



Senior Discount? Gender, Age, and Small Donor Fundraising

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Abstract

Recent discussions surrounding candidate age and its impact on small donor fundraising have raised questions about ageism in American politics. However, existing studies of age in politics largely neglect the obstacles older female candidates encounter. This paper, which examines the impact of age and gender on small contribution receipts in U.S. House of Representatives campaigns from 2006-2010, explores how age and gender interact to predict small contribution receipts. The findings reveal a significant negative interaction between age and gender, indicating that older female candidates receive less from small-dollar donations than would be expected compared to their older male peers. This suggests that age-related biases intersect with gender, posing unique challenges for older women candidates in fundraising efforts.

Keywords: ageism, sexism, campaign finance

Introduction

In the 2024 presidential race, voter attitudes regarding candidate age have been at the forefront of American political discourse. Either contender, Joe Biden or Donald Trump, would become the oldest ever elected to the office. From NPR to the Los Angeles Times, commentators have debated whether these criticisms constitute ageism and raised concerns about whether candidate age negatively affects small donor fundraising (Donella, 2024; Epstein, 2023; Torres, 2024; Piper, 2023). However, this discourse has revolved around the experiences of two male candidates, leaving a gap in the discussion regarding the unique challenges aging female leaders face. Existing literature suggests that ageism may affect female leaders differently as it intersects with sexism and discrimination based on physical appearance (McIver-Harris, 2021; Chiao et al. 2008; McLellan & McKelvie, 1993). In the political context, candidate age, gender, and physical attractiveness are usually studied in relation to voter choice.

This paper explores how gendered age discrimination and how age and gender intersect to predict small-dollar fundraising. Incumbent campaigns for the United States House of

Representatives are examined to determine whether gendered differences arise. The findings indicate that older women candidates raise less than would be expected given their gender and age individually.

Gender in Campaign Finance

Scholars have long noted that women from the Democratic and Republican parties consistently raise funds equivalent to or surpassing men in U.S. House campaigns (Burrell, 1985). However, female candidates' funding profiles differ from their male peers in important ways. Female candidates tend to receive more small contributions than men and rely on individual contributions more than their male counterparts (Heberlig & Larson, 2020; Crespín & Deitz, 2010). For Democrats especially, these individual contributions are more likely to come from female supporters (Thomsen & Swers, 2017). Since only a third of high-dollar (\$10,000 and above) donors are women, small contributions may be vital to a female candidate's fundraising (Heerwig & Gordon, 2018).

While a female House candidate's advantage in campaign fundraising is well established in the literature, female candidates may need more resources than men to succeed, and there has been little exploration of the conditions under which a female candidate's advantage is diminished (Herrick, 1996; Lazarus & Steigerwalt, 2018). Sorensen and Chen (2021) contend that most campaign finance literature adopts a one-dimensional approach, emphasizing the need for more intersectional exploration. Older female candidates face unique challenges that arise specifically from being an aging woman in society (Crenshaw, 1991). For that reason, the impacts of age, gender, and gendered ageism are explored.

Age and Elections

Commentary on gerontocracy, or government by the old, is almost always negative. Ng and Indran (2023) found that only 6% of U.S.-originated tweets with the word gerontocracy defend gerontocracy and that most of these tweets contained negative stereotypes about old people. This is consistent with voter evaluations that suggest that elderly candidates are "seen as the least competent, least likely to focus on most policy issues, and least electable" (McClellan & Ono, 2024). Multiple studies have found that candidate age has a stronger effect on voter choice than candidate race or gender alone (Piliavin, 2006; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1982). Even if age

negatively affects male and female candidates equally, in practice female candidates would still be at a disadvantage due to starting their political careers later than men (Carroll, 1983; Lazarus et al., 2023). However, ageism is gendered and impacts male and female candidates differently.

The 2024 race is not the first presidential election in which the value of age has been debated. Research from the 2020 presidential race found that an individual's positive or negative age stereotypes about the candidates were strongly related to their vote choice (Monahan et al., 2021). In the 2008 contest, campaign ads attacked John McCain's age (71), and the McCain campaign attempted to counter these attacks by emphasizing McCain's experience (Rodamer, 2010; Kenski & Jamieson, 2010). In the 2016 presidential race, then-69-year-old Hillary Rodham Clinton's campaign similarly emphasized her public service record as a qualification for the presidency (Jacobson, 2016). Yet, those with less awareness of sexism were more likely to hold negative age stereotypes about Clinton than her opponent Donald Trump, despite Trump being slightly older than Clinton (Lytle et al., 2018). This relationship between sexism and ageism is notable since Clinton frequently faced sexism during her campaign, including comments on her "annoying" voice, style of dress, and seemingly angry demeanor (Hall, 2022). Conservative commentator Tucker Carlson famously stated, "When Hillary Clinton shows up on TV I inadvertently cross my legs" (Hall, 2022).

Gendered Ageism

Clinton's experience highlights the intersection of sexism and ageism that female leaders face. The feeling is not unique to those running for elected office, either. Older women report feeling seen as difficult to work with and less capable than their male peers (Beery & Swayze, 2023). This gendered age discrimination limits women's career opportunities (Walker et al., 2007). In the political sphere, these gendered age stereotypes may compound existing biases against female candidates and present barriers to electoral success (Ono & Burden, 2019).

Because more weight is placed on women's appearances, gendered ageism is augmented by lookism, or discrimination based on attractiveness (McIver-Harris, 2021). As Calasanti (2005) notes, "Women are seen to be 'old' much sooner than men. We don't generally refer to men as 'sagging'" (9). There is also evidence that women's facial attractiveness ratings decline more with age than men's (McLellan & McKelvie, 1993). This negative interaction of age and gender has political implications because attractiveness is a determinant of electoral support particularly

in candidate-centered, low information, and first-past-the-post elections (Milazzo & Mattes, 2016; Stockemer & Praino, 2015; Stockemer & Praino, 2017; Wigginton & Stockemer, 2021). Furthermore, the literature suggests that attractiveness is especially influential in determining support for female candidates. In a simulated election, female candidates who appeared more attractive were more likely to win votes, while for male candidates what mattered was being perceived as more approachable (Chiao et al., 2008).

Since male candidates benefit from being seen as approachable, they may be harmed less by aging since there is a general stereotype of old people as warm and noncompetitive (Cuddy et al., 2005). At the same time, older female candidates may be subject to more negative age stereotypes and perceived as less capable and less attractive. For these reasons, it is hypothesized that older female candidates will receive fewer small contributions than would be expected if age and gender did not interact.

Methodology

This paper utilizes Culberson et al.'s (2019) dataset of small contribution data for incumbent U.S. House representatives running for reelection in the 2006-2010 cycles. Their dataset contains a rigorous set of controls for both district and candidate-level characteristics including district median household income, high school graduation rate, rural percentage, and white population percentage, as well as candidate scandals, large contribution receipts, competitiveness of the primary and general elections, opponent political experience, party leadership roles, and ideological extremeness.

Additionally, their dataset is unique in that it accounts for what they term “serial reporters”: candidates who may unnecessarily itemize small contributions for bookkeeping purposes. Accounting for serial reporters ensures that a more complete picture of small donor activity is captured.

Binary variables, coded 1 and 0, for candidate gender and whether a candidate is older than 55 were added to this dataset, along with continuous variables for candidate age and years since their first election to the House of Representatives. Continuous variables are calculated as the difference between the cycle year and year of interest (ex. candidate's birth year or election year). Although Culberson et al. (2019) produced datasets for candidates in open-seat races and challenger candidates, demographic information is most accessible for incumbent house

candidates. Additionally, limiting the analysis to incumbents controls for fundraising differences related to candidates' prior political experience.

Culberson et al. use Bonica's campaign finance (CF) scores to provide an ideal point estimate of a candidate's ideological extremism based on their contribution record (Bonica 2014). Bonica's CF scores are typically used to estimate the ideologies of newcomer candidates who have never held office. Since this paper's analysis only concerns incumbents, it instead utilizes DW-nominate scores, which estimate ideology using a representative's past roll-call votes (Lewis et al. 2024). Additionally, since the existing body of literature suggests that candidate divergence is not a significant factor in small-dollar fundraising and that its inclusion may obscure significant effects, these models do not consider opponent ideology (Ensley 2009).

To test the hypothesis that older female candidates will have a diminished advantage, age and gender interact in two models. The only difference between the models is how age is represented. Model 1 utilizes a binary variable indicating whether a candidate is under or over age 55. In Model 2, age is a quantitative predictor. Standard errors for both ordinary least squares and robust regression procedures are provided (Cribari-Neto & Da Silva 2011).

Results

Findings are partially consistent with earlier scholarship, as a significant small contribution advantage is observed for female candidates over and under 55 (see Figure 1). However, both models provide evidence of an interaction between age and gender. In Model 1, there is evidence at the 95% confidence level of an interaction regardless of the standard errors used. In Model 2, the interaction is significant after reweighting procedures.

	Estimate	Naive SE	Pr(> z)	Robust SE	Pr(> z)
(Intercept)	-3.818	1.743	0.029	1.840	0.038
ln(Large Contributions)	0.715	0.054	0.000	0.069	0.000
Competition	-0.016	0.004	0.000	0.004	0.000
Primary Competition	0.038	0.101	0.710	0.107	0.726
Democrat	0.175	0.067	0.009	0.071	0.014
Quality Opponent	0.180	0.076	0.018	0.068	0.008
Extreme DW-Nom 1	1.537	0.209	0.000	0.254	0.000
Scandal	-0.208	0.147	0.157	0.175	0.235
Leader	-0.266	0.085	0.002	0.100	0.008
White Percent	0.010	0.002	0.000	0.003	0.000
ln(Median Household Income)	0.054	0.170	0.751	0.185	0.771
HS Grad Rate	0.035	0.006	0.000	0.006	0.000
Rural Percent	0.006	0.002	0.004	0.002	0.004
Year 2008	-0.092	0.069	0.181	0.071	0.195
Year 2010	0.115	0.070	0.099	0.072	0.110
Years Since Election	-0.015	0.004	0.000	0.004	0.000
Fifty Five and Over	0.065	0.071	0.362	0.068	0.344
Female	0.565	0.129	0.000	0.109	0.000
Fifty Five and Over:Female	-0.317	0.156	0.042	0.136	0.020

Model 1: Predicting ln(Small Contributions) With Dummy Variable Interaction

	Estimate	Naive SE	Pr(> z)	Robust SE	Pr(> z)
(Intercept)	-4.078	1.757	0.020	1.852	0.028
ln(Large Contributions)	0.719	0.054	0.000	0.070	0.000
Competitiveness	-0.016	0.004	0.000	0.004	0.000
Primary Competitiveness	0.030	0.101	0.763	0.107	0.776
Democrat	0.172	0.067	0.010	0.071	0.015
Quality Opponent	0.185	0.076	0.015	0.068	0.006
Extreme DW-Nom 1	1.524	0.209	0.000	0.253	0.000
Scandal	-0.200	0.147	0.173	0.176	0.256
Leader	-0.259	0.085	0.002	0.100	0.010
White Percent	0.010	0.002	0.000	0.003	0.000
ln(Median Household Income)	0.050	0.170	0.770	0.184	0.787
HS Grad Rate	0.034	0.006	0.000	0.006	0.000
Rural Percent	0.005	0.002	0.007	0.002	0.006
Year 2008	-0.093	0.069	0.177	0.071	0.193
Year 2010	0.114	0.070	0.101	0.072	0.113
Years Since Election	-0.017	0.004	0.000	0.005	0.000
Age	0.006	0.004	0.136	0.004	0.119
Female	1.135	0.444	0.011	0.369	0.002
Age:Female	-0.014	0.008	0.071	0.006	0.034

Model 2: Predicting ln(Small Contributions) With Age As A Quantitative Predictor

The significant interaction term in Model 1 suggests that being a female candidate over 55 is associated with a reduction in small contributions that is significantly different from the slight increase in small contributions observed in male candidates over 55. In Model 2, age is also associated with a more negative impact on women's small contribution fundraising than on men's. Regardless of the model, the basic interpretation of this interaction is that the small-dollar advantage observed for female candidates, relative to their male contemporaries, is not constant and shrinks with age. Graphically, this is visible in the lack of parallelism in the interaction plot for Model 1, shown in Figure 1 below.

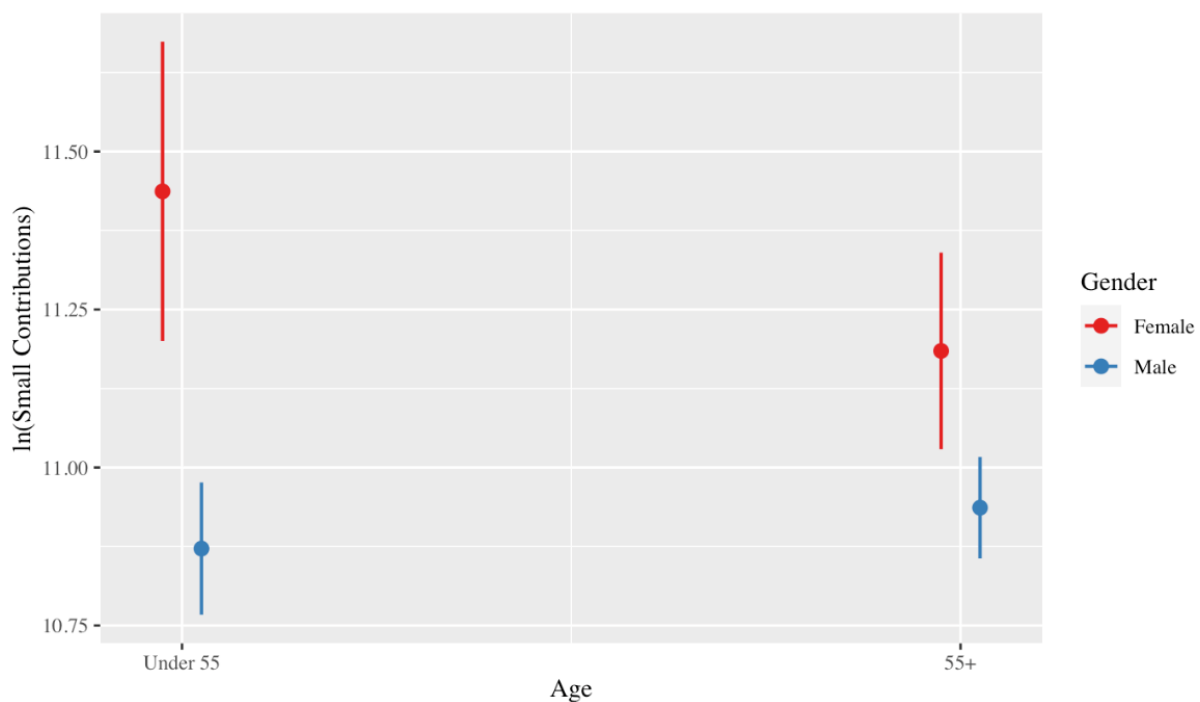


Figure 1: Small Contributions Under and Over Age 55

Other variables identified as significant, including competition, party, opponent quality, ideology, and district demographics, are largely consistent with the models in Culberson et al. (2019). Time in office is associated with a negative coefficient, which is consistent with their finding that freshman candidates raise more in small contributions than more senior peers. However, in models with age and gender, party leadership has a significant negative effect. This doesn't indicate that party leaders raise fewer small contributions than most candidates but rather fewer small contributions than would be expected for a candidate with a party leader's level of large contributions.

This relative aspect must be considered in the interpretation of these observational results. Because the model does not control for individual candidates but rather candidate and district characteristics, it should not be concluded that any individual female candidate's contribution totals will decline as they age. Rather, the takeaway is that older women raise less from small contributions than would be expected given their level of large contribution support and their personal and district characteristics. Age predicts not necessarily a decline in total contributions but rather a gendered shift in the composition of a candidate's fundraising.

Discussion

There are several possible explanations for age and gender's negative interaction when predicting small-dollar receipts. The first would be that older women's campaigns are less adept in their use of small contribution fundraising strategies than their older male counterparts or that they focus more on large donors. However, there isn't a strong theoretical reason to believe this would be the case given women's generally strong grassroots fundraising efforts (Heberlig & Larson, 2020).

Another explanation for the observed interaction could be that female candidates' small donor bases are younger than male candidates. Studies have found that voters tend to prefer candidates who are proximal to their age (Sigelman & Sigelman, 1982; Sevi, 2020). The existing composition of the small-dollar donor pool for women's campaigns may favor the emergence of younger female candidates due to donor preferences for similarly aged candidates (Grumbach & Bonica, 2024). Little information is recorded about the individuals who make small contributions, so this explanation isn't readily testable via observational data. Regardless, it would not negate the role of gendered ageism but rather suggest that more research is necessary into how *donor* age and gender interact to shape participation in grassroots campaign finance.

Alternatively, if the small donor pool is similarly aged for both female and male candidates, another explanation is that these donors and grassroots fundraising organizations like EMILYs List simply disfavor old women. This explanation is rooted more directly in systemic biases, stereotypes, and discrimination associated with gendered ageism. Older women are subject to double discrimination that compounds and intersects with age and gender (Casalanti, 2005; Westwood, 2023). The dismissal of presidential candidate Nikki Haley as "past her prime" by CNN commentator Don Lemon exemplifies how gendered ageism permeates political discourse

(Elsesser, 2023). If donors see aging women through stereotyped lenses, this could negatively influence their perceptions of a female candidate's viability and reduce their likelihood of making a small-dollar donation. These individual biases could be the reason for older women's reduced support from small-dollar donors.

Regardless of whether the small donor pool or individual bias explanation is favored, the implications are similar. If their grassroots advantage is diminished, female incumbents may face harder-to-win elections as they age, compounding their already greater vulnerability (Lazarus & Steigerwalt, 2018). This could pose an obstacle to greater gender parity in the legislature (Vespa, 2018).

Further research is needed to explore the relationship between age, gender, and political fundraising in greater depth. Longitudinal studies tracking the fundraising trajectories of male and female candidates over time could provide insights into how age-related factors shape donation patterns and electoral outcomes. Qualitative research examining the political experiences of older women candidates could shed light on how these candidates respond to gendered ageism. Finally, it is known that women of color face greater fundraising challenges, and research should also examine whether these gaps are exacerbated as candidates age (Sorensen & Chen, 2022).

Conclusion

In sum, a significant negative interaction between age and gender is observed in the small contribution receipts of U.S. House incumbents in the 2006-2010 campaign cycles. This interaction is interpreted as evidence of gendered differences in the composition of older candidates' fundraising profiles. Possible explanations for this shift include asymmetrically aged donor pools and gendered age discrimination on the part of grassroots and the organizations that facilitate grassroots giving. Female candidates are regularly subject to an array of intersecting gender and age biases that affect voter choice, and this paper suggests these biases may affect political contributions as well. Given this finding, it may be necessary to develop focused media and fundraising strategies to address these biases, diversify donor networks, and promote older women's electoral success.

Acknowledgments

We thank Dr. Sharon Austin for her mentorship and the Bob Graham Center for funding this research. We also thank Dr. Michael McDonald and Dr. Suzanne Robbins for making available the Culberson et al. (2019) dataset.

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