

Youth Representation and Democratic Legitimacy

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Abstract

How does the age composition of democratic institutions shape public evaluations of their legitimacy? While most institutions are dominated by older politicians, we argue that incorporating younger representatives can enhance perceptions of legitimacy. To test this claim, we conduct a survey experiment in the United States that varies the age composition of a bipartisan state legislative committee and its decisions. We find that including younger members increases perceptions of procedural fairness and institutional trust, and improves evaluations of decisions on lower-salience policies. These effects are stronger among young people and Democrats. Evidence on mechanisms suggests these legitimacy gains reflect beliefs that younger politicians are more attuned to young people's experiences and concerns. Observational evidence from U.S. state legislatures and a replication experiment in the United Kingdom yield consistent patterns, suggesting that these findings extend beyond the original experimental context. This suggests that expanding youth representation can meaningfully strengthen democratic legitimacy.

American politics has increasingly come to be defined by age. In 2024, concerns about Joe Biden’s (81) age ultimately forced him from the presidential race, yet the eventual winner, Donald Trump (78), was also twice the age of the average American (39). Congress was barely younger: the median age of House members was 58, and in the Senate it was 65. This age imbalance is not unique to Washington or even to the United States. Across many democracies, legislators are far older than the citizens they represent (Stockemer and Sundström 2022).

The predominance of older politicians raises an important question: how does the age composition of democratic institutions shape public perceptions of their legitimacy? Institutions dominated by older representatives may appear capable and stable, drawing on their greater experience, knowledge, and resources to project competence (Roberts and Wolak 2023). Yet such bodies can also seem detached from contemporary realities. Citizens may worry about declining health and mental acuity among senior leaders, question whether older politicians can adequately address long-term challenges such as climate change, and perceive that politics has become closed off to new voices (McClean and Ono 2024; Munger 2022; Sevi 2021). By contrast, decision-making bodies that include younger members alongside their elders can signal intergenerational equity, blend the wisdom of experience with the fresh perspectives of youth, and convey responsiveness to the concerns of a changing society.

We argue that gerontocracy can erode the perceived legitimacy of democratic institutions. To test this claim, we conduct a survey experiment that varies the age composition of a bipartisan state legislative committee and its policy decisions. The results show that incorporating more young people into decision-making processes increases perceptions of procedural fairness and trust in institutions to act in the future, and can also improve evaluations of decisions made on lower-salience issues. These effects are especially strong among young adults and Democrats. Explorations of mechanisms suggest that these legitimacy gains stem, in part, from beliefs that younger politicians better understand the lived realities and future needs of younger generations. We find further support for these patterns in observational

data from U.S. state legislatures and in a replication experiment conducted in the United Kingdom. Taken together, these findings suggest that who makes policy decisions—and specifically, whether young people have a seat at the table—can enhance public faith in democratic governance.

Youth Representation and Democratic Legitimacy

Descriptive representation—the extent to which decision-making bodies reflect the diversity of the populations they serve—has long been viewed as central to public perceptions of legitimacy. Democratic theorists argue that citizens are more likely to view institutions as just when historically underrepresented groups are present in deliberations (Mansbridge 2015; Phillips 1995). Such inclusion can foster psychological belonging among members of marginalized groups and more broadly signal that institutions are fair, open, and attentive to diverse perspectives (Mansbridge 1999). Empirical research supports this view, showing that descriptive representation enhances perceptions that the decision-making process was fair (procedural legitimacy), that the resulting outcomes are right or just (substantive legitimacy), and that institutions can be trusted to act in the public’s best interest (Clayton et al. 2019, 2025; Gay 2002; Hayes and Hibbing 2017; Kao et al. 2024). In other words, political legitimacy depends not only on *what* decisions are made, but also on *who* is entrusted to make them (Parkinson 2003).

However, most work on descriptive representation and legitimacy has focused on the gender, race, or ethnicity of representatives, leaving open important questions about whether these effects extend to age. Youth is a distinct social identity: it is both universal and temporary. Every older citizen was once young, while younger citizens can expect eventually to age out of youth. The exclusion of youth from office may therefore seem less unjust than the exclusion of women or racial and ethnic minorities, since young people may be viewed as only temporarily outside positions of authority, not permanently excluded from them. Some citizens may even doubt that age meaningfully shapes political representation

at all. Others may worry that younger politicians lack the maturity or judgment leadership requires, or view older politicians as possessing the experience, knowledge, and wisdom they associate with effective governance (Gulzar 2021; Roberts and Wolak 2023). By this logic, institutions dominated by older members may even appear *more* legitimate, signaling stability and competence rather than exclusion.

We argue, however, that decision-making bodies composed mostly of older members can also appear detached from the everyday realities and future concerns of younger generations. Institutions with a balance of younger and older members may therefore strengthen perceptions of legitimacy through several channels. First, the presence of younger members can convey fairness and inclusivity, countering the sense that political authority belongs to a single generation (Bidadanure 2021; Stockemer and Sundström 2022). Second, because they share a similar life stage, younger representatives may be regarded as better able to understand and relate to the needs and concerns of younger citizens (McClean and Ono 2024; Sevi 2021). Third, younger politicians may be seen as more attuned to many contemporary and future policy challenges, from technology and the labor market to climate change, that older representatives might overlook (Hanretty et al. 2025; McClean 2026). Finally, citizens may view younger members as more likely to bring energy and new ideas that complement the institutional memory of older legislators (Munger 2022). In short, while gerontocracy may convey competence in some respects, we expect the public to view age-balanced bodies as more legitimate because they signal inclusivity, responsiveness, and shared ownership across generations.

H1: Age-balanced decision-making bodies will be seen as more legitimate than those composed of only older members.

We expect the influence of youth inclusion on legitimacy perceptions to differ depending on the salience of the policy issue under consideration. When citizens lack strong prior opinions about a policy, they may rely more on institutional cues, such as who participates in decision-making, to judge whether the process was fair, whether different perspectives

were considered, and whether the committee can be trusted to act impartially in the future. In these cases, age-balanced bodies may reassure citizens that the deliberations incorporated the experiences and concerns of multiple generations. By contrast, when an issue is highly salient and opinions are firmly established, legitimacy judgments are likely to depend more on the decision itself than on who made it. We therefore expect the positive effect of age balance on perceived legitimacy to be strongest for lower-salience issues, where institutional cues matter more.

H2: The effect of age balance on legitimacy will be stronger on lower-salience issues than on higher-salience issues.

We also expect these effects to vary based on citizens' age. Younger citizens, who are often underrepresented in elected office and feel neglected by political institutions (Munger 2022; Holbein and Hillygus 2019), may respond especially strongly to the presence of generational peers in leadership roles. For young adults, seeing young legislators can foster a sense of identification, reinforce beliefs in fair treatment, and show that their concerns and life experiences are valued. Older citizens, however, may see age diversity as less important for legitimacy, instead emphasizing the experience, seniority, and wisdom they associate with older leaders.

H3: Younger people will be more positively influenced by age balance than older people.

Finally, we expect partisanship to influence these effects. Support for descriptive representation varies by party, with Democrats more likely than Republicans to back diversity in gender, race, and ethnicity within governing bodies (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Mikkelsen 2025; Weissman 2025). Democrats may also view youth representation more positively because younger voters have largely supported Democratic candidates in recent elections (CIRCLE 2024). Thus, we anticipate that Democrats will be more likely to interpret the in-

clusion of younger members as evidence of fair and responsive governance, while Republicans may place less weight on age balance as a source of institutional legitimacy.

H4: Democrats will be more positively influenced by age balance than Republicans.

Experimental Design

To test these hypotheses, we conducted an online survey experiment in July 2025 with YouGov using a quota-based sample of the U.S. adult population based on age, gender, race, and region.¹ A total of 6,029 respondents participated in a between-subjects vignette experiment. Each respondent viewed a short prompt describing a hypothetical state legislative committee tasked with making a recommendation on a specific policy issue. The vignette included text and photos of the eight committee members.

We randomize three features of the vignette. The first—and most important—is the committee’s age composition: respondents viewed either a committee with only older members or an age-balanced committee with younger and older members. To enhance the realism of the vignette, we use photos of actual state legislators from KnowWho (2024), which covers all 7,552 legislators. We first randomly selected 50 legislator photos, then chose 12 with similar monochromatic backgrounds to construct two committees: an older committee (eight members aged 60 or older) and an age-balanced committee (four members 60 or older and four under 40).² The mean age is 69 for our older committee and 47 for our age-balanced committee, compared to mean ages of 56 among state legislators and 48 among respondents.³

The second and third randomized elements concern the policy issue and the committee’s final decision. To test H2, which anticipates stronger effects on lower-salience topics, we

¹We pre-registered our study at OSF (see Appendix 1).

²Four photos of older legislators are held constant across groups, with the other four photos rotating between younger and older legislators. To ensure age is the main observable difference, we also hold gender and race constant. Both committees contain two women (25%) and one Black member (12.5%), which are close to the averages among state legislators (33% women and 10% Black) (Appendix 1.3).

³Pre-tests confirm that respondents perceive significant age differences between photos (Appendix 1.4).

selected two youth-relevant policy issues that differ sharply in public salience. The “higher-salience” condition describes a proposal to increase renewable energy standards to combat climate change—an issue where attitudes tend to be crystallized, identity-driven, and resistant to persuasion (Egan and Mullin 2017). The “lower-salience” condition describes a proposal to lower the age of candidacy for all state offices to 18—a policy widely discussed in youth representation debates abroad but one that has received relatively little public attention in the United States (Stockemer and Sundström 2022). We also randomize whether the committee supports or opposes the proposal. For space reasons, we focus on the age-balance and issue-salience treatments in the main text; analyses of the committee-decision treatment appear in Appendix 2.6.

We also introduced two design features to address concerns raised by recent experimental work on descriptive representation. First, prior studies show that respondents sometimes infer that more diverse decision-making bodies lean ideologically left (e.g., Reher 2025), potentially confounding evaluations of legitimacy. To mitigate this possibility, we explicitly describe both committees as bipartisan. Second, research highlights that legitimacy judgments are strongly shaped by attitudes toward policy issues and decisions (Agerberg and Wängnerud 2025; Esaiasson et al. 2019), raising the risk that the observed effects of age balance may instead reflect the chosen policies or outcome favorability. To address this concern, we included a treatment arm in which the committee was introduced without any policy issue, allowing us to estimate the effect of age balance on perceived legitimacy independent of views about a specific policy or decision.⁴

After viewing the vignette, respondents rated the committee’s legitimacy along three dimensions. Following prior work, we measured whether respondents thought the decision-making process was fair (procedural legitimacy) and the committee reached the right decision (substantive legitimacy) (Clayton et al. 2019; Kao et al. 2024).⁵ We also introduced a more

⁴Out of 6,029 participants, 4,785 were assigned to the “youth policy” groups and 1,244 were assigned to the “no policy” groups (Appendix 2.6).

⁵We also follow these studies in removing respondents who failed manipulation checks, reducing our “youth policy” sample size from 4,785 to 3,693. We find similar results if we include all respondents (Appendix 2.5).

forward-looking question on whether the committee could be trusted to make good decisions on a range of policy issues in the future. All items use five-point Likert scales, which we dichotomize for interpretability (1=strongly agree/agree; 0=neutral/disagree/strongly disagree).⁶ We then estimate average treatment effects using OLS regression.

Experimental Results

Figure 1 reports our experimental results across four panels: the main effect (H1), followed by effects by policy issue (H2), respondent age (H3), and respondent party (H4). For our three legitimacy outcomes, the left column shows perceptions of whether the decision-making process was fair, the middle whether the committee made the right decision, and the right whether the committee could be trusted to make good decisions on other issues in the future.

Beginning with our first panel, we find support for H1 for two of our three legitimacy measures: fairness and trust. Fairness effects are especially strong, with respondents being 21 percentage points more likely to view an age-balanced committee as representing a fair process than one with only older members. Age balance also increases trust in the committee’s future decision-making by 10 percentage points, but has no significant effect on perceived decision quality (3 percentage points, $p=0.12$).⁷

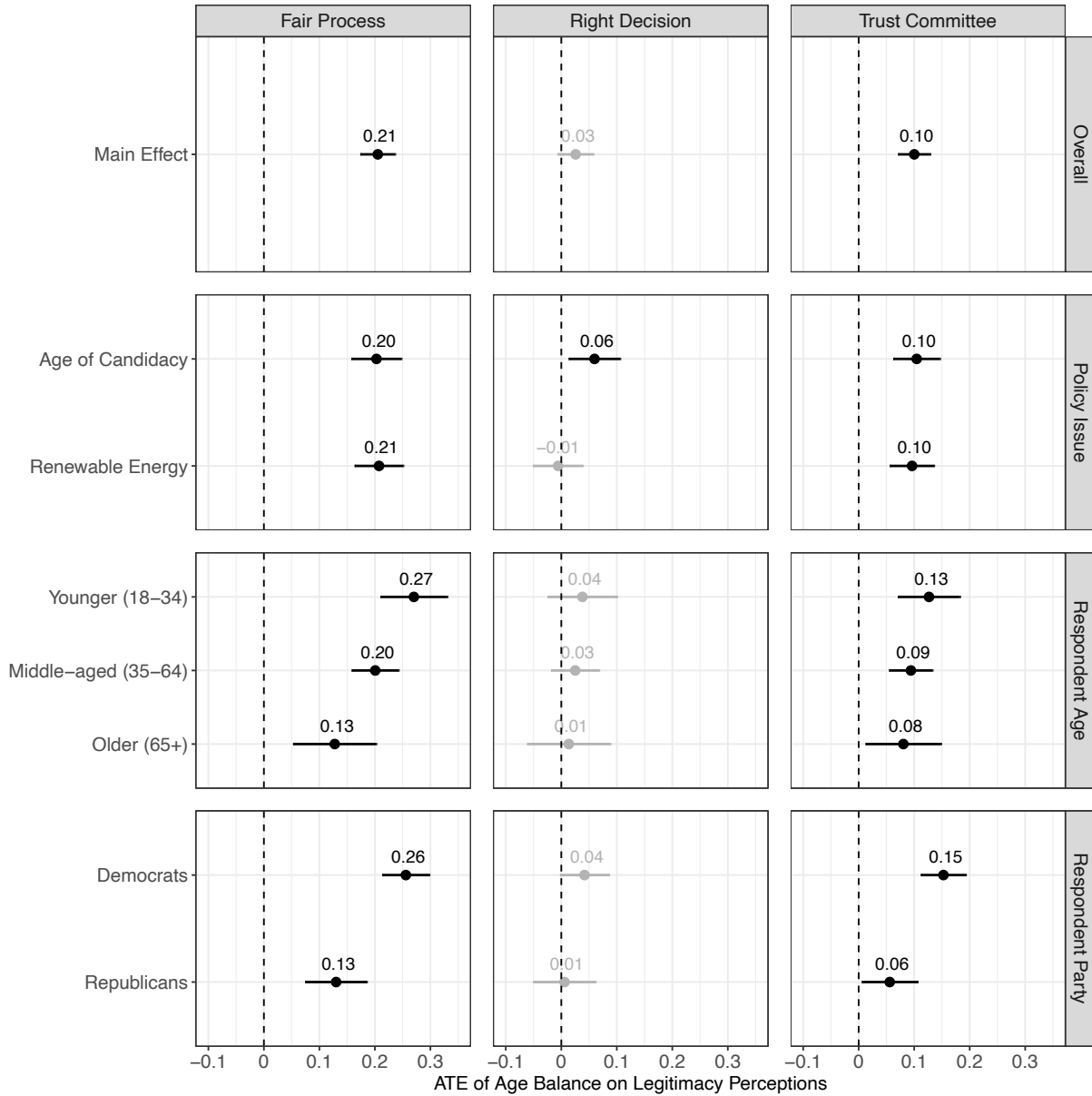
Next, we find that the effect of age balance on perceived decision quality varies by policy issue (H2). As predicted, having young people at the decision-making table improves perceptions of decision quality more for lower-salience issues than higher-salience ones. More specifically, we find a significant 6 percentage point boost for right decision for age of candidacy, but no significant effect for renewable energy. By contrast, perceptions of fairness and trust are consistent across issues, with nearly identical estimates of 20–21 percentage points for fairness and 10 percentage points for trust.

Respondent age also moderates the effect of age balance (H3). Age differences are clearest for fairness: age balance enhances perceived fairness more for younger respondents (27

⁶See Appendix 1.8 for specific question wording.

⁷In our robustness checks (Appendix 2.5), the estimates for right decision become statistically significant.

Figure 1: Effect of Age Balance on Perceptions of a Committee's Legitimacy



Notes: Average treatment effects (ATEs) of age balance on perceptions of whether the decision-making process was fair, whether the committee made the right decision, and whether the committee can be trusted to make good decisions in the future. See Appendix 2.3 for table versions.

percentage points) than for middle-aged (20 percentage points) or older respondents (13 percentage points). Similar but smaller age differences appear for trust, with estimates ranging from 13 percentage points among younger respondents to 8 percentage points among older

respondents, though the difference between these estimates is not significant. For decision quality, age balance has no significant effect for any age group.

Lastly, we find partial support for H4: age balance matters more for Democrats’ perceptions of fairness and trust than for Republicans, with no clear effect for decision quality. Both Democrats and Republicans view age-balanced committees as fair, but the effect for Democrats (26 percentage points) is twice that of Republicans (13 percentage points). Similar but smaller patterns appear for trust: age balance increases trust by 15 percentage points among Democrats compared to 6 percentage points among Republicans. By contrast, age balance does not significantly affect either Democrat or Republican perceptions of whether the committee made the right decision.

In sum, we find support for all hypotheses, though this support varies across our legitimacy measures. For H1 (overall), H3 (age), and H4 (party), age balance has the largest effects on perceived fairness, smaller but substantial effects on trust, and no significant effects on whether the committee reached the right decision. For H2 (policy issue), issue salience matters only for perceptions of decision quality, not for fairness or trust.⁸ Finally, Appendix 2.6 shows that when the committee is introduced without mentioning any policy issue or decision, age balance has an even larger effect on fairness and a similar effect on trust, indicating the results are not driven by respondents’ views on the selected policy issues.

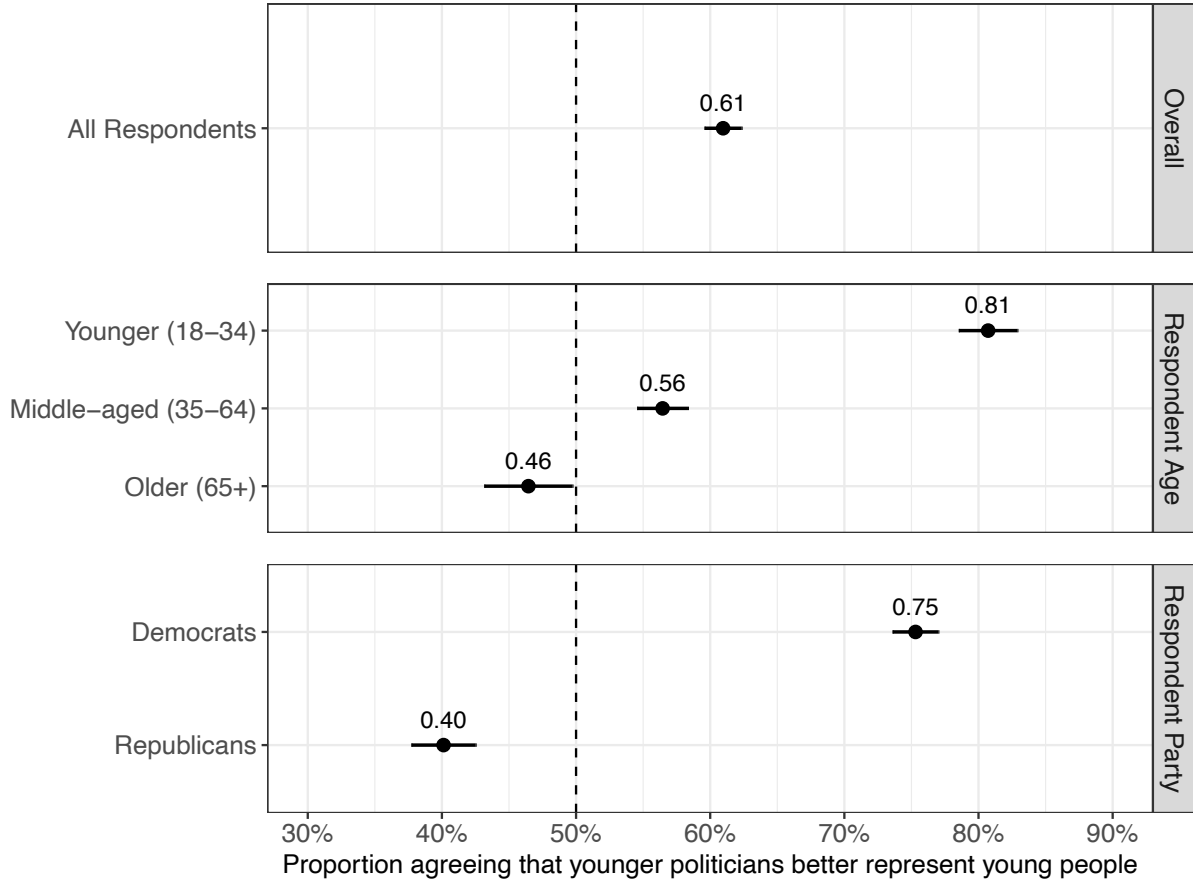
Exploring Mechanisms

To further explore why age-balanced institutions enhance legitimacy, we first asked respondents, after the vignette, whether younger politicians are better at representing young people than older politicians (Figure 2).

Overall, 61% agree that younger politicians are better positioned to represent young people. Agreement is higher among young adults (81%) and Democrats (75%). These patterns mirror our experiment: respondents who view younger politicians as better representing young people are also most responsive to age balance in their legitimacy judgments.

⁸Formal interaction tests confirming subgroup differences for H2–H4 are reported in Appendix 2.4.

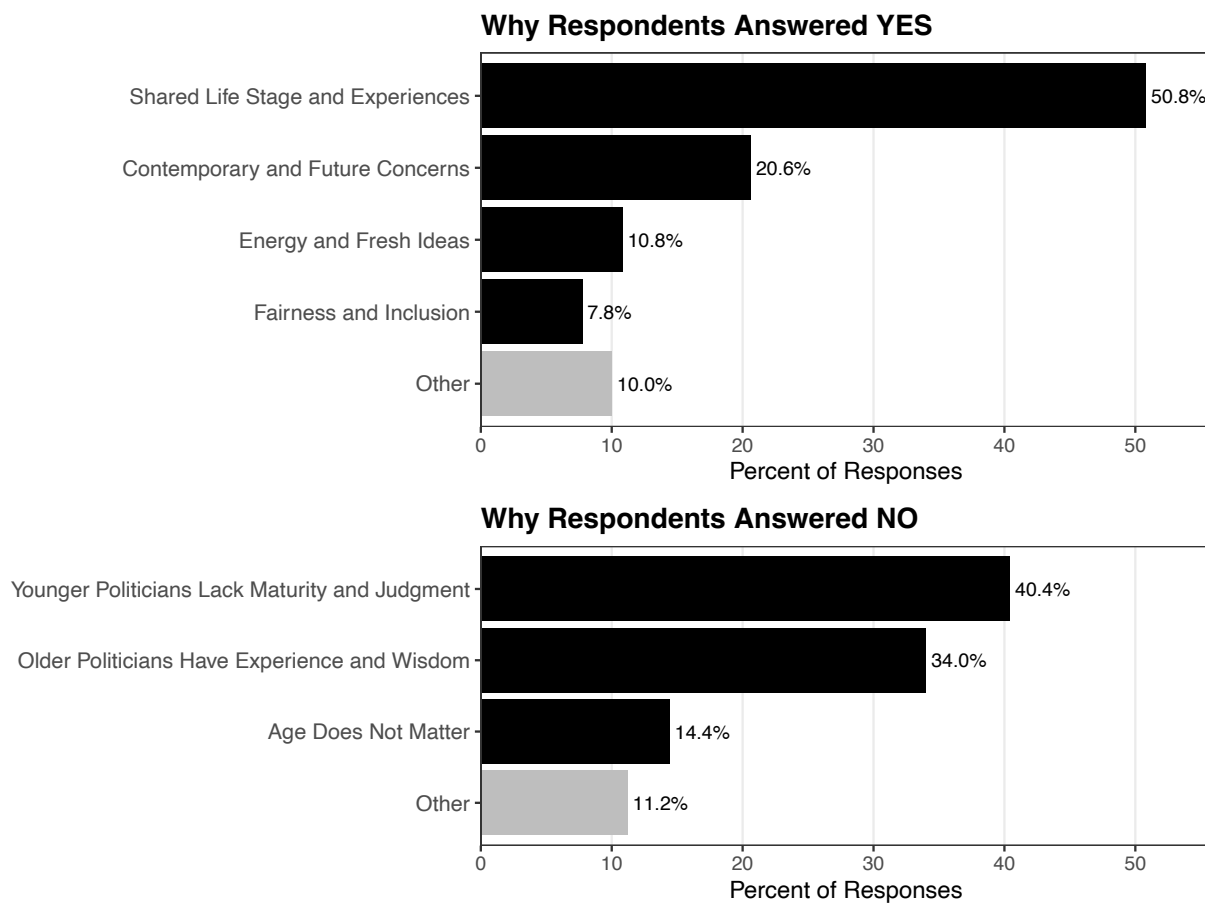
Figure 2: Are Younger Politicians Better at Representing Young People?



Notes: The percentage of respondents, by subgroup, who agree that younger politicians better represent young people.

To understand *why* respondents hold these views, we invited them to explain their reasoning in an open-ended follow-up question. We analyzed these responses by drawing two random samples of 500 respondents—from those who answered “yes” and “no”, respectively—and developed coding schemes grounded in our theoretical framework. Earlier, we identified several channels through which younger members might enhance legitimacy: shared life stage and experiences, attunement to contemporary and future concerns, energy and new ideas, and fairness and inclusion. Likewise, we outlined reasons for skepticism: concerns about younger politicians’ maturity and judgment, the value of older politicians’ experience and wisdom, and beliefs that age does not matter for representation. Research assistants then

Figure 3: Why Respondents Think Younger Politicians Are (Not) Better at Representing Young People



Notes: The most common reasons respondents gave for why younger politicians are (not) better at representing young people.

read through the responses and assigned each to one of these categories (see Appendix 3 for details). Figure 3 reports the results.

Among respondents who believe younger politicians better represent young people, the dominant explanation is shared life stage: just over half (50.8%) argue that younger politicians better understand young adults because they are closer to their everyday lives. Another 20.6% emphasize contemporary and future concerns, describing younger leaders as more attuned to current challenges and long-term issues affecting younger generations. Smaller shares cite energy and fresh ideas (10.8%) or fairness and inclusion (7.8%).

By contrast, respondents who reject the claim emphasize experience and competence. The most common view (40.4%) is that younger politicians lack maturity and judgment and are not yet ready for office. Another 34.0% cite older politicians' experience and wisdom as enabling equal or better representation. Finally, 14.4% contend that age does not matter.

Beyond these age-specific mechanisms, two alternative explanations merit consideration. First, because the older committee in our experiment reflected a descriptive majority of older white men, respondents' reactions may have been driven by intersectional considerations rather than age alone. To address this concern, we searched the open-ended answers for references to gender or race in respondents' explanations. Such references were rare. Among the 1,000 responses analyzed (500 in each condition), only 1 percent mentioned gender and fewer than 1 percent referenced race or ethnicity. Moreover, these infrequent comments typically framed age as one dimension of diversity among others rather than criticizing the panel as consisting of "old white men." Instead, the overwhelming majority of responses justified their answers in terms of age-related experiences, as previously discussed.

Second, respondents may have evaluated younger politicians not only on their capacity to represent young people specifically but on perceived quality more broadly. Research on candidate emergence suggests that members of underrepresented groups who succeed in politics may be stronger than their peers, having overcome greater barriers to entry (Anzia and Berry 2011; Fulton 2012). If such perceptions shaped our respondents' evaluations, we would expect their reasoning to reference general competence or quality rather than age-specific considerations. Yet when we searched the open-ended responses for references to candidate quality, competence, or related terms, we found that only a handful of responses made general quality claims that were not tied to the age-specific mechanisms documented above.

Neither intersectional considerations nor perceptions of general candidate quality thus appear to have driven respondents' reactions. Instead, respondents most often anchor their reasoning in the link between age and experience—but in different ways. Those who agree

focus on the *type* of experience: proximity to youth, contemporary knowledge, and future orientation. Those who disagree focus on the *amount* of experience: maturity, judgment, and accumulated wisdom. These contrasting intuitions echo our core theoretical mechanisms and help explain why age-balanced institutions enhance perceived legitimacy.

External Validity

We assess the external validity of our experimental findings through two additional analyses. First, using new data on the age composition of U.S. state legislatures (Young Elected Leaders Project 2024) combined with public opinion data from the Cooperative Election Study (2022–2024), we examine whether the patterns observed in our experiment are also reflected in citizens’ evaluations of their state governments. We find that residents of states with younger legislatures report higher trust in state government, even after accounting for party seat shares, gender composition, and legislative professionalism (Appendix 4). Similar to our experiment, these effects are strongest among younger respondents and Democrats.

Second, we conducted a replication study in the United Kingdom to examine whether our findings hold beyond the U.S. context (Appendix 5). In March 2026, we fielded an online survey experiment with 1,315 respondents recruited through Prolific. The experimental design closely followed the U.S. study: participants evaluated a hypothetical cross-party committee composed either entirely of older councillors or of a mix of younger and older councillors, with no specific policy decision mentioned. Although the U.S. and UK political settings differ in many ways, including the UK’s multiparty system and the role of local councillors rather than state legislators, the results closely match the main findings. Respondents who viewed age-balanced committees judged the decision-making process as significantly fairer, expressed more confidence that the committee would make sound decisions, and reported greater trust overall. As in the U.S. study, these effects were strongest among younger respondents. These results suggest that the positive effects of age-balanced representation are not confined to the U.S. but can also appear in other democratic contexts.

Discussion

Our findings speak to several veins of research. We contribute to literature showing that people are attentive to legislators’ group memberships when assessing an institution’s legitimacy (Arnesen and Peters 2018; Mansbridge 1999). While prior work has focused on gender (Clayton et al. 2019, 2025; Kao et al. 2024) as well as race and ethnicity (Clark 2019; Clark and Rogers 2025; Gay 2002; Hayes and Hibbing 2017; Tate 2004), we show that citizens also value age diversity and identify the distinct ways in which age balance matters for legitimacy. The fact that respondents consistently rate age-balanced committees as more fair and trustworthy—regardless of policy issue, the committee’s decision, or even whether a policy is mentioned—suggests that youth presence carries legitimacy benefits that extend beyond outcome favorability (Agerberg and Wängnerud 2025; Esaiasson et al. 2019).

Moreover, we provide evidence for a new mechanism underlying the recent finding that voters often prefer younger candidates (Eshima and Smith 2022; McClean and Ono 2024; Roberts and Wolak 2023; Sevi 2021). Our results suggest that voters favor young candidates in part because they believe younger representatives enhance the legitimacy of decision-making bodies. Our analysis of open-ended responses offers further insights into *why* people hold this view: respondents emphasize younger politicians’ shared experiences with younger generations, greater attentiveness to contemporary and future challenges, new ideas, and considerations of fairness and inclusion.

Finally, our findings speak to debates about declining trust in democratic institutions (Brady and Kent 2022; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019; Valgarðsson et al. 2025), particularly among younger citizens (Holbein and Hillygus 2019; Munger 2022). We show that gerontocracy—a defining feature of contemporary politics in the United States and many other democracies, such as India and Japan (McClean 2026; Stockemer and Sundström 2022)—may carry important legitimacy costs. Efforts to recruit and support more young political leaders may therefore help restore public confidence in democracy at a moment of increasing fragility.

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1 Experimental Design

1.1 Pre-Analysis Plan

We pre-registered our study at Open Science Framework (OSF) prior to conducting the online survey. The presentation of results in the main text differs from the PAP in four main respects. First, we have simplified the wording of the hypotheses to improve readability. Second, for space reasons, we report a subset of pre-registered hypotheses and results in the main text and present additional pre-registered hypotheses and exploratory analyses in Appendix Section 2.6 (Additional Analyses). Third, we formulated H2 (Policy Issue) after the survey was conducted but prior to any analysis of the data; as such, this hypothesis does not appear in the PAP. Finally, our framing of H3 (Respondent Age) focuses on the overall effect to maintain parallelism with the other hypotheses; we discuss more specific expectations by legitimacy measure in Appendix Section 2.6.

1.2 Survey Experiment Design

Table A1: Survey Experiment Design

Policy:	Lower Age of Candidacy		Increase Renewable Energy		None
Decision:	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose	None
Age Balance	Group 1	Group 3	Group 5	Group 7	Group 9
Only Older	Group 2	Group 4	Group 6	Group 8	Group 10

Notes: Table version of the survey experiment described in the main text. We randomize three dimensions in the experiment: 1) the age composition of the committee (age balance or only older), 2) the policy considered by the committee (lowering the age of candidacy or increasing renewable energy standards, and 3) whether the committee made a decision (support or oppose the proposal). We also include a separate treatment arm (Groups 9 and 10) in which no policy issue or decision is mentioned.

1.3 Construction of the Visual Prompt

We conducted our survey experiment in July 2025 using YouGov. Our survey presented 6,029 participants with an information treatment about a state legislative committee. Inspired by the design of the vignettes in Clayton et al. (2019), we convey the age composition of our two committee treatment groups—“Age Balance” and “Only Older”—through a headline, text, and photos of the eight state legislators serving on the committee.

For the photos, we began by randomly selecting a set of 50 photos from KnowWho’s State Legislators Data Service (KnowWho 2024), a database that has the photos of all 7,552 state legislators. From this sample, we then carefully chose 12 legislator photos to use for our two treatment groups. Apart from age, we took care to select photos that appeared as similar as possible, with all legislators adopting smiles, facing toward the camera, and appearing against a monochromatic background. In two cases, we altered photo backgrounds to reduce stark colors and make them appear more similar to the other photos.

For the “Age Balance” committee, we use four photos of legislators under 40 and four photos of legislators aged 60 or older. For the “Only Older” committee, we rotate out the younger photos to be replaced by four more photos of legislators aged 60 or older. In total, we therefore have photos of 12 legislators: four under 40 and eight 60 or older. The average age of our “Age Balance” committee is 47 compared to 69 for our “Only Older” Committee. By comparison, the average age of state legislators is 56 (KnowWho 2024) and 48 among our survey respondents.

The 12 legislators in our committee treatment groups represent 12 different states: Arizona, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, and Wyoming. The chance that a respondent could recognize more than one person is therefore minimal. To ensure age is the main observable difference between legislator photos, we set both committees to contain two women and one Black member. We chose these ratios to be as representative as possible of the average state legislature. In our mock committees, 25% (2/8) of members are women, compared to 33% of

state legislators (Center for American Women and Politics 2024), and 12.5% (1/8) are Black, compared to 10% of state legislators (Smith 2021).

In the information vignettes, we arrange the committee photos into 2x4 grids just under the headlines (see Section 1.6 for examples). Within these grids, we further take care to alternate between “core photos” of the four older legislators held constant across treatment groups and “rotating photos,” which switch between four older and younger legislators.

1.4 Pre-Test of Visual Prompts in Vignettes

Our survey design relies on us being able to manipulate respondents’ *perceptions* of the age distribution in the two sets of committee photos. To corroborate that people in our study plausibly perceive the two groups as having contrasting age distributions, we constructed a smaller, pre-test survey experiment where we only provided these visual prompts without any text describing their age composition (no headlines and no explanatory text about the groups). We recruited a sample of 531 US citizens using the online panel Prolific in February 2024, before we fielded our main survey experiment.¹ Participants were given a short survey that they could complete on any type of device, which they could access through a link sent through the Prolific platform.

We randomly assigned respondents to view one of our two sets of images: either the “Age Balance” or “Only Older” committee. We then posed two questions. First, we asked “Which age do you think is the most correct to describe the average age of this group of people? YOUR BEST GUESS IS FINE.” Participants then had eight response options, ranging from “45 years” to “80 years” in five-year increments. Second, we asked “Do you think the people in this image – as a group – are on average older, younger, or about the same age as the general adult population in the US? YOUR BEST GUESS IS FINE”. Respondents had three response options for this question: “Older”, “Younger” and “About the same age”.

The results show that our images indeed convey to respondents that the “Only Older”

¹Prolific panel members are paid and they normally participate in commercial and academic surveys (see <https://www.prolific.com/about>)

group is significantly older than the “Age Balance” group. Participants who viewed the “Only Older” committee (N=270) estimated their mean age to be 60.5 (standard deviation: 6.1). By comparison, participants who saw the “Age Balance” group (N=261) estimated their average age to be 50.6 (standard deviation: 4.5).

The second survey item generated a similar pattern. Respondents in the “Only Older” group were much more likely than those in the “Age Balance” group to say committee members were “older” than the general population (73.16% vs. 42.69%) and much less likely to say members were “about the same age” (25.37% vs. 43.85%).

1.5 Vignettes

1.5.1 Vignette 1: Lowering the Age of Candidacy

A state legislative committee of [both younger and older/ of older] members has voted to [support/ oppose] lowering the age of eligibility for state office to 18 years

(Eight Photos of [Age-Balanced Committee/Committee of Older Legislators])

The legislature recently created a special bipartisan committee (pictured above) to evaluate a proposal that would reduce the minimum age required to run for state office. Currently, the threshold in this state is as high as 30 for some elected positions. The proposed law would set a uniform minimum age of 18 across all state offices.

The committee was formed [to reflect the age range of the public, resulting in a group with both younger and older legislators/ based on seniority, resulting in a group of legislators that are significantly older than the average member of the public.]

Supporters argue that lowering the age of candidacy would allow young people to participate more fully in politics and help address the gap between the average age of elected officials and the broader population. Opponents contend that most young people lack the experience and maturity needed for public office.

After careful discussion, the committee voted to [support/ oppose] the proposal.

1.5.2 Vignette 2: Increasing Renewable Energy Standards

[Age-Balanced Committee/Committee of Older Legislators] [Supports/Opposes]

Increasing Renewable Energy Standards to Combat Climate Change

(Eight Photos of [Age-Balanced Committee/Committee of Older Legislators])

The legislature recently created a special bipartisan committee (pictured above) to consider legislation that would raise the required percentage of electricity that must come from renewable sources—such as wind, solar, and hydro—rather than conventional energy sources like coal, natural gas, and oil.

The committee was formed [to reflect the age range of the public, resulting in a group with both younger and older legislators/ based on seniority, resulting in a group of legislators that are significantly older than the average member of the public.]

Supporters argue that the increased standards will help reduce the state's carbon emissions and promote the growth of a clean energy economy. Opponents claim the proposal will raise energy costs and lead to job losses in the traditional energy sector.

After careful discussion, the committee voted to [support/ oppose] the proposal.

1.5.3 Vignette 3: No Policy or Decision

A state legislative committee of [both younger and older/of older members] members has been formed to consider upcoming policy proposals

(Eight Photos of [Age-Balanced Committee/Committee of Older Legislators])

The legislature recently created a special bipartisan committee (pictured above) to evaluate legislation on a range of important issues affecting the state and its residents. The committee will begin deliberations in the coming weeks.

The committee was formed [to reflect the age range of the public, resulting in a group with both younger and older legislators/ based on seniority, resulting in a group of legislators that are significantly older than the average member of the public.]

All eyes will be on the committee as it begins its work.

1.6 Examples of Treatments

In total, our survey design has ten treatment groups with ten different vignettes (see Table A1). For space purposes, we present three examples of our treatments over the next three pages:

1. Only Older $\times$ Supports Lowering the Age of Eligibility (Group 2)
2. Age Balance $\times$ Opposes Increasing Renewable Energy Standards (Group 7)
3. Age Balance $\times$ No Policy or Decision (Group 9)

A state legislative committee of older members has voted to support lowering the age of eligibility for state office to 18 years



The legislature recently created a special bipartisan committee (pictured above) to evaluate a proposal that would reduce the minimum age required to run for state office. Currently, the threshold in this state is as high as 30 for some elected positions. The proposed law would set a uniform minimum age of 18 across all state offices.

The committee was formed based on seniority, resulting in a group of legislators that are significantly older than the average member of the public.

Supporters argue that lowering the age of candidacy would allow young people to participate more fully in politics and help address the gap between the average age of elected officials and the broader population. Opponents contend that most young people lack the experience and maturity needed for public office.

After careful discussion, the committee voted to support the proposal.

Figure A1: Treatment (Group 2)

A state legislative committee of both younger and older members has voted to oppose increasing renewable energy standards to combat climate change



The legislature recently created a special bipartisan committee (pictured above) to consider legislation that would raise the required percentage of electricity that must come from renewable sources—such as wind, solar, and hydro—rather than conventional energy sources like coal, natural gas, and oil.

The committee was formed to reflect the age range of the public, resulting in a group with both younger and older legislators.

Supporters argue that the increased standards will help reduce the state’s carbon emissions and promote the growth of a clean energy economy. Opponents claim the proposal will raise energy costs and lead to job losses in the traditional energy sector.

After careful discussion, the committee voted to oppose the proposal.

Figure A2: Treatment (Group 7)

A state legislative committee of both younger and older members has been formed to consider upcoming policy proposals



The legislature recently created a special bipartisan committee (pictured above) to evaluate legislation on a range of important issues affecting the state and its residents. The committee will begin deliberations in the coming weeks.

The committee was formed to reflect the age range of the public, resulting in a group with both younger and older legislators.

All eyes will be on the committee as it begins its work.

Figure A3: Treatment (Group 9)

1.7 YouGov Sample

Our study consists of a sample of 6,029 participants, recruited from the YouGov panel. Participants complete the survey through a link, which they can answer on any device. A total of 6,446 interviews were conducted within the target group: 6,029 completed the survey and 417 were screened out because they did not want to participate in the survey. This sample consists of respondents from the US, aged 18 years and above, and is nationally representative based on quotas for age (18-29, 30-44, 45-64, 65+), gender, education, race and region (Northeast, Midwest, South and West). The survey was conducted from July 3–22, 2025, with the majority of respondents sampled within the first few days.

In our analyses in the main text, we focus on respondents who were in one of our “Youth Policy” treatment groups (Groups 1–8 in Table A1) and those who passed manipulation checks (correctly identifying the age makeup of the committee and the decision reached). This reduces our final sample size to 3,693 respondents. In Section 2.5.3, we present the results with all 6,029 respondents and show that they are substantively similar (Figure A5).

1.8 Dependent Variables

We gauge legitimacy perceptions using three different survey items:

1. How fair do you think the decision-making process was?
2. The committee made the right decision
3. The committee can be trusted to make the right decision on a range of policy topics in the future

For the first question, respondents answered on a 5-point Likert scale: Very fair, Somewhat fair, Neither fair nor unfair, Somewhat unfair, Very unfair. For the latter two items, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements, and then again answered on a 5-point Likert scale: Fully disagree, Partly disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Partly agree, Fully agree. In the main text, we dichotomize these measures, with

a one indicating respondents who answered “Very fair” or “Somewhat fair” for the first question and “Fully agree” or “Partly agree” for the second and third questions, and zero otherwise. For the “No Policy or Decision” groups, the second question was reframed to be prospective: “The committee will make the right decision.”

1.9 Power Analysis

Clayton et al. (2019, p. 119–120) describe finding standardized effect sizes (d) that range from medium ($d = 0.56$) to very large ($d = 1.50$) in their study focused on gender. Since there has been considerably less work on age, the focus of our study, we wanted to ensure that we recruited sufficient respondents to detect substantially smaller effect sizes.

To determine our sample size, we used the `pwr` package in R. Assuming a small effect size ($d = 0.20$), a power of 0.80, and a two-sided test ($\alpha = 0.05$), the minimum sample size per treatment group should be 393 respondents. To be conservative, we designed our experiment such that group sample sizes range from 500 (at a minimum) to 2,000 respondents. This should enable us to detect even smaller effect sizes ranging from 0.09 to 0.18 standard deviations.

1.10 Ethics and IRB

We obtained IRB approval for this study. Respondents that participated in our survey did not run the risk of being exposed to any significant harm. The only possible sensitive aspect is that they were asked questions about their political ideology and beliefs. For instance, we can assess how close or far they consider themselves to identify with being a Republican or a Democrat. Yet, these questions are taken from established surveys and should not be seen as intrusive. Answering these questions, we believe, poses a minimal risk of discomfort or personal injury.

2 Experimental Results

2.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table A2: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Age	6,029	48.14	17.42	18	94
Female	6,029	0.54	0.50	0	1
Education	6,029	3.35	1.45	1	6
Income	5,342	6.56	3.62	1	16
Married	6,029	0.39	0.49	0	1
Region (Northeast)	6,029	0.19	0.39	0	1
Region (Midwest)	6,029	0.23	0.42	0	1
Region (South)	6,029	0.38	0.49	0	1
Region (West)	6,029	0.20	0.40	0	1

2.2 Covariate Balance

Table A3: Covariate Balance

	Only Older		Age Balance		Difference in Means	Standard Error
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Age	48.42	17.22	47.87	17.62	0.55	0.45
Female	0.54	0.50	0.54	0.50	0	0.01
Education	3.34	1.46	3.35	1.45	-0.01	0.04
Income	6.55	3.62	6.58	3.61	-0.03	0.10
Married	0.40	0.49	0.39	0.49	0.01	0.01
Region (Northeast)	0.19	0.39	0.19	0.39	0	0.01
Region (Midwest)	0.23	0.42	0.22	0.42	0.01	0.01
Region (South)	0.38	0.48	0.39	0.49	-0.01	0.01
Region (West)	0.21	0.40	0.20	0.40	0.01	0.01

Notes: *p<.1; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

2.3 Table Versions of Results

Table A4: Table Version of Figure 1 (Fair Process)

	Estimate	SE	Constant	SE	N	R ²
Main Effect	0.205***	(0.016)	0.441***	(0.011)	3,693	0.042
Policy Issue						
Age of Candidacy	0.203***	(0.023)	0.466***	(0.016)	1,781	0.042
Renewable Energy	0.207***	(0.022)	0.418***	(0.016)	1,912	0.043
Respondent Age						
Younger (18–34)	0.270***	(0.031)	0.399***	(0.022)	979	0.073
Middle-Aged (35–64)	0.201***	(0.022)	0.455***	(0.015)	2,039	0.041
Older (65+)	0.128***	(0.038)	0.462***	(0.027)	675	0.016
Respondent Party						
Democrats	0.256***	(0.022)	0.433***	(0.015)	1,961	0.066
Republicans	0.130***	(0.028)	0.484***	(0.020)	1,216	0.017

Table A5: Table Version of Figure 1 (Right Decision)

	Estimate	SE	Constant	SE	N	R ²
Main Effect	0.026	(0.016)	0.460***	(0.012)	3,693	0.001
Policy Issue						
Age of Candidacy	0.060**	(0.024)	0.458***	(0.017)	1,781	0.004
Renewable Energy	−0.006	(0.023)	0.462***	(0.016)	1,912	0.000
Respondent Age						
Younger (18–34)	0.038	(0.032)	0.461***	(0.023)	979	0.001
Middle-Aged (35–64)	0.025	(0.022)	0.470***	(0.015)	2,039	0.001
Older (65+)	0.014	(0.038)	0.429***	(0.027)	675	0.000
Respondent Party						
Democrats	0.042*	(0.023)	0.467***	(0.016)	1,961	0.002
Republicans	0.006	(0.029)	0.469***	(0.020)	1,216	0.000

Notes: *p<.1; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

Table A6: Table Version of Figure 1 (Trust Committee)

	Estimate	SE	Constant	SE	N	R ²
Main Effect	0.100***	(0.015)	0.236***	(0.010)	3,693	0.012
Policy Issue						
Age of Candidacy	0.104***	(0.022)	0.245***	(0.015)	1,781	0.013
Renewable Energy	0.096***	(0.020)	0.228***	(0.014)	1,912	0.012
Respondent Age						
Younger (18–34)	0.127***	(0.029)	0.220***	(0.020)	979	0.020
Middle-Aged (35–64)	0.094***	(0.020)	0.242***	(0.014)	2,039	0.011
Older (65+)	0.081**	(0.035)	0.243***	(0.025)	675	0.008
Respondent Party						
Democrats	0.153***	(0.021)	0.240***	(0.015)	1,961	0.027
Republicans	0.056**	(0.026)	0.249***	(0.018)	1,216	0.004

Notes: *p<.1; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

2.4 Interaction Effects

Table A7: Interaction Between Age Balance and Policy Issue

	Fair Process	Right Decision	Trust Committee
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age Balance × Age of Candidacy	−0.005 (0.032)	0.066** (0.033)	0.008 (0.030)
Age Balance	0.207*** (0.022)	−0.006 (0.023)	0.096*** (0.021)
Age of Candidacy	0.048** (0.023)	−0.004 (0.023)	0.016 (0.021)
Constant	0.418*** (0.016)	0.462*** (0.016)	0.228*** (0.014)
N	3,693	3,693	3,693
R ²	0.044	0.003	0.013

Notes: *p<.1; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

Table A8: Interaction Between Age Balance and Respondent Age

	Fair Process	Right Decision	Trust Committee
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age Balance $\times$ Younger (18-34)	0.143*** (0.049)	0.024 (0.050)	0.046 (0.045)
Age Balance $\times$ Middle-Aged (35-64)	0.073* (0.043)	0.011 (0.044)	0.014 (0.040)
Age Balance	0.128*** (0.038)	0.014 (0.038)	0.081** (0.035)
Younger (18-34)	-0.063* (0.035)	0.032 (0.036)	-0.023 (0.032)
Middle-Aged (35-64)	-0.007 (0.031)	0.041 (0.032)	-0.002 (0.028)
Constant	0.462*** (0.027)	0.429*** (0.028)	0.243*** (0.025)
N	3,693	3,693	3,693
R ²	0.045	0.002	0.013

Notes: *p<.1; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

Table A9: Interaction Between Age Balance and Respondent Party

	Fair Process	Right Decision	Trust Committee
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age Balance $\times$ Democrat	0.110*** (0.031)	0.025 (0.031)	0.086*** (0.028)
Age Balance $\times$ Independent	0.061 (0.044)	0.045 (0.045)	-0.036 (0.041)
Age Balance	0.162*** (0.024)	0.016 (0.025)	0.058*** (0.022)
Democrat	-0.068*** (0.022)	-0.004 (0.022)	-0.021 (0.020)
Independent	-0.128*** (0.031)	-0.091*** (0.032)	-0.084*** (0.029)
Constant	0.465*** (0.017)	0.415*** (0.018)	0.259*** (0.016)
N	4,868	4,868	4,868
R ²	0.059	0.004	0.023

Notes: Reference category is Republican. *p<.1; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

Table A10: Effect of Age Balance by Respondent Party and Policy Issue

	Fair Process	Right Decision	Trust Committee
	(1)	(2)	(3)
<i>Democrats</i>			
Age of Candidacy	0.262*** (0.031)	0.075** (0.033)	0.137*** (0.030)
Renewable Energy	0.251*** (0.030)	0.011 (0.031)	0.167*** (0.029)
<i>Republicans</i>			
Age of Candidacy	0.125*** (0.040)	0.056 (0.041)	0.101*** (0.038)
Renewable Energy	0.135*** (0.040)	-0.042 (0.040)	0.014 (0.034)

Notes: Each cell reports the OLS estimate of the effect of age balance on the outcome variable within the given party $\times$ policy subgroup. * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

2.5 Robustness Checks

2.5.1 Results with Covariates

Table A11 reports covariate-adjusted estimates of our main treatments effects. Models include controls for respondent age, gender, education, income, region, and party identification. Note that the N (3,271) is slightly smaller as some respondents did not report their income (see Table A2). Overall, we find very similar estimates as reported in the main text, with one notable change being that the estimate for Age Balance on Right Decision becomes statistically significant.

2.5.2 Dependent Variables

In the main text, we choose to dichotomize our three main dependent variables (fair process, right decision, and trust committee) to ease interpretation. Figure A4 shows the results if we instead use the five-point Likert scales for our dependent variables.

The results are substantively similar to Figure 1 in the main text. The only notable difference are that two results that are close to statistical significance when using our binary

Table A11: Results with Covariates

	Fair Process	Right Decision	Trust Committee
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age Balance	0.197*** (0.017)	0.035** (0.017)	0.101*** (0.016)
Age	0.0004 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.0001 (0.0005)
Female	-0.037** (0.017)	-0.045** (0.018)	-0.025 (0.016)
Education	-0.008 (0.006)	-0.005 (0.007)	-0.014** (0.006)
Income	0.001 (0.003)	0.006** (0.003)	0.001 (0.002)
Northeast	0.006 (0.027)	-0.032 (0.028)	-0.016 (0.025)
Midwest	0.027 (0.026)	-0.011 (0.026)	-0.016 (0.024)
South	0.041* (0.024)	-0.020 (0.024)	-0.032 (0.022)
Democrat	0.026 (0.019)	0.014 (0.020)	0.042** (0.018)
Independent	-0.073*** (0.028)	-0.042 (0.029)	-0.076*** (0.026)
Constant	0.440*** (0.044)	0.502*** (0.045)	0.310*** (0.041)
N	3,271	3,271	3,271
R ²	0.046	0.007	0.022

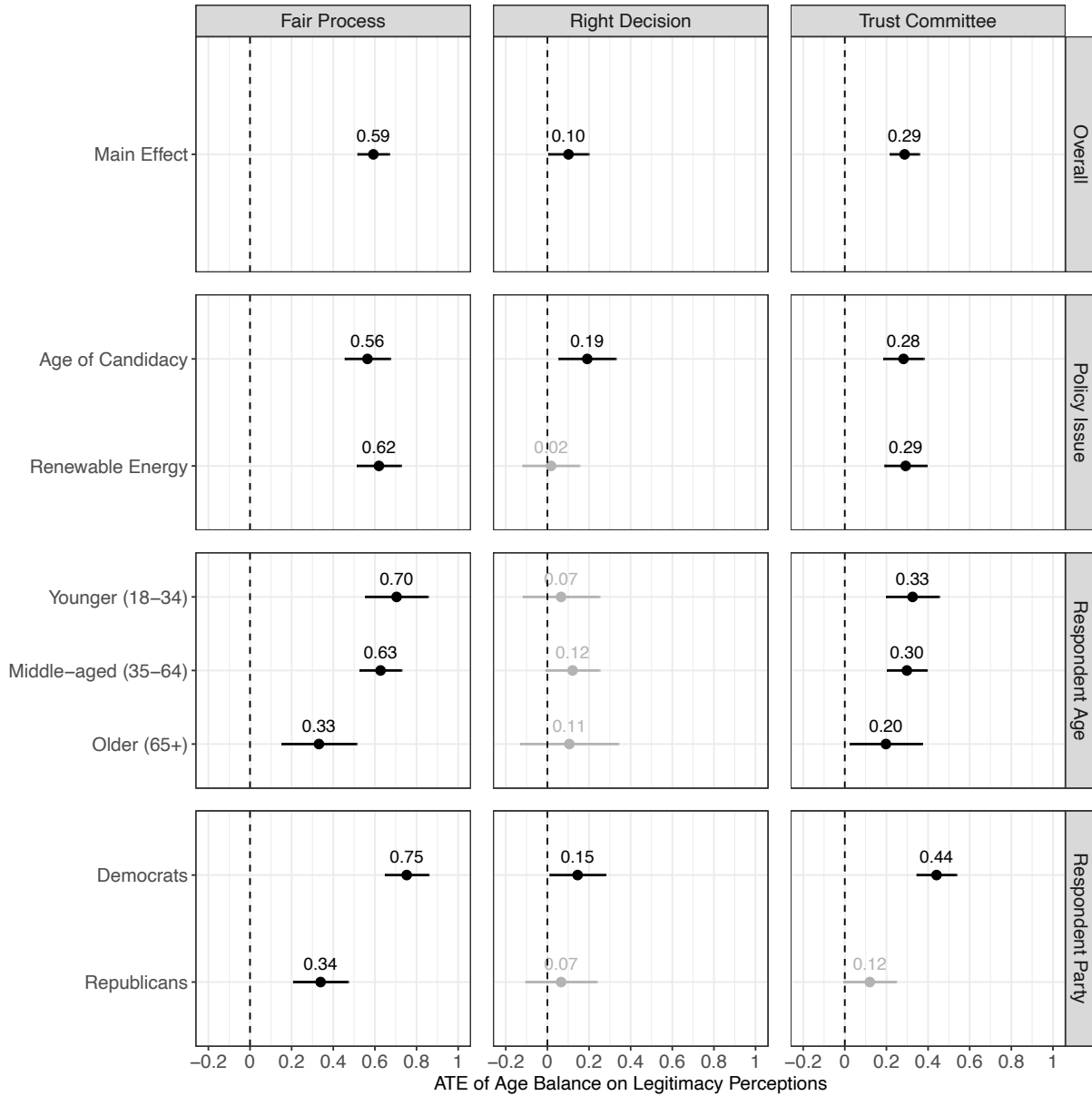
Notes: *p<.1; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

measures reach conventional levels of significance ($p < 0.05$) with the Likert measures. The first is that the overall estimate of age balance for “Right Decision” is now statistically significant and equal to 0.10 units along the Likert scale. The second is that the estimate for Democrats becomes significant for “Right Decision” (0.15 units).

2.5.3 Intent-to-Treat Effects

Figure A5 presents our main results including all 6,029 respondents (i.e., adding back in respondents in the “No Policy” treatment groups and those who failed manipulation checks). We find similar results, with some estimates falling just into or out of statistical significance. For the “Right Decision” outcome, the estimates for Main Effect and Younger (18–34) become

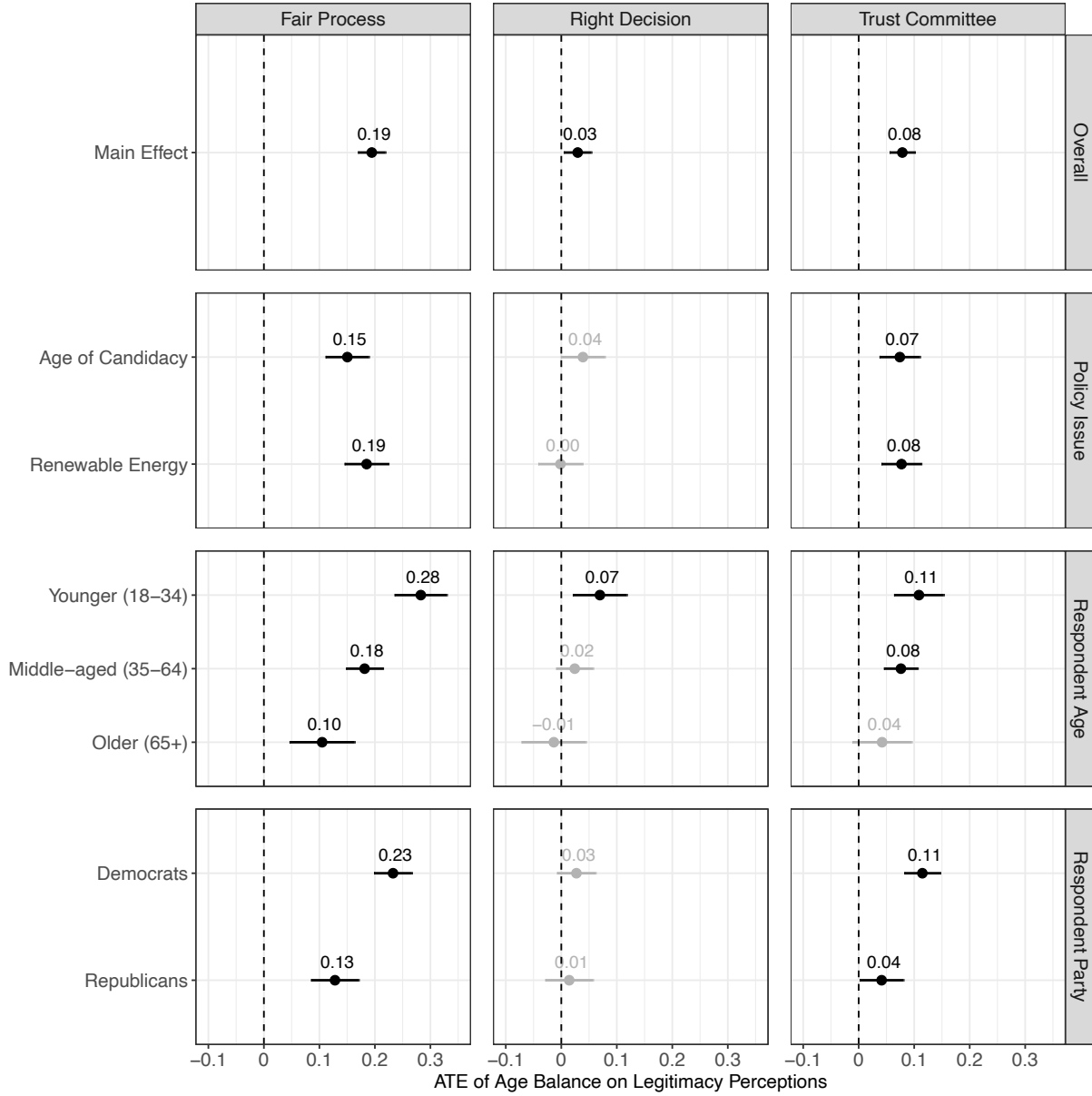
Figure A4: Likert Scale Dependent Variables



Notes: Figure A4 shows the results (Figure 1) with the dependent variables measured using five-point Likert scales.

significant, while the effect for Age of Candidacy falls into marginal significance ($p < 0.10$). For the “Trust Committee” outcome, we also find that the effect for Older (65+) falls into marginal significance.

Figure A5: Robustness Checks



Notes: Figure A5 shows the results (Figure 1) for all respondents (n=6,029).

2.6 Additional Analyses

Finally, we use this last section to report results from additional pre-registered hypotheses and exploratory analyses. While some of these analyses refer back to Figure 1 from the main text, the results for others are shown in a similarly organized Figure A6.

2.6.1 Policy

First, we hypothesized that the effect of age balance on perceptions of fairness would be stronger for the “No Policy” groups compared to the “Youth Policy” groups. We find support for this hypothesis: the effect of age balance is 31 percentage points for the former compared to 21 percentage points for the latter. We also find a larger effect of age balance on perceptions that the committee reached the right decision—although note here that, as described earlier, in the “No Policy” groups this question is framed prospectively and there is no mention of what specific policy they will discuss. Finally, we find no differences between the effect of age balance on trust in the committee to act in the future.

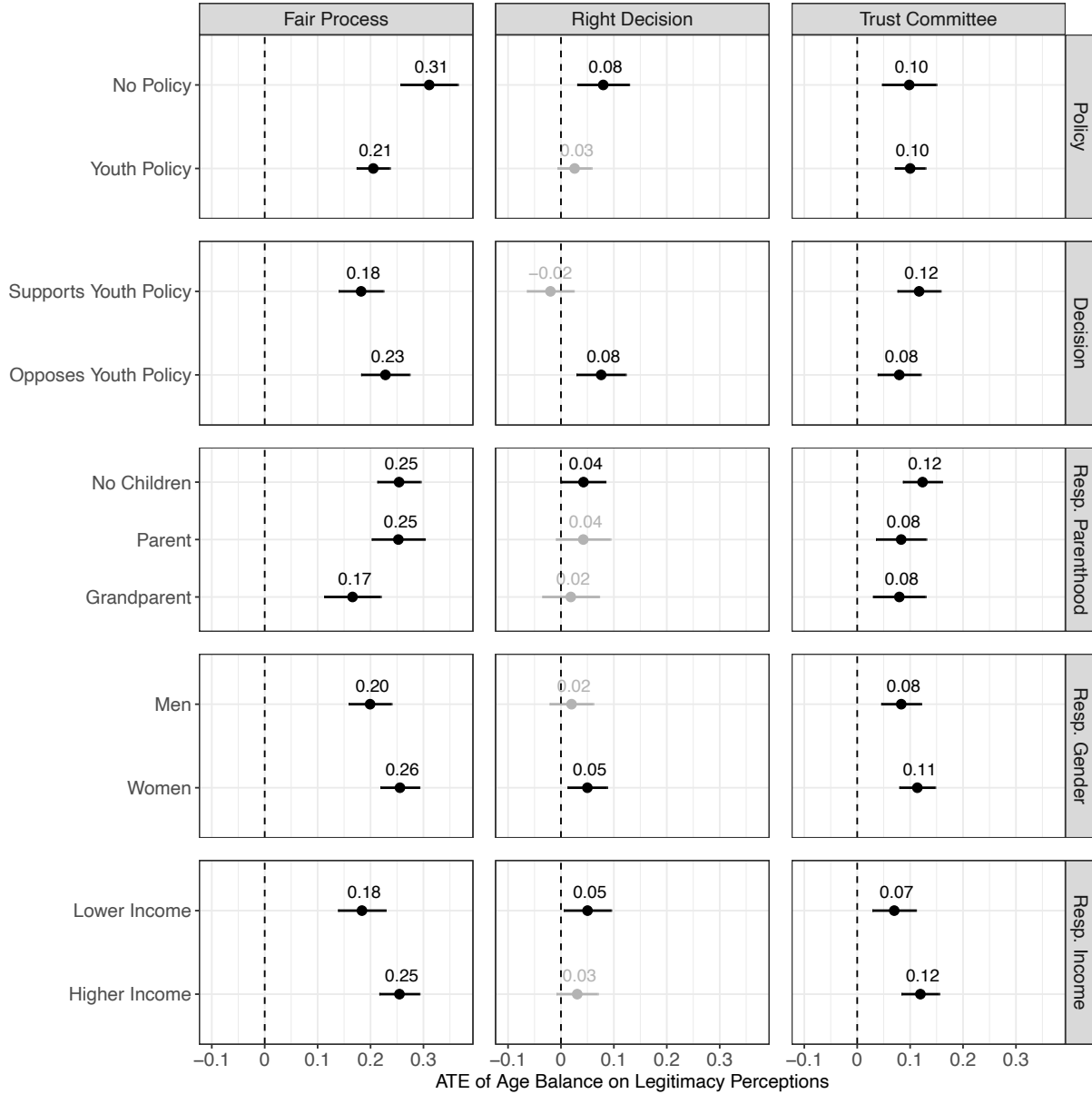
2.6.2 Decision

Second, we offered two hypotheses concerning the effect of a committee’s ultimate decision. We theorized that the positive effect of age balance on decision quality would be stronger when committees opposed youth policies rather than supported them, but that we would find similar effects regardless of the decision for fairness. We find mixed support for these hypotheses, as the pattern seems to be similar across perceptions of fairness and decision quality, with stronger effects in both cases when the committee opposes youth policies, although the effect is stronger for decision quality. In comparison, the opposite pattern seems to be the case for trust in the committee to act in the future, although the difference across subgroups is not significant.

2.6.3 Respondent Demographics

Third, while we focus on the overall effect of respondent age in the main text, we also theorized that the effects would vary across measures of legitimacy. More specifically, we thought that age balance might have a relatively larger effect on young people regarding perceived fairness, but a relatively larger effect on older people for decision quality. As we can see in Figure 1 in the main text, there is mixed support for these expectations: age balance does have a larger effect on young adults for fairness, but the effect for decision

Figure A6: Additional Analyses



Notes: Figure A6 shows the ATE of our age balance treatment on perceptions of procedural and substantive legitimacy by generation, policy issues, respondent parenthood, respondent gender, and respondent income. Results are limited to those who passed manipulation checks.

quality is not significant for any of the age groups.

Moving beyond our pre-registered hypotheses, we also conducted exploratory analyses to see if our findings vary by respondent parenthood, gender, and income levels. The results for these three factors are shown in the third, fourth, and fifth panels of Figure A6.

For parenthood, we find that age balance has a smaller effect on fair process for grandparents compared to parents and respondents without children, though this pattern seems more muted for decision quality and trust in the committee. For gender, we generally find larger effects for women compared to men, although the difference is only significant for fair process. Lastly, for income, we find significant differences for fair process and trust in the committee, with a higher impact of age balance among respondents with higher income levels.

3 Exploring Mechanisms

3.1 Analyzing Open-Ended Responses

As discussed in the main text, after respondents completed the vignette experiment, they were presented with a question asking whether they think younger politicians are better able to represent young people.

We also invited respondents to explain their answer in an open-ended follow-up question. To analyze these responses, we first drew two random samples of 500 responses: one from respondents who answered “yes” and one from those who answered “no.” Following our theoretical expectations, we developed coding schemes to categorize each response. We identified four categories for the “yes” responses: (i) shared life stage and experiences, (ii) greater attunement to contemporary and future concerns, (iii) energy and new ideas, and (iv) fairness and inclusion. For our “no” responses, we chose three possible categories: (i) concerns about younger politicians’ maturity and judgment, (ii) the perceived value of older politicians’ experience and wisdom, and (iii) the belief that age does not matter for representation.

We recruited four research assistants (RAs), assigning two to code the 500 “yes” responses and two for the 500 “no” responses. We asked our RAs to assign each response to one of the respective categories, but also said that they could instead code the response as “Other” if they did not feel it fit any of our predetermined categories. In cases where responses seemed to fit into more than one category, we asked RAs to choose the single category they felt best

fit the response. We also adjudicated any cases where the two coders did not agree.

The results are shown in Figure 4 in the main text. For our “yes” responses, we find the coders agreed 64.8% of the time, with a Cohen’s Kappa of 0.502 indicating moderate agreement. Disagreements seemed to largely stem between the top-two categories (“shared life stage and experiences” and “contemporary and future concerns”) and in cases of lengthier responses that could fit into more than one category, but the distribution of responses was similar across both RAs. For our “no” responses, the two RAs agreed 82.9% of the time, with a Cohen’s Kappa of 0.755 indicating substantial agreement. Again, disagreements largely focused on the top-two categories and lengthier responses. Finally, the “Other” category largely consisted of respondents who wrote nonsensical or off-topic responses.

The coding protocols provided to our RAs are summarized below.

3.2 Coding Protocol (Yes Responses)

In our survey, we asked respondents the following: “Do you think younger politicians are better at representing young people?” Then, in an open-ended follow-up question, we asked respondents to explain their reasoning (e.g., “Why or why not?”).

You have been assigned to the yes group: respondents who said “yes” to the first question and have now been asked to explain why. You will read a sample of 500 responses and assign one category to each response based on its main idea. Your goal is to choose the single best-fitting category from the list below, even if more than one might apply. Do your best to apply the same logic across all responses. If you change how you’re interpreting a category, skim back through earlier responses to check for consistency.

Categories:

1. Shared Life Stage and Experiences: Younger politicians understand young people because they share similar experiences, backgrounds, lifestyles, or generational context.
2. Contemporary and Future Concerns: Younger politicians are more aware of current issues or better positioned to plan for the future (technology, economy, social change, long-

term consequences).

3. Fairness and Inclusion: Support for youth descriptive representation as a matter of fairness, diversity, equity, or giving young people a voice.

4. Energy and Fresh Ideas: Younger politicians bring energy, creativity, innovation, or a fresh perspective.

5. Other: Responses that are irrelevant, nonsensical, vague, do not address the question, or do not fit into any of the above categories.

3.3 Coding Protocol (No Responses)

In our survey, we asked respondents the following: “Do you think younger politicians are better at representing young people?” Then, in an open-ended follow-up question, we asked respondents to explain their reasoning (e.g., “Why or why not?”).

You have been assigned to the no group: respondents who said “no” to the first question and have now been asked to explain why not. You will read a sample of 500 responses and assign one category to each response based on its main idea. Your goal is to choose the single best-fitting category from the list below, even if more than one might apply. Do your best to apply the same logic across all responses. If you change how you’re interpreting a category, skim back through earlier responses to check for consistency.

Categories:

1. Older Politicians Have Experience and Wisdom: Older politicians are seen as having more experience, knowledge, wisdom, or practical understanding of politics and life.

2. Younger Politicians Lack Maturity and Judgment: Younger politicians lack maturity, judgment, emotional stability, or life experience.

3. Age Doesn’t Matter: Age is irrelevant; representation depends on personal traits, qualifications, character, or policy positions—not age.

4. Other: Responses that are irrelevant, nonsensical, vague, do not address the question, or do not fit into any of the above categories.

4 Observational Evidence

As a complement to our experimental findings, we examine whether observational data on the age composition of U.S. state legislatures are consistent with the patterns identified in our experiment. While these analyses are correlational and cannot establish causality, they provide suggestive evidence that the legitimacy benefits of youth representation extend beyond our survey.

4.1 Data

The data on the age composition of state legislatures comes from the Young Elected Leaders Project (2024) and includes the ages for the near universe of elected state legislative officials from 2017 until 2024, with ages captured at the time of elections. The data on trust in state government comes from the 2022 and 2024 waves of the Cooperative Election Study (CES). Each wave includes the following question: “How much trust do you have in the government of the state where you live when it comes to handling the state’s problems?” Respondents could then select one of the following four options: “A great deal,” “A fair amount,” “Not very much”, or “None at all.” We dichotomize this measure by recording a one for respondents who answered “A great deal” or “A fair amount,” and zero otherwise. Summaries of responses by subgroups are shown in Table A12.

To merge the Young Elected Leaders Project (2024) data with the CES survey, we focus on the median ages of state legislatures at the time respondents answered the survey (i.e., following the most recent election). Overall median ages for state legislatures are shown in Figure A7.

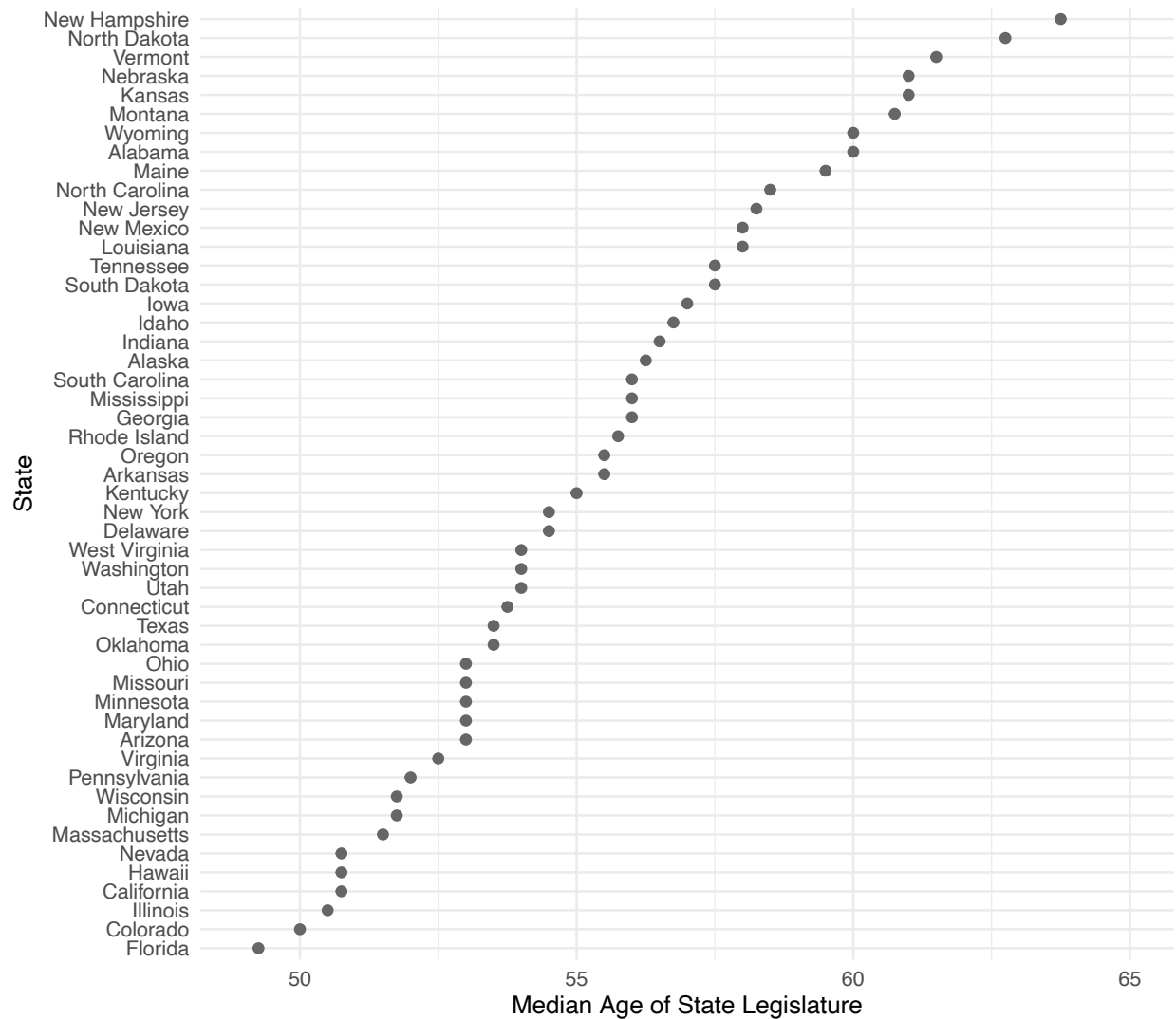
4.2 Trust in State Government

Table A12: Trust in State Government

	Mean	SD	N
All Respondents	0.511	0.500	100,188
Respondent Age			
Younger (18–34)	0.477	0.500	15,460
Middle-aged (35–64)	0.489	0.500	54,454
Older (65+)	0.569	0.495	30,274
Respondent Party			
Democrats	0.571	0.495	48,815
Republicans	0.490	0.500	37,969

4.3 Median Ages of State Legislatures

Figure A7: Median Ages of State Legislatures



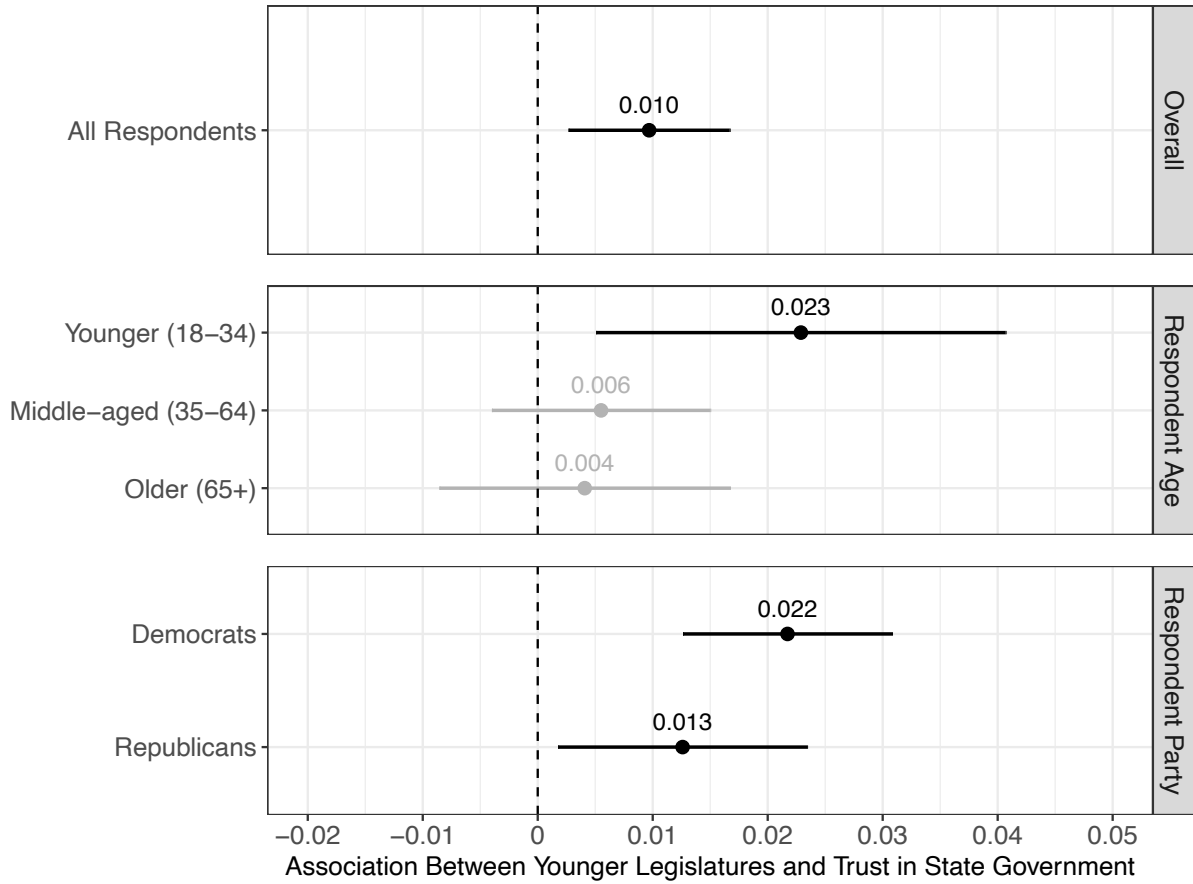
Notes: Figure shows the median ages of state legislatures (2017–2024). Data: Young Elected Leaders Project (2024).

4.4 Results

Figure A8 presents OLS estimates of the association between residing in a state with a younger legislature and trust in state government. We classify legislatures as “younger” if their median age is under 55 and “older” otherwise, and include three control variables. First, we control for the share of Democratic legislators, since partisan composition may be correlated with the age composition of state legislatures, and partisanship may independently shape trust in government. Second, we control for the share of female legislators, since prior work has shown that the descriptive representation of women affects perceptions of institutional legitimacy (Clayton et al. 2019), and the share of women may correlate with the share of young legislators. Third, we control for the Squire Index of Legislative Professionalism (Squire 2017), since less professionalized legislatures may tend to be older, and professionalism could independently affect public trust.

Consistent with our experimental findings, we find that respondents living in states with younger legislatures are significantly more likely to express trust in their state government. In line with the experimental results for H3 and H4, these associations are larger among younger adults and Democrats. By contrast, we find no significant associations among older adults, while Republicans show a smaller but significantly positive association. Formal interaction tests confirm that the association is significantly larger among younger respondents and Democrats.

Figure A8: Association Between Younger Legislatures and Public Trust in Government



Notes: OLS estimates of the association between living in a state with a younger legislature (median age under 55) and respondents' trust in their state government, controlling for the share of Democratic and female legislators and the Squire Index of Legislative Professionalism (Data: CES 2022–2024; Young Elected Leaders Project 2024).

5 Replication Study in the United Kingdom

To assess whether the experimental findings travel to a different political context, we conducted a replication of the U.S. survey experiment with respondents in the United Kingdom. The UK represents a useful test case because, similar to the United States, elected representatives tend to be older on average than the citizens they represent: the average age among local councillors is about 60 years, compared to about 40 years in the general population. At the same time, the UK differs institutionally and politically in important respects, including

its multiparty system and the structure of local political representation.

5.1 Sample and Fieldwork

The survey was fielded in March 2026 using Prolific, an online participant recruitment platform. Participants were directed from the Prolific platform to an external survey hosted via Qualtrics. A total of 1,315 respondents completed the survey. Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions in a between-subjects design. For the analyses presented here, we focus on the two conditions that did not include a specific policy decision outcome (mirroring the comparison of groups 9 and 10 in the U.S. experiment), allowing us to isolate the effects of the committee’s age composition on respondents’ perceptions of procedural fairness, expectations of decision quality, and institutional trust.

5.2 Experimental Design

The experimental design closely follows the structure of the U.S. study. Respondents viewed a short vignette describing a hypothetical committee responsible for making a recommendation on a policy issue. As in the U.S. experiment, the vignette included both text and visual representations of the committee members.

The key experimental manipulation concerns the age composition of the committee. Respondents were randomly assigned to view either an older committee, composed entirely of older representatives, or an age-balanced committee, composed of both older and younger representatives. In the older committee condition, all eight members were aged 60 or older (mean age approximately 73 years). In the age-balanced condition, four members were aged 60 or older and four were under the age of 40 (mean age approximately 53 years).

To construct the visual stimuli, we assembled profile photographs of actual elected representatives from publicly available sources. In contrast to the U.S. study, which used state legislators, the UK replication focuses on local councillors. While local councillors differ from state legislators in institutional role, they nonetheless represent locally elected officials with meaningful responsibilities in public decision-making. Following the approach used in

the U.S. experiment, we aimed to maintain visual realism by selecting photos with similar backgrounds and presentation styles. One contextual adjustment was made to the group composition: one member was depicted as a man of South Asian origin rather than the Black legislator included in the U.S. stimuli, reflecting differences in the demographic composition of elected representatives across the two contexts.

The textual description of the vignette was modified to reflect the institutional context of local politics in the United Kingdom. References to state legislators were replaced with local councillors, and the term “bipartisan” was replaced with the UK equivalent “cross-party.” Aside from these contextual adjustments, the overall structure and content of the vignette remained identical to the original U.S. experiment, allowing for a close comparison of results across the two political contexts.

The survey instrument closely mirrors the U.S. questionnaire. The wording of the outcome variables was kept identical to facilitate comparison across the two contexts. One adjustment concerns the measure of party support: the UK version included six response options reflecting the multiparty structure of British politics (Greens, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Conservatives, Reform UK, and none/prefer not to say). The attention check was also modified to reference Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak, prominent political figures in the UK context, to ensure that the prompt remained recognizable and contextually appropriate for UK participants.

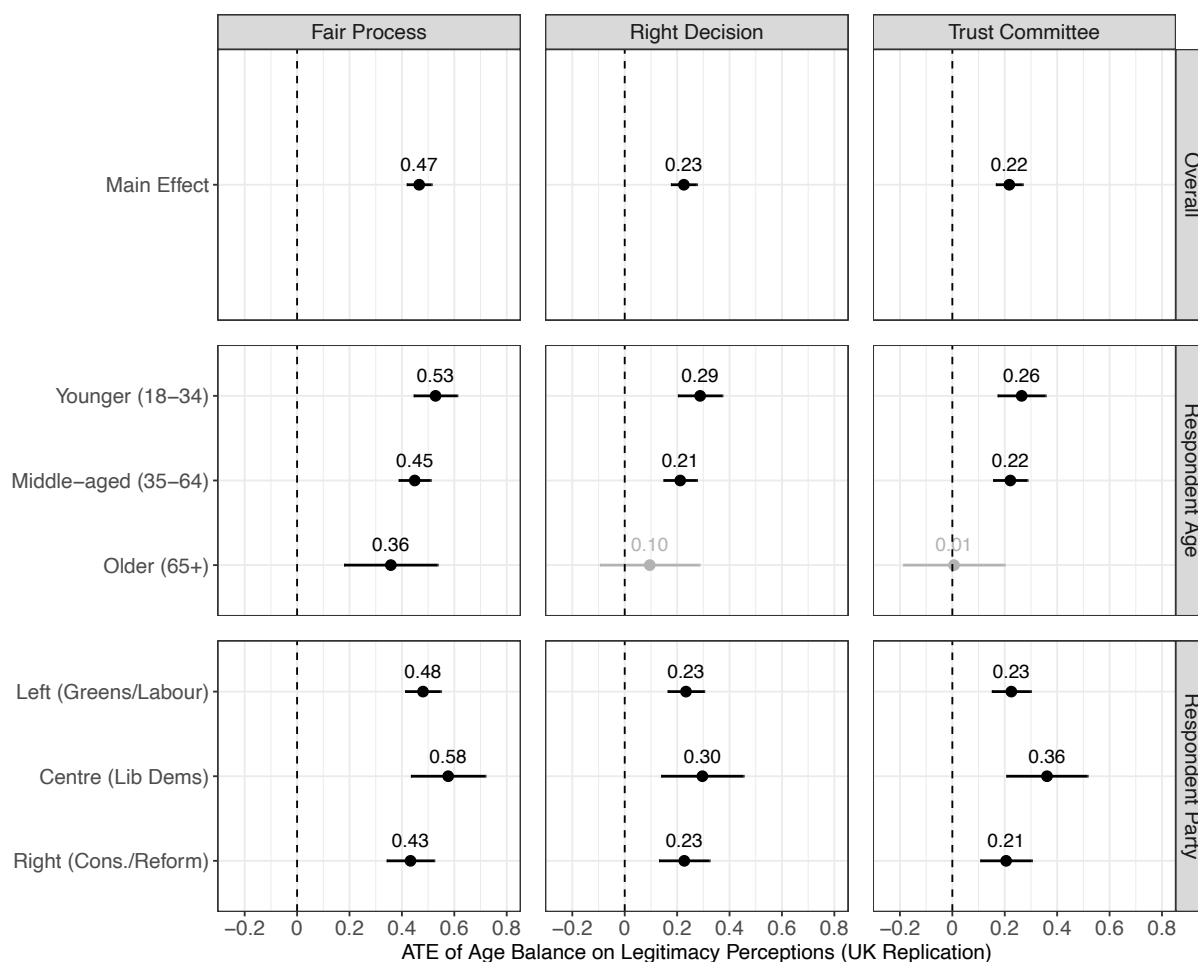
5.3 Results

A manipulation check confirms that respondents correctly understood the treatment. In the older committee condition, 95.8% correctly recalled that the committee consisted of older councillors, while in the age-balanced condition, 96.5% correctly recalled that the committee included both younger and older councillors. Randomization produced balanced treatment groups across observed covariates; a joint balance test predicting treatment assignment from pre-treatment covariates shows that the variables jointly do not predict treatment status

($F(5, 1293) = 1.21$, $p = 0.30$).

Figure A9 presents the results. The experimental manipulation produces strong and consistent effects across all three outcome variables. Respondents exposed to the age-balanced committee evaluate the decision-making process as significantly fairer (+47 percentage points, $p < 0.001$), express greater confidence that the committee will make the right decisions (+23 percentage points, $p < 0.001$), and report higher levels of trust in the committee (+22 percentage points, $p < 0.001$). Consistent with the U.S. experiment, these effects are largest among younger respondents (18–34): +53 percentage points for fairness, +29 for right decisions, and +26 for trust. Among older respondents (65+), the fairness effect remains significant (+36 percentage points, $p < 0.001$) but the effects on right decisions and trust are not distinguishable from zero. Across partisan groups—left (Greens/Labour), centre (Liberal Democrats), and right (Conservatives/Reform)—the effects are consistently positive and significant, though there is no strong ideological gradient, as might be expected in a multiparty system. These results are substantively unchanged when restricting the sample to respondents who both passed the attention check and correctly recalled the treatment ($N = 1,182$).

Figure A9: UK Replication: Effect of Age-Balanced Committee on Legitimacy Perceptions



Notes: Linear probability model estimates of the effect of exposure to an age-balanced committee (versus an older committee) on binary measures of perceived fairness, expectations of right decisions, and trust. The sample includes 1,315 respondents recruited via Prolific in March 2026. No specific policy decision was introduced. Subgroup analyses by respondent age (younger, middle-aged, older) and partisan orientation (left, centre, right).

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