

**THE 'QUALIFIED VOTER' AND THE MINIMUM VOTING AGE**

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This paper is a part of a larger project about the history of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, which lowered the national minimum voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. Passed in 1971, the amendment was ratified far more quickly than any other amendment in American history.<sup>1</sup> However, the minimum voting age had been a minor but recurring issue since World War II. The first federal proposals to reduce the voting age were introduced in 1942, and over the next twenty-eight years, federal legislators introduced dozens of unsuccessful proposals to lower the voting age by constitutional amendment. Similarly, during this same period, most states considered constitutional amendments and referenda that would lower the voting age, which were usually—although not always—rejected.<sup>2</sup> The incipient movement to lower the voting age gained momentum in the mid-1960s, and in the spring of 1970, Congress passed an amended version of the Voting Rights Act that statutorily established a minimum age of eighteen for both state and federal elections. The Supreme Court, though, promptly struck down the eighteen-year-old voting provision as applied to state elections. Faced with the potential administrative nightmare of two different minimum voting ages in the upcoming 1972 election, both houses of Congress quickly approved a constitutional amendment to lower the minimum voting age in state and federal elections to eighteen, and state legislatures hastily ratified the amendment.

The dominant narrative of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, to the extent that one exists at all, is that the minimum voting age was lowered to eighteen primarily in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 281.

<sup>2</sup> Georgia was the first state to lower its voting age, amending its state constitution in August 1943 to provide for eighteen-year-old voting. Kentucky followed suit in 1955, as did the territories of Guam (1954) and American Samoa (1965). Alaska joined the Union with a voting age of nineteen in 1956, and Hawaii lowered its voting age to twenty shortly thereafter. Wendell Cultice, *Youth's Battle for the Ballot: A History of Voting Age in America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 30–43, 54–59, 86–92.

bring it into line with the minimum draft age, on the logic that it was unfair to subject eighteen- to twenty-one year-old men to compulsory military service in Vietnam without allowing them to vote for or against the political leaders conducting the war.

I maintain, in contrast, that the movement to lower the voting age to eighteen was animated by a collection of rationales, many of which were in tension or even conflict with one another.

Elsewhere, I have demonstrated that the conventional wisdom that a connection between draft liability and voting rights—encapsulated in the slogan ‘old enough to fight, old enough to vote’—drove the eighteen-year-old voting movement is indeed partly true, but that the force of such social contract arguments was limited in several ways. Most notably, the fact that women had gained the suffrage without being subject to compulsory military service seriously undermined the rhetorical force of the military service–voting link. In this paper, I show that a very different kind of argument—the argument that eighteen-, nineteen- and twenty-year-old should be able to vote because they possessed the qualities necessary to be good voters—also played a central role in the movement leading up to the Twenty-Sixth Amendment. Discussions about whether eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds had the intellectual and/or emotional ability to vote well—what I call ‘qualified-voter arguments—were a crucially important part of the discourse about the voting age, and in fact were used by advocates to counteract some of the inherent weaknesses in social contract arguments for lowering the voting age. I further show that these qualified-voter arguments were historically contingent; they rested on specifically contemporary ideas about what makes a good voter, as well as on ever-shifting perceptions about the nature of youth.

This paper is divided into two Parts: In Part I, I detail the debates between advocates and opponents of eighteen-year-old voting about eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds' qualifications to vote; first, in the years 1952–1967, when proponents of lowering the voting age had the upper hand, and then in the late 1960s, when these debates became much more contentious. Part II analyzes these qualified-voter arguments as a historical phenomenon.

### *I. The Debates*

The language of social contract theory—specifically, the idea of reciprocity between voting rights and the civic responsibility to serve in the military—dominated debate about the minimum voting age during and immediately after World War II. Introducing one of the first joint resolutions to lower the voting age to eighteen, Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan declared: “Mr. President, if young men are to be drafted at 18 years of age to fight for their Government, they ought to be entitled to vote at 18 years of age for the kind of government for which they are best satisfied to fight.”<sup>3</sup> In the 1943 Senate subcommittee hearings on the voting age issue, both proponents and opponents of eighteen-year-old voting focused primarily on the relationship (or lack thereof) between military service, especially compulsory military service, and the franchise.<sup>4</sup> By 1946, the slogan ‘old enough to fight, old enough to vote’ was a “refrain.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Congress, Senate, 77th Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 88, pt. 6 (October 19, 1942): 8316.

<sup>4</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee No. 1 of the Committee of the Judiciary, *A Joint Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States; Extending the Right to Vote to Citizens Eighteen Years of Age or Older*, 78th Cong., 1st sess., October 20, 1943, 1–13.

<sup>5</sup> Transcript of radio broadcast, April 16, 1946, introduced into *Congressional Record* by Representative Jennings Randolph of West Virginia, Congress, House of Representatives, 79th Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 92, pt. \_\_ (April 18, 1946): A2276.

In the early 1950s, however, the tone of the debate began to shift a bit. Advocates of lowering the voting age began to argue that eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds should be able to vote not only because they were liable to be drafted, but also because they could—and would—contribute positively to the polity through their votes. Modern young people, maintained proponents of eighteen-year-old voting, had a great deal to offer American society. Advocates argued that on the whole, contemporary youth demonstrated the most important qualities necessary to be good voters: they were generally well-educated, knowledgeable about politics, independent-minded, and committed to the public good.

Those who pushed these qualified-voter arguments formulated their claims sometimes in terms of rights and sometimes in terms of the public good. On one line of reasoning, proponents of lowering the voting age argued that if eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds, as a group, met the standards for being good and responsible voters, then it was only fair that they have the right to vote. Alternatively, many emphasized that by bringing such educated and publicly-minded citizens into the electorate, lowering the voting age would improve the political discourse. However, both of these formulations were derivative of the same central idea: in determining whether a group of Americans should have the right to vote, the most pertinent question is whether those people have the ability to make a positive contribution to political society.

The next subsection details the qualified-voter arguments that figured prominently in the case for eighteen-year-old voting from about 1952 until approximately 1967. (As I discuss in subsection B, when the student protest movement came to national attention in the late 1960s, arguments about youth's qualifications to vote began to work against the

cause of eighteen-year-old voting.) In asserting that young people would make good voters, advocates sought to paint contemporary youth as simultaneously similar to and different from the adult population. Many stressed that the modern eighteen-year-old was as educated and informed as the average American adult, if not more so. At the same time, some proponents of lowering the voting age also maintained that certain qualities specific to youth—such as idealism and freedom from economic responsibility—amplified young people’s qualifications as good voters.

*A. 1952–1967*

A core argument in the voting age debates of the 1950s and early-to-mid 1960s was that thanks to an improved and expanded public education system, as well as technological changes such as the advent of radio, television, and jet airplanes, modern eighteen-year-olds were highly knowledgeable about politics, and therefore qualified to vote. Advocates for lowering the voting age maintained that a minimum voting age of twenty-one might have been appropriate for earlier generations, but it was “obsolete.”<sup>6</sup> in this brave new world of compulsory public education and televised presidential debates,

Some of those who favored eighteen-year-old voting emphasized the contrast between the (supposedly) politically unsophisticated rubes of America’s distant past and the (allegedly) savvy urbanites of the modern era. In a statement submitted to a 1953 Senate subcommittee hearing, the national legislative director of the American Veterans of World War II suggested, “In the 18th and 19th centuries, 18-year-old citizens very probably knew little about their Government. But today is it noteworthy that many of our

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<sup>6</sup> Representative James Howard of New Jersey speaking in favor of lowering the voting age, Congress, House of Representatives, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (February 21, 1967): 4182.

more informed citizens fall into this age group.”<sup>7</sup> Senator Blair Moody of Wisconsin, speaking in a 1952 Senate subcommittee hearing, maintained that unlike the well-educated, well-informed youth of the present day, earlier generations of voters made political choices in a primitive manner: “I remember reading of presidential elections in the past decided by such phrases as ‘Tippecanoe and Tyler too’ and the people around the country with the lack of communication systems never did realize the big issues.”<sup>8</sup> The most memorable comment of this ilk, however, came from Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois, speaking on the Senate floor in 1954:

It is rather interesting to consider what a young man of 18 was up against in the backwoods days, as compared with the situation today. In the old days, such a young man probably grew up in a log cabin, and probably drank water from a gourd which he dipped into a wooden bucket—a practice which today by any standard probably would be classed as insanitary. Yet somehow or other, those young people lived through those conditions. They lived on bacon and corn pone. They were no dulcet tones of orchestra music coming, via the air waves, from Kansas City, to waft them to sleep. There were no McCarthy hearings to be seen on the TV in the mornings and in the afternoons. Oh Mr. President, how lacking they were in the availability of information and knowledge, and one thing and another. Today, information and knowledge are at the beck and call of everyone, both the young and the old.<sup>9</sup>

Proponents of lowering the voting age asserted that tremendous expansion and improvement of the American educational system, in particular, was behind eighteen- to twenty-one year olds’ ostensible transformation from backward ignoramuses into intelligent, well-informed citizens. Representative John Moss of California captured the prevailing sentiment when he commented, in early 1967, “We are now in an age of educational opportunity and achievement unmatched in the history of mankind.”<sup>10</sup>

Advocates of lowering the voting age stressed that far more children were attending

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<sup>7</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 83rd Cong., 1st sess., June 2, 1953, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 82d Cong., 2d sess., May 27, 1952, 61.

<sup>9</sup> Congress, Senate, S.J. Res. 53, 83rd Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 100, pt. \_\_\_\_ (May 21, 1954): 6971.

<sup>10</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, H.J. Res. 18 & H.J. res. 56, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (February 21, 1967): 4174.

school, and for a longer period of time, than in earlier eras; statistics indicating rising rates of literacy, high school attendance, high school graduation, and college enrollment were a staple of the voting age debates. In 1959, Representative Kenneth Hechler of West Virginia commented, “At the time when the voting age was set at 21, our school system was vastly inferior. Boys and girls only went to school a few months during the year. Now they become educated faster and should be allowed to assume their civic responsibilities faster.”<sup>11</sup> Testifying before a Senate subcommittee in 1961, the chairman of the Republican National Committee enthusiastically endorsed proposals to reduce the voting age: “I think that in this day and age in 1961, the level of education in our country has risen considerably, that among 18-year-olds we have a group of Americans well educated, interested in the problems of our country and of free men everywhere.”<sup>12</sup> Representative Edward Patten of New Jersey agreed, declaring in 1967 that “[a]s advanced education becomes more a part of a citizen’s heritage, we must recognize that a fuller knowledge of government, issues, and candidates, is a national byproduct.”<sup>13</sup>

Advocates of eighteen-year-old voting maintained that not just the greater quantity, but also the improved quality, of American education had made the voting age of twenty-one outdated. Some pointed to supposed developments in pedagogy, like Representative Richard Fulton of Tennessee, who declared, “Not only are greater

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<sup>11</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, H.J. Res. 515, 86th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 105, pt. \_\_ (September 1, 1959): 17622.

<sup>12</sup> Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments on the Committee of the Judiciary United States Senate Eighty-Seventh Congress First Session on S.J. Res. 1, S.J. Res. 2, S.J. Res. 4, S.J. Res. 9, S.J. Res. 12, S.J. Res. 16, S.J. Res. 17, S.J. Res. 23, S.J. Res. 26, S.J. Res. 28, S.J. Res. 48, S.J. Res. 96, S.J. Res. 1-2, S.J. Res. 113, and S.J. Res. 114, Proposing Amendments of the Constitution Relating to the Method of Nomination and Election of the President and Vice President and S.J. Res. 14, S.J. Res. 20, S.J. Res. 54, S.J. Res. 58, S.J. Res. 67, S.J. Res. 71, S.J. Res. 81, and S.J. Res. 90, Proposing Amendment to the Constitution Relating to Qualifications for Voting*, 87th Cong., 1st sess., July 13, 1961, 552.

<sup>13</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (April 12, 1967): 9196.



numbers graduating, but these students have been taught by more qualified instructors, utilizing improved techniques in teaching that were not even known in previous generations.”<sup>14</sup> Others praised the ostensibly broad scope of modern education; in particular, proponents of lowering the voting age argued that public school classes in history, civics, and/or social studies gave contemporary youth a sophisticated understanding of the American political system. In 1951, Representative Carroll Kearns of Pennsylvania declared, “The advances made in the study of public affairs in the high schools throughout the Nation today, especially the classes in problems of democracy, have . . . trained [youth] sufficiently to make them intelligent voters.” Representative Richard McCarthy of New York, speaking in 1967, agreed, “Our 18-, 19-, and 20-year-olds are better educated than any citizens of their age have ever been before. History and social studies courses offered in high school today are finer and have deeper scope than ever before, and youths graduating from high school possess a strong knowledge of political and historical affairs.”<sup>15</sup>

Proponents of eighteen-year-old voting supplemented their paeans to American education with similar praise for the development of the mass media (termed “communication systems”). Contemporary youth were not only better educated than their ancestors, they maintained, but the expanded reach of newspapers, magazines, radio and especially television, meant that young people were far more up-to-date on political events. Speaking in 1951, Representative Edward H. Jenison asserted, “The present limit of 21 was determined in a period when the public was without the means for obtaining

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<sup>14</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (May 15, 1967): 12737.

<sup>15</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, H.J. Res. 374, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (March 1, 1967): 5101.

with ease a general knowledge of public affairs, public issues, and candidates for public office. Greater educational opportunities and present-day newspaper, radio, and television facilities bring the problems of the day to all the people, young persons included.” “Who dreamed half a century ago,” Senator Moody asked in 1952, “of radio, television, and the news magazines which today keep the voters apprised of political developments not only in the United States but in the world at large?”<sup>16</sup>

For the most part, proponents of lowering the voting age concentrated on trying to show that contemporary eighteen-year-olds were more knowledgeable, and therefore more qualified to vote, than were eighteen-, or even twenty-one-year-olds of previous generations. A minimum voting age of twenty-one might have been suitable for an earlier, more ignorant time, but it was inappropriate for the sophisticated, plugged-in world of the 1950s and early 1960s. But some of those who favored lowering the voting age dared to go further, delicately—and not so delicately—suggesting that not only were modern eighteen-year-olds more politically astute than teenagers of the past, they were just as, if not more, informed about politics as were many present-day Americans over the age of twenty-one. In debate on the Senate floor in 1954, Senator William Knowland of California put into the *Congressional Record* assorted statistics suggesting that young Americans were more politically aware, had higher rates of literacy, and even demonstrated greater intelligence than those in older age groups. Senator Kenneth Keating of New York referenced one such study in 1959, declaring, “The strongest reason for lowering the voting age is the political awareness of our young Americans. A Gallup poll has found that the people between 18 and 20 are the best informed of any age

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<sup>16</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 82d Cong., 2d sess., May 27, 1952, 61.

group on basic political facts. The proposition that this group be given voting rights is perfectly logical; only hoary custom is against it.” Similarly, Representative Lloyd Meeds of Washington maintained that the “one, overriding point” that convinced him of the merits of granting eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds the right to vote was “simply that they are ready; ready in the sense that they have the knowledge of government and current events at least equal to that of citizens over 21.”<sup>17</sup>

But a few advocates of eighteen-year-old voting went further, criticizing outright the educational and mental qualifications of many adult voters. In 1963, Representative Hechler declared, “There is far more illiteracy among people over 60 than there is among people between 18 and 21.”<sup>18</sup> A 1965 newspaper article introduced into the *Congressional Record* by Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia charged that plenty of Americans over twenty-one, including those who opposed lowering the voting age, lacked the requisite knowledge to cast a responsible vote:

It’s really interesting to talk to someone who is vehemently against the 18-year-old voter. His reason? Generally that the ’18-year-old lacks maturity and judgment to cast a vote . . . what will the country come to?’ Then ask that same person why he wants a certain candidate to win an election. Sometimes he makes a lightweight attempt to point out the candidate’s experience, and then often includes a personality judgment rather than a judgment based on facts. ‘Oh, he’s so good-looking’; ‘He’s a family man’; ‘His family’s store sells such good eggs and butter,’ etc., etc. Some voters today base their decisions on what kind of television actor the candidate is. Does this make an intelligent electorate?<sup>19</sup>

In suggesting that adult voters did not necessarily demonstrate the sort of political awareness and understanding that was necessary for good voting, advocates like Hechler were on precarious rhetorical ground. As noted above, arguments that eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds should be granted the vote because they were “intelligent, well-

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<sup>17</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (February 21, 1967): 4185.

<sup>18</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 88th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 109, pt. \_\_ (December 23, 1963): 25498.

<sup>19</sup> Gail Matthews, “Is an 18-Year-Old Ready to Vote?” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 23, 1965, introduced into *Congressional Record* by Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia, Congress, Senate, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (January 16, 1967): 515.

informed, and responsible”<sup>20</sup> rested on the premise that the franchise should be limited to persons who possessed these qualities. If a substantial number of adults were ill-educated and/or poorly informed, then one of two conclusions was inescapable: One possibility was that some—or even many—segments of the population should not have been enfranchised in the first place. This, of course, was a largely untenable political position for any publicly elected official to take.

The other possibility was that perhaps political knowledgeability was not a meaningful qualification for voting after all. Even the most passionate proponents of eighteen-year-old voting, however, resisted this idea, and (especially) its attendant notion that the franchise might be purely a matter of right. Speaking before a Senate subcommittee in 1961, Senator Randolph declared, “But for [the minimum voting age of twenty-one], we have traveled a long road from the belief in voting as a privilege of the few to the conviction that voting is a right of all persons on whom we impose the responsibilities of citizenship.” This most certainly did not mean that there were no standards at all for who was permitted to vote, though: “With such exceptions as felons and specially determined cases, or incompetency, we are prepared to hazard the experiment in democracy on the ultimate good judgment of all classes and conditions of citizens.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Senator Michael Mansfield of Montana speaking in favor of lowering the voting age, Congress, Senate, S.J. Res. 8, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (January 16, 1967): 295.

<sup>21</sup> Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments on the Committee of the Judiciary United States Senate Eighty-Seventh Congress First Session on S.J. Res. 1, S.J. Res. 2, S.J. Res. 4, S.J. Res. 9, S.J. Res. 12, S.J. Res. 16, S.J. Res. 17, S.J. Res. 23, S.J. Res. 26, S.J. Res. 28, S.J. Res. 48, S.J. Res. 96, S.J. Res. 1-2, S.J. Res. 113, and S.J. Res. 114, Proposing Amendments of the Constitution Relating to the Method of Nomination and Election of the President and Vice President and S.J. Res. 14, S.J. Res. 20, S.J. Res. 54, S.J. Res. 58, S.J. Res. 67, S.J. Res. 71, S.J. Res. 81, and S.J. Res. 90, Proposing Amendment to the Constitution Relating to Qualifications for Voting*, 87th Cong., 1st sess., June 8, 1961, 187.

For the most part, then, especially in the years before 1967, advocates of lowering the voting age concentrated on praising the ‘new breed’ of highly educated, politically informed youth, rather than on criticizing the voting qualifications of those over twenty-one. However, not everyone was completely sold on this cheerful vision of contemporary young people. In a rare dissent from the panegyrics to American education that dominated the voting age debates in this time period, law professor Robert G. Dixon asserted to a Senate subcommittee that despite the expansion of the public school system, modern eighteen-year-olds were no more qualified to vote than were their predecessors: “While I am a great supporter of the American public school as the basic force for ‘unity in diversity’ in our society, I have no illusion about either the level of knowledge or the degree of maturity which high school youths, en masse, attain. I fear that in America we have been educating more people, over longer periods of attendance, at greater cost, and with less real attainment in knowledge than anywhere else in the world. A high school diploma is not even a guarantee that the holder is literate.”<sup>22</sup>

For the most part, though, opponents of eighteen-year-voting did not challenge proponents’ arguments about the virtues of modern education head-on. Instead, they argued that eighteen-, nineteen-, and twenty-year-olds would be unduly vulnerable to outside influences in casting their votes. For one thing, they asserted, young voters would express their parents’ preferences, not their own. In March of 1954, Representative Emmanuel Celler of New York, a committed foe of eighteen-year-old

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<sup>22</sup> Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments on the Committee of the Judiciary United States Senate Eighty-Seventh Congress First Session on S.J. Res. 1, S.J. Res. 2, S.J. Res. 4, S.J. Res. 9, S.J. Res. 12, S.J. Res. 16, S.J. Res. 17, S.J. Res. 23, S.J. Res. 26, S.J. Res. 28, S.J. Res. 48, S.J. Res. 96, S.J. Res. 1-2, S.J. Res. 113, and S.J. Res. 114, Proposing Amendments of the Constitution Relating to the Method of Nomination and Election of the President and Vice President and S.J. Res. 14, S.J. Res. 20, S.J. Res. 54, S.J. Res. 58, S.J. Res. 67, S.J. Res. 71, S.J. Res. 81, and S.J. Res. 90, Proposing Amendment to the Constitution Relating to Qualifications for Voting*, 87th Cong., 1st sess., June 27, 1961, 328.

voting, proposed a constitutional amendment establishing a minimum voting age of twenty-one.<sup>23</sup> He declared, “Teenagers usually vote along family lines. They vote like ma and pa.”<sup>24</sup>

However, even before the era of student protests, the more meaningful issue was whether eighteen-year-old voters would be sufficiently independent from the potentially insidious designs of those other than their parents. (Indeed, advocates for reducing the voting age were abundantly aware that the claim that teenagers would not simply vote in accordance with their parents’ instructions did just as much as work as an argument *against* lowering the voting age.<sup>25</sup>) In particular, opponents of eighteen-year-old voting fretted that unformed, malleable youth would be easily manipulated by unscrupulous leaders. Representative Celler warned: “Young men under 21 are more pliable and more amenable to indoctrination. They are not likely to exercise critical judgment in matters demanding instant obedience . . . . Self-interested groups and corrupt politicians would find such obedience a fertile playground.”<sup>26</sup> Worries that youthful voters might fall under the spell of communist sympathizers were especially pronounced in the 1950s: Speaking in favor of lowering the voting age in 1954, Senator William Langer of North Dakota noted that a number of other nations, including some behind the Iron Curtain, had minimum voting ages below twenty-one. Senator Richard Russell of Georgia pounced

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<sup>23</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, H.J. Res. 463, 83rd Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 100, pt. (March 8, 1954): 2870.

<sup>24</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, H.J. Res. 463, 83rd Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 100, pt. (March 10, 1954): 3050.

<sup>25</sup> Testifying before a Senate subcommittee hearing in 1953, Duane Emme, a former Young Democrat leader, pointed to a newspaper article that had criticized efforts to lower the voting age by showing that 52% of high school students did not agree with their parents’ political convictions. Emme sought to recharacterize this statistic, arguing that it demonstrated not radicalism but youth independence. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 83rd Cong., 1st sess., July 13, 1953, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, H.J. Res. 463, 83rd Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 100, pt. (March 10, 1954): 3050.

on Langer, commenting that Russia did not “afford[ ] a very good illustration of democratic elections.”<sup>27</sup>

Advocates of eighteen-year-old voting agreed wholeheartedly that it was—in theory, at least—crucial for an American voter to cast his or her vote independently, free of others’ influence. They maintained, however, that modern education and an expanded mass media more or less guaranteed that young people would vote their own preferences, not those of anyone else. An eighteen-year-old who was knowledgeable about the American political system and well-informed about current events was unlikely to be vulnerable to demagoguery. Speaking in 1952, Senator Moody disagreed with critics who argued that eighteen-year-olds did not think independently: “I have found that the questions which are propounded on matters of public importance by college students, for example, are direct. They have no patience generally with weasel-worded answers.”<sup>28</sup> Ellis Arnall, the former governor of Georgia, which had lowered its state voting age to eighteen in 1943, concurred: “It has been my experience in watching youth voting in my State that the young people evaluate the issues and the candidates. They exercise a very informed opinion, not just some hearsay.”<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, proponents of lowering the voting age occasionally tried to turn their opponents’ arguments about independence on their head, declaring that young people might be freer from influence by political parties than were older citizens. As early as 1943, Senator Randolph declared: “I feel . . . that men and women [of older age] are

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<sup>27</sup> Congress, Senate, S.J. Res. 53, 83rd Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 100, pt. \_\_ (May 21, 1954): 6857.

<sup>28</sup> Congress, Senate, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 82d Cong., 2d sess., June 27, 1952, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Congress, Senate, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 82d Cong., 2d sess., June 27, 1952, 67.

more inclined to vote along strict party lines, because of the channels along which their lives have been fashioned; whereas we find the younger age group more desirous of probing into parties and considering the candidates and then making their own decisions.”<sup>30</sup> Many years later, Randolph introduced into the *Congressional Record* an editorial that echoed his earlier words:

The young voter is inclined to be both idealistic and curious. He, or she, tends to believe that a candidate’s qualifications should be carefully examined and that the best-qualified candidate should be chosen regardless of party affiliation.

This, we think, is a pretty good test of ‘maturity’ and it is a pity the adult voting population does not display a little more interest in the qualifications of candidates.”<sup>31</sup>

Along similar lines, a number of advocates suggested that not only did modern eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds meet ‘adult’ standards of political knowledgeability and independence, but they also generally possessed certain qualities—perhaps unique to the young—conducive to good voting. Many characterized youthful enthusiasm and energy as a civic asset. Lowering the voting age could be a “blood transfusion, of new, vitalizing ‘plasma’ into the veins of the body politic,” asserted one retired Air Force colonel in a Senate subcommittee hearing of 1953.<sup>32</sup> Continuing with the same metaphor, a Young Democrat leader declared that eighteen-year-old voting “would inject into our political blood stream youthful, vigorous thinking.”<sup>33</sup> Proponents of lowering the voting age emphasized that young voters could offer new solutions to stubborn social

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<sup>30</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee No. 1 of the Committee on the Judiciary, *A Joint Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States; Extending the Right to Vote to Citizens Eighteen Years of Age or Older*, 78th Cong., 1st sess., October 20, 1943, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Raymond Brewster, “Give 18-Year-Olds the Vote,” *Herald-Dispatch* (Huntington, W.Va.), July 11, 1967, introduced into *Congressional Record* by Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia, Congress, Senate, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (July 21, 1967): 19680.

<sup>32</sup> Filed statement of Colonel W.R. Watson, Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 83rd Cong., 1st sess., June 2, 1953, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Statement of Duane Emme, , Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 83rd Cong., 1st sess., July 13, 1953, 16.



and political problems. Speaking in 1952, Senator Moody declared: “It seems to me . . . that we can well use the spark and enthusiasm which our young people would contribute to the political scene. We can well use the idealism and vigor with which young people traditionally challenge boundless frontiers. We can well use their new ideas, their selfless devotion, and their pioneering spirit in conquering the roadblocks which lie in the way of a better tomorrow.”<sup>34</sup> Fifteen years later, Representative William St. Onge of Connecticut made a similar point, albeit rather less effusively, claiming that reducing the voting age would force the legislative and executive branches of government “to be much more aware of, and responsive to, a new group of voters with fresh ideas and new approaches to our problems.”<sup>35</sup>

Some advocates of eighteen-year-old voting linked such youthful virtues to an image of America as a young and vibrant nation. In 1953, one Young Republican leader captured this sentiment: “The strength of America has always been characterized and reflected by the youthful vigor of its people.”<sup>36</sup> Speaking at a Senate subcommittee meeting in 1961, Senator Gale McGee of Wyoming declared that lowering the voting age “would tend to strike a balance back towards the youthful spirit and the youthful face that has traditionally been associated with America.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 82d Cong., 2d sess., June 27, 1952, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (January 30, 1967): 1962.

<sup>36</sup> Filed statement of James H. Guilmarten, Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 83rd Cong., 1st sess., June 2, 1953, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments on the Committee of the Judiciary United States Senate Eighty-Seventh Congress First Session on S.J. Res. 1, S.J. Res. 2, S.J. Res. 4, S.J. Res. 9, S.J. Res. 12, S.J. Res. 16, S.J. Res 17, S.J. Res 23, S.J. Res. 26, S.J. Res. 28, S.J. Res. 48, S.J. Res. 96, S.J. Res. 1-2, S.J. Res. 113, and S.J. Res. 114, Proposing Amendments of the Constitution Relating to the Method of*

Not only would young voters offer enthusiasm and energy, maintained proponents of lowering the voting age, but they would also contribute a much-needed dose of idealism to the national political discourse. More than a few advocates pointedly suggested that eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds were generally more public-spirited than were older citizens. In a 1952 Senate subcommittee hearing, Senator Harley Kilgore of West Virginia asserted, “My experience with Boy State [sic] over a period of 10 years taught me that younger people do not let selfish personal interests influence their vote and they think more of the general welfare than do people who have gotten into business later in life when selfish interests may intervene.”<sup>38</sup> Eighteen-year-olds, maintained Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, were “more apt to place the national interest above those particular interests which they will later acquire.”<sup>39</sup> The notion that enfranchising eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds would “help raise the moral tone in government”<sup>40</sup> was a theme with Representative Hechler; in 1959 he declared, “I am convinced that passage of this constitutional amendment will not only stir a greater interest in public affairs, but will inject a new note of idealism into our politics at all levels. Youth is the age of idealism, unfettered by personal, selfish, or economic group interest.”<sup>41</sup>

But even those who declined to criticize the public-spiritedness of older age groups stressed that lowering the voting age would improve society by bringing into the

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*Nomination and Election of the President and Vice President and S.J. Res. 14, S.J. Res. 20, S.J. Res. 54, S.J. Res. 58, S.J. Res. 67, S.J. Res. 71, S.J. Res. 81, and S.J. Res. 90, Proposing Amendment to the Constitution Relating to Qualifications for Voting, 87th Cong., 1st sess., June 8, 1961, 267.*

<sup>38</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 82d Cong., 2d sess., June 27, 1952, 60.

<sup>39</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 83rd Cong., 1st sess., June 2, 1953, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (February 21, 1967): 4183.

<sup>41</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 86th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 105, pt. \_\_ (September 1, 1959): 17622.

electorate voters who were particularly attuned to the public good. In 1952, Ellis Arnall asserted, “We need some of that idealism that is sometimes disparagingly referred to as starry-eyed, but we need ideals in democracy. I think youth affords that kind of devotion to ideal that we need.”<sup>42</sup> Arguments like Arnall’s were heard even more frequently beginning in the mid-1960s: proponents often cited young people’s participation in political campaigns,<sup>43</sup> the Peace Corps, VISTA, and the like as evidence of their idealism and civic-mindedness. Senator Michael Mansfield of Montana captured a common sentiment among advocates in 1967: “[Eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds’] interest in public affairs and their potential for highly creditable public service at home and abroad are attested to by the personal dedication that is characteristic of such voluntary programs as VISTA and the Peace Corps.”<sup>44</sup>

The notion that eighteen-, nineteen-, and twenty-year-olds should have the franchise primarily because they possessed the requisite intellectual and emotional characteristics to be good voters was a significant force behind the movement to lower the voting age during the 1950s and early 1960s. Qualified voter arguments were certainly not the only rationales offered—advocates also continued to press a connection between military service and voting, claimed that lowering the voting age would remedy voter apathy and channel dissent, and drew analogies to other discriminated-against groups—but they were a crucially important strand of the arguments for eighteen-year-old voting during this particular time period.

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<sup>42</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 82d Cong., 2d sess., June 27, 1952, 66–67.

<sup>43</sup> Unsurprisingly, a number of politicians noted with interest young people’s willingness to serve as unpaid campaign workers; the Goldwater campaign of 1964 demonstrated to many that college students might be an untapped resource of enthusiastic volunteers.

<sup>44</sup> Congress, Senate, S.J. Res. 8, 90th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 113, pt. \_\_ (Jan. 12, 1967): 295.

One might question how convincing these qualified-voter arguments really were, given that the voting age was not actually lowered to eighteen until 1971, several years after these kinds of arguments and the sentiments that underpinned them had become much more controversial. It is of course enormously difficult, if not impossible, to gauge the relative success of various arguments behind any political change, and the Twenty-Sixth Amendment is no exception. However, two points are worth noting. First, advocates for lowering the voting age enjoyed a brief flurry of minor victories in the mid-1950s: Guam lowered its minimum voting age to eighteen in 1954,<sup>45</sup> and Kentucky did the same in 1955.<sup>46</sup> In 1956, Alaska came into the Union with a voting age of nineteen,<sup>47</sup> and Hawaii became a state with a voting age of twenty in 1958.<sup>48</sup> What's more, the one and only eighteen-year-old voting proposal to make it through committee and onto the floor of Congress prior to 1970 emerged in 1954; the measure failed the Senate with 34 yeas, 24 nays, and 37 not voting.<sup>49</sup> Second, the eighteen-year-old movement generally was substantially hampered at the federal level for decades by the opposition of Representative Emmanuel Celler, who chaired the House Committee on the Judiciary from 1949 to 1953, and again from 1955 to 1973.<sup>50</sup> Celler, an implacable foe of lowering the voting age on any rationale whatsoever, refused to hold hearings on the issue for years.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Wendell Cultice, *Youth's Battle for the Ballot: A History of Voting Age in America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 54

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 55–56.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–59

<sup>48</sup> [get cite]

<sup>49</sup> Congress, Senate, S.J. Res. 53, 83rd Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 100, pt. \_\_ (May 21, 1954): 6979–80.

<sup>50</sup> [get cite]

<sup>51</sup> Lyn Shepard, “Despite Student Upheaval; Poll in House Backs Teen Vote—A Monitor Survey,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Mar. 30, 1969, introduced into *Congressional Record* by Representative John

B. 1968–1971

In the mid-to-late 1960s, the tenor of the voting age debates changed again. As the student protest movement intensified and images of youthful demonstrators became a media staple, arguments that modern youth had all of the qualities necessary to be good voters came under attack. Fears of civic unrest spurred opponents of eighteen-year-old voting, who charged that modern young people were too radical, emotional, and susceptible to dangerous influences to be allowed to vote. Advocates defended their cause by simultaneously distancing themselves from the student protesters and continuing to praise youth's political knowledgeable and public-spiritedness. These debates took on real energy in 1968 and continued until mid-1970, when Congress amended the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to include a provision for eighteen-year-old voting.

Those who opposed lowering the voting age argued that campus unrest was a natural product of young people's tendency towards extremism. In a 1970 article introduced into the *Congressional Record* by Representative James Cleveland of New Hampshire, philosophy professor Robert Gahringer suggested that the tendency to view issues in terms of black and white was "characteristic of the young," who "lack the involvements that would enable them to see that no one in public life is simply good or simply evil, that power will always be founded in objective issues, and that issues will always in some degree serve private purposes."<sup>52</sup> Speaking in 1968, Senator Jack Miller of Iowa lamented that "many teenagers, lacking the experience and maturity, are prone to

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Saylor of Pennsylvania, Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 116, pt. \_\_ (April 1, 1969): 8373.

<sup>52</sup> Robert E. Gahringer, "On Lowering the Voting Age," Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 116, pt. \_\_ (April 15, 1970): 11933. Note that Representative Cleveland himself favored lowering the voting age but introduced Gahringer's article as an "interesting and useful" perspective. *Ibid.*, 11931.

take an extreme point of view and to push their ideas to the exclusion of all others. One need only look at what has happened and is happening on the campuses of some of our great universities to see the results of this lack of maturity.”<sup>53</sup>

Opponents darkly warned that young people’s propensity for extreme positions, coupled with their general malleability and excessive emotionalism, left them vulnerable to the evil designs of radical demagogues. Senator Spessard Holland of Florida declared: “[W]e all know that leaders of radical movements understand that patience is not a particular virtue of the young and that radicalism has had its greatest appeal to the youth between 18 and 21.” If the voting age was lowered to eighteen, he ominously predicted, political organizations would organize “with a vengeance” on college campuses. “This would be a most dangerous situation since the years 18 to 21 are now, as they have been in previous years, formative years when youth is reaching maturity during which time his attitude shifts from place to place and are the years of great uncertainties, which are a fertile ground for demogogs [sic], for youth attaches itself to promises rather than to performance.”<sup>54</sup> Gahringer argued that students were especially susceptible to the politics of their teachers, who, he maintained, were increasingly radical: “[T]o give political power to every person of eighteen or over is to increase the political power of

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<sup>53</sup> Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate Ninetieth Congress Second Session On S.J. Res. 8, S.J. Res. 14, and S.J. Res. 78 Relating to Lowering the Voting age to 18*, 90th Cong., 2d sess., May 14, 1968, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate Ninetieth Congress Second Session On S.J. Res. 8, S.J. Res. 14, and S.J. Res. 78 Relating to Lowering the Voting age to 18*, 90th Cong., 2d sess., May 15, 1968, 32–33.

the S.D.S. and similar organizations with programs for infiltrating the teaching profession.<sup>55</sup>

Opponents also began to more forcefully challenge advocates' claims that modern eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds were better educated and therefore better qualified to vote than were previous generations. In 1970, Pennsylvania Representative John R. Rarick vehemently rejected the notion that contemporary youth were more intelligent and better informed than previous generations:

. . . To the contrary, records in our public schools, the Selective Service System, and our Armed Forces show a constant decline in both intelligence and aptitude averages.

The common experience of adults – especially employers – is that today's young people cannot spell, cannot read, and cannot reason.

Yet, this is not to say that many of our young are not proficient in parroting loudly the emotional slogan [sic] programed [sic] into them by the left-wing pseudo-intellectuals dominating our schools and the mass media.<sup>56</sup>

Representative Charles Griffin of Mississippi asked rhetorically:

. . . Can we safely assume that modern education has brought such a high level of judgment to the typical 19-year-old that the precepts of our forefathers are to be sloughed off?

What actions by the persons we are asked to enfranchise suggest their readiness to accept responsibility? Is it found in the smoke from the Bank of America over California? Do student strikes over the country suggest a cool and reasoned approach to the problems facing America in 1970?<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, the *National Review* contradicted proponents' claims that student demonstrations were evidence that young people were especially well-informed about politics: "There is . . . nothing about a political demonstration that implies wisdom, judgment, or even correct information. More likely a demonstration reflects impatience,

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<sup>55</sup> Robert E. Gahringer, "On Lowering the Voting Age," Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 116, pt. \_\_ (April 15, 1970): 11933.

<sup>56</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 116, pt. \_\_ (March 20, 1970): 8493.

<sup>57</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 116, pt. 15 (June 17, 1970): 20251.

frustration, a misunderstanding of what kind of behavior persuades others—all capped off by an abundance of youthful energy.”<sup>58</sup>

Advocates of lowering the voting age responded to such charges with a two-pronged strategy. First, they insisted that the student protesters, while reprehensible, were not representative of the great majority of eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds. Second, they sought—albeit subtly—to paint politicization among young people as a positive civic development.

Members of Congress in the late 1960s, regardless of whether they supported or opposed eighteen-year-old voting, almost uniformly decried campus demonstrators. Speaking in the summer of 1968, Representative John Rooney of New York expressed support for lowering the voting age but captured the dominant sentiment toward youthful protesters:

They [the protesters] represent the socially immature who respond to pressures by emotional reactions rather than by any mental process. They are the ones who think with their glands instead of their brains. They are the ones who find it easier to conform to society’s established rules and customs but to protest and demonstrate without actually being aware of what they are against or what they are for.

They are the ones who in protest against the ‘establishment’ find themselves the willing slaves of the lunatic fringe who manipulate them as though they were puppets on a string.

They are the ones who think that an unkempt appearance – whether it be beards and flowing hair, unwashed bodies and filthy garments, or loose and shoddy morals – give them the solace and distinction to which they aspire.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> “The Right to Be 18,” *National Review*, introduced into the *Congressional Record* by Representative Louis C. Wyman of New Hampshire, Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 116, pt. \_\_ (March 20, 1970).

<sup>59</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 90th Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 114, pt. \_\_ (July 12, 1968): 21069. Even those politicians who might have been more sympathetic to the protesters easily recognized that the student demonstrations harmed the cause of eighteen-year-old voting. In a 1968 Senate subcommittee hearing, Senator Birch Bayh of Indiana, a prime mover behind the push to lowering the voting age, quickly reprimanded a young speaker who suggested that students had good reason to demonstrate: “[I]n the face of the fact that Congress is the one who passes the laws, I would heartily recommend that you encourage all your membership to lean over backwards as far as their responsible activity and responsible protest is concern, because to do otherwise is going to defeat the purposes of many people who are trying to open the channel so there can be a legally recognized means of making your voice heard in the Government.” Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate Ninetieth Congress Second Session on S.J. Res. 8, S.J. Res. 14, and S.J. Res. 78 Relating to Lowering the Voting Age to 18*, 90th Cong., 2d sess., May 15, 1968, 51.



However, proponents of lowering the voting age hurried to characterize the demonstrators as a “tiny minority”<sup>60</sup> in a vast sea of unthreatening, stable, law-abiding young people. Senator Alan Bible of Nevada urged his fellow senators to “maintain a proper perspective, and understand that the militants and renegades who foment and fuel campus and other disruptions are but a tiny minority of our young people. For every rowdy demonstrator there are thousands of serious, responsible, hardworking youngsters going about their daily business of earning a living or getting an education.”<sup>61</sup> “The vast majority of our young citizens,” asserted Representative Cornelius E. Gallagher of New Jersey, “have no taste or agreement for those who would tear apart the fabric of American society under the guise of revolutionary rhetoric.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, advocates of eighteen-year-old voting repeatedly lamented the supposed excessive media focus on unruly protesters; speaking in 1969, Representative John M. Zwach of Minnesota declared, “It is my sincere belief that while the minorities at our colleges get 95 percent of the press and television coverage . . . the vast majority of our collegiants and 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds do not agree with the destructive shenanigans of the minority . . . .”<sup>63</sup>

Those who favored lowering the voting age rejected opponents’ claims that young people were drawn to radical and extreme political positions. In 1968, Gallagher introduced into the *Congressional Record* an article by Cornell professor Andres Hacker, who memorably reassured readers that the overwhelming majority of eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds were anything but radical revolutionaries:

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<sup>60</sup> Senator Gale McGee of Wyoming speaking in favor of lowering the voting age, Congress, Senate, 90th Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 114, pt. \_\_ (July 1, 1968): 19491.

<sup>61</sup> Congress, Senate, 91st Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 115, pt. \_\_ (April 1, 1969): 8228.

<sup>62</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 115, pt. \_\_ (June 10, 1969): 15503.

<sup>63</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 115, pt. \_\_ (February 5, 1969): 2947.

[T]his potential electorate is . . . quite sober, responsible, and even prematurely mature. Most belonging to it have their sights set on careers with General Electric or General Dynamics (for all the brave talk, the country has only about 15,000 Peace Corps volunteers in the field) and they are intent on keeping their hair cut and their records clean. It is these incipient entrants to suburban and corporate American who would form the bulk of the new 18-to-21 voters—if, that is, they remember to sign up for absentee ballots before leaving home. Far from being rebellious, the men in this group who try to avoid the draft do so not out of principle but because they are anxious to get on with their traineeship at Chase Manhattan and into Westchester wedded bliss with that sorority education major.<sup>64</sup>

Many noted that several states, as well as Great Britain, had instituted eighteen-year-old voting with minimal effect. In 1970, then-Representative George H.W. Bush from Texas remarked that he had “carefully looked at the voting patterns in Georgia and Kentucky, where 18-year-olds are already enfranchised, and have found nothing radical about them.”<sup>65</sup> Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island pointed out that in the first British elections in which eighteen-year-olds were permitted to vote, the conservatives won.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, though, proponents of eighteen-year-old voting also tried to frame increased political activism among the young as evidence of a greater commitment to the public good. Like those who argued for lowering the voting age in the 1950s and early 1960s, advocates in the late 1960s (some of whom were the same people) argued that contemporary eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds were better qualified to vote than were the eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds of previous generations. But now they stressed that political involvement, as well as educational attainment, set contemporary youth apart from their predecessors. In 1968, Senator Birch Bayh of Indiana declared, “[T]his generation . . . is no longer docile, passive, and uninvolved. They are deeply involved in the issues of our time, the issues of war and peace, freedom and equality for

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<sup>64</sup> Andres Hacker, *New York Times Magazine*, introduced into *Congressional Record* by Representative Cornelius E. Gallagher of New Jersey, Congress, House of Representatives, 90th Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 114, pt. \_\_ (July 12, 1968): 21076.

<sup>65</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 116, pt. \_\_ (April 8, 1970): 10890.

<sup>66</sup> Congress, Senate, 91st Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 116, pt. 27 (October 14, 1970): 36401.

all Americans, and uncompromising fulfillment of the promise of our Nation.”<sup>67</sup>

Representative Hechler noted that he was “impressed by the fact that this generation of young people is on the whole more serious-minded than their counterparts among the students of the 1950’s. They are searching for the meaning of life, and their role in society.”<sup>68</sup> Senator Jacob Javits of New York maintained that “the most compelling reason for lowering the voting age at this point in our national history” was that “today’s 18- to 21-year-olds . . . are more highly motivated toward political action and more of them are better educated than their fathers or grandfathers ever thought possible.”<sup>69</sup>

If the voting age debates from the early 1950s until the mid-1960s were characterized by a general agreement that modern young people were an improvement on their ancestors, any such agreement disintegrated by the late 1960s. From approximately 1968 until mid-1970, proponents and opponents of lowering the voting age battled vociferously about whether eighteen- to twenty-one year olds were serious-minded and dedicated to the public good, or excessively emotional and dangerously prone to radical extremism.

## *II. Analysis*

### *A. Beyond rights and obligations*

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<sup>67</sup> Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate Ninetieth Congress Second Session On S.J. Res. 8, S.J. Res. 14, and S.J. Res. 78 Relating to Lowering the Voting Age to 18*, 90th Cong., 2d sess., May 14, 1968, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 90th Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 114, pt. \_\_ (June 27, 1968): 19135.

<sup>69</sup> Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate Ninetieth Congress Second Session On S.J. Res. 8, S.J. Res. 14, and S.J. Res. 78 Relating to Lowering the Voting Age to 18*, 90th Cong., 2d sess., May 14, 1968, 11.

What little history has been written about the Twenty-Sixth Amendment has generally omitted the persistent presence of qualified-voter arguments. A few commentators have noted that the student protests of the late 1960s hindered the movement for eighteen-year-old voting by highlighting what many adults perceived to be irresponsible and radical behavior on the part of college-aged Americans. However, no one, to my knowledge, has acknowledged the important role that arguments about young people's superior educational background and greater political knowledgeability played in sustaining the voting age issue throughout the 1950s and early 1960s;<sup>70</sup> the focus has been almost exclusively on arguments linking compulsory military service to the right to vote.

However, arguments about young people's intellectual and personal qualifications to vote were absolutely crucial to the movement to lower the voting age to eighteen, and the story of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment is incomplete without them. Indeed, while most advocates for eighteen-year-old voting cited both a reciprocity between rights and obligations (particularly voting rights and the obligation of military service) and the improved educational background of young people as reasons to lower the voting age, more than a few proponents explicitly distanced themselves from the military service–voting connection in favor of qualified-voter arguments. In 1959, Senator Keating suggested that the increased political awareness of eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds was a “more potent argument” for lowering the voting age than was the effort to link the

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<sup>70</sup> Two possible explanations for this omission spring to mind: First, by the time the issue of eighteen-year-old voting garnered widespread national attention, in the late 1960s, these qualified-voter arguments had become considerably more contentious, so commentators who focus entirely on these last few years may not realize how important such arguments were in earlier years. Second, it seems possible that historians, and especially historians of voting rights, may inadvertently overlook arguments that lack resonance today; the 1950s notion that a sophisticated public educational system was transforming young people into more intelligent, politically knowledgeable American citizens seems almost laughable in 2004, when the dominant narratives about both public education and youth's capabilities are much more negative.

minimum draft and voting ages.<sup>71</sup> Ten years later, Senator Stephen Young of Ohio, a supporter of eighteen-year-old voting, described the ‘old enough to fight, old enough to vote’ claim as “the perfect example of a non sequitur.” “The real reason 18-year-olds are entitled to vote,” he maintained, “is that a youngster of today upon graduation from high school has attained a better education and is better informed than a college graduate of 30 or 40 years ago.”<sup>72</sup>

Qualified-voter arguments were so important to the movement for eighteen-year-old voting because they addressed two of the most glaring weaknesses of the social contract rationale for linking the minimum voting age to the minimum draft age: on one chain of reasoning, the military service–voting connection led to the idea that perhaps only those who served in the military should vote; on another, it suggested that the franchise should be universal, regardless of age. By arguing not only that young people deserved the franchise as a matter of right, but also that as highly educated, well-informed citizens they would contribute positively to the polity, advocates for eighteen-year-old voting were able to minimize these rhetorical problems.

Constructed narrowly, the social contract argument for connecting military service to the right to vote went as follows: Political obligations and the right to direct representation should be reciprocal; military service is the greatest civic obligation of all, so it is only just that conscripted soldiers have the right to vote for or against the political leaders who sent them to war. While this argument played an exceptionally significant role in the movement to lower the voting age, opponents of eighteen-year-old voting noted that on this logic, voting should be limited to those in the armed forces. They

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<sup>71</sup> Congress, Senate, 86th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 105, pt. \_\_ (March 24, 1959): 5026.

<sup>72</sup> Congress, Senate, 91st Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 115, pt. \_\_ (July 24, 1969): 20699.

pointed to the fact that women, in particular, had gained the vote without being subject to compulsory military service. Speaking in 1960, Representative Rarick argued that the military service–voting connection “logically disenfranchises all of those Americans who are not eligible for military service—including all of the women of the country.”<sup>73</sup> By shifting the discussion away from rights and obligations and towards the matter of eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds’ qualifications as good voters, advocates of eighteen-year-old voting were able to avoid getting too deeply into the sticky problem of using the military draft as a reason to lower the voting age not simply for those in the armed forces, but for everyone.

These qualified-voter arguments were even more useful in addressing the problems that arose from broader constructions of the social contract rationale for coordinating the draft and voting ages. Some advocates suggested that military service was merely one of many civic obligations that justified expanding the right to vote; being subject to taxation, as well as being criminally and civilly liable for one’s actions, entitled one to voting rights. In a written statement submitted to a 1968 subcommittee hearing, Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri declared: “In a democracy such as ours it appears desirably that the obligations of citizenship be accompanied by rights to participate in the election of political representatives who establish policies who impose these obligations.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 116, pt. \_\_ (March 20, 1970): 8493.

<sup>74</sup> Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments of the Committee of the Judiciary United States Senate Ninetieth Congress Second Session on S.J. Res. 8, S.J. Res. 14, and S.J. Res. 78 Relating to Lowering the Voting age to 18*, 90th Cong., 2d sess., May 16, 1968, 110

The problem with this argument, however, is that it would open the door to lowering the minimum voting age far below eighteen, if not abolishing it altogether.<sup>75</sup> Even in the 1950s and 1960s, many states had minimum ages for civil and/or criminal liability that were younger than eighteen, and children of all ages have always been taxed on their income, as well as paid sales taxes. But even the most fervent advocates of eighteen-year-old voting had little to no interest—at least not publicly—in expanding the franchise to Americans under the age of eighteen. In the very first Congressional subcommittee hearing on the voting age issue, held in 1943, Representative Celler challenged then-Representative Jennings Randolph, one of the earliest and most energetic proponents of lowering the voting age:

Mr. Celler: Let us suppose—God forbid—that the exigencies of war would turn against us and our armies would have to be greatly augmented, and we would have to reduce the draft age to 16, as is the case in Germany today. Would you say the voting age should likewise be reduced to 16?

Mr. Randolph: No, Mr. Chairman. I would not advocate the lowering of the voting age to 16. I feel there is a point below which we should not go.

Qualified-voter arguments served to justify not only the expansion, but also the continued limitation, of the right to vote. Implicit in arguments that eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds should have the franchise because they possessed the qualities necessary to be good voters was the idea that those who did not have such qualities—i.e., those under age eighteen—should not be permitted to vote, regardless of whether or not they were subject to the obligations of citizenship. In the words of one advocate for eighteen-year-old voting, voting was “a right, but it is a right that is based upon qualification.”<sup>76</sup> By focusing on ‘qualification,’ rather than simply ‘right,’ proponents of lowering the voting

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<sup>75</sup> It would also create space for extending voting rights to non-citizens.

<sup>76</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 83rd Cong., 1st sess., June 2, 1953, 14.

age steered clear of some of the more troubling logical consequences of the social contract argument for eighteen-year-old voting.

### *B. Historical contingencies*

These qualified-voter arguments demonstrate not only that the movement for eighteen-year-old voting was driven by more than just a conceptual link between military service and voting, but also that the Twenty-Sixth Amendment itself was not, as some have implied, historically predestined. On the contrary, the voting age debates were both a product and a reflection of the events, tenor, and sensibilities of postwar America. A comparison of the qualified-voter arguments for and against eighteen-year-old voting with Founding-era rationales for excluding those under twenty-one from the franchise highlights the historically contingent nature of discussions about voting rights in both eras. Similarly, the contrast between the overwhelmingly positive vision of young people that prevailed in the 1950s and early 1960s and the more negative images that emerged in the late 1960s illustrates how dominant perceptions of adolescents' capacities were embedded in broader political and social narratives that changed over time.

#### *(1) What makes a qualified voter?*

As discussed at length above, proponents of eighteen-year-old voting maintained that the most crucial qualification for voting was political awareness; the potential voter should be able to demonstrate that he or she understood the basic principles of American democracy, knew how the government worked, and was familiar with the issues, events, and candidates of the day. “[I]f voting means anything,” Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois declaimed on the Senate floor in 1954, “it must be predicated upon intelligence,



knowledge, and comprehension, not only of the issues, but also of the virtues of the candidates.

The notion that it is important for potential voters to be knowledgeable about politics and well-informed about the issues of the day was certainly not a novel idea in 1952. However, if one compares postwar discussions about what qualities were necessary to be a good voter with similar discussions in mid-to-late eighteenth century America, the difference is striking. In particular, Founding-era political thinkers emphasized that above all, voters had to be independent from others' control, especially financial control. By the mid-twentieth century, such concerns seem to have substantially receded; while proponents and opponents of eighteen-year-old voting did debate whether eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds would be able to cast their votes independent of outside influence, the discussions focused primarily on intellectual and emotional, rather than economic and legal, independence.

The idea that individual autonomy was a prerequisite for voting rights in the republican polity was central to pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary American political thought. Eighteenth-century writers, both English and American, assumed that personal independence, or freedom from others' control, was "the most essential component of liberty and the sine qua non of citizenship."<sup>77</sup>

Historians have noted that one of the most important rationales for property requirements for the suffrage in early America was the notion that only those who were economically independent could be relied upon to cast votes free of manipulation by

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<sup>77</sup> Jack P. Greene, "All Men Are Created Equal: Some Reflections on the Character of the American Revolution," in *Imperatives, Behaviors, and Identities: Essays in Early American Cultural History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 251.

others.<sup>78</sup> In his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, published in Britain in 1765 and in the American colonies in 1771–72,<sup>79</sup> William Blackstone offered what would become an enormously influential defense of property qualifications:

The true reason of requiring any qualification, with regard to property, in voters, is to exclude such persons as are in so mean a situation that they are esteemed to have no will of their own. If these persons had votes, they would be tempted to dispose of them under some undue influence or other . . . If it were probable that every man would give his vote freely, and without influence of any kind, then, upon the true theory and genuine principles of liberty, every member of the community, however poor, should have a vote in electing those delegates, to whose charge is committed the disposal of his property, his liberty, and his life. But . . . that can hardly be expected in persons of indigent fortunes, or such as are under the immediate dominion of others . . . .<sup>80</sup>

Writing in May 1776, John Adams echoed Blackstone, asking rhetorically: “Is it not . . . true, that men in general, in every society, who are wholly destitute of property, are also too little acquainted with public affairs to form a right judgment, and too dependent upon other men to have a will of their own?” “Such is the frailty of the human heart,” he continued, “that very few men who have no property, have any judgment of their own. They talk and vote as they are directed by some man of property, who has attached their minds to his interest.”<sup>81</sup>

Historian Jack Greene asserts that this all-important criterion of personal independence, or being presumed to have a ‘will of one’s own,’ was the essential rationale behind colonial restrictions on voting, including a minimum voting age:

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<sup>78</sup> Willi Paul Adams, *The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 207–8; Keyssar, *Right to Vote*, 5, 9–10; Marc W. Kruman, *Between Authority and Liberty: State Constitution Making in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 89; Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage: From Property to Democracy 1760–1860* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 3–19.

<sup>79</sup> Wayne Morrison, preface to *Blackstone’s Commentaries on the Laws of England*, by William Blackstone, ed. Wayne Morrison (London: Cavendish Publishing, 2001), 1:cxix.

<sup>80</sup> William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 1st ed. (1765–1769; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 165. Alexander Keyssar notes that Blackstone’s argument “was repeated endlessly in the revolutionary era.” Keyssar, *Right to Vote*, 10. Chilton Williamson also underscores Blackstone’s influence on American political discussion. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 11–12.

<sup>81</sup> Adams to James Sullivan, Philadelphia, 26 May 1776, in *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1854), 9:376.

What most categories of people who were deprived of citizenship had in common was their dependence upon the wills of others: wives were dependent upon their husbands, minors and sons still living at home upon their fathers, servants and slaves upon their masters, short-term tenants and renters upon their landlords, aliens upon their native countries, Catholics upon their church, soldiers and sailors upon their commanders, debtors upon their creditors, and the poor and insane upon the community.<sup>82</sup>

Even Thomas Paine, one of the most committed democrats of the American Revolution, agreed that servants should not be permitted to vote, at least for the duration of their service: “[B]ecause their interest in is their master, and depending upon him in sickness and in health, and voluntarily withdrawing from taxation and public service of all kinds, they stand detached by choice from the common floor. . . .”<sup>83</sup>

The dependency of those under age twenty-one, then, arguably lay at the core of their exclusion from the franchise. “[C]hildren,” said John Adams, “have not judgment or will of their own.”<sup>84</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s, however, there was comparatively little discussion about whether eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds were economically independent enough to make good voters. As noted above, both proponents and opponents of eighteen-year-old voting agreed that to be a qualified voter, one had to be able to cast one’s ballot free of undue influence by others. However, the debate was about whether young people were intellectually, rather than economically, independent. Advocates of lowering the voting age stressed that high school graduates were politically sophisticated and well-informed, and therefore could be relied upon to express solely their own preferences in the voting booth. Opponents maintained that eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds’ emotional immaturity and undeveloped sense of self left them vulnerable to outside pressures on

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<sup>82</sup> Greene, “Created Equal,” 356.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas Paine, “A Serious Address to the People of Pennsylvania on the Present Situation of Their Affairs,” in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel Press, 1947): 2:287. For further discussion of Paine’s thinking about this issue, see Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 142–44.

<sup>84</sup> Adams to Sullivan, 376.

their voting choices. But hardly anyone, on either side of the debate, pointed to young people's economic independence, or lack thereof, as a reason to either lower or retain the existing minimum voting age.

Indeed, at times proponents voiced arguments that ran counter to the Founders' claims about the benefits of property holding: more than a few advocates of eighteen-year-old voting suggested that young people tended to vote *more* independently—or at least more in the interest of the public good—than did older Americans precisely because they were not as wrapped up in their own economic interests. Professor Hacker maintained that middle-aged voters' vision was often obscured by such concerns:

Far more important than the statistics on expanded schooling is the evidence that young people are now thinking for themselves . . . . America has reached the point where the voice of adult experience can no longer pretend to be the sole custodian of truth and reason. While the middle-aged may be better apprised of the 'facts' and have had a more prolonged exposure to the vicissitudes of life, it is also clear that we have our own notions of what properly constitutes a 'fact' and are not without interests in perpetuating patterns and procedures with which we feel comfortable . . . . And the wisdom of convention becomes especially entrenched in an age of affluence, when there is every impetus to bestow a moral value on an entire social system because of the comforts it has afforded to so many. . . . Put another way, young Americans -- whether careerists or critics, conservatives or liberals -- have a sharper and more detached understanding of their society than do most adults who take the status quo for granted.<sup>85</sup>

There is an argument to be made that the idea that qualified voters should be economically independent was floating around the voting age debates, if not openly, then at the level of subtext. Proponents of eighteen-year-old voting often cited statistics demonstrating that substantial percentages of eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds were employed and/or married. Indeed, a number of advocates continued to assert, as did Representative William Steiger of Wisconsin in 1970, that “[m]any of those in the age group 18 to 21 are not enrolled in institutions of higher education but are working, raising

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<sup>85</sup> Andres Hacker, “If the 18-Year-Olds Get the Vote,” *New York Times Magazine*, introduced into *Congressional Record* by Representative Cornelius Gallagher of New Jersey, Congress, House of Representatives, 90th Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 114, pt. \_\_, July 12, 1968, 21076.

families, paying taxes, and leading productive lives”<sup>86</sup> even as it became clear that ever-increasing percentages of young people were going to college and delaying their entry into the employment market.<sup>87</sup> In 1968, Representative Charles Price of Illinois declared: “Today’s young adult is . . . more responsible for his own destiny and livelihood because he become more self-sufficient at an earlier age.”<sup>88</sup>

Nevertheless, any interest in the extent to which eighteen- to twenty-one year-olds were economically independent paled next to the focus on young people’s intellectual capacities. While a full explanation of when and why the Founders’ worries about economic self-sufficiency faded and discussion of voting qualifications shifted to citizens’ mental and emotional capabilities is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting a few of the ways in which 1950s and 1960s America differed from the America of 1780.

For one thing, just as women had been able to win the vote without being subject to compulsory military service, so they had been able to gain the franchise without demonstrating that they were financially independent. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, more and more women, especially married women, steadily entered the workforce, but married women’s earnings generally supplemented, rather than replaced, their husbands’ income.<sup>89</sup> In 1970, the overwhelming majority of households were still headed by men.<sup>90</sup> Given this backdrop, it would have been odd for either proponents or opponents to try

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<sup>86</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 116, pt. 14 (June 9, 1970): 19031.

<sup>87</sup> [get cite ]

<sup>88</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, 90th Cong., 2d sess., *Congressional Record* 114, pt. \_\_ (July 8, 1968): 20101.

<sup>89</sup> James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 368

<sup>90</sup> *The Statistical History of the United States From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 42

and link the minimum voting age to the age at which young people—or more precisely, young men—became financially self-supporting.

Furthermore, the Founding-era ideal of pure personal independence expressed through the ballot box seems almost quaint in light of the political landscape in post-World War II America. By the 1950s, the role of political parties in the American electoral system was well established. Parties controlled the political process, fielding candidates, mounting campaigns, and mobilizing voters. It was widely accepted—indeed, expected—that voters of all ages were fully susceptible to such outside pressures.

The qualities that one needed to demonstrate to be considered qualified to vote in the 1780s were meaningfully different than the qualities thought relevant in the 1950s and 1960s. While there were commonalities between Founding-era thinking about voting rights and the ideas that prevailed nearly two centuries later, it is important to recognize that the Twenty-Sixth Amendment was more than just another application of ideas articulated at the nation's founding; it was a product of ideas that were shaped by intervening developments—such as woman suffrage—as well as the circumstances of the time.

## *(2) The nature of youth*

The details of the qualified-voter arguments that played such an important role in the movement leading up to the Twenty-Sixth Amendment further illustrate the incompleteness of the conventional narrative about the expansion of the franchise in America, which suggests that over time, those in power gradually realized (mostly thanks to agitation on the part of the disenfranchised) that various excluded groups did, in fact,

possess the qualities necessary to be good voters, and the right to vote was correspondingly extended. The story of the eighteen-year-old vote diverges substantially from this narrative: Dominant perceptions about young people's capacities went from overwhelmingly positive in the 1950s and early 1960s, to much more negative by the late 1960s. These perceptions were bound up with wider social phenomena; specifically, the tremendous optimism and faith in progress that pervaded the 1950s and early 1960s, and then the social upheaval of the late 1960s.

The effusive praise that advocates of eighteen-year-old voting heaped on youth in the earlier years of the movement may strike the modern reader as peculiar, but it was a clear reflection of broader ideas that prevailed in that era. Historians have remarked on the tremendous buoyancy that characterized American society in the 1950s and into the 1960s. Phenomenal economic growth and the resulting transformation of many Americans' standard of living fostered a sense of great optimism. Historian James Patterson notes, "The whole world, many Americans seemed to think by 1957, was turning itself over to please the special, God-graced generation. . . that had triumphed over depression and fascism, that would sooner or later vanquish Communism, and that was destined to live happily ever after (well, almost) in a fairy tale of health, wealth, and happiness."<sup>91</sup>

Children and education were the epicenter of these great hopes. The postwar baby boom put children at the heart of a newly and ever-increasingly affluent society, and the correspondingly expanded educational system was the locus of almost impossible

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<sup>91</sup> Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 311.

optimism. Patterson remarks, “The astonishing growth of education in the late 1940s (and thereafter) seemed yet another sign that the American dream was alive and well.”<sup>92</sup>

The sentiments that predominated in the voting age debates from 1952 until the mid-1960s, that thanks to a sophisticated educational system and technological advances, modern young people were more intelligent, politically knowledgeable, and maybe even morally superior to the generations that had come before them, were typical of the time. Youth were getting better all the time, and lowering the voting age was an expression of this faith in progress. Indeed, more than one advocate couched the case for eighteen-year-old voting in exactly these terms. In 1952, Ellis Arnall asserted: “If the young people are not an improvement over our generation and the generations before us, the world is going backwards.”<sup>93</sup> And going backwards was simply inconceivable in 1952.

By the late 1960s, however, the social and political climate had changed for the worse, as had the dominant narrative about young people’s capacity to be good voters. The optimism of the previous two decades years soured as the Vietnam War escalated, racial tensions worsened, and levels of violence and civic unrest rose quickly. And, as noted above, young people, especially college students, featured prominently in the disorder of the times. The consensus that young people were well-qualified to vote fell apart, and disagreements about whether contemporary youth were public-spirited idealists or dangerous radicals became sharp. Just as the overwhelmingly positive vision of young people that dominated the 1950s and early 1960s was a product of that era, the

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<sup>92</sup> Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 67.

<sup>93</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Grant to Citizens of the United States Who Have Attained the Age of Eighteen the Right to Vote*, 82d Cong., 2d sess., June 27, 1952, 68.



ambivalence about the nature of youth that predominated in the late 1960s was a reflection of the particular circumstances of that time.

In the final years of the 1960s, advocates of eighteen-year-old voting continued to invoke the link between military service and voting, but qualified-voter arguments gradually lost much of their power to convince. However, while the student protest movement seriously undermined the rhetorical force of the idea that contemporary youth possessed the necessary qualities to be responsible voters, it also spurred concerns that unless youth were given a legitimate outlet for their political concerns, the situation might worsen even further. As I discuss elsewhere, as the 1960s drew to a chaotic close, advocates of eighteen-year-old voting turned away from qualified-voter arguments and instead put forth the notion that lowering the voting age would create a much-needed safety valve for youthful dissent, an argument that proved to be remarkably successful in galvanizing support for the eighteen-year-old franchise.