

# Wisdom versus Creativity

## Which presidential candidate is wiser? Old John McCain or young Barack Obama?

You may already know whom you're voting for in the upcoming presidential election. Your decision may have been made based on your candidate's party, his platform, his background, or whether you just like him.

The election continues at a frantic pace as each candidate seeks to win over the undecided voters that will determine the election.

The stakes are high. Our economic woes, the cost of energy, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the emerging East, all threaten our position in the world.

Decisions made by the next president could possibly impact the United States for generations to come.

But how do we know who will make the best president, and what qualities should we be looking for. Both candidates appear to be smart and genuine in their convictions. We've been told by both candidates to ignore race.

Aside from their obvious party affiliations, there is one important difference between the candidates that merits a closer look: age.

The McCain camp highlights the experience of their seventy-two-year-old candidate while the forty-seven-year old Obama is billed as the candidate of change. Their respective critics point to Obama's lack of experience and McCain's antiquated thinking in a new world.

We tend to associate wisdom with age and creativity with youth, but do these generalizations hold water? Is wisdom acquired with age? Can you teach an old dog new tricks?

Believe it or not, these questions have been researched by psychologists and social scientists.

There is some truth to the adage that wisdom comes with age. Plato identified three types of wisdom. The first is a philosophical search for the truth, the second is search for scientific knowledge, and the third is the practical wisdom exhibited by statesmen and legislators. Implicit in the Platonic notion of

wisdom is that it is the result of search, which takes time, and thus develops with age.

Social scientists have identified a number of components of wisdom, including factual knowledge, procedural knowledge (how things work), perspective (the relative importance of life events, goals, and priorities), and intelligence; all but the last improve with age.

Wisdom, it seems, is harder to catch and quantify than a Leprechaun. We know that some of us have a better chance of becoming wise than others. It helps to have high intelligence, good character, and emotional health.

But there is no measurement of wisdom as there is for intelligence, which, it turns out, remains relatively constant throughout our life. You can't go to school for wisdom; it cannot be taught, but must be learned through personal search and experience.

In my informal study of wisdom, I asked friends and family whether they believed that they are currently the wisest they have ever been. Every respon-

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dent, no matter their age, indicated that "yes," they believed that they are currently the wisest they have ever been.

Take this self-test at home: Ask yourself: are you the wisest (not necessarily the smartest) you have ever been. I bet your answer is "yes," unless you are suffering from a significant illness or advanced age.

Interestingly, studies don't substantiate the theory that wisdom increases with age. One theory is that fluid thinking and cognitive ability decline with age, making older people less capable

and less confident in their abilities. We also become more entrenched in our ideas and less likely to accept new ways of thinking.

Darwin's theory of evolution was accepted much more readily by younger British scientists than older scientists, who stubbornly rejected his formulation.

Creativity, on the other hand, tends to be the province of the young. However, creative work cannot begin until one acquires the requisite knowledge from which to create.

Certain fields require greater amounts of baseline knowledge and therefore the creative process begins at a later age. Mozart composed his first symphony at age eight and had written forty works by the time he was thirty. J.D. Salinger was thirty-two when he wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*, his most significant and successful work.

Einstein was twenty-six when he introduced his theory of relativity in his "Annus Mirabilis Papers," and Abraham Lincoln was fifty-four when he introduced the "Emancipation Proclamation."

The quantity and quality of creative work tends to vary over a lifetime. Youthful creators tend to be much more productive, producing spontaneous "hot from the fire" works.

Middle age creators tend to sculpt their work, while mature creators produce works that involve observations observed over a life span in the form of memoirs, histories of their field, and textbooks.

Old artists are often inspired by issues of old age and death.

There are a number of theories as to why creativity declines with age. Creativity requires tolerance of ambiguity, perseverance, and openness to new experiences, all of which decline with age.

Older people are less willing to accept risk which is important in creative work where there is a higher chance of failure. Also, older people tend to be invested with their earlier accomplishments closing themselves off to ideas that would devalue their works.



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There may also be a tendency for older people to slow their rate of knowledge acquisition; they fail to keep up with changes in their field once they have mastered the knowledge of their day.

We see examples of wisdom and creativity in our presidential candidates. McCain certainly has the experience. But is he too old to accept novel solutions to new world challenges?

McCain readily admits that he's not so swift with technology and this new-fangled-thing called the Internet.

Although George W. Bush was only fifty-four when he took office (the same age Lincoln introduced the "Emancipation Proclamation," a wise and creative solution to the problems of the day), his relative youth was negated by his key advisors, Donald Rumsfeld, seventy-six, and Richard Cheney, sixty-seven, who cut their teeth during the Ford administration in the mid-seventies (remember the eight-track stereo, lava lamps, and aluminum foil on the TV antennae?).

Is Obama too inexperienced and impetuous? He certainly can't match McCain's statesmanship and military knowledge. Can his superior intelligence overcome his lack of experience?

Though not mutually exclusive, there does appear to be somewhat of an inverse relationship between wisdom and creativity. Unfortunately, our next president will need both.

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