. But as I matured, my aspirations evolved. I no longer wanted to be the best. I wanted to be the same. Predictable courage, predictable justice. I

> wanted my son to be the same too. Another Cleon. Perfectly Cleon (*Foundation*, Season 1, Episode 10).

Despite his *capacity* for change as an individual, and the external actions he takes to stave off rebellion, this iteration of Day—like those who came before—is motivated almost entirely by the notion of preservation over change, and the past over the future. America's geriatric political elites may not be as ego-centric as the Cleons, but the parallels are clear: those who hold power for too long come to see themselves as indispensable, and that entrenchment and commitment to the existing conditions that enable their positions of power can weaken their capacity for necessary political evolution.

It is important to recognize that the mindset held by Brother Day is somewhat predetermined. Throughout *Foundation*, the audience learns that the immortal robot Demerzel, who acts as the Emperor's aide, mother, consort, confidant, and prisoner, is the true power behind the throne. Based on directives bestowed to her by the original Cleon hundreds of years in the past, Demerzel's programming forces her to serve and preserve the Empire. She acts as an invisible hand for the Brothers in ways that they themselves are unable to perceive, raising them to fulfill their set roles century after century. Her presence ensures the stability of the dynasty and the continuity of their behavior. As she says, "I've always been here, as I always will be" (*Foundation*, Season 2, Episode 10).

Demerzel's influence further entrenches the Genetic Dynasty as a predictable, yet stagnant, political power, and prevents any errant Cleons from straying too far from the vision of Cleon I. Her behind-the-scenes management is somewhat analogous to how America's geriatric politicians have been guided into their positions by path dependence. Baby Boomers did not preemptively decide to stay in office for record periods of time when they were first elected. Rather, the historical institutionalist conditions of their lives—unprecedented wealth, expanded educational opportunities, and advances in medical technology and healthcare—locked in the conditions by which this generation wound up gaining power, and staying in power (Munger 2022). Like the members of the Genetic Dynasty, whose paths through life are largely predetermined by the original commands of

Cleon I, and carried out via Demerzel, America's gerontocracy was established through historical forces far beyond the aspirations or egos of any individual politician. This analogy is lacking, however, in the agency it ascribes to American politicians. Unlike the Cleons, who face execution and replacement for defying their place in power, our elected members of the Baby Boomer and Silent generations are free to step down and retire at any point they like.

In its many forms, gerontocracy thwarts change and foments stagnation, as political institutions are captured and held by entrenched generational interests for extended periods of time. Unlike America's aging elite, the Genetic Dynasty are constantly refreshed in body and mind, but they remain motivated by the same spirit that they alone can be trusted to wield the levers of power. In the Galactic Empire, as in the United States, this hubris contributes to the stagnation, de-legitimization, and decline of the political order.

4 Physical (and National) Decline

4.1 Age as a Biological Issue in the United States

> I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience.
> - Ronald Reagan, 1984 Presidential Debate

Concerns surrounding physical and cognitive status are not new to politics, but they have become more common points of criticism in an era of geriatric politicians. While Ronald Reagan famously disarmed critiques of his age while debating Walter Mondale, the question is harder to brush aside today—especially considering Reagan's diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease after he left office. Both Presidents Biden and Trump have been asked numerous questions about their fitness for office related to their age and health, and seeming unwillingness to provide a complete picture to the public. Following Biden's disastrous performance in the June 2024 presidential debate in which he appeared frail and confused, numerous individuals and political figures called for the president to abandon his reelection campaign, a step he took the following month (Long et al. 2024;

Pereira and Sarnoff 2024; Fisher and Sanbar 2025). Trump, in his second term, has appeared fatigued in front of cameras, received a diagnosis of chronic venous insufficiency and appeared with unexplained discoloration on his hand, was screened with an MRI for no clear reason, and has bragged multiple times about passing a cognitive test typically taken to identify dementia (Kolata 2025; Rogers and Freedman 2025; Cameron 2026).

Beyond the presidency, the numerous septuagenarian and octogenarian members of Congress face far less scrutiny over their health and cognitive status, to the detriment of Americans' political representation. A congressional pharmacist in 2017 disclosed to a reporter that he had filled prescriptions for Alzheimer's drugs to Members of Congress (Mershon 2017), and in 2024, Texas Representative Kay Granger, who had missed roll call votes for nearly half a year, was discovered to be living in the memory care unit of an assisted living facility (Schaffer 2025). There have been prolific news stories about elderly lawmakers being shuffled or wheeled around the Capitol by their staffers, appearing confused or freezing during hearings and speeches, or disappearing for months on end (Jeong 2023; Zurcher and Cabral 2023; Sommerlad 2025; Konig 2026). In the weeks before she died, the *New York Times* reported that 90-year-old Dianne Feinstein "is surrounded by a large retinue of aides at all times, who tell her how and when to vote, explain what is going on when she is confused, and shield her from the press and public" (Karni 2023). As of August 2026, Mitch McConnell has been hospitalized for nearly two months, with only a few photos offering proof of life to a public demanding information about his condition (Diaz 2026). In the last six years alone, 18 members of Congress have died in office—in several cases running for or achieving reelection while sick with a terminal illness.[7]

Health problems are not unique to older people, nor do all people age in the same way. However, electing politicians who are so much older than the general public requires voters to take the physical and mental fitness of their leaders more seriously. And when a party apparatus operates to protect its older members from scrutiny, the legitimacy of the democratic system can further come

[7]Senator Lindsey Graham and Representative Kay Granger both passed away between the initial submission and edits to this very article.

into question by younger voters (Sundström et al. 2026).

4.2 Genetic Drift in the Galactic Empire

> Can you truly say that all you've ever wanted was to be an installment in a long, long line of us, living out a script written centuries ago?
> - Brother Dawn, *Foundation*, Season 1, Episode 10

The Genetic Dynasty also suffers from a crisis of legitimacy related to the declining health and wellness of its leaders. The brothers' imperial rule rests on the notion that each clone is an exact copy of Cleon I, ensuring that their behavior in office will be stable and predicable. Throughout the first season of the show, we follow an iteration of Brother Dawn (Cleon XIV) who appears to be different than his brothers. He is shown to be secretly colorblind and left-handed, variations which indicate that the cloning process has gone awry. Unlike his past exponents, he also expresses greater sympathy for others and a desire to flee the palace and abandon his duties. However, Dawn recognizes that he cannot disclose these differences to his brothers:

> If I ever fail, if they ever learn how different I am, it'll be my last day... My job, my reason for existing, is to be a perfect copy (*Foundation*, Season 1, Episode 7).

Eventually, it is revealed that Dawn, as well as the other clones, have been genetically altered by a rebel group that tampered with the original Cleon's body. This revelation is covered up, but not before the defective Dawn is killed and replaced with a more accurate copy. Though the context differs[8], the concealment of this condition is reminiscent of many of the stories regarding America's elderly elected officials. The following seasons of the show cover successive iterations of the brothers who experience greater and greater "genetic drift" from their source. By the third season of *Foundation*, the Cleons have drifted significantly, to the extent that Brother Day (Cleon XXIV)—usually depicted as the face of Empire—has functionally abdicated power, choosing to

[8]It's hard to imagine a major scandal over finding out a president is color-blind or left-handed—Bill Clinton is both, and neither condition led to his impeachment.

live a life of hedonistic pleasure at the expense of his imperial duties. In her opening narration of the third season, Gaal Dornick summarizes the Empire's plight:

> The Cleonic Dynasty no longer commands the stars, or even their own Galactic Council. They've drifted farther and farther away from the center of power. And the weight of it all falls on the shoulders of each new Cleon. They're forced to ask themselves, "Will I be the last? Will the dream of Cleon I die with me? Or will I be the one who saves it?" (*Foundation*, Season 3, Episode 1).

Further, Brother Dusk (Cleon XXIII) notes the following about the failing health of the Genetic Dynasty:

> When the drift began and we, uh... we saw that cognitive decline was starting sooner, a Day adjusted the timing. Cutting the, uh, thread of life shorter for all of us (*Foundation*, Season 3, Episode 2).

As the Cleons cling to power for century after century, the decline in their fidelity to the original Cleon I can be considered analogous to the long-term physical decline of a single political figure. Each iteration resembles the original to a lesser degree, just as President Joe Biden was a far cry from the junior Senator elected in 1972. This decline threatens the Empire's governance, and calls into question whether the Genetic Dynasty is still capable of rule. While they've kept the genetic tampering and drift secret for hundreds of years, the emperors' legitimacy among their subjects is on the wain, to no small extent because of their declining competence and reliability. This crisis is not identical to the problems of real world biological aging, but stems from the same root: physical deterioration is something that no one, not even a clone, can outrun.

5 Psychohistory, Prediction, and Imperial Collapse

Hari Seldon predicted that the stagnation of the Galactic Empire, driven by the Genetic Dynasty's firm grip on power, had doomed it to imminent collapse. Is it appropriate to link Asmiov's psychohistory to political science research, and the ways in which our models can forecast future events? In many respects, the disciplines are not too different. The literatures on regime survival, durability, and legitimacy are full of works that study the conditions by which nations fail, and what

happens in the aftermath (Brownlee 2009; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Haggard and Kaufman 2012; Geddes et al. 2014). But do scholars who study gerontocracy, democratic institutions and democratic backsliding have a broader responsibility to communicate their research to American elected officials, or to warn them of the potential downstream consequences of the current political moment? After all, political scientists are not in the business of predicting *exact* events in the future.

Like our best theories in political science, some of the predictions of psychohistory are also demonstrated to be incorrect. The third season of *Foundation* introduces a chaotic, narcissistic, and telepathic villain called the Mule, who conquers most of the galaxy in a relatively short period of time. In many ways, the Mule acts as a confounding variable in psychohistory: unforeseen and unmeasured, his introduction alters many of the calculations that Seldon was convinced were correct. Some authors have analogized the rise of Donald Trump to that of the Mule, as both are charismatic outsiders who radically changed the political landscape (Heer 2016; Nevala-Lee 2018; Douthat 2024). There is some truth to this argument, as the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement has led to the breakdown of many political norms, as well as the revision of many long-standing theories in political science (Bartels 2026). However, to analogize Trump to the Mule is to imply that he is an aberration, rather than a product of a stagnating political order committed to the status quo and a return to an idealized era of past greatness.[9]

If anything, Trump is closer to the final iteration of the Genetic Dynasty that we observe in the show. At the end of the third season of *Foundation*, a particularly crazed version of Brother Dusk (Cleon XXIII) refuses to pass the torch to the next generation. This iteration of Dusk, who is already facing a reduced lifespan and earlier onset cognitive decline as a result of the clones' genetic drift, spends the season attempting to run from his impending retirement and death. Rather than submit to the process like his predecessors, Dusk stages a violent coup against the Genetic Dynasty, killing his clone brothers and Demerzel. At the same time, he destroys several planets using a Death Star-esque laser, including The Maiden, the center of Luminism. Dusk anoints

[9]Additionally, Trump is unable to control peoples' minds with mutant telepathic powers.

himself as "Brother Darkness," and claims the throne for himself, recognizing that his actions may bring about the collapse of the Empire that Hari Seldon foresaw. As Darkness puts it, "I will not have my world continue without me" (*Foundation*, Season 3, Episode 10). Even in the context of the everlasting Genetic Dynasty, *Foundation* emphasizes that the eldest may be willing to destroy their own political system for future generations just to hold onto power.

The current democratic crisis in United States is not likely to lead to a 30,000 year societal collapse. However, with MAGA voters heavily motivated by a return to an imagined past, resistance to a changing world, and beholden to an elderly, norm-shattering president, it is not hard to see the similarities. Brother Darkness' autocoup is particularly reminiscent of the January 6th Insurrection, in which President Trump attempted to overturn the results of the 2020 Presidential Election and remain in power in spite of Joe Biden's victory. In addition, Trump himself has long joked about breaking America's constitutionally-mandated presidential term limits, wearing hats or posting videos that suggest that he will run for office in 2028, 2032, 2036, *ad infinitum* (Naughtie 2020). Whether Trump actually tries to run for a third term, or an event like January 6th is repeated in a future election cycle, the danger of such a political erosion is made clear in both *Foundation*, and the many real world cases in which older elected leaders transition into autocrats.

6 Ending the Gerontocracy?

Through its exploration of the Genetic Dynasty, *Foundation* tackles gerontocracy taken to the extreme. Gerontocracy may not be exactly the right term to describe the Cleonic mode of governance—perhaps the clones should be referred to as a genetocracy, or a cleonocracy—but their Galactic Empire is hampered by the same issues of stagnation and legitimacy that stem from America's aging political elite. *Foundation* shows the limits of this kind of rule, emphasizing that a reluctance to cede power, a reliance on stability, and an obsession with the past can weaken a government's legitimacy and create a political and social doom loop that is almost impossible to escape from. With the Genetic Dynasty seemingly terminated by Brother Darkness at the end of

Season 3, it is unclear how (and whether) the Empire will persist or evolve in future seasons of the show.

Real-world psychohistorians lack the predictive power of Hari Seldon, but it is still worth considering whether more concentrated efforts can, or should, be taken to educate American political elites about the consequences of an aging, stagnating empire. Many academics and public scholars are already engaged in this work (see, e.g., Peyser 2021; Lewis 2025; Moyn 2026).

Some younger politicians are also taking proactive steps to combat, or at least raise awareness of, American gerontocracy. Oregon Representative Marie Gluesenkamp-Perez recently introduced a proposal to require cognitive testing for members of Congress (Karni 2025). While her effort was rejected, it is unlikely to be the last of such proposals. Additionally, in recent years, a number of senior and powerful members of Congress have actively decided to step down and make room for fresh leadership. When he announced that he was not running for reelection, Representative Jerry Nadler, 79, stated that "it is the right time to pass the torch to a new generation" (Nadler 2025). Similarly, retiring Senator Dick Durbin, 81, said that "in my heart, I know it's time to pass the torch" (Durbin 2025). Senators Tina Smith and Gary Peters, who at 68 and 66 years old are nearly on the younger side of the chamber, also announced their retirements prior to the 2026 midterm elections. Senator Peters noted the following in his statement:

> I always thought there would be a time that I would step aside and pass the reins for the next generation. I also never saw service in Congress as something you do your whole life. (Holleman 2025)

Senator Smith cited a comparable rationale:

> I know my decision may come as a surprise. After all, we live in a time when elected officials tend to continue their service well past what the rest of us consider to be "retirement age." And I understand, I really do, why it's so hard for people to walk away from this job. I'll never have a greater honor than working for the people of Minnesota. That said, politicians are human beings. As much as I love my work, I'm fortunate enough to be able to say that my work is only part of what makes up my life. And after two decades of hard, rewarding work in public service, I'm ready to prioritize other things—starting with my family . . .
>
> I know that we have a deep bench of political talent in Minnesota ready to carry on this work for all of us. I think it's important that people in my position do what they can to lift up the next generation of leaders, and our state is fortunate enough to have many such rising leaders

> who are more than ready to serve in the Senate. One of them will earn my vote and, I hope, yours. (Olson 2025)

As the public appetite for new leadership grows, elected officials age, and opinion leaders and scholars continue to study the negative externalities of gerontocracy, it is likely that many more politicians will issue similar statements issued across the next few electoral cycles. Whether this trend will offset the rising age of America's ruling class is yet to be seen. Political science can only predict so much.

References

Acemoglu, Daron and James A. Robinson (2012). *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown Currency.

Asimov, Isaac (1954, October). The Foundation of SF Success. *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 69.

Atella, Vincenzo and Lorenzo Carbonari (2017, May). Is Gerontocracy Harmful for Growth? a Comparative Study of Seven European Countries. *Journal of Applied Economics 20*(1), 141–168. _eprint: https://doi.org/10.1016/S1514-0326(17)30007-7.

Atkins, G Lawrence and Marian Grant (2024, October). Political Implications of our American Gerontocracy. *Public Policy & Aging Report 34*(3), 74–77.

Bartels, Larry M (2026, March). Donald Trump's Contributions to Political Science. *Political Science Quarterly 141*(1), 1–7.

Binstock, Robert H. (1974, September). Aging and the Future of American Politics. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 415*(1), 199–212.

Binstock, R. H. (2000, February). Older people and voting participation: past and future. *The Gerontologist 40*(1), 18–31.

Bonica, Adam and Jacob M. Grumbach (2025). Old Money: Campaign Finance and Gerontocracy in the United States. *Journal of Public Economics 249*.

Brownlee, Jason (2009). Portents of Pluralism: How Hybrid Regimes Affect Democratic Transitions. *American Journal of Political Science 53*(3), 515–532. Publisher: [Midwest Political Science Association, Wiley].

Cameron, Chris (2026, May). White House Releases Results of Trump's Latest Physical Exam. *The New York Times*.

Carter, Zachary D. (2021, November). The Decline and Fall of the Galactic Empire. Section: Ideas.

Curry, James M. and Matthew R. Haydon (2018, July). Lawmaker Age, Issue Salience, and Senior Representation in Congress. *American Politics Research 46*(4), 567–595.

Diaz, Olivia (2026, July). After Weeks of Silence, McConnell Says He Is Recovering From a Fall. *The New York Times*.

Donno, Daniela (2013). Elections and Democratization in Authoritarian Regimes. *American Journal of Political Science 57*(3), 703–716.

Douthat, Ross (2024, January). Opinion | Is Trump an Agent or an Accident of History? *The New York Times*.

Durbin, Dick (2025, April). Durbin Announces He Will Not Seek Re-Election in 2026 | U.S. Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois.

Enns, Peter K. , Nathan J. Kelly, Jana Morgan, Thomas Volscho, and Christopher Witko (2014, April). Conditional Status Quo Bias and Top Income Shares: How U.S. Political Institutions Have Benefited the Rich. *The Journal of Politics 76*(2), 289–303. Publisher: The University of Chicago Press.

Eshima, Shusei and Daniel M. Smith (2022, July). Just a Number? Voter Evaluations of Age in Candidate-Choice Experiments. *The Journal of Politics 84*(3), 1856–1861. Publisher: The University of Chicago Press.

Fisher, Mark and Sandy Sanbar (2025). Cognitive Decline and the U.S. Presidency: The Case of Joe Biden Special Topic: Cognitive Decline and the Law. *Health Matrix: Journal of Law-Medicine 35*, 183–190.

Frantz, Erica and Elizabeth A. Stein (2017, June). Countering Coups: Leadership Succession Rules in Dictatorships. *Comparative Political Studies 50*(7), 935–962.

Friedersdorf, Conor (2011, December). Gingrich's Great-Man Complex, From Sci-Fi to History. Section: Politics.

Gandhi, Jennifer and Adam Przeworski (2007, November). Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats. *Comparative Political Studies 40*(11), 1279–1301.

Geddes, Barbara , Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz (2014, June). Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set. *Perspectives on Politics 12*(2), 313–331.

Gonyea, Judith G (2024, October). Historical Perspectives on Older Americans' Voting and Po-

litical Influence: Explorations of the Effects of Individual Aging, Life Cycle, and Generational Cohort. *Public Policy & Aging Report 34*(3), 78–82.

Gramlich, John (2023, October). Most Americans favor maximum age limits for federal elected officials, Supreme Court justices. Section: U.S. Elections & Voters.

Hacker, Jacob S. , Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Paul Pierson, and Kathleen Thelen (2021, November). *The American Political Economy: Politics, Markets, and Power*. Cambridge University Press. Google-Books-ID: N2lHEAAAQBAJ.

Haggard, Stephan and Robert R. Kaufman (2012, August). Inequality and Regime Change: Democratic Transitions and the Stability of Democratic Rule. *American Political Science Review 106*(3), 495–516.

Hardesty, William H. (1987). Mapping the Future: Extrapolation in Utopian/Dystopian and Science Fiction. *Utopian Studies* (1), 160–172. Publisher: Penn State University Press.

Hartig, Hannah , Scott Keeter, Andrew Daniller, and Ted Van Green (2025, June). 2. Voting patterns in the 2024 election. Section: Election 2024.

Heer, Jeet (2016, January). The Classier of Two Evils. *The New Republic*.

Heer, Jeet (2025, May). The Democratic Party Is Literally Dying. *The Nation*.

Holleman, Krystle (2025, January). 'Honor of my life:' Sen. Gary Peters not seeking reelection. Section: State.

Jeong, Andrew (2023, July). Sen. Dianne Feinstein appears confused during vote, prodded to say 'aye'. *The Washington Post*.

Kahloon, Idrees (2021, July). Are Americans More Trusting Than They Seem? | The New Yorker.

Karni, Annie (2023, May). Dianne Feinstein Relies Heavily on Staff to Function in Senate - The New York Times. *The New York Times*.

Karni, Annie (2025, July). This Democrat Wants Cognitive Standards in Congress. Her Colleagues Disagree. *The New York Times*.

Klofstad, Casey A. , Rindy C. Anderson, and Stephen Nowicki (2015, August). Perceptions of

Competence, Strength, and Age Influence Voters to Select Leaders with Lower-Pitched Voices. *PLOS ONE 10*(8), e0133779. Publisher: Public Library of Science.

Kolata, Gina (2025, December). After Trump's MRI Claim, His Doctor's Memo Offers Little Clarity - The New York Times. *The New York Times*.

Konig, Joseph (2026, May). 83-Year-Old Congresswoman Misses Full Month of Votes as Her Staff Reposts Photos to Social from Last Year. Section: People.

Krugman, Paul (2012, December). Paul Krugman: Asimov's Foundation novels grounded my economics. *The Guardian*.

Kurz, Kira Renée , L. Constantin Wurthmann, and Martin Gross (2025, April). The Influence of Age on Citizens' Preferences for Age-Related Descriptive Representation. *Politics and Governance 13*, 9251.

Lewis, Helen (2025, June). The Democrats Must Confront Their Gerontocracy. Section: Ideas.

Long, Colleen , Zeke Miller, Michael Balsamo, Aamer Madhani, and Sylvie Corbet (2024, July). Biden at 81: Often sharp and focused but sometimes confused and forgetful.

Magni Berton, Raul and Sophie Panel (2017). Strategic gerontocracy: why nondemocratic systems produce older leaders. *Public Choice 171*(3/4), 409–427.

Magni Berton, Raul and Sophie Panel (2018, December). Alternation through Death: Is Gerontocracy an Equilibrium? *Political Research Quarterly 71*(4), 975–988.

Magni-Berton, Raul and Sophie Panel (2021). Gerontocracy in a comparative perspective: Explaining why political leaders are (almost always) older than their constituents. *Sociology Compass 15*(1), e12841. _eprint: https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/soc4.12841.

McClean, Charles and Yoshikuni Ono (2020, August). How Do Voters Evaluate the Age of Politicians? *Discussion papers*. Number: 20069 Publisher: Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry (RIETI).

McKelvey, Richard D. and Raymond Riezman (1992). Seniority in Legislatures. *The American*

Political Science Review 86(4), 951–965. Publisher: [American Political Science Association, Cambridge University Press].

Mershon, Erin (2017, October). An old-school pharmacy hand-delivers drugs to Congress, a little-known perk for the powerful.

Miller, Michael K. (2017). The Strategic Origins of Electoral Authoritarianism. *British Journal of Political Science 50*(1), 17–44.

Moyn, Samuel (2026, May). The Old Guard: Confronting America's gerontocratic crisis. *Harper's Magazine May 2026*.

Munger, Kevin (2022, June). *Generation Gap: Why the Baby Boomers Still Dominate American Politics and Culture*. Columbia University Press. Pages: 216 Pages.

Nadler, Jerry (2025, September). Nadler Statement on Decision to Not Seek Re-election Next Year. Section: Press Releases.

Naughtie, Andrew (2020, August). Trump reshares old video showing him as president ad infinitum. Section: News.

Nevala-Lee, Alec (2018, October). What Isaac Asimov Taught Us About Predicting the Future. *The New York Times*.

Ng, Reuben and Nicole Indran (2023, November). Does Age Matter? Tweets About Gerontocracy in the United States. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B 78*(11), 1870–1878.

Olson, Meredith (2025, February). U.S. Senator Tina Smith Pens Op-Ed Announcing She Will Not Seek Reelection in 2026.

Pereira, Ivan and Leah Sarnoff (2024, July). These Democrats called for Joe Biden to drop out of 2024 race before his announcement.

Peyser, Eve (2021, March). Gerontocracy Is Hurting American Democracy.

Pratt, Henry (1993). *Gray Agendas | Henry Pratt*. University of Michigan Press.

Raju, Manu (2026, March). GOP Sen. Steve Daines' last-minute withdrawal from Senate race was meant to block Democrats from fielding a top-tier recruit | CNN Politics.

Rego, Max (2025, November). Marie Gluesenkamp Perez blasts Chuy García's 'undemocratic' retirement.

Rogers, Katie and Dylan Freedman (2025, November). Shorter Days, Signs of Fatigue: Trump Faces Realities of Aging in Office. *The New York Times*.

Rubashkin, Jacob , 4th Floor Washington, and DC 20002 Phone:546-2822 Email · Subscriptions API for Developers (2023, March). The 'Nepo Babies' of the House of Representatives.

Runciman, David (2018). *How Democracy Ends*. New York: Basic Books.

Schaffer, Michael (2025, March). A Congresswoman with Dementia Stopped Coming to Work. The DC Press Corps Never Noticed. - POLITICO.

Solender, Andrew (2025, June). Deceased Rep. Gerry Connolly promotes a candidate for his seat.

Sommerlad, Joe (2025, September). 88-year-old Democrat is seeking reelection in 2026: 'I'm not stepping aside'. Section: News.

Sundström, Aksel , Charles T McClean, and Daniel Stockemer (2026). Youth Representation and Democratic Legitimacy.

Traister, Rebecca (2025, November). The Democrats Have a Problem: They Are Way Too Old.

Vlandas, Tim (2023). From Gerontocracy to Gerontonomia: The Politics of Economic Stagnation in Ageing Democracies. *The Political Quarterly 94*(3), 452–461. _eprint: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1467-923X.13301.

Vlandas, Tim (2026). Aging Advanced Capitalist Democracies: The New Electoral Politics of Economic Stagnation. *World Politics 78*(1), 48–90.

Wuffle, A. , Thomas Brunell, and William Koetzle (1997, March). Death, Where Is Thy Sting? The Senate as a Ponce (de Leon) Scheme. *PS: Political Science & Politics 30*(1), 58–59.

Zurcher, Anthony and Sam Cabral (2023, August). Mitch McConnell freezes for second time during press event.