

Does Political Power Lead to Premature Aging?

Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely: but it is common knowledge, or at least opinion, that it also ages. Men who achieve political power early in life turn middle-aged within a year or two, however youthful they may have appeared at the outset. Do they die earlier than they otherwise would?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to find a group with whom they can be relevantly compared. Some researchers had the clever idea of comparing the age at death of political leaders (presidents or heads of government) with the age at death of their unsuccessful opponents in elections who never achieved office. The results are reported in a recent edition of the *British Medical Journal*.

Previous research had found that U.S. presidents had the same life expectancy as the general population, but this could mean either that power had no effect on their life expectancy or that it curtailed it, since presidents tend to be drawn from a sub-group with a relatively high life expectancy.

The researchers (who were American) looked at the age at death of successful and unsuccessful election candidates in 17 countries. They assumed that opposing candidates, successful and unsuccessful, were drawn from the same stratum of society and therefore, but for success and failure in elections, would have had the same life expectancy. The longest records available are for Britain, from 1722 onwards, though the United States had data from the most elections. The ages at death of 279 successful candidates were compared with ages at death of 261 runners-up who never achieved office. Obviously, the researchers had to exclude those countries in which death was often the consequence of not winning an election.

The authors found that, allowing for life-expectancy at election, those who were successful and therefore achieved office had a reduced life span. They lived, on average, 2.7 years fewer than their unsuccessful opponents. Of course, one should not make the elementary mistake of supposing that a statistical association implies causation; but it is nonetheless tempting to say that power not only corrupts, it kills. It is not necessary to add that absolute power kills absolutely.

The authors admit to limitations to their study. First, of course, they examined the records of only a minority of countries. Japan, for example, was excluded. But it was also possible that successful candidates, being more determined to win, ignored health problems before election which would have made unsuccessful candidates withdraw. What, then, is being measured by the study is the will to power, not the health effects of power.

On the other hand, the deleterious effect of power on health might be underestimated in this study. After all, even unsuccessful candidates must have expended a lot of energy on the political process, nearly as much, or as much as, the successful candidates. Moreover, the party leader of an unsuccessful party wields a great deal of power in his own sphere. If the exercise of political power had a deleterious effect on health, one would expect even unsuccessful candidates to have a reduced life expectancy compared with similar people who do not seek power or office. If this were the case, political power would be even worse for the health of those who achieve it than this study suggests.

If the relationship between power and shortened life expectancy were causative, what could explain it? The authors do not speculate except to mention a general aging process. One subversive thought crossed my mind: leaders tend to be the object of greater than average medical attention. When one reads of the medical attention given to monarchs such as

Philip II of Spain, Charles II of England and Louis XIV of France, to say nothing of that given to George Washington, one is grateful to be powerless. Of course, things have changed completely since those days...

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