

Age of Least Resistance: Candidate Age and its Relation to Election Results

Undergraduate Research Thesis

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by

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Abstract

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Congressmembers in the United States have a higher age on average than the general public. Questions of accurate representation of youth in government swarm, and many older candidates face criticism. More young politicians are entering the world of candidacy and must defend their age and experience levels against more established politicians, while older politicians are tasked with defending their ability to perform their duties. This research examines the relationship, or lack thereof, between a candidate's age and their success in their election. Through observational analysis of the (limited) available data, I find that the age of a candidate has little significant correlation with the outcome of an election—whether that be if a candidate wins or loses, or how much they lose by. Some significant correlation is found between winning an election and a candidate's age within certain parties, but the question leaves much to be considered.

Introduction

With a relatively large older population and a new generation of voters coming of age, there is a wide range of eligible voters and age demographics in today's political scene. To match this, more young politicians are entering the world of candidacy and must defend their age and experience levels against older and more established politicians. Prior studies have suggested that "a candidate's age can and does act as a voting heuristic" and that "members of the electorate prefer to vote for co-partisan candidates who are closest to themselves in age" (Webster & Pierce). Despite this, little research has been done on the impact of a candidate's age on how they are received in an election, especially compared to other demographics.

This work examines the age, education level, gender, race, and incumbency of many candidates and elected officials in an observational analysis of elections in Canada and the United States. These variables are selected in order to look at age as a factor in election results, as well as variables that may interact with age or confound the results. For each of these variables, the null hypotheses are that there is no significant difference in the results of an election between candidates as the variable changes. The alternative hypotheses would be that there is a significant difference in the outcome of an election between candidates as we change the variable(s), in one direction or another (or both). This could occur if higher ages are associated with worse election outcomes, and/or if lower ages are associated with worse election outcomes. This analysis opens the door to a possibility of a curvilinear relationship that is not easily translated in linear regressions, with ageism affecting candidates on both sides of the median. Future research could further develop and visualize this possibility.

Within the Canadian data, we analyze the relationship of candidate age on winning federal level elections as well as the size of the result trails for those who lose. For the American

data, we analyze the relationship of candidate age on winning elections in governors' races, US Senate races, and US House races. Though data including age in candidate demographics is limited, this scope will give us a broad understanding of how age interacts with election results, as well as allow us to compare results between two different political landscapes.

I believe that this research, as well as whatever may follow it, can have a significant impact on how we understand campaign politics and voter perceptions. There is little information on how the age of a candidate itself impacts voter perceptions and election results, and even less data that includes candidate ages. By pursuing this analysis, campaigns may be able to take our findings into account when crafting their messaging and public image, and candidates may be encouraged to run for office in spite of questions of their age. Particularly following the recent upheaval in the 2024 US Presidential election caused by President Biden stepping out of the race, it is vital to consider how perceptions of age play a role in our political systems. I hope that this work will be a first step in doing so.

Literature Review

Many studies have sought to answer neighboring questions to my own, and have built a foundation for our understanding of the role age plays in politics. Prior work has suggested that “a candidate’s age can and does act as a voting heuristic” and that “members of the electorate prefer to vote for co-partisan candidates who are closest to themselves in age” (Webster & Pierce, 2019). Similarity between voters and their candidates has the potential to sway perceptions, and while it is not addressed in this work, it may be taken into consideration in future research.

Another important consideration is how other variables interact with age to create results. For example, age preferences may change considerably depending on the candidate's gender. Some work has been done specifically examining how voters' age and other demographic variables impact voting for female candidates. One study finds a significant *interaction* between gender and voter age, but not broader significance in the differences (Flannelly, 2002); furthermore, this analysis examines the impact of the voters' age on their perception of female candidates, rather than voters' perception of different aged female candidates. This research attempts to examine this combination of factors, looking for a relationship between the gender and age of the candidate with their success in an election.

Another study found that voters' "intention to vote for female candidates consistently decreased with candidates' age", as well as that "perceived attractiveness and warmth" accounted for some of this trend (Shen & Shoda, 2021). Apart from gender, attractiveness has shown to be an impactful factor on perceptions of a candidate itself (Efrain & Patterson, 1974; Hoegg & Lewis, 2011; Marcinkowski, Lünich, & Starke, 2018; Milazzo & Mattes, 2016). Attraction certainly has the potential to change based on the subject's age, and thus this interaction holds a place in answering these questions as well. Candidate attractiveness is not measured in this analysis, but could be measured or controlled for in future research.

Some research has been done specifically regarding perceptions of candidates based on age. It is still a young topic, but there are suggestions that different levels of public office and varied contexts may change how age is viewed. One study of candidate age in the 2008 presidential election found that voters were more likely to view John McCain as "too old to be president" than Barack Obama as "too young to be president", and showed that perceptions of candidate age were significantly associated with evaluations of the candidate on both sides

(Kenski & Jamieson, 2010). Given the events of the 2024 presidential election, in which President Joe Biden especially faced criticism from all fronts related to perceptions of being too old to be president, this line of questioning certainly has a strong future in research and must be heartily considered.

However, other research suggests that the opposite problem exists as well. One study examines the difficulties that non-middle-aged candidates face, particularly within access to individual resources, and details the age-related disadvantages that young candidates face in election campaigns (Belschner, 2024). This work, alone and in combination with other research, shows that age extremes on either side of middle-aged candidates face difficulties in campaigns, and voter perceptions of their age could make things more difficult to work past. This contributes to the idea of middle-aged candidates being at the age of least resistance – there are fewer structural and perceived barriers for them than candidates on either end of age extremes. The primary goal of this work is to attempt to identify whether and where this exists, and future research should consider this in developing further questions.

This research seeks to fill a gap in analyzing the relationship of the political candidate's age with their success in an election. While there is much research on the relationship of voters' age to their decisions in selecting a candidate, there is more to learn about the role of the candidate's age itself. This paper aims to build on current knowledge of the interaction between age and other demographic and identity variables, and analyze whether age alone or in combination with other factors does, in fact, correlate with the outcome of an election. The following analysis compares outcomes in Canada and the United States, and attempts to account for the variety of outside factors which could work with age or outside of it to create effects on election results. Within the context of current literature, this work aims to open up new questions

and paths of research in examining the relationship between candidate age, voter perceptions, and election outcomes.

Methods

I used two data sets for this analysis. The first is Canadian data on federal election candidates, spanning federal elections from 2008 to 2019. This data allows for analysis of wins and losses, as well as the extent of losses through the difference in votes received between the winner and the loser in question (this will be referred to as result trails or loss trails). The second set is data from the United States, compiled by Daily Kos, and includes races for governor, the US Senate, and the US House of Representatives. This data does not include vote percentages or differences, so it is used solely to analyze the wins and losses. For both of these data sets, I use linear probability models and scatter plots with lines of best fit to display the trends shown in the regression analysis. To compare Canadian electoral data with general population demographics, particularly education, I used official census data from Statistic Canada. In the regressions, significance is noted at the 0.1, 0.05, and 0.001 levels. All analysis and visualization is completed through the program R.

Results

Beginning with the analysis of candidates in Canadian federal elections, the results in [Table 1](#) show that there is little statistical significance in the relationship between the demographic variables and the outcome of the election. Running in the Green Party shows significant results in *increasing* the trail among those who lose their election ([0.196 coefficient at \$p < 0.01\$](#)). Running as an incumbent also shows significant results in *decreasing* the trail among

those who lose their elections ([-0.211 coefficient at \$p < 0.01\$](#)). Neither of these has any significant interaction with age, and age itself nor interacting with any other variable shows any significant relationship with the result trails in this context.

Similarly shown in [Table 2](#), running as an incumbent or in certain parties shows some significant relationship with the outcome of winning the election as well. Those running in the Green Party have a significant negative association with winning ([-0.336 coefficient at \$p < 0.01\$](#)), whereas running as an incumbent shows a positive association with winning ([0.494 coefficient at \$p < 0.01\$](#)). These, again, are taken alone and are not interacting with age.

Notably, however, the interaction between age and those running in the Conservative Party show a significant association with winning in the negative direction, as seen in [Table 2](#) ([0.004 coefficient at \$p < 0.1\$](#)). Though not a game-changing margin by any means, this level of significance shows that an increase of age does bear a small relationship to the end-result of a win for those running within the Conservative Party. With each year increase in age within candidates in the Conservative Party the constant increases by this small margin, showing a positive relationship between an increase in age in this party and the outcome of winning.

The US data does not allow for analysis of result trails, but there are still observations to be made regarding the relationship between candidate age and winning elections. At the governor level shown in [Table 3](#), no significance is shown between any of the demographic variables – interestingly, including age or incumbency. (It should be noted that the sample size for governor races in this data is significantly smaller than the other data used in this analysis – this must be kept in mind while comparing results.)

In the US Senate elections shown in [Table 4](#), only one variable shows a significant relationship to winning elections: gender. The analysis shows that female candidates have a

negative relationship with winning their elections ([-1.496 coefficient at \$p < 0.1\$](#)). Again, age does not show any significant impact at this level, alone or interacting with other variables.

Offering the most significant results back is the analysis on US House elections displayed in [Table 5](#). Candidates running in the Republican Party, not interacting with age, are shown to have a positive association with winning ([0.442 coefficient at \$p < 0.01\$](#)). Incumbents, also not interacting with age, are shown to have a positive association with winning ([0.370 coefficient at \$p < 0.05\$](#)). Most notably for the purposes of this project, however, is the interaction between age and members of the Republican party. Despite a positive association between Republican candidates and winning, the analysis shows a negative association on winning an election ([-0.005 coefficient at \$p < 0.05\$](#)). This displays a negative relationship between an increase in age in Republican candidates and a winning outcome. With a one-year increase in age for candidates in the Republican Party the constant decreases by a small margin, showing a negative relationship between an increase of age in this party and the outcome of winning.

In analyzing the general population's education levels in Canada with the relevant Canadian election data, I found a slight negative relationship between the interaction of candidate age and moderate education levels with winning election outcomes as displayed in [Table 6](#) ([-0.0003 coefficient at \$p < 0.05\$](#)). This indicates that, in districts with some college as the predominant level of education, the outcome of winning an election decreases very slightly as a candidate's age increases. Neither other education level (high school or less and BA or more) held any significance in this relationship with age and election outcome. This finding could provide an interesting basis for future research on how voters of varying education levels perceive the age of political candidates.

Discussion

The results of this analysis do not show strong evidence of a significant relationship between a candidate's age and the results of their election. Several other variables without the interaction of candidate age held a significant relationship with the likelihood of a candidate winning, or the margins by which they lost. However, age by itself had no significant relationship with winning or loss trails, nor did age interacting with most of the other variables examined. This is in contrast with many prior works on the subject – no statistically significant relationship between age and gender to election outcome was found, nor was age itself found to have a generally significant relationship to election outcome. Rather, this study primarily showed a lack of relationship between age and election outcome.

The instances in which we see age having a significant impact on these results are when interacting with parties. In Canada, we find age interacting with the Conservative party to create an association of 0.004 with winning an election, significant at the 0.1 level. Therefore, as age increases by one year, the probability of a Conservative candidate winning their election increases by 0.004 times. In the United States, we find age interacting with the Republican party to create an association of -0.005 with winning an election for the House of Representatives, significant at the 0.05 level. In this situation, as age increases by one year, the probability of a Republican candidate winning their election decreases by 0.005 times.

The broad takeaway from this analysis is that a candidate's age is not a significant or reliable indicator of how successful they will be in their election. Though candidate's running in their country's more right-wing party may take age into consideration, the effects of their age on the outcome of their election are likely marginal at best. Based on this information, candidates

should not be discouraged or dissuaded from running because they fear their age will be a barrier. It should be noted that some of these results are apparently opposite depending on their country: significant age interaction in Canada shows a positive association with increasing age and winning when the candidate is a member of the right-wing party, whereas the significant age interaction in the US shows a negative association with increasing age and winning when the candidate is a member of the right-wing party. These differences between nations should be discussed and observed further, as it might offer valuable insight to the differing operations and social norms between the two countries' political landscapes.

These results have implications for potential candidates and campaigns building a strategy. Candidates of all ages may feel more emboldened to run for office, which has the potential to improve representation across age groups in election processes and government. The campaign itself can use this to inform their messaging and presentation of the candidate. With this information, a strategy may deemphasize issues of age and possible questions that come with it—whether that be qualifications, competency, naivete, weakness, or otherwise. More attention can be focused on addressing variables that have more of a relationship, such as emphasizing an incumbent's experience, or emphasizing experience and building familiarity with a non-incumbent. Hopefully, taking some focus off of a candidate's age can allow campaigns to return to the issues and hone in on the most important elements of the candidate's work.

It is essential to acknowledge the imperfections in my use of this data. In joining the election outcomes with census data, demographic information did not match at the smallest geographic level; rather, the joined data had to be broadened to the provincial scope. This, unfortunately, limits the specificity of matching that I am able to achieve in this work. Moreover, due to inconsistencies within the available Canadian census data, this analysis used

information from the 2016 Canadian Census to compare to Canadian election results from 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2019. This, again, creates greater uncertainty in the accuracy of these regressions, but was necessary at this point to analyze each desired demographic.

Another further limitation is the availability of data that contains age information on political candidates at all. Despite the significance of the question of age's role in politics, very few data exist that include ages of political candidates or elected officials. Many datasets included information on candidates and election results, but excluded any information on the candidates' age. Even the American data used in this project, though including age, did not include election results past winners, which limited the analysis that could be done. Future data collection might aim to include age more commonly to improve our understanding of the role of age in politics. Continued data collection may also look to include relevant demographic data of candidates in primary elections, which would allow for control of party effects on results and situate our understanding of age on a more consistent stage.

Due to the limited nature of relevant data, there is much room for future research to continue on. As an observational analysis, one shortcoming is that we are only able to analyze elections that have happened and candidates who made it to Election Night. This, then, cannot explain how perceptions of a candidate's age impact the likelihood of an individual running for office in the first place – or, perhaps, the ability to *stay* in an election when questions related to age are ubiquitous in the public, media, and even party leadership. Certain age factors could encourage or discourage individuals from starting a campaign at all, or prohibit them from ultimately making it on the ballot if they do attempt a campaign. To account for these factors, further research examining these phenomena outside of documented votes could open up new understandings in the field.

On a similar note, this data does not allow us to fully understand voter perceptions of candidates based on their age. While we can speculate on what perceptions may exist or contribute to election outcomes, this analysis of election data does not offer insight into how the populace sees and assesses candidates of different ages. Possible future research could incorporate an experimental survey in which participants are shown images of potential candidates, aged up or down, and asked to select words that describe how they view each candidate's leadership qualities (e.g. strong/weak, understanding/disconnected, energetic/passive, capable/unprepared, etc.) and whether they would trust that candidate to represent them. Such a survey would build on existing survey research on the role of age and other demographic variables on perceptions of candidates (Campbell & Cowley, 2014) by examining the attitudes and presumptions underlying those effects. This would also allow to further control for extenuating political circumstances and observe possible interactions between age, gender, race, and more in voter perceptions, and could help better understand constituent attitudes toward age within our government and as an aspect of identity.

Conclusion

This analysis serves as a starting point for what I believe to be a promising niche of political campaign research. At this stage and through these methods, there was shown to be little significance of the impact of the age of political candidates on the outcomes of their elections. This may serve as a relief to some candidates and campaigns, as it may open doors for a broader range of candidates to get involved or stay involved in running for office. The lack of significant and influential relationships between age and election success may allow campaigns to hone their focus on issues more valuable to them, and minimize valuable time and attention going to

curating an image related to the candidate's age or age-related qualities. If we are able to continue producing and sharing knowledge that age is rarely significant, especially at any consequential level to end results, age demographics in our political offices may become more diverse and truly representative of the ages of constituents.

That being said, some significance was noted – this included opposite trends for comparable interacting variables between Canada and the United States. Each country showed small, significant associations between increasing age within their more right-wing political party and winning elections, and that cannot be ignored. These differences may lead to deepened understandings of how age is approached across different cultures, as well as different political strategies depending on where a campaign is based. Within each country, it offers further insight into what qualities may help or hurt, even at marginal levels. Different qualities, depending on party membership, may be emphasized or countered to avoid possible age-related impacts.

Beyond this, there are many gaps in this niche to be filled. Both in the collection of data and in the analysis following it, there is much to do. Going forward, researchers will have the opportunity to consider age as a valuable demographic characteristic to include in their own work. We can increase our understanding of how society views different ages, both in and out of the political world. Future studies can control for more variables and take an experimental approach to get to the core of voter perceptions of candidate age. The opportunities are boundless, and there is real change to come of it in campaign and political work.

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Tables

Table 1

Table 1: Age and Associated Variables with Result Trails in Canadian Federal Elections

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	trail
age	-0.001 (0.002)
partyConservative	-0.018 (0.048)
partyGreen	0.196*** (0.059)
partyLiberal	0.008 (0.049)
partyNDP	0.087* (0.047)
incumbent	-0.211*** (0.031)
raceIndigRacialized	-0.037 (0.085)
age:partyConservative	-0.0001 (0.001)
age:partyGreen	-0.0002 (0.001)
age:partyLiberal	0.0001 (0.001)
age:partyNDP	-0.0005 (0.001)
age:gender	-0.0004 (0.001)
age:incumbent	0.001 (0.001)
age:raceIndigNot known	-0.002 (0.004)
age:raceIndigRacialized	0.001 (0.002)
age:raceIndigWhite	0.001 (0.002)
Constant	0.227** (0.090)
3	
Observations	2,843
R ²	0.329
Adjusted R ²	0.325
Residual Std. Error	0.159 (df = 2822)

Table 2

Table 2: Age and Associated Variables with Winning in Canadian Federal Elections

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	winner	
age	-0.004	(0.005)
partyConservative	-0.059	(0.127)
partyGreen	-0.336**	(0.156)
partyLiberal	-0.044	(0.128)
partyNDP	-0.195	(0.124)
incumbent	0.494***	(0.080)
raceIndigRacialized	-0.007	(0.225)
age:partyConservative	0.004*	(0.002)
age:partyGreen	0.004	(0.003)
age:partyLiberal	0.003	(0.003)
age:partyNDP	0.004	(0.002)
age:gender	-0.001	(0.001)
age:incumbent	-0.001	(0.002)
age:raceIndigNot known	0.006	(0.010)
age:raceIndigRacialized	-0.0003	(0.005)
age:raceIndigWhite	0.0003	(0.004)
Constant	-0.605**	(0.238)
Observations	4	2,843
R ²		0.257
Adjusted R ²		0.252
Residual Std. Error		0.416 (df = 2822)

Table 3

Table 3: Age and Associated Variables with Winning in US Governors' Elections

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	winner
age	0.019 (0.026)
partyRep	1.462 (1.790)
gender	0.159 (0.709)
incumbent	-0.036 (1.554)
raceWhite	0.372 (0.457)
age:partyRep	-0.018 (0.029)
age:gender	
age:incumbent	0.008 (0.026)
age:raceWhite	
Constant	-1.252 (1.781)
Observations	16
R ²	0.691
Adjusted R ²	0.421
Residual Std. Error	0.364 (df = 8)
F Statistic	2.555 (df = 7; 8)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 4

Table 4: Age and Associated Variables with Winning in US Senate Elections

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	winner
age	0.008 (0.012)
partyRep	-1.195 (1.001)
gender	-1.496* (0.852)
incumbent	1.321 (1.066)
raceRacialized	0.097 (1.189)
raceWhite	-0.166 (0.511)
age:partyRep	0.018 (0.016)
age:gender	0.022 (0.014)
age:incumbent	-0.016 (0.018)
age:raceRacialized	-0.007 (0.022)
age:raceWhite	
Constant	0.265 (0.778)
Observations	54
R ²	0.373
Adjusted R ²	0.228
Residual Std. Error	0.428 (df = 43)
F Statistic	2.561** (df = 10; 43)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5

Table 5: Age and Associated Variables with Winning in US House Elections

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	winner
age	0.004 (0.003)
partyRep	0.442*** (0.136)
gender	-0.071 (0.125)
incumbent	0.370** (0.146)
raceIndig	1.181* (0.605)
raceRacialized	0.727** (0.298)
raceWhite	0.605** (0.267)
age:partyRep	-0.005** (0.002)
age:gender	0.001 (0.002)
age:incumbent	0.001 (0.003)
age:raceIndig	-0.007 (0.010)
age:raceRacialized	-0.001 (0.002)
age:raceWhite	
Constant	-0.368 (0.322)
Observations	450
R ²	0.348
Adjusted R ²	0.330
Residual Std. Error	0.264 (df = 437)
F Statistic	19.447*** (df = 12; 437)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 6

Age and Population Education on Election Outcomes in Canadian Federal Elections

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
winner	
age	0.008** (0.003)
hs_or_less	0.002 (0.004)
some_college	0.009 (0.007)
ba_or_more	
age:hs_or_less	-0.00003 (0.0001)
age:some_college	-0.0003** (0.0001)
age:ba_or_more	
Constant	0.007 (0.153)
Observations	2,843
R ²	0.013
Adjusted R ²	0.011
Residual Std. Error	0.479 (df = 2837)
F Statistic	7.439*** (df = 5; 2837)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figures

Fig. 1

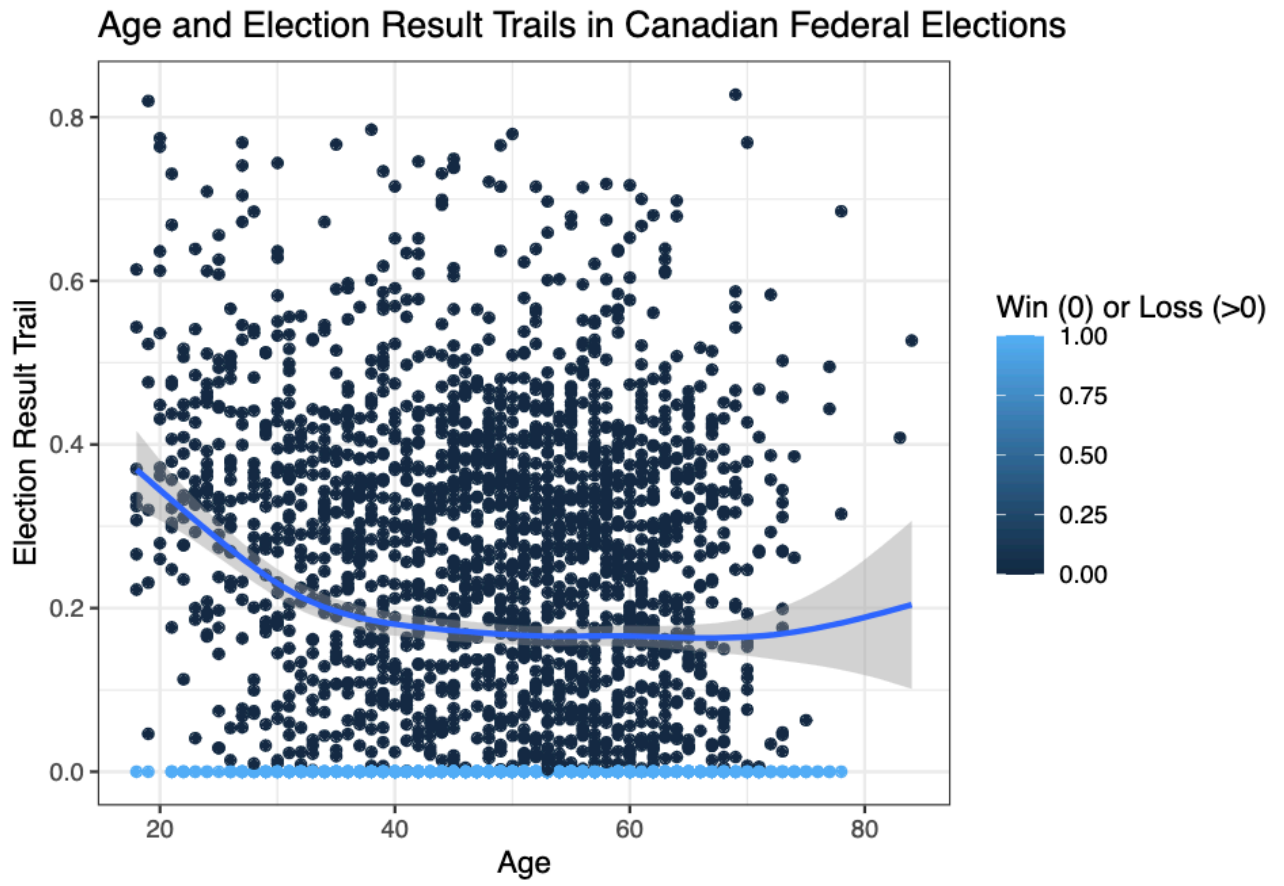


Fig. 2

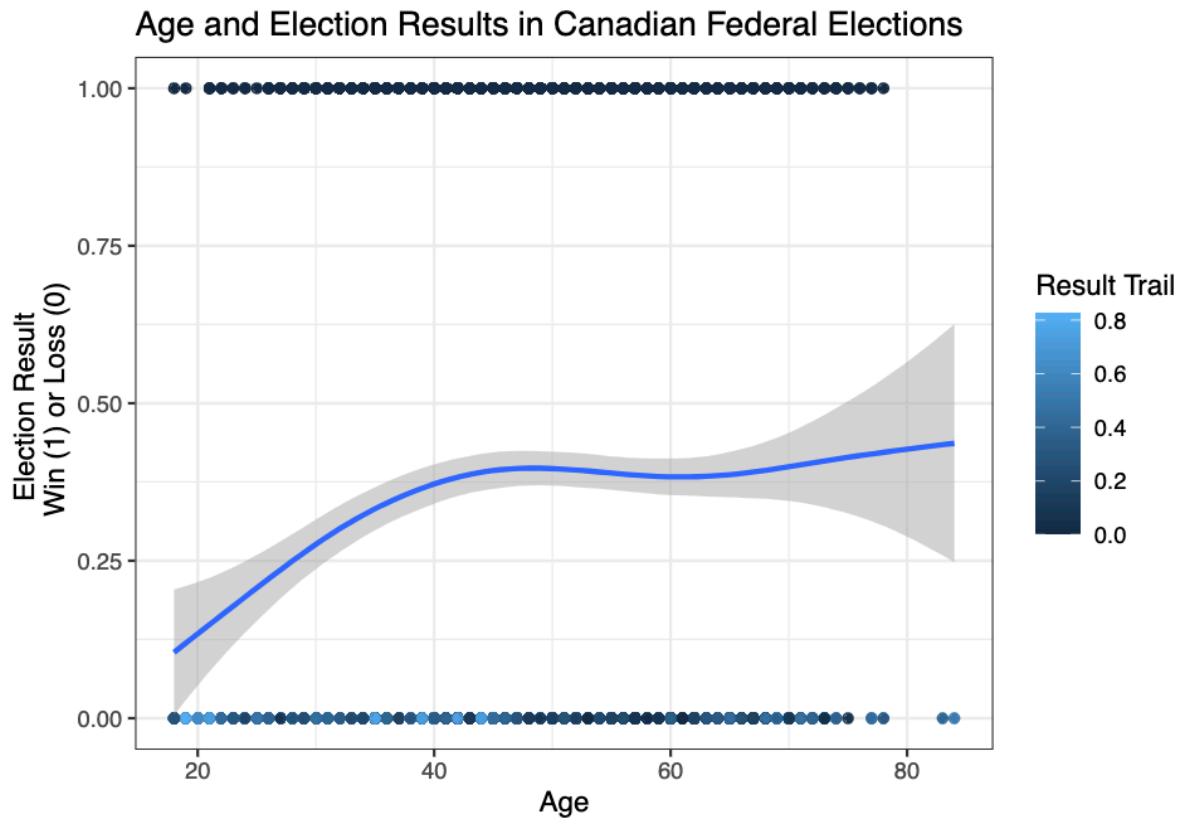


Fig. 3

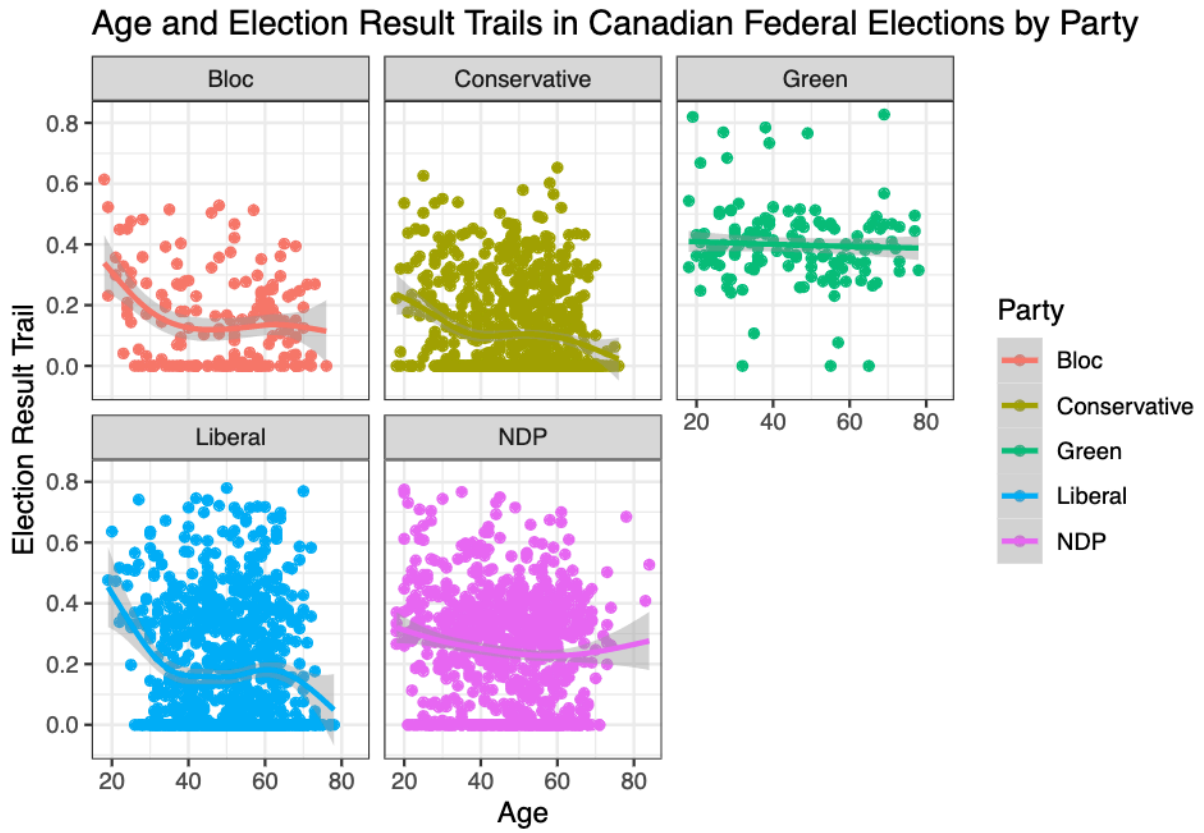


Fig. 4

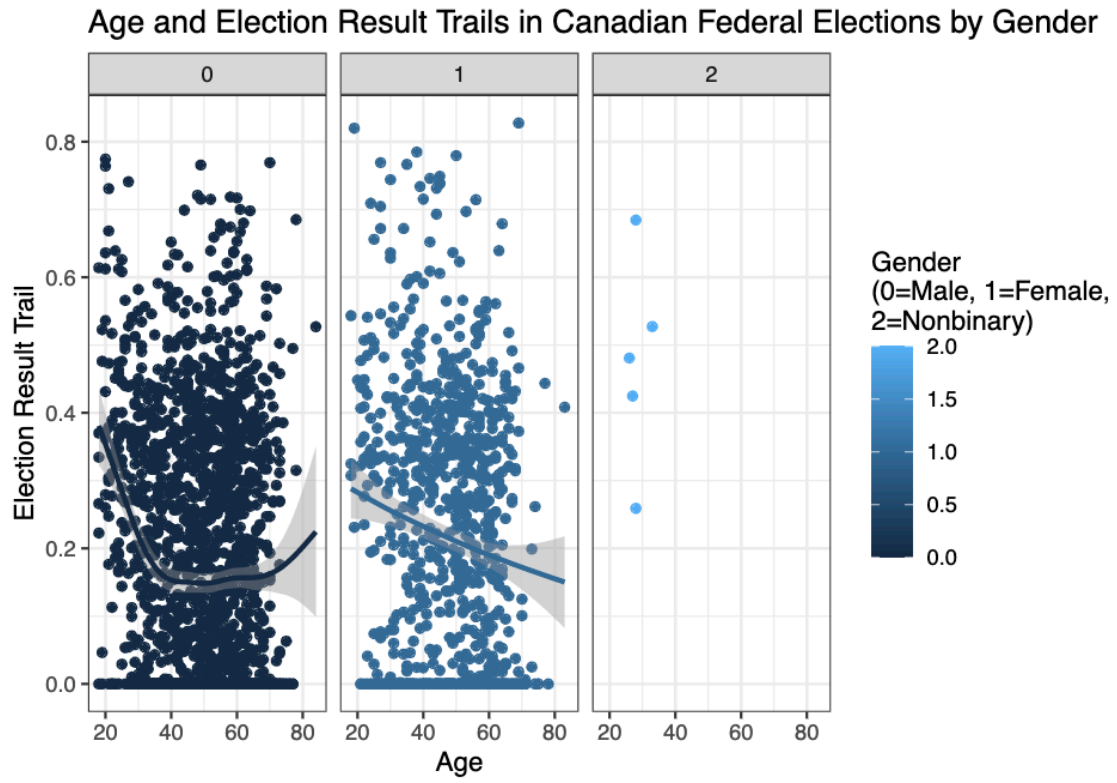


Fig. 5

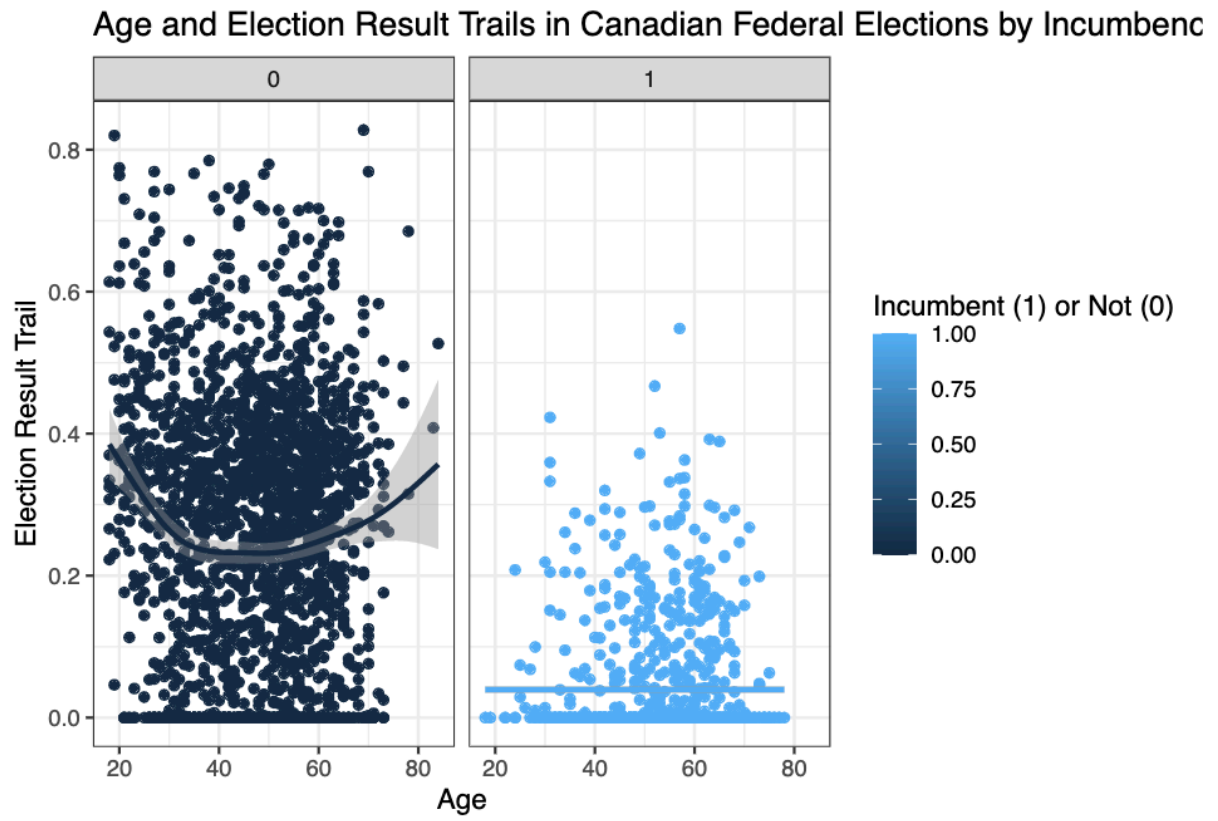


Fig. 6

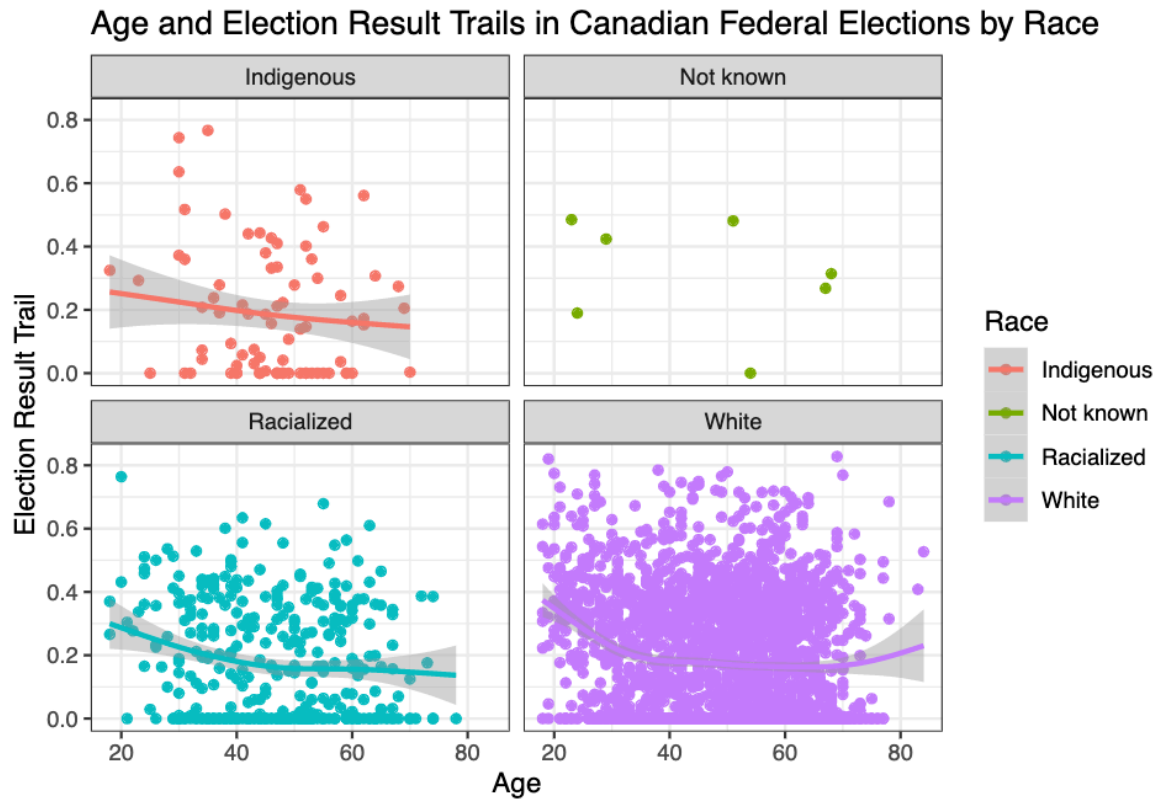


Fig. 7

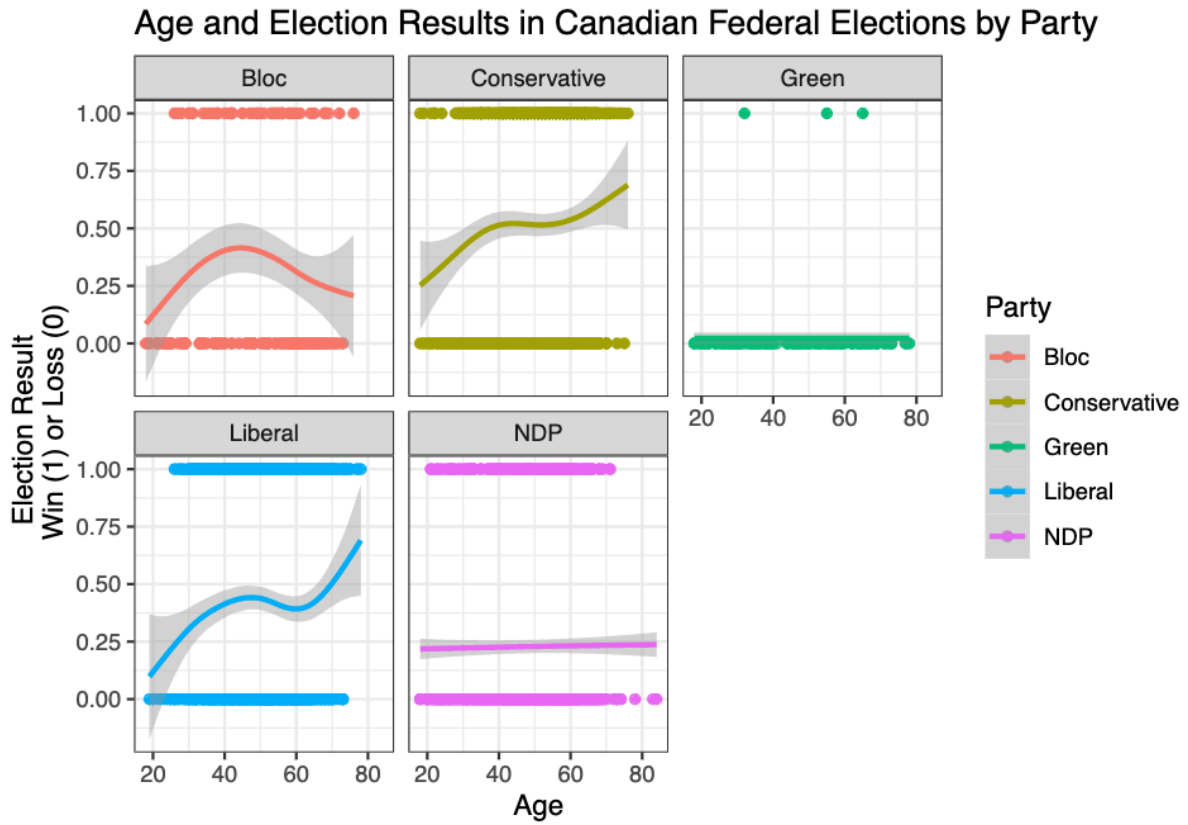


Fig. 8

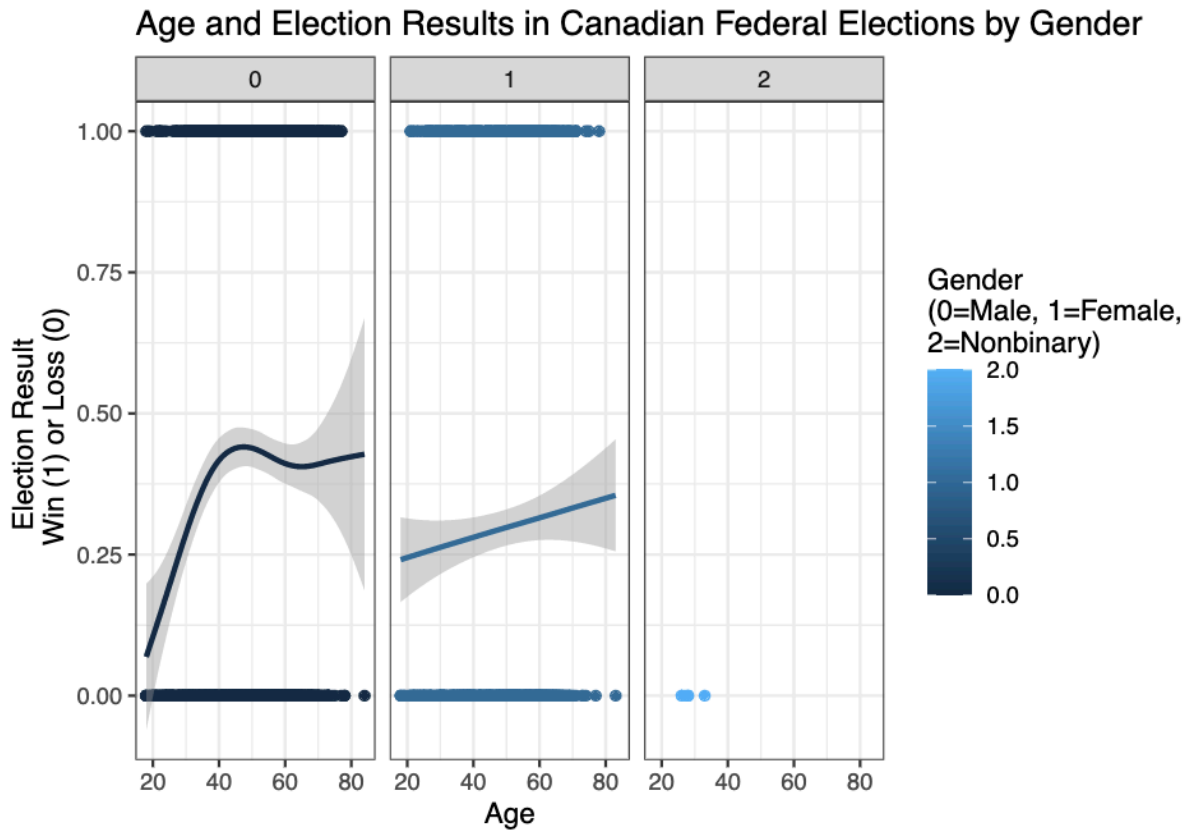


Fig. 9

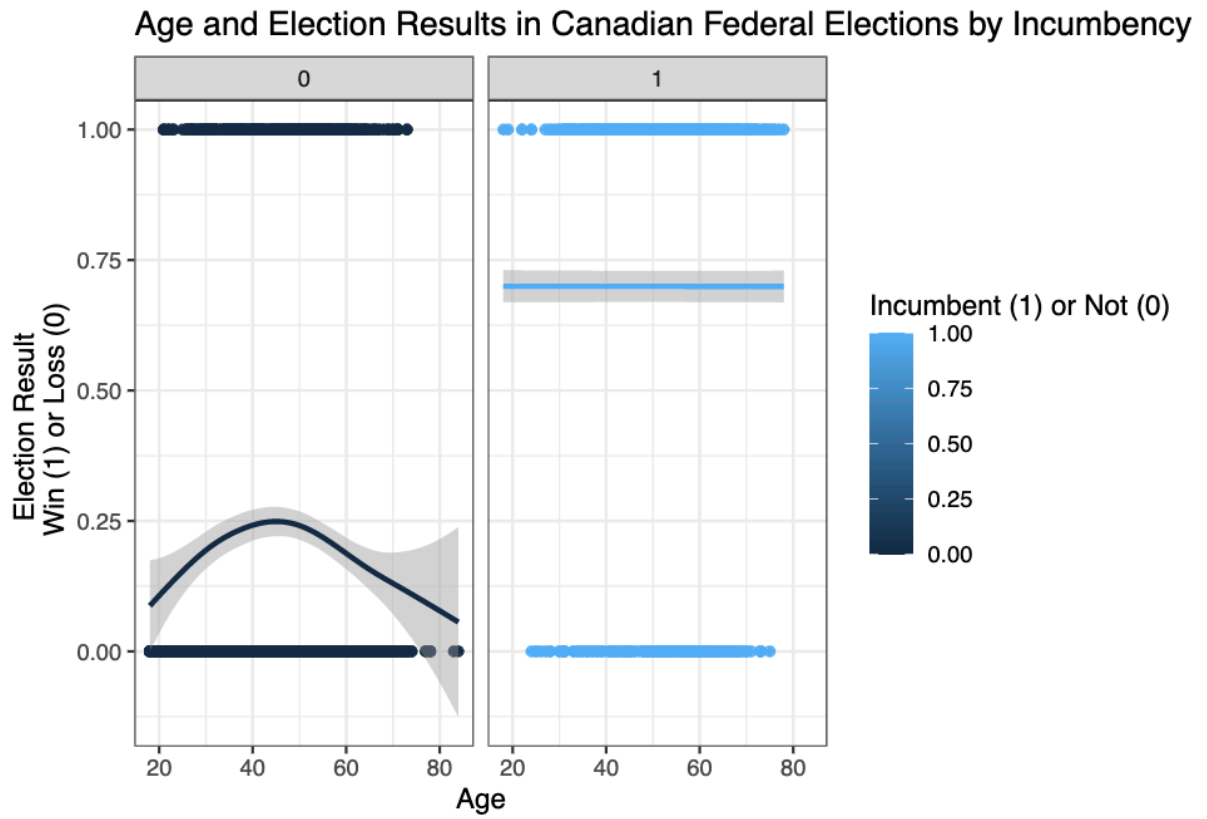


Fig. 10

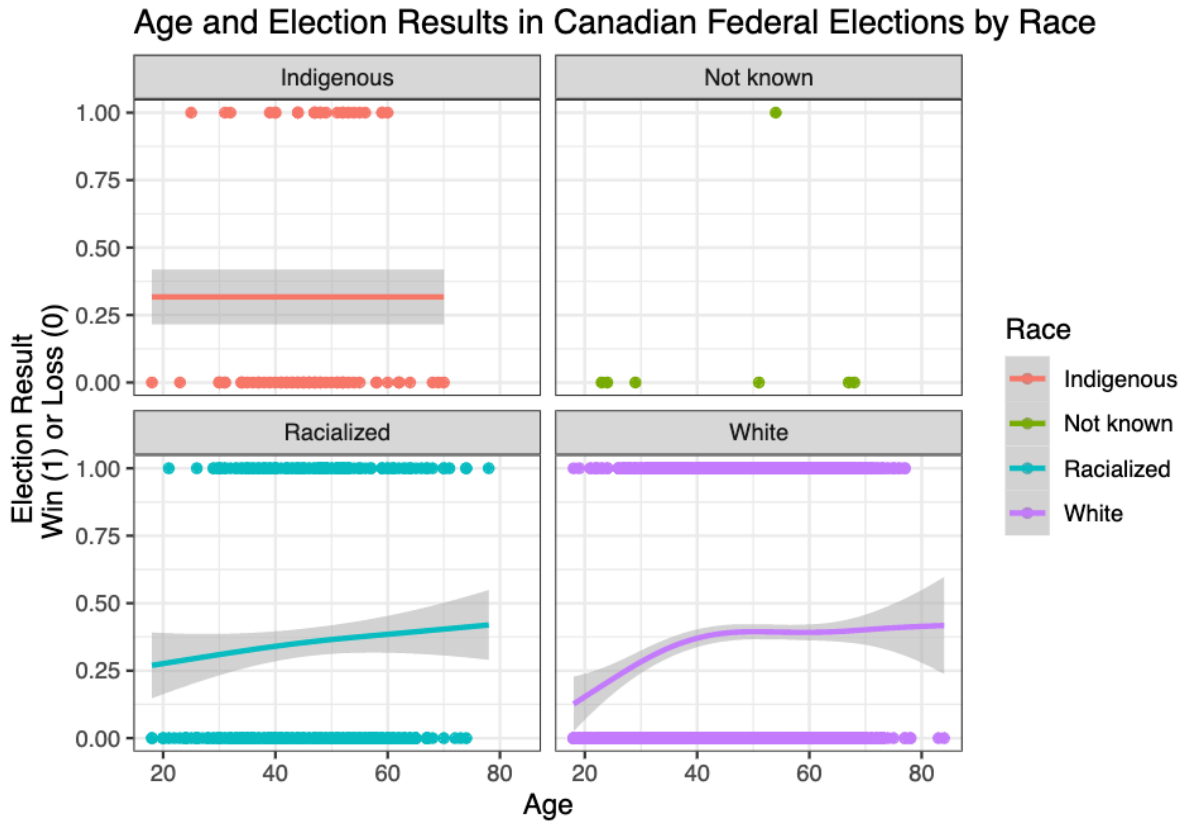


Fig. 11 (Canadian Federal Elections)

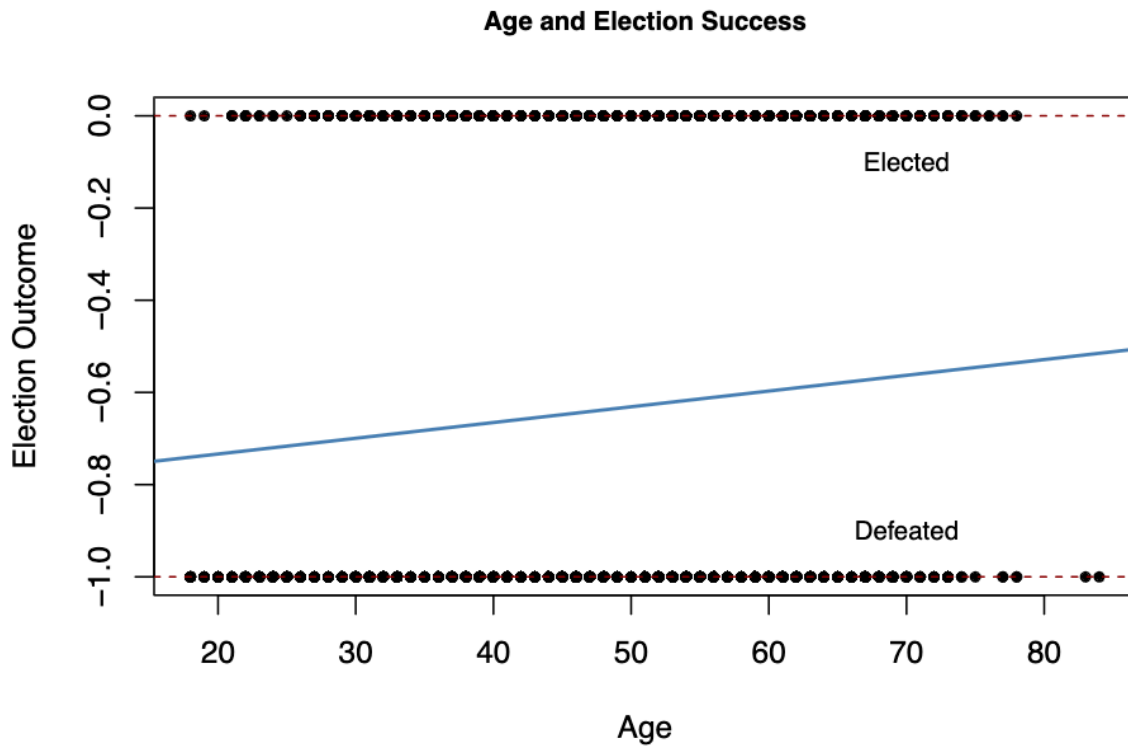


Fig. 12 (Canadian Federal Elections)

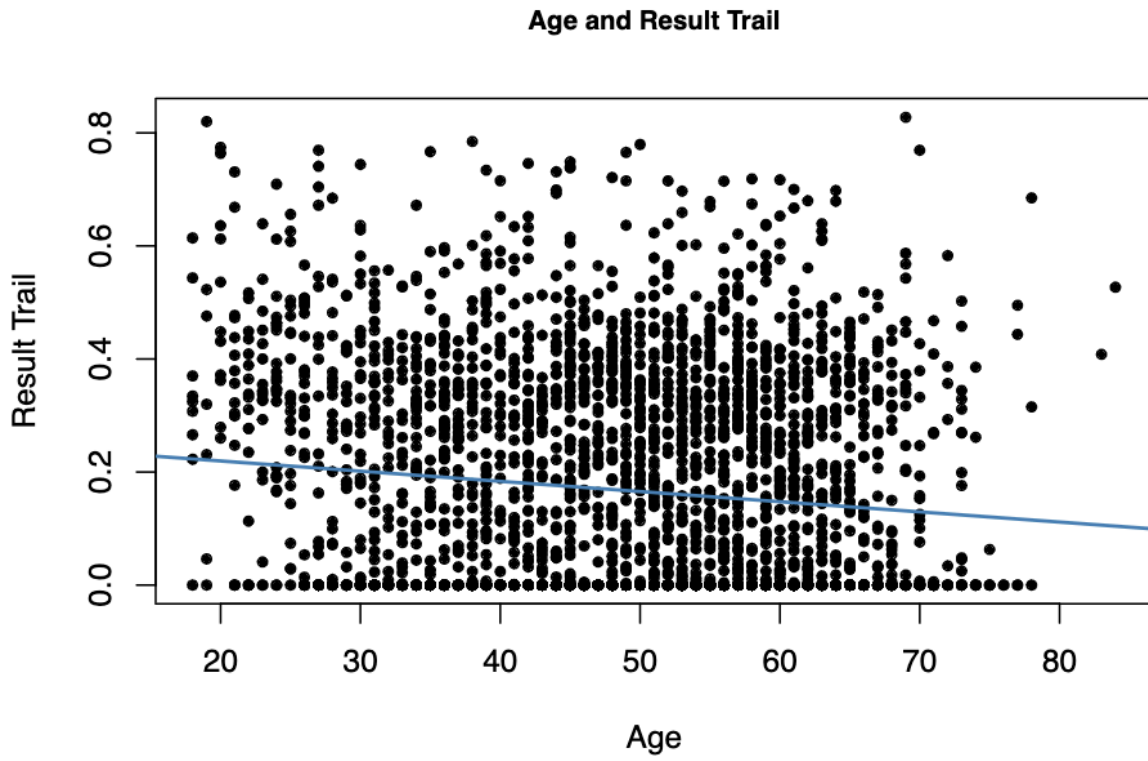


Fig. 13

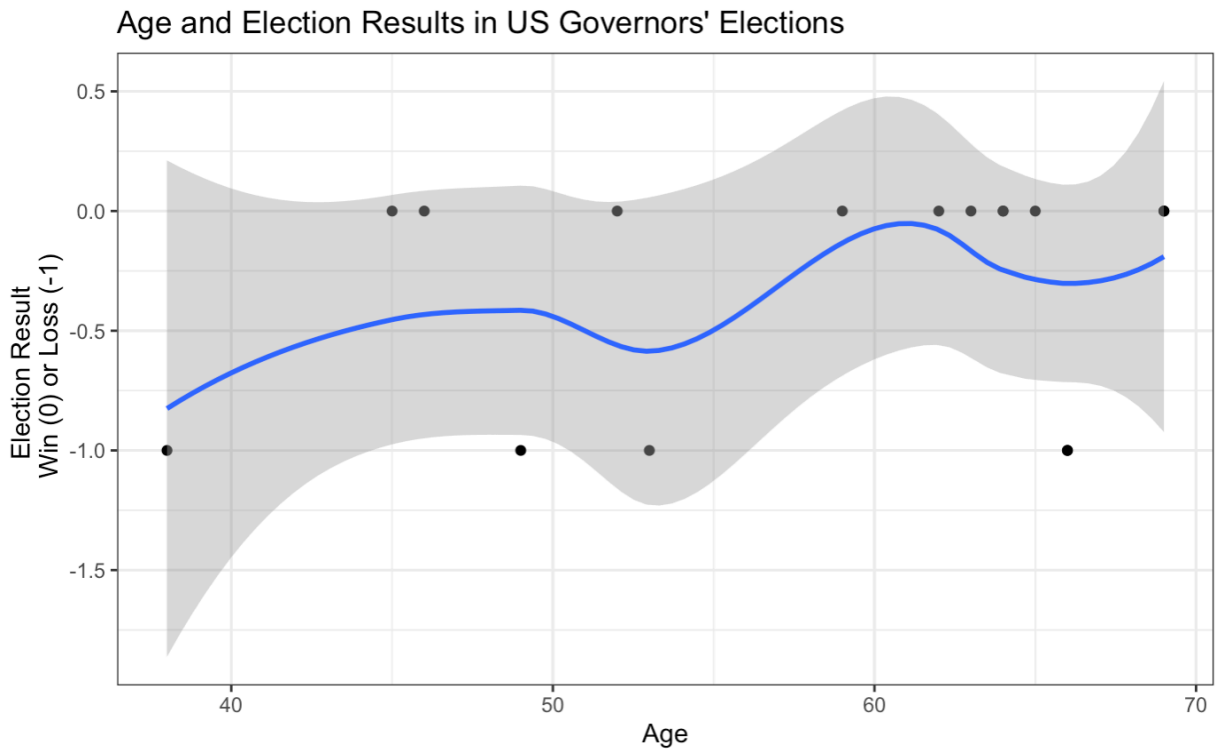


Fig. 14

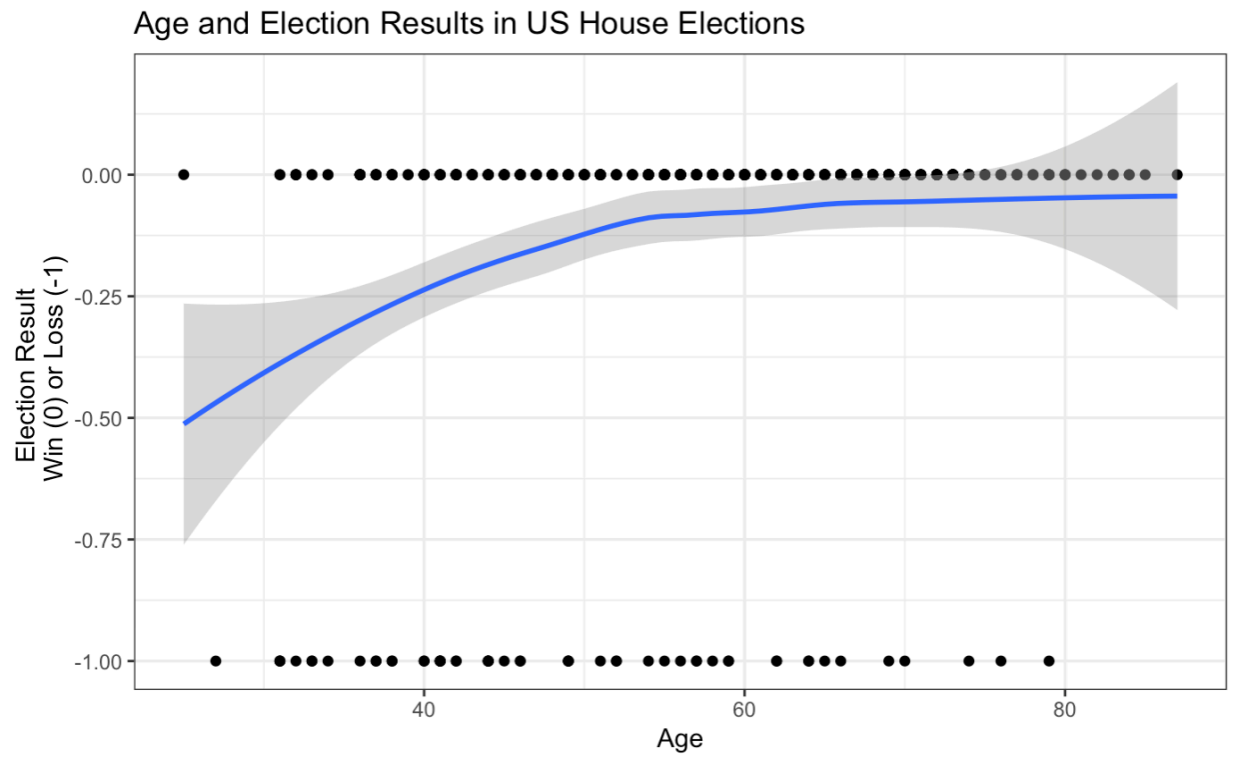


Fig. 15

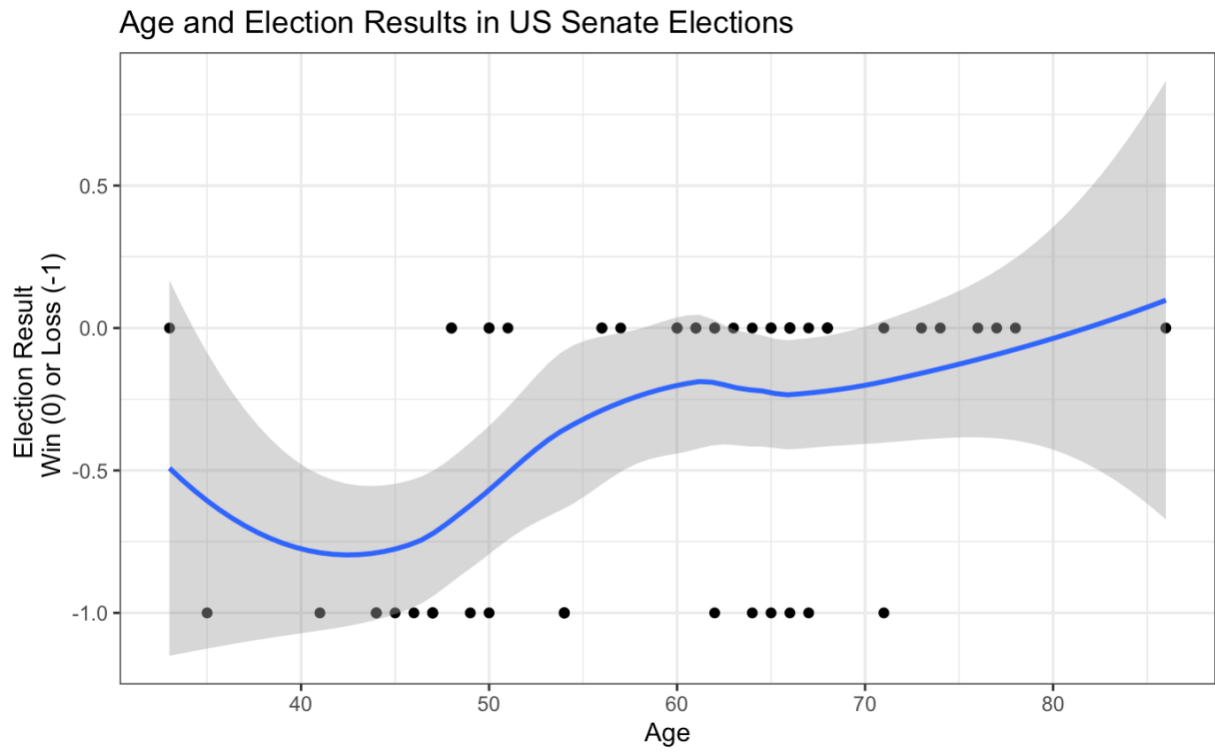


Fig. 16

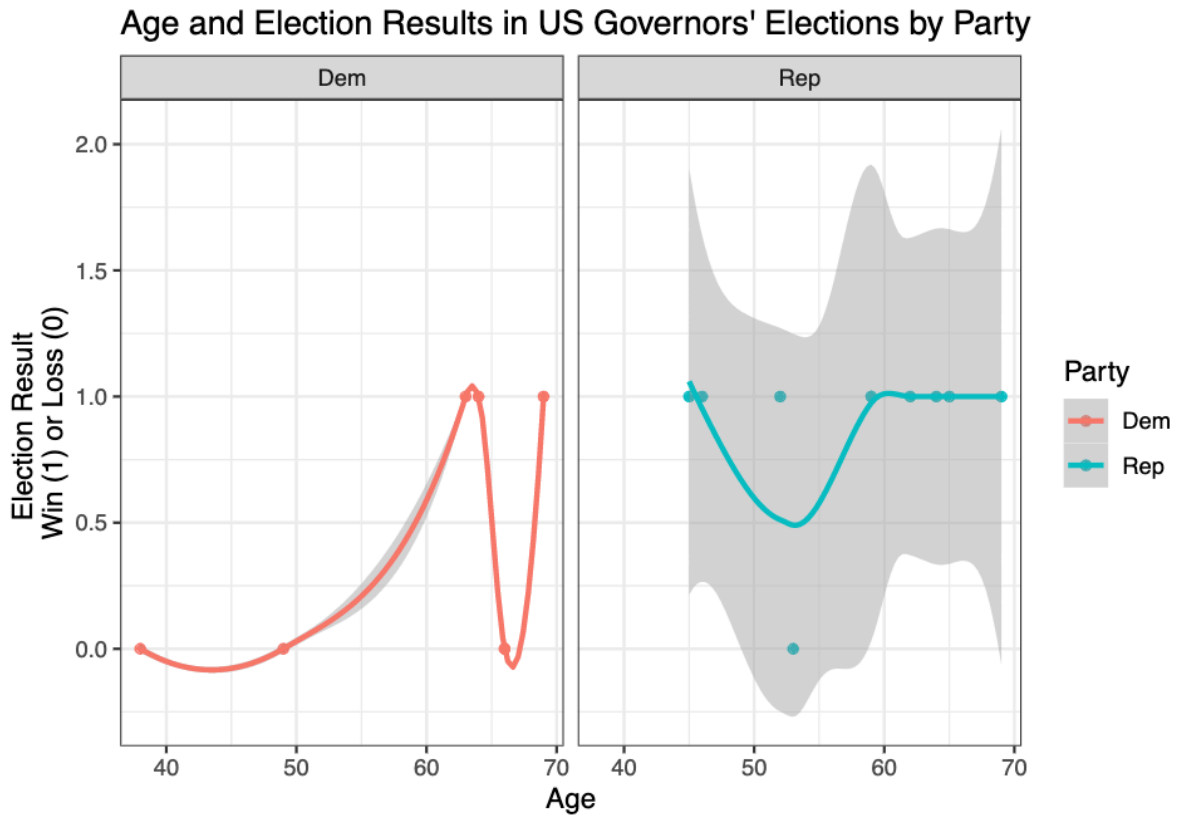


Fig. 17

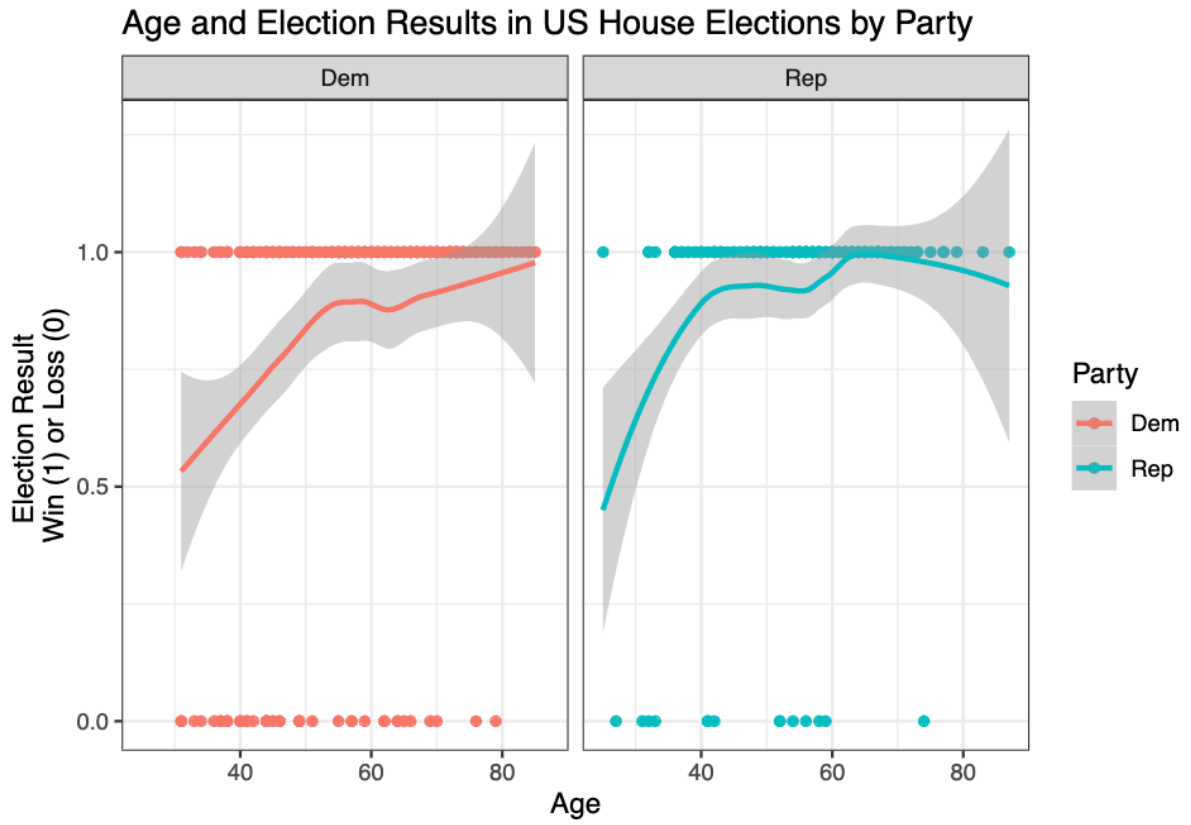


Fig. 18

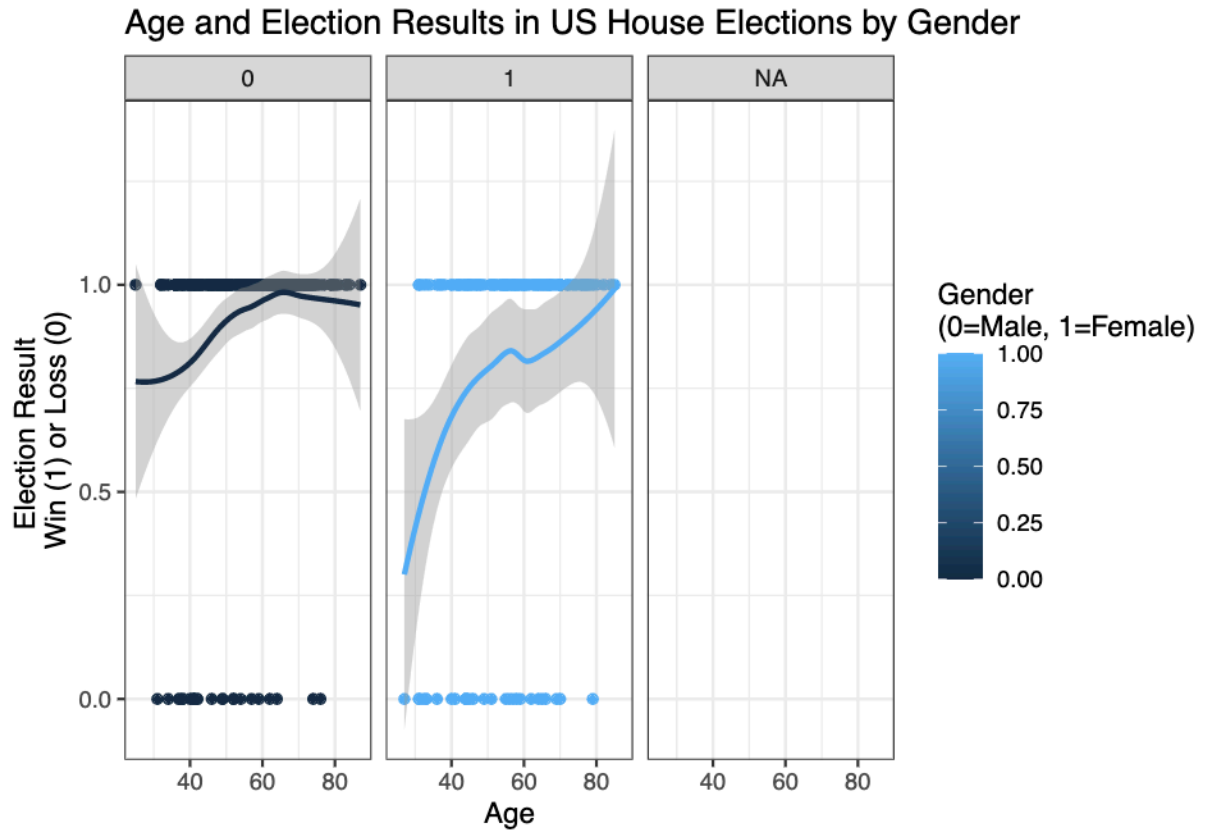


Fig. 19

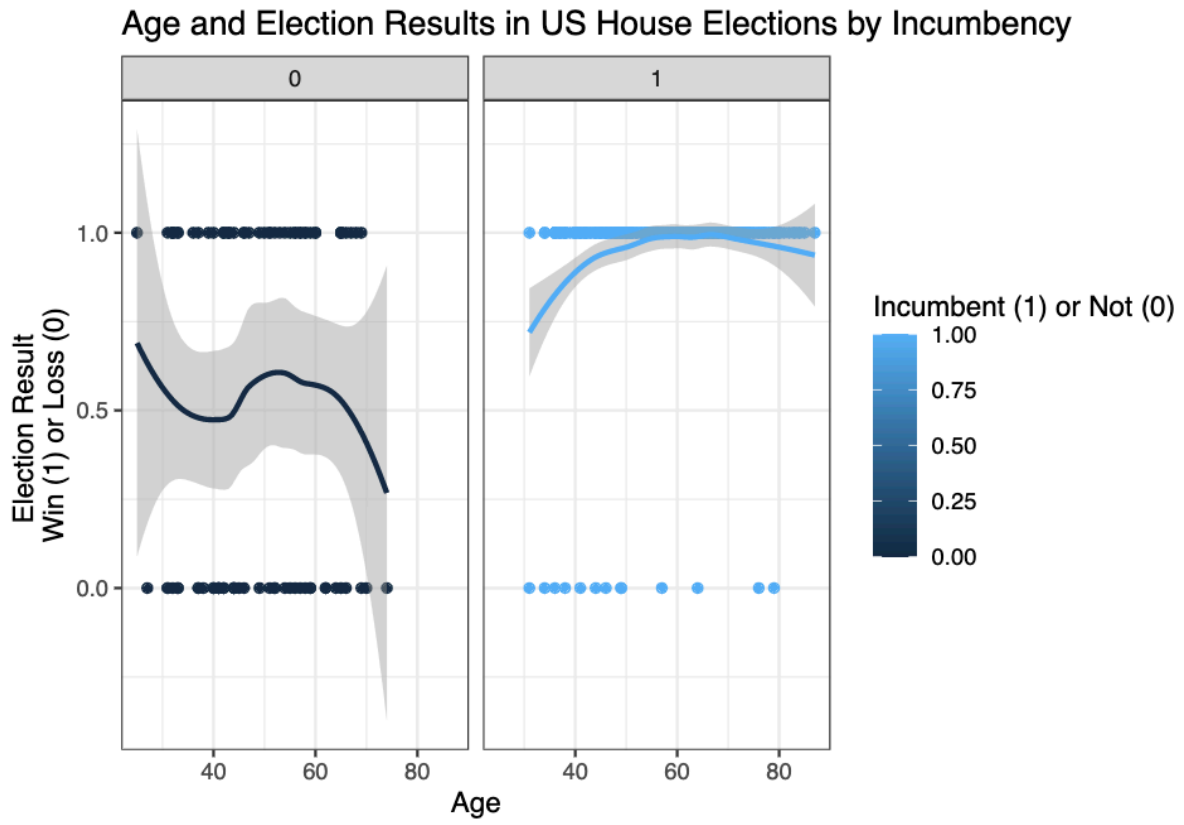


Fig. 20

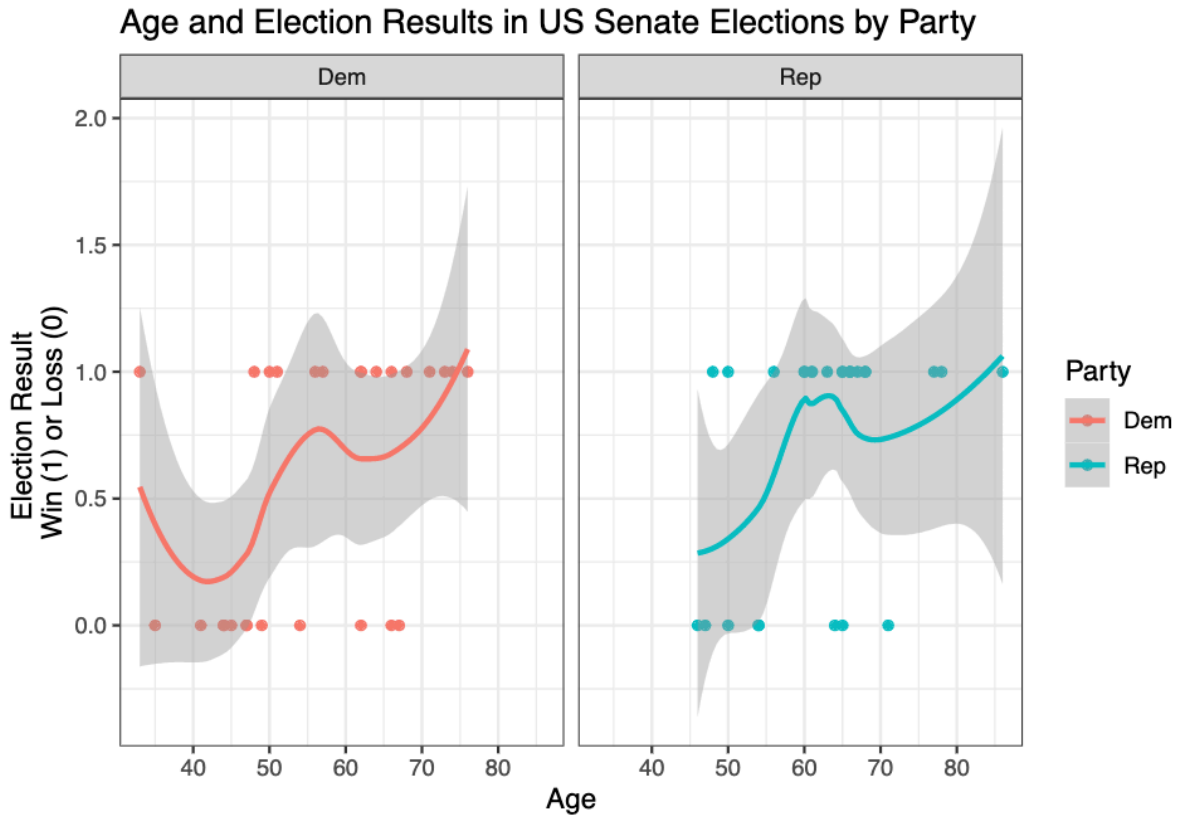


Fig. 21

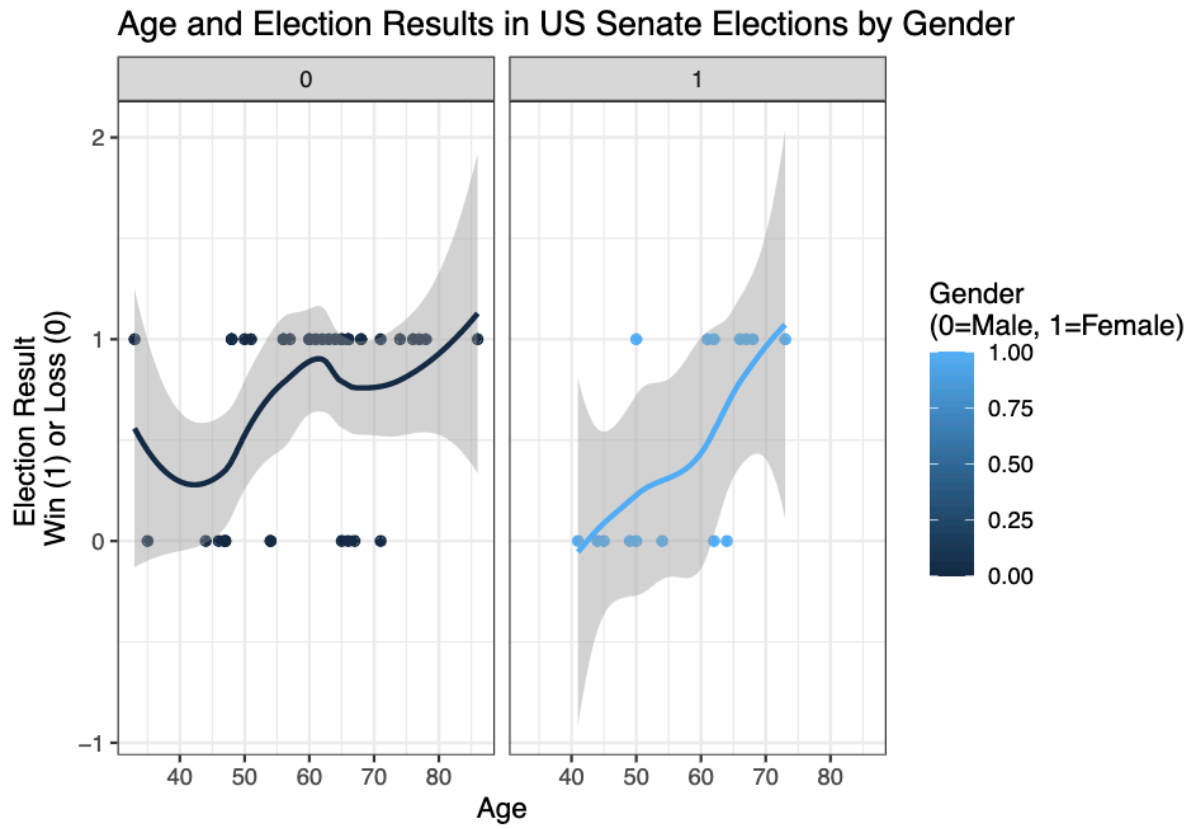


Fig. 22

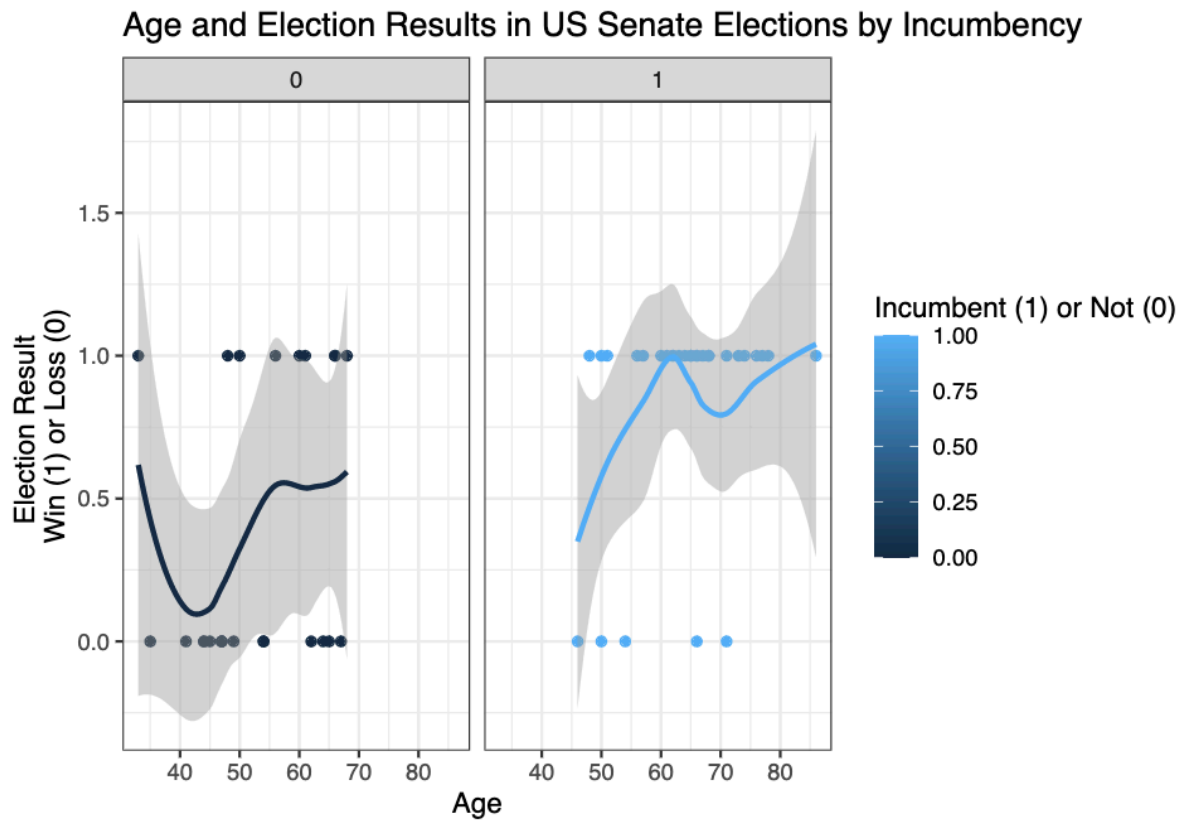


Fig. 23

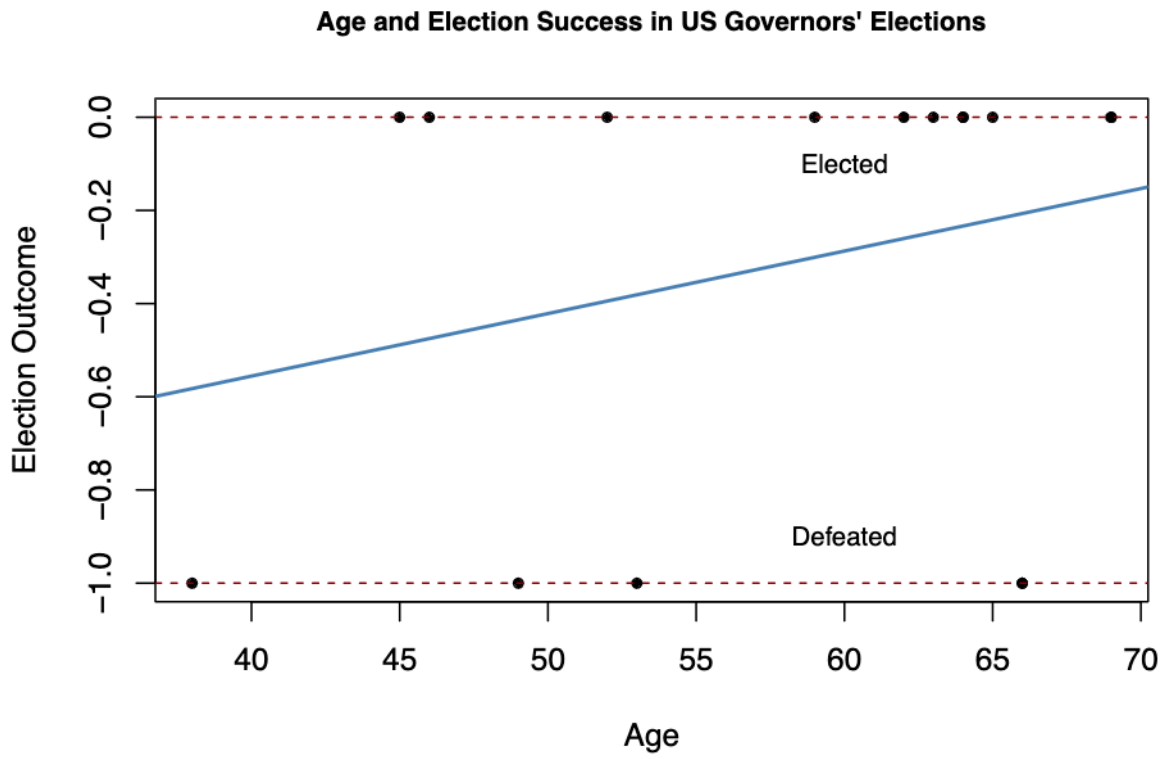


Fig. 24

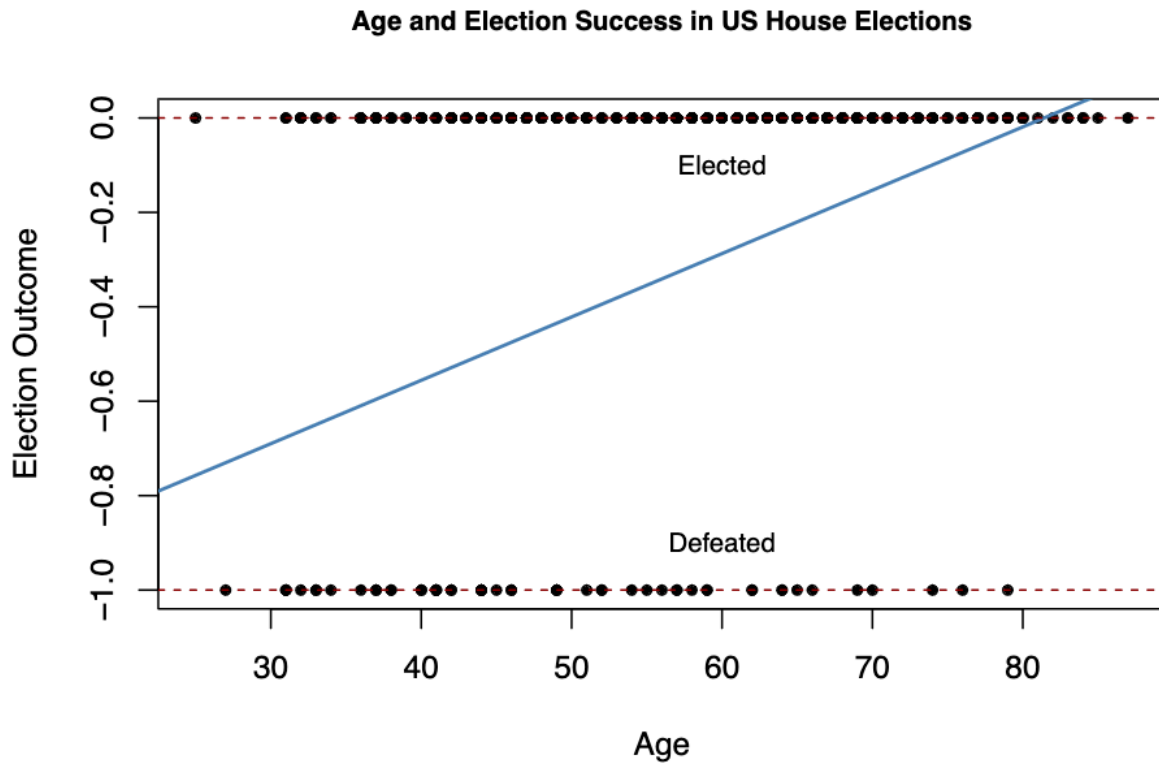


Fig. 25

