

# [***Older voters in this key battleground state are divided over whether Biden and Trump are too old to be president***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BFD-XMM1-DY7V-G0NN-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Easton, Pennsylvania (CNN) &#8212; Darrell Ann Murphy teaches Mahjong at the local library with a dual purpose: to create new fans of the game she loves while also helping keep fellow seniors mentally sharp.

She begins class with a rule that has nothing to do with how to play the colorful tiles.

"We are all here to learn," is Murphy's opener. "We are all here for one reason. And we're never going to talk religion or ***politics***."

Sitting with us in her Easton home, however, the 83-year-old Murphy is happy to share she is a lifelong Democrat, a moderate, a supporter of abortion rights and fierce critic of [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45).

"He actually scares me," Murphy said of the former president. "I think he does not have the best interest of the country at heart."

Easton is a deep blue city in a bellwether purple county in [*a battleground state*](https://www.cnn.com/election/2024/electoral-college-map?game-id=2024-PG-CNN-ratings&game-view=map) that will be pivotal for both control of the White House and [*the Senate*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/01/politics/senate-race-rankings-january-2024/index.html) this year.

Northampton County has a history of close races, and a history of picking presidential winners.

Trump narrowly carried Northampton in 2016 and his narrow win in Pennsylvania was a critical piece of his Electoral College victory. [*Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) flipped the script in 2020.

Murphy shrugs off a conservative who says Biden - at 81 - is too old, dismissing such talk as partisanship. But other recent conversations have her more than a little nervous about the county's 2024 leanings.

"When I start talking about Joe Biden and how I admire and respect him, I get plenty of blowback," Murphy said. "Plenty of blowback. 'He is too old. Kamala Harris, forget her.' Blowback. Now these are people who do not necessarily love Trump. But they talk about wanting a better choice."

Our visit to Easton is the latest stop in [*a CNN project*](https://www.cnn.com/specials/politics/all-over-the-map) to track the 2024 campaign through the eyes and experiences of voters in key states or demographic groups. Voters over the age of 65 are the most reliable voting group, and in the nail-biting battlegrounds like Pennsylvania, their support can prove decisive.

An afternoon game of Mahjong at Murphy's home is instructive: Even aging voters are divided over the 2024 age debate.

Catherine Long is a fan of Murphy's rule forbidding talk of religion and ***politics***.

"We can't do that and play the game at the same time," she said.

Friend Mary Ann Horvath added that the policy is wise even when not focusing on pairing Mahjong tiles.

"I hardly talk ***politics*** with anybody because you just don't know what the other person believes," Horvath said. That, everyone at the table agreed, is different from, say, 10 or 20 years ago - when you could debate ***politics*** without risking friendships.

"Feelings are so much stronger now," Horvath said.

Still, a visitor decides to break the rule, and asks if anyone at the table would prefer younger candidates for president.

The divide is immediate.

"I think there should be an age limit at the top," is the view of Pamela Aita.

Murphy disagreed and recalled recently attending a friend's 100th birthday party. "Shirley knows just what is going on politically," Murphy said. "A lot of older people now are pretty darn sharp."

Aita was not persuaded.

"But they are not running the country," she said. "That person should be able to speak. That person should know who they are speaking to. That person should be able to know simple things that you and I would know. And I don't think the person in charge of this country at this time is capable of that."

Long offered what she called the counter argument, pointing to the 77-year-old former president: "Donald Trump can't know the difference between Nancy Pelosi and Nancy Haley."

Murphy was quick with the correction: "Nikki Haley."

"Nikki Haley," Long repeated. "I get even those confused."

As laughter broke out, Long added this about her memory mixup: "This is what happens."

Larry Malinconico offered a take similar to what we heard from Murphy: He is a Biden fan and sees the age debate as a distraction.

"I don't think he has gotten appropriate credit for the things he has done," Malinconico said.

But he worries enough of his peers and some of his students do see Biden's age as disqualifying, and he knows what even modest shifts in voter sentiment can mean in Northampton County and Pennsylvania.

"I'd be more discouraged this year, at this point, about Trump being elected over Biden," he said.

Malinconico, 71, is a geology professor at Lafayette College in Easton. He is energetic and engaging in the classroom and says his views on age are shaped by his teaching and watching his father live to 94.

"I don't think that age is necessarily a determining factor," Malinconico said in an interview at his campus office.

Still, when we ask if he would have preferred that Biden had decided to serve just one term, and announced that months ago, the answer is, "Yes, I would."

Why?

"I think there are people who will not vote for him or sit out because they perceive his age as a potential problem," Malinconico said. "He looks physically more frail than he did a decade ago or two decades ago. And unfortunately, I think people equate physical frailty with lack of mental acuity. And I think that is wrong."

Malinconico listed reading, Wordle, crossword puzzles and physical activity when we asked what he does to stay sharp. Yes, a memory mixup now and then. But he said he believes his experience makes him a better teacher now than he was 10 or 20 years ago. "I hope to be learning until I die," he said.

Perceptions of age that differ across the aisle

Mickey Brown is West Point Class of 1966, which makes him 80. He plays tennis, pickleball and senior softball at this over-55 community in Hanover Township and says Sudoku and reading are his go-tos to keep his mind sharp.

Three or four times a week he spends most of the day at a care center where his wife lives because of her dementia.

"It's just something you have to do," he said, tearing up. "I believe in Jesus and God. I think it keeps me strong and I'll be fine. And I want to make sure she is taken care of as well as she can be."

Brown is a conservative and two-time Trump voter. But he insists his worries about Biden are based on his experience, not his ***politics***.

"Caring for my wife, I see certain things in the way, his mannerisms, that make me wonder if he is really in fact the president," Brown said.

We reminded Brown that Trump, too, often meanders into verbal tangents and of recent episodes where he, at length, mixed up Haley and Pelosi and suggested the former South Carolina governor was somehow in charge of the US Capitol when Trump supporters stormed it on January 6, 2021.

"At times I forget something," Brown said. "Comes back. But I'm fit, I have confidence in myself. I just think the differences between the two are enough for me to be more concerned about Mr. Biden going forward than Mr. Trump."

Pat Levin calls Brown a friend. But she disagrees vehemently with his ***politics*** and with his take on Biden's fitness to serve.

"Donald Trump is essentially the same age and makes similar errors," Levin said. "So I don't fault Joe Biden. I think that's just part of life. We are not infallible."

Levin was precise when asked her age: "94 and a half."

We met her at the SteelCore Studio in Bethlehem, where she comes once a week for a workout of crunches, balance exercises and more.

"This is important for - to keep me vertical," Levin said with a playful smile. "At my age I need all the help I can get."

Levin is a lifelong Democrat who is well aware of Northampton County's bellwether legacy but also tends to forget it on a day-to-day basis, not because of any memory issues but because she generally is in the company of fellow Democrats.

"To be honest with you, that always surprises me," Levin said of Northampton's history. "Because you tend to spend time with people who think the way we do. So, I think everybody is for Joe Biden until November comes. Then it surprises me."

The president's age, she said, hardly ever comes up when she is in the company of friends who are about as old as Biden or even, like her, about a dozen years older.

"They're terrified of what might happen if Joe Biden doesn't win," Levin said.

Terrified of what?

"What will happen to this democracy."

Election Day is more than eight months away. Levin would be 95 then. Every crunch at SteelCore is her way of saying age is just a number, and she argues Biden should be judged by his performance, period.

"I don't think age should be a determinant of competence," Levin said. "I don't think they go together in any way, shape, or form. I know a lot of young people who are quite incompetent. I know a lot of older people who are very competent. And Joe Biden falls into that category for me."

By John King, CNN

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