



BlackEconomics.org®

“Wisdom, Ability, Incentives”

Stories swirled in the press and in social media recently concerning the age of US Congresspersons, then disappeared. We take this opportunity to contend that, absent term limitations, the voting public should consider a three-variable model when casting votes.

First wisdom.—There is no doubt that wisdom counts, especially when existential and big questions of the day are in focus. In the African tradition, there is probably no more important an idea than to hearken to the “wisdom of the elders.” In this regard, elders should be factored into Congressional decision-making—but not necessarily as voting members. It should be possible to secure the advice and counsel of aged and wise former congresspersons for purposes of making important decisions. Besides, there is considerable evidence against the actual display of wisdom in Congress by its elderly leadership. The US recent exit from Afghanistan is a case in point. Does it take 20 years to recognize the prospect of, or an actual, multi-trillion-dollar failure? Or was it all about incentives? We will address incentives below.

Second ability.—Even if 80 is the new 60, it is nearly impossible for an 80- or 90-year-old

congressperson to exhibit mastery of the same abilities as his/her younger counterpart. Besides, those who know, know that it is the behind-the-scenes staffers who do so much of the real work in the US Congress. Generally speaking, these staffers are of the younger and energetic variety, who can maintain the fast and intense pace of Congressional operations. Therefore, an ability to display ability weighs against continuance of older officials in Congress.

Third incentives.—This may be the most important of the three variables. We all know that all economic agents respond to incentives. The key for voters, who are being represented in Congress, is that elected officials respond to the correct incentives. We have argued elsewhere that US Congresspersons are delinked from average Americans, and probably respond to their own incentives more so than to the needs of their constituents.^{1,2} Importantly, given the nature of mainly Black Congressional Districts, once elected, Black Congressional representatives have little fear of challenges or reprisals when they do not operate in the very best interest of their constituents, who are generally uninformed.

¹ See [“Resolving the Great Separation: If Unity is What You Seek.”](#)

² Also see the clear disconnect in incentives between poor voters and their Congressional Representatives

in the October 11, 2021, article in *The Guardian*: [“Democrats Blocking Biden’s Agenda Represent Some of the Nation’s Poorest,”](#) by Marcus Baram.

For Black Americans especially, two important examples warrant consideration.

- Several Congressional members who acceded to recommendations of the Greenspan Commission to resolve the 1980s Social Security crisis were advanced in age and are now deceased. They adopted a temporary fix, which has now unwound and may lead to a new Social Security crisis. For a variety of reasons, these Congressional members had an incentive to “kick the can down the road,” as opposed to making the very difficult choices that were required to fix Social Security once and for all.³
- Today, with certain Black Congressional members in leadership positions and wielding significant power, and with a sizeable contingent of Black Congressional representatives in a closely divided (Democrats versus Republicans) House and Senate, it now appears to be a favorable time to practice innovative entrepreneurship and form a Black Political Party to optimize outcomes for Black voters.⁴ However, rather than adopt such a forward-leaning strategy, Black Congressional members adhere ever

more closely to the Democratic Party. Given Committee Seniority Rules and the leverage that would be generated by a “swing vote” status of Black representatives from a Black Political Party, Black representatives could inure more power, and benefit Black voters more than by remaining under the umbrella of the Democratic Party.⁵ In this case, wisdom does not appear to be on display, and older Black congressional members do not reflect the correct incentives (they are too risk averse) vis-à-vis their Black constituents.

We all know that term limits were deemed unconstitutional, and that any effort to place age limits on congressional service would be deemed discriminatory. Therefore, members of the US Congress have protected themselves from ouster at any age.

However, we urge Black Americans to consider seriously the three-variable model that we propose here (wisdom, ability, and incentives) when deciding who to support for Congressional seats going forward.

B Robinson
10/22/21
--

³ There were no Black Americans on the 15-membered 1981-1983 National Commission on Social Security Reforms, only three Black American members on the US House Ways and Means and Rules Committees, and no Black Americans on the Senate Financing and Aging Committees that helped “resolved” the 1980s Social Security crisis. However, it is common knowledge that Social Security is a very important issue for Black Americans. According to a 2019 Social Security Administration [Fact Sheet](#), 35 percent of married and 58 percent of unmarried Black

elderly persons relied on Social Security for over 90 percent of their income.

⁴ See “[Why Not a Black Political Party?](#)” and recent efforts to establish Our Black Party: <https://www.ourblackparty.org/> (Accessed 10/21/21).

⁵ The Seniority System in Congress is not party specific. Rather, it operates independently within the two important parties (Democrats and Republicans). A Black Political Party could adopt the Seniority System as part of its *modus operandi* if it were deemed to be beneficial.