

Why the Age Issue Is Hurting Biden So Much More Than Trump

Both Donald J. Trump and President Biden are over 75. But voters are much less likely to worry that Mr. Trump is too old to serve.



By Rebecca Davis O'Brien

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Donald J. Trump has praised Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, for his leadership of Turkey, and confused Nikki Haley with Nancy Pelosi. President Biden has named dead former European leaders when describing his contemporary peers, and referred to Egypt as Mexico.

The episodes might have raised parallel concerns about age and mental acuity. Instead, while Mr. Biden, 81, has been increasingly dogged by doubts and concerns about his advancing years from voters, Mr. Trump, who is 77, has not felt the same political blowback.

The response suggests profound differences not only between the two men, but in how they are perceived by the American public, and in what their supporters expect of them — a divide that could play a major role in the coming presidential election.

In a New York Times/Siena College poll of six battleground states, an overwhelming majority of voters said they had serious concerns about Mr. Biden's age, with 70 percent saying he is too old to be president. Fewer than half of voters have expressed similar misgivings about Mr. Trump.

“Even though we know both candidates are three and a half years apart, one side seems to have it sticking a little more, and that's going to be a concern,” said Representative Mark Pocan, Democrat of Wisconsin.

Some of it comes down to basic physical differences.

Mr. Biden's voice has grown softer and raspier, his hair thinner and whiter. He is tall and trim but moves more tentatively than he did as a candidate in 2019 and 2020, often holding his upper body stiff, adding to an impression of frailty. And he has had spills in the public eye: falling off a bicycle, tripping over a sandbag.

Mr. Trump, by contrast, does not appear to be suffering the effects of time in such visible ways. Mr. Trump often dyes his hair and appears unnaturally tan. He is heavysset and tall, and he uses his physicality to project strength in front of crowds. When he takes the stage at rallies, he basks in adulation for several minutes, dancing to an opening song, and then holds forth in speeches replete with macho rhetoric and bombast that typically last well over an hour, a display of stamina.

"It is the perception of how you communicate," said Carol Kinsey Goman, a speaker and coach on leadership presence. "When Trump makes those kinds of faux pas, he just brushes it off, and people don't say, 'Oh, he's aging.' He makes at least as many mistakes as Joe Biden, but because he does it with this bravado, it doesn't seem like senility. It seems like passion."

With Mr. Biden, Ms. Goman said, "it looks like weakness."

It is difficult to go beyond public perception to compare the physical health of the two men. Democrats and some Republicans have said Mr. Biden remains sharp in private conversations. Mr. Biden and Mr. Trump have each released limited medical information. Nearly a year ago, the White House released a letter from Mr. Biden's longtime doctor describing him as a "healthy, vigorous 80-year-old male" after a physical examination. The White House has not made his doctors available to reporters. In November, Mr. Trump released a vague health report describing his condition as "excellent."

Democrats and Mr. Biden's supporters say the two men are held to different standards.

This week, the president was forced to defend his mental acuity publicly after a special counsel's report said there was evidence that Mr. Biden may have willfully retained classified documents. The office would not recommend charges, the report

said, in part because Mr. Biden would most likely appear to a jury “as a sympathetic, well-meaning elderly man with a poor memory.” It said he had difficulty remembering the date that his son Beau died.

When Mr. Biden gathered reporters to dispute aspects of the report and angrily denounce its assertions about his memory and mental state as out of bounds, he also took questions about the Middle East — and mixed up Egypt and Mexico.

Mr. Trump has also faced questions about his health and fitness for office. He is prone to long, incoherent remarks and slip-ups. He has suggested that he defeated Barack Obama, not Hillary Clinton, in the 2016 presidential election, and has warned that the country is on the verge of World War II. In office, he was seen walking haltingly down a ramp and struggling to hold a water glass.

While Mr. Biden has acknowledged that voters’ concerns about his age are reasonable, Mr. Trump has responded to these episodes with typical hyperbole. In 2015, he released a hastily written doctor’s note declaring that if elected, he would be “the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency.” In office, amid news reports of his erratic behavior, Mr. Trump asserted that he was actually a “very stable genius.”

Today, he regularly mocks Mr. Biden for his age, while boasting about acing a test that detects cognitive decline.

Mr. Trump’s responses point to a basic asymmetry of expectations that appears to be working in his favor: His impulsiveness and willingness to go off-script in ways that can be messy only adds to his image as an unrehearsed, unvarnished chaos agent, a key source of his popularity with Republicans.

(When Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, Mr. Trump’s defeated rival for the Republican nomination, tried to convince voters that Mr. Trump had “lost the zip on his fastball,” it didn’t stick.)

Verbal flubs by Mr. Biden, by contrast, undermine the image of experience, competence and professionalism that got him elected, and that even his supporters quietly fear may be slipping away.

“Donald Trump is more of an entertainer than a politician in many ways,” Mr. Pocan said. “And I think there’s just a different set of expectations and that’s why he gets away with it.”

Ms. Goman, the leadership coach — who said she supports Mr. Biden — also suggested that Mr. Trump’s experience as a reality television star might have influenced how he performs and is perceived in public.

“Trump is big,” Ms. Goman said. “He simply takes over. He has that kind of full-charge-ahead persona that does correlate with being younger, healthier, more active. Biden doesn’t. He is a different kind of person. And, unfortunately, in this situation, it doesn’t work out well.”

Mr. Biden has spent his life in government, but he was never a gifted public speaker. He had a significant stutter during his childhood. And he has always been vulnerable to verbal slips and malapropisms. His unscripted moments have long made his backers nervous, even before age came into the picture.

Henry Barbour, a Republican strategist based in Mississippi, said he thought Americans were simply responding to what they saw and heard.

“Donald Trump is no young man, but he does seem to be, for the most part, on top of his game,” he said. “Is he what he was five or 10 years ago? I’m sure he’s not. Anybody who is 78 years old would tell you that.”

But it is different with Mr. Biden, Mr. Barbour said. “I don’t think you can compare the two,” he said. “Clearly, the American people are uncomfortable with Joe Biden continuing as president just because of what is happening before their very eyes.”

Mr. Barbour has backed Ms. Haley, Mr. Trump’s last Republican challenger, but he is prepared for Mr. Trump to be the nominee and face off against Mr. Biden. “It’s painful for the American people that these are their two choices,” he said.

Reid Epstein contributed reporting.

Rebecca Davis O’Brien covers campaign finance and money in U.S. elections. She previously covered federal law enforcement, courts and criminal justice. More about Rebecca Davis O’Brien