

Responding to Ageist Election Coverage in the Media

A Brief Guide

As the 2024 election cycle ramps up, there has been an increase of ageist media coverage focused on our elected officials and both Democratic and Republican candidates. Many of us have been unsure how to respond most productively. The National Center to Reframe Aging, the trusted source for proven communication strategies and tools to effectively frame aging issues, has created this guide to pave the way for us all to answer constructively. We believe it is important for all of us to have the tools to reply to these very public displays of ageism and remind the American public that, like the rest of us, (even) politicians grow in ways that improve their ability to do their work as they get older.

In addition to guidance on addressing ageism during the election season, this resource includes advice on two of the main ways these approaches can be made public — writing a letter to the editor in response to an article or editorial or writing an op-ed piece. Both types of commentary can be circulated on your social media platforms to maximize audience reach.

Crafting Language That Reframes Aging

1. Tell a positive “developmental” story about aging, emphasizing our unique capacities at every stage of life. Then connect the developmental strengths of older people directly to leadership skills.

➤ **Stay fully strength based.** Avoid phrases such as “when we get older, we get better,” which can be heard as diminishing the potential contributions of people of different ages. Lift up the value and contributions of older people without making negative comparisons to other ages.

– Example: “Each stage of life comes with different knowledge, abilities, capacities and strengths, which are all valuable in our society.”

➤ **Pivot to a specific developmental strength of older people.** It is not enough to say, “experience matters” or use clichés such as “older and wiser.” Talk in detail about the unique capacities of older people and explicitly connect those exceptional qualifications to leadership skills.

– Example: “As we age, we gain lots of experience in making decisions under stressful circumstances, which is critical to people in government or elected office.”

2. Address ageism by appealing to the idea that we want to build a just and fair society, which values the contributions of people at all ages.

➤ **Anchor all responses in the value of justice.** While there are different tactics that we can use to address specific forms of ageism, all of them boil down to the desire for equity and fairness.

– Example: In response to the call for testing older officials for mental or cognitive competency, you might say, “Historically, mental competency tests have been misapplied to exclude various groups from full participation. They are fundamentally flawed, don’t measure people’s capacities, and have no place in a democratic society.”

3. Ageist discourse is based on many harmful stereotypes about older people. It may be tempting to rebut those labels or ideas, but when we repeat stereotypes, we cue and reinforce them.

➤ **Where possible, reframe—don’t rebut.** In contentious and even combative communications contexts, make sure you are on your own ground. Write affirmatively about the relevant benefits of getting older.

– Example: “Aging is a dynamic process that can lead to new abilities and knowledge. It generates experiences that can inform our decision making, expand our networks, and deepen our relationships and judgment. Why not evaluate our political leaders, no matter their age, along these dimensions, which are clearly more relevant to high office?”

➤ **Make your affirmative case first.** If you have to rebut a harmful stereotype, open by presenting your affirmative case.

– Example: “For most people, every year that passes leaves us with new experiences that can inform our decision making and expand our networks. Unfortunately, negative stereotypes around aging suggest that as we grow older, we’re less able to contribute to society.”

Tips for Writing Effective Letters to the Editor and Op-Eds

Letters to the Editor

A letter to the editor is a very short response to an article or editorial that has recently appeared in a newspaper, magazine or digital publication. Its purpose can be to express either support for or criticism of a particular piece or even respond to a specific point or idea that is part of a larger article.

Some things to keep in mind when composing a letter to the editor:

- **Be brief.** Aim for 150 words or so, though shorter tends to be better.
- **Start strong.** The first sentence or two of your letter should contain the title and date of the article to which you are responding and the specific point that you either support or oppose. For example:

To the Editor:

David Remnick writes “the prospect of a Presidential election as a contest of the ancients is not a heartening one, and the anxieties it provokes cannot be dismissed as ageism” (The Washington Gerontocracy, September 24, 2023). Perhaps, but the issue’s cover depicting various leaders racing with walkers is most certainly ageist—and ableist.
- **Act immediately.** The news cycle stops for no one. Submit your letter to the editor within a couple of days and no more than a week after the original article is published. The sooner you get it submitted, the more relevant it will be, and the better chance that it will be posted or published.
- **Focus on making your main point.** Don’t waste valuable words talking about your own organization or programs (which may be viewed by editors as self-serving). Focus on making your point.
- **Select one spokesperson.** A letter to the editor should not come from an entire organization. Rather, it can be signed by a person (or two), noting her/his/their organizational affiliation.

Op-Eds

An op-ed is a short opinion piece expressing a viewpoint on a timely news topic. (Fun fact: It is called an op-ed not because it has an op-inion, but because in the days before digital newspapers, these pieces ran op-posite the ed-itorial page.) Here are some tips to help you draft your op-ed:

- **Be timely.** Editors need a reason to publish your viewpoint right now so it’s important to connect your article to something that is happening at this moment. For example, negative coverage of a politician using an assistive device, such as a cane, could be an opportunity to write about the intersectionality of ageism and ableism.
- **Know the word limit.** In general, 600 to 750 words is a good length, but check the paper’s online submission guidelines.
- **Start strong and end strong.** Grab your reader’s attention quickly using a personal story or a specific example of ageism. Your final paragraph is critical to summarizing your argument and leaving readers with a clear call to action.
- **Avoid jargon.** Make sure someone with very limited knowledge of the subject/our field can understand what you’re trying to say. Don’t use acronyms or industry terms without providing a definition and/or context.
- **Make a specific recommendation.** Don’t just call out an issue or problem; provide concrete solutions.
- **(Very briefly) include the other side of the argument.** You can counter ageism without dismissing people’s reasonable concerns. Op-eds that include a “to be sure” paragraph towards the end with a point or two from the other side come off as more credible and balanced.
- **Go one at a time.** You cannot send your op-ed to multiple outlets at once. Only after one outlet has passed on it (or you haven’t heard back in five business days) should you try the next one.
- **Don’t forget about your own channels.** Congrats! You’ve gotten an op-ed published—but you are not done yet. Maximize this opportunity by sharing a link to the op-ed across your social channels, in your newsletter and/or to your organizational partners.



LED BY THE GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA