



# PERSPECTIVES

by Rinaldo S. Brutoco



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## Are We Becoming a Gerontocracy?

Think about it. In 2017, Donald Trump was inaugurated at the age of 70 making him the oldest person to assume the presidency. He is running this year against Joe Biden who will be 78 if inaugurated in 2021, while Trump will be 74. In a campaign where there are massive differences between “the Donald” and Joe, their age is the one thing they have in common. They are both fairly old to be running for the highest office in the land. And, while we might not want to do anything to restrict someone from running for president, given their age it is somewhat problematic they will survive a full term in office. Let's hope not, but the possibility is very real that either Donald or Joe will not make it a full term. That makes the race for Vice President far more important. Joe's health records appear to show he's in very good shape, and he clearly intends to stay that way with a good exercise regime and healthy diet. Donald, on the other hand, is obese, delights in a diet of Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonalds hamburgers, gets absolutely no exercise at all, recently contracted Covid-19, paid a mysterious emergency visit to Walter Reed Hospital a couple of months ago for unknown reasons, and continues refusing to release a credible report of his basic medical records. Viewed this way, even though he is three years older than Trump, Biden probably has the far better chance of surviving a full term. Nonetheless, a vote for Trump should probably be considered a vote for Mike Pence as he would step in if Trump's health or mental stability were to fail.

A fundamental question is why are so many of our society's leaders so old? Should anything happen to Trump and Pence, the next in line for succession to the Presidency is Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi who is already 80 years old. And, God forbid, if anything happens to her the next in line is Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Chuck Grassley, who is already 87 years old! What's going on here? California's own Senator Feinstein is 87, and the incredibly powerful Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, is 78! In fact, seven US Senators are over the age of 80, and 14 more are above the age of 75. As a group, more than half of all Senators, and 15 state governors, are over the traditional retirement age of 65.

I'm delighted that Ruth Bader Ginsburg served her country until her dying day at the ripe old age of 87. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer is already 82 and Clarence Thomas is 72, and Justice Samuel Alito is a relatively “youthful” 70! And, over 147 members of the House of Representatives are over the age of 65. Has the United States become a gerontocracy? Merriam Webster defines that as “a form of social organization in which a group of old men or a council of elders dominates or exercises control.” It is literally an oligopoly (power shared by a small group) of leaders who are older than most of the adult population. Given that the average American is only 37.9 years old, we clearly have a gerontocracy happening. Is that good or bad?

The ancient Greeks felt that older men (not women) were better at ruling than younger men so they wanted a gerontocracy. Given how well Athens did for so long, one could make the argument that an older leadership would be more experienced and possess calmer emotions more suitable for governing than younger folks. Maybe so. On the other hand, in a world as complex and fast changing as ours is today, I think the better argument is that we should be ruled by leaders who are not that much older than the rest of us, say one generation or so above the mean. That would mean our leadership on average would be in their late 60s to early 70s which, I believe, would make it more likely they would be more closely in touch with the issues that matter to the vast majority of our citizens. They would also have a better chance to engage our citizens in a more active manner. Without a doubt, a more youthful leadership would be far better at understanding the advantages and perils posed by our rapidly advancing technology. Does an 80-year-old really understand what matters to most of us, or even how to find out that answer given how complex our technology has become? Does a 75-year-old understand the stresses and joys of people two and three generations younger who grew up in radically different times, with radically different cultural moorings? Do all those old leaders really understand the pace of life experienced by the under 30 generation, or even the deep concerns over the climate and other sociologically important challenges they face? I sincerely doubt it.

So, what should we do? How about we start with a mandatory retirement age for Supreme Court Justices of 75? How about term limits on the Congress like we have here in California that keeps moving older politicians out and younger ones in? How about having mandatory judicial retirement ages as 32 of our 50 states already have? After all, we require pilots to retire at 65, air traffic controllers at 56, military personnel at 62 except for “flag” officers (i.e. the rank of General), and FBI field officers at 57. These age restrictions are not age discrimination, they are basically safety precautions. Wouldn't our society be “safer” if the gerontology oligopoly which makes most of our life-threatening decisions gave way to shared power with younger men and women who more closely relate to the people being governed? That's my opinion and I'm 73. I hope you'll write in to share your thoughts— particularly if you are over 70!