

# [***Haley goes after Trump and Biden as 'grumpy old men' while courting older voters in South Carolina***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B8H-88P1-JBSS-S00M-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Hilton Head, South Carolina (CNN) &#8212; On a cool February night in this popular enclave for tourists and retirees to enjoy warmer winters, hundreds of [*Nikki Haley*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/04/politics/nikki-haley-texas-secede-us/index.html) supporters packed into a restaurant where the former South Carolina governor repeated a familiar line.

"Don't you think it's time we had mental competency tests for anyone over the age of 75?" Haley asked the crowd filled with seniors, who responded with loud applause. "These are people making decisions on our national security. These are people making decisions on the future of our economy. We need to know they're at the top of their game."

Haley, 52, has pitched herself as the leader of the next generation since launching her campaign almost a year ago. Her attacks on former President [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45)'s mental fitness [*have sharpened*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/20/politics/nikki-haley-donald-trump-mental-fitness/index.html) in recent months, and, with the state's Republican primary in sight, the campaign recently started a media campaign in South Carolina casting Trump and President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) as two grumpy old men.

It could be a risky pitch in a place where Haley needs the support of senior voters. South Carolina was the fastest growing state in 2023, largely due to an influx of almost 40,000 retirees, according to the US Census Bureau. But even as Haley seeks to draw in older voters - especially those who have moved to the state in recent years - her campaign is leaning into distinctions between her relative youth compared with Biden and Trump.

Maureen Bulger, a 69-year-old retiree who moved to Hilton Head from New Jersey in 2022, watched Haley's remarks intently from the back of the restaurant. She's planning on voting for the former South Carolina governor in the primary on February 24, in part because she agrees with Haley's argument that older politicians should step aside.

"As we age, your knees don't work the way they used to. Your brain might be sharp, but it takes energy to be the president of the United States, and it takes a lot of fortitude," Bulger said. "I just don't think our country should be with someone who is going on his way out, when we still have so much young blood."

In her remarks on the night of the New Hampshire primary last month, Haley urged Republican and Democratic voters to move away from Trump, 77, and Biden, 81, saying, "The first party to retire its 80-year-old candidate is going to be the party that wins this election." A recent Haley campaign ad labeled both Biden and Trump as "grumpy old men" and "stumbling seniors." And in an [*appearance on NBC's "Saturday Night Live,"*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/03/entertainment/nikki-haley-snl-cold-open-ayo-edebiri/index.html) Haley joked voters would "see dead people" if both candidates appeared on the general election ballot.

But the Haley campaign is also courting the support of South Carolina retirees, a growing portion of the Republican primary voter pool. The state remains an attractive destination for retirees, many of whom settle in South Carolina after living in moderate or Democratic-leaning areas.

That dynamic puts pressure on Haley to carefully walk a line between making the case for generational change at the top of the Republican Party and not alienating older voters who could help close the gap between her and Trump. Haley finished third behind Trump and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (who has since [*dropped out*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/21/politics/desantis-ends-2024-campaign/index.html)) in the Iowa caucuses and came in second behind Trump in the New Hampshire primary. A Washington Post/Monmouth University poll released last week of potential Republican primary voters in South Carolina showed Trump with 58% support, while 32% said they backed Haley.

For some of the voters at Haley's rallies, it appears she is striking the right chord.

Anna Memmo, 61, has been coming to Hilton Head for 25 years. She now lives in South Carolina full time after previously making trips from her home in Virginia, and she's planning to vote for Haley in the primary. She thinks age and mental competency should be factors in considering who to vote for.

"Whether it's the Biden ticket or the Trump ticket, I do feel that it's very important to ... consider age and cognitive skills," Memmo said. "I think it's a very important role. I mean, the president of the United States."

Haley's attacks on Trump's and Biden's mental acuity put some of her older supporters in the awkward position of defending the former United Nations ambassador even as they disagree with her decision to hit the candidates for their age.

Ray Makalous, a 75-year-old Haley supporter, has lived in Hilton Head for seven years after spending most of his life in Kansas. He said he wouldn't vote for Biden or Trump if Trump won the nomination. But he said he's somewhat put off by Haley diminishing her rivals based on their age.

"I do think that we still have people that are 78 and 80 that can be senators and representatives. That would be an issue that I'd look at and I'd say - I wouldn't be driving that on home," Makalous said.

"I think I would do some other talking points other than that one," he added.

There are also limitations on how impactful Haley's new generation pitch appears to go - particularly given how many GOP voters in the state already plan to vote for Trump.

Laura Holtzman, a 76-year-old retiree from New York who now primarily lives in Hilton Head, plans to cast a ballot for Trump and believes criticisms of the former president's age don't carry the same weight as they do for Biden.

"Trump could run around in circles, and you can see that," Holtzman said, noting her view of Biden as being in "bad shape." "So, I don't go by numbers, especially since I'm 76."

'Typecasting the seniors'

Haley has previously said she thinks voters ages 65 and older will understand her argument and won't feel personally slighted. When asked in an interview with CNN last week whether she was concerned her attacks on Biden and Trump would estrange older voters, Haley said she isn't because "they get it."

"I think older people see it too. They know that we need a new generational leader. They know that we need to start focusing on the issues at hand and stop all the chaos and stop all the division and stop these investigations that are happening with both Biden and Trump and start focusing on what we're going to do to help the American people," she said.

Based on CNN's New Hampshire [*exit polls*](https://www.cnn.com/election/2024/primaries-and-caucuses/exit-polls/new-hampshire/republican-primary/0), Haley ran closer to Trump with voters 65 and older than other age groups, losing by only 8 points. Trump bested her by double digits with the younger age subgroups. Maintaining that support among older voters, and doing better with younger age groups, will be critical to Haley's campaign in South Carolina, where [*she has promised to do better*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/28/politics/haley-south-carolina-results-new-hampshire-trump/index.html) than she did in New Hampshire.

While Haley continues to stress the age concerns, some older voters aren't convinced it's a salient issue in the primary, even if they accept her point of view. Larry Greenwold, 82, said he's sympathetic to Haley's reasoning that she can uniquely bring youth to the ticket. But he still plans to support Trump because he doesn't trust Haley.

"I totally understand the argument," Greenwold said of Haley's focus on age. "She's young, she's articulate. But she's a fraud."

For Greenwold, the more important issue is whether Trump will be able to navigate the [*four criminal indictments*](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/07/politics/trump-indictments-criminal-cases/) he faces in multiple jurisdictions. If Trump were to be found guilty of a crime, Greenwold said he'd throw his support behind Haley instead.

Haley has slightly ramped up her focus on Trump's legal woes, highlighting in recent days the reports that the former president and his allied super PACs [*spent more than $50 million*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/31/politics/fundraising-trump-legal-fees-pacs/index.html) on legal expenses last year. But she often avoids discussing the details of his criminal cases on the campaign trail, instead making broader references to the investigations and the "chaos" that accompanies them.

Ed Spears, 82, is an undecided voter who has lived in Hilton Head since 1977. He voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020, and is leaning toward the former president in the primary, but fondly recalls Haley's time as governor of the state.

"She was never in the paper for doing something wrong," he said.

Spears said the deciding factor for him will be Trump's legal situation ahead over the next few weeks. He isn't offended by Haley contrasting her age with Trump, but he marks those attempts as "just ***politics***," rather than a key issue.

"If I was a younger candidate, I would do the same thing. That's just strategy. It's the same thing they used against Biden to characterize him as being incompetent," Spears said.

Carol Carty, 77, has lived in Hilton Head for nine years. She said she likes Haley and would consider voting for her if Trump weren't in the race. However, she strongly disagrees with Haley's attacks on Trump's and Biden's ages and thinks age is "irrelevant" when looking at the field of candidates.

"I just don't think it's the correct attitude to have," Carty said. "It's typecasting the seniors, and that's not right, because we're individuals."

Nevertheless, she harbors positive sentiment for Haley but is sticking with Trump, whom she voted for in previous elections.

"I've always been a Trumper, and I'll stay with Trump. I like what he did. I think (Haley's) a neat person. We read her book, and I like her background and everything. But I know what he did, and those years were very comfortable years for us," Carty said.

"If Trump were not running, yes, I would," she added on the possibility of voting for Haley. "But I'm old, so I'm stubborn."

By Aaron Pellish and Kylie Atwood, CNN

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