The Indian Journal for Research in Law and Management

Open Access Law Journal – Copyright © 2026

Editor-in-Chief – Dr. Muktai Deb Chavan; Publisher – Alden Vas; ISSN: 2583-9896

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Gerontocracy in Global Politics: Experience or Democratic Challenge?

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Political leadership is often associated with experience. Years spent in public life can provide politicians with institutional knowledge, diplomatic relationships, political networks, and an understanding of how governments function. Yet across many political systems, the people exercising political power are considerably older than the populations they represent. This has renewed interest in the idea of gerontocracy a political order in which older people hold a disproportionate share of political authority. In contemporary politics, gerontocracy rarely exists through formal rules that require older people to govern. Instead, it can emerge through long political careers, electoral incentives, party structures, demographic change, and the value placed on political experience. [1]

The question, therefore, is not simply whether political leaders are old. Nor is age itself an indicator of political ability. The more important question is whether the political value attached to experience creates a system in which seniority becomes a structural advantage, limiting opportunities for younger generations to participate in political decision-making. This makes gerontocracy a question of democratic representation as much as one of leadership age.

[1] Raul Magni-Berton & Sophie Panel, Gerontocracy in a Comparative Perspective: Explaining Why Political Leaders Are (Almost Always) Older Than Their Constituents, 15 Sociology Compass e12841 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12841

Why Experience Matters

There is an understandable reason why older political leaders are common. Political experience can be valuable. Governing involves institutional procedures, negotiations, legislative processes, electoral competition, foreign relations, and crisis management, all of which can take years to understand. Voters may therefore prefer politicians with established records over candidates who have limited experience in public office.

Magni-Berton and Panel argue that contemporary gerontocracy can partly be explained by the importance voters attach to political experience. As political careers become longer, politicians have more opportunities to accumulate knowledge and political resources, which can contribute to the persistence of older leadership. [2] Gerontocracy, in this sense, does not necessarily result from an explicit preference for older people. It may emerge from a political system in which experience is gradually associated with age.

There are also circumstances in which continuity may be particularly valuable. In international politics, for example, leaders frequently operate within long-standing diplomatic relationships and security arrangements. Familiarity with previous negotiations, alliances, institutional commitments, and international crises can influence how governments approach contemporary challenges. Older leaders may therefore possess forms of institutional memory that are difficult to reproduce quickly.

This makes it problematic to treat gerontocracy as inherently undemocratic. An older politician can be elected through a fully democratic process, possess considerable public support, and effectively represent citizens of different ages. Democratic representation does not require political leaders to share the demographic characteristics of every voter.

The difficulty arises when experience ceases to be merely one qualification among many and becomes a mechanism through which political careers reproduce themselves

When Experience Becomes a Structural Advantage

Political experience is not acquired in a vacuum. Long political careers can generate advantages such as name recognition, party networks, access to political resources,

[2] Id

familiarity with electoral campaigns, and established relationships with institutions. These advantages can make it easier for experienced politicians to remain in office while making entry more difficult for newcomers.

The resulting age imbalance is visible internationally. Stockemer and Sundström find that people aged thirty-five or below make up only around ten percent of parliamentarians globally, despite constituting a much larger share of the population. [3] Their research identifies young adults as consistently underrepresented not only in legislatures but also in cabinets and political candidacies.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union's most recent data illustrates the continuing gap. In 2025, only 2.8 percent of parliamentarians worldwide were aged thirty or under, while 19 percent were aged forty or under. More than one-third of parliamentary chambers had no member aged thirty or under. [4] The IPU also reported in 2026 that the global proportion of parliamentarians aged thirty or under had remained unchanged at 2.8 percent since 2023, marking the first halt in progress since the organisation began tracking youth representation in 2014. [5]

These figures do not demonstrate that older politicians are incapable of representing younger citizens. They do, however, demonstrate a substantial difference between the age composition of the public and the age composition of political institutions.

This distinction is important because democratic representation has both a procedural and a representational dimension. Procedurally, citizens possess the right to vote and choose their representatives. Representationally, however, the composition of political institutions can influence which experiences and perspectives are visible within decision-making processes.

The Demographic Dimension of Gerontocracy

Population ageing makes this issue more complicated. As societies become older, older citizens naturally constitute a larger share of the electorate. They may also participate in elections at higher rates than younger voters. Consequently, demographic change can alter the political incentives facing parties and governments. Bruckheimer and Vogt identify three

[3] Daniel Stockemer & Aksel Sundström, Youth Without Representation: The Absence of Young Adults in Parliaments, Cabinets, and Candidacies 1–3 (Univ. Mich. Press 2022).
[4] Inter-Parliamentary Union, Youth Participation in National Parliaments: 2025, at 4–5 (2026).
[5] Inter-Parliamentary Union, Youth Representation in Parliament Flatlines for First Time in 12 Years (Apr. 9, 2026).

interconnected effects of an ageing democracy: participation effects, representation effects, and policy effects. [6] Participation effects arise when younger voters become a smaller or less active proportion of the electorate. Representation effects appear when older lawmakers become disproportionately represented in political institutions. Policy effects may emerge when governments increasingly respond to the preferences of an ageing electorate.

Japan provides an important illustration. With one of the world's oldest populations, it demonstrates how demographic ageing can affect both electoral participation and political representation. Buchmeier and Vogt argue that the growing political weight of older citizens can create a tension between the principle of majority rule and the broader objective of maintaining generational pluralism. [7]

This does not mean that older voters constitute a single political bloc. Age does not determine political preferences in the same way for everyone. Class, gender, income, ideology, ethnicity, education, and national context also influence political behaviour. Consequently, it would be misleading to assume that all older citizens support the same policies or that all younger citizens share a common political agenda.

The concern is instead structural. If one generation becomes substantially more influential in elections and political institutions than another, the political system may become less capable of incorporating different generational experiences.

From Representation to Policy

The consequences of gerontocracy may extend beyond who occupies political office. Demographic changes can also influence what governments prioritise.

Tim Vlandas argues that population ageing can shift the “electoral centre of gravity” toward older voters. His analysis suggests that ageing electorates can increase political incentives to prioritise pensions, healthcare, and low inflation, while reducing incentives for certain long-

[6] Yosuke Buchmeier & Gabriele Vogt, The Aging Democracy: Demographic Effects, Political Legitimacy, and the Quest for Generational Pluralism, 22 Persps. On Pol. 168, 168–80 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592723000981
[7] Id. At 170–75.

term investments, including social investment and policies directed toward economic growth. [8] He describes the resulting political economy as **"**gerontonomia**."**

The concept is significant because it connects representation with policy time horizons. Policies such as pensions and healthcare address immediate and legitimate needs of older citizens. At the same time, younger generations may have stronger long-term interests in areas such as education, employment opportunities, housing, environmental sustainability, technological adaptation, and public investment.

This does not mean that policies benefiting older people are inherently unfair. Older citizens have equal democratic rights and legitimate social needs. Nor does it follow that younger citizens should automatically receive greater political influence. The issue is whether political systems are capable of balancing immediate electoral incentives with the interests of citizens who will experience policy consequences over much longer periods.

Gerontocracy thus raises a question of intergenerational political time. Governments operate through relatively short electoral cycles, while many consequences of public policy unfold over decades. When political institutions are disproportionately occupied by older generations and electoral participation is also uneven across age groups, the interests of future or younger citizens may receive less political weight.

Gerontocracy Beyond Democratic System

The relationship between age and political power is not limited to democracies. In authoritarian systems, the age of political leaders can have different consequences.

Magni-Berton and Panel's study of 160 countries between 1960 and 2008 examined whether the age of political leaders affected the likelihood of violent rebellion. Their findings indicate that older authoritarian leaders were associated with a lower likelihood of violent rebellion, whereas the same relationship did not appear in democratic regimes. [9] Their explanation

[8] Tim Vlandas, From Gerontocracy to Gerontonomia: The Politics of Economic Stagnation in Ageing Democracies, 94 Pol. Q. 452, 452–61 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13301

[9] Raul Magni-Berton & Sophie Panel, Alternation Through Death: Is Gerontocracy an Equilibrium?, 71 Pol**.** Rsch**.** Q. 975, 975–88 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912918775251

relates partly to political succession: in an authoritarian system, the expected departure of an older leader can shorten the period opposition groups must wait for potential political change.

This finding complicates the assumption that older leadership necessarily produces political instability. Age can have different political consequences depending on the institutions surrounding leadership succession. In a democracy, regular elections provide an institutional mechanism for political change. In an authoritarian system, succession may be less predictable, making the age of a leader politically consequential in a different way.

Gerontocracy should therefore not be treated as a single phenomenon with identical effects across political systems. Its significance depends on the relationship between age, institutions, political competition, and mechanisms of succession.

The Indian Experience

India presents an especially relevant case because it combines a relatively young population with an ageing political leadership.

Research on Indian electoral politics has identified the underrepresentation of young people as an institutional concern. Dishant Parakh's analysis of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections associated the limited presence of younger MPs with institutional barriers, political networks, dynastic succession, and the persistence of gerontocratic patterns. [10]

The age profile of India's current lower house provides a more recent illustration. According to PRS Legislative Research, the average age of MPs elected to the 18th Lok Sabha in 2024 was 56 years. Fifty-two percent of MPs were older than 55, while only 11 percent were aged forty or below. At the same time, three MPs were elected at the minimum constitutional age of twenty-five. [11]

These figures should not be interpreted as evidence that the Lok Sabha is democratically illegitimate. Elections determine representation, and age is only one characteristic of a representative. Nevertheless, the contrast between India's demographic structure and the age profile of its parliament raises questions about the pathways through which younger citizens

[10] Dishant Parakh, Representation of Youth in Electoral Politics: An Analysis of the Indian Election System, 8 J. Pol. & Governance 43, 43–59 (2020)
[11] PRS Legislative Research, Profile of the 18th Lok Sabha (2024)

enter political institutions. The issue is therefore not simply that India's politicians are older. It is whether younger citizens have comparable opportunities to develop political experience, secure party nominations, compete electorally, and eventually occupy positions of authority.

Experience or Democratic Challenge?

The debate ultimately presents a false choice if it asks whether gerontocracy is either beneficial experience or a democratic problem. It can involve both dynamics simultaneously.

Political experience is a genuine political resource. A politician's age does not determine competence, democratic commitment, policy preferences, or ability to represent others. Older leaders can provide institutional continuity and accumulated knowledge, while younger leaders can bring different experiences and perspectives. Neither category is inherently superior.

At the same time, persistent age inequalities in political representation can create democratic concerns. Stockemer and Sundström's review of the literature shows that young people remain substantially underrepresented across different levels of government and that institutional factors including candidate selection, electoral systems, party structures, and political eligibility rules can influence their access to office. [12]

This suggests that the democratic challenge lies less in the presence of older politicians than in the limited circulation of political opportunity between generations**.**

A healthy democratic system does not need to impose an artificial age balance in every legislature. Instead, it needs political institutions in which age does not become an invisible barrier to political entry. The objective is not to replace experienced politicians simply because they are old, but to ensure that experience is not defined exclusively through long tenure and seniority. Generational pluralism provides one possible way of thinking about this problem. Buchmeier and Vogt argue that political legitimacy in ageing democracies requires greater attention to the inclusion of different generations in political processes. [13] Such pluralism does not require generations to be treated as opposing political camps. Rather, it recognises that different age groups may encounter different economic, social, technological,

[12] Daniel Stockemer & Aksel Sundström, Age Inequalities in Political Representation: A Review Article, 60 Gov't & Opposition 271, 271–88 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2023.11
[13] Buchmeier & Vogt, supra note 6, at 176–80

and environmental conditions and that democratic institutions benefit from having these experiences represented.

Conclusion

Gerontocracy in global politics is ultimately less about the biological age of political leaders than about the distribution of political opportunity. Experience can strengthen political leadership, but when political systems consistently reward accumulated seniority while providing limited pathways for younger citizens to enter positions of authority, age becomes connected to political inequality. The challenge is particularly significant in a world experiencing simultaneous population ageing, large youth populations, and rapid changes in technology, employment, climate, and social policy. Decisions made today will affect generations differently and for different lengths of time. A political system that contains experience but lacks generational diversity may therefore struggle to capture the full range of perspectives necessary for long-term democratic decision-making.

Yet the answer cannot simply be to favour younger politicians over older ones. Doing so would replace one form of age-based reasoning with another. The more meaningful democratic objective is generational pluralism: preserving the institutional knowledge that comes with political experience while ensuring that younger citizens have genuine opportunities to acquire experience, enter political institutions, and participate in shaping public decisions.

Gerontocracy, then, should neither be dismissed as merely a natural consequence of experience nor treated as proof that older leadership is inherently undemocratic. Its significance lies in the structural relationship between age, political access, representation, and policy priorities. The central democratic question is not who is too old to govern? It is whether political systems remain open enough for every generation to have a meaningful opportunity to help govern the future it will inherit