

Why We Should Lower the Voting Age

Seth Anthony

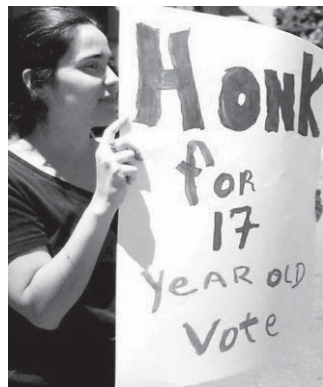
Today, we look back on those who tried to deny voting rights to women and minorities as bigoted, biased, and closed-minded. We like to think that we now see things more clearly.

But maybe our vision is still clouded by prejudice. Invoking the same tired arguments that were used to push down the rights of women and minorities for centuries, we still deny the right to vote to millions of American youth.

In 1971, during the Vietnam War, the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18. The nation realized that it was unconscionable to send youth off to fight in war, but not give them the right to vote. But 18 is just an arbitrary cutoff. So why not lower the voting age?

Opponents of lowering the voting age argue that youth will be overly swayed by their families, by authority figures, by slick commercials or by sound-bite promises.

Yet, all of us are influenced in our political views by our families, churches, mentors, friends, and the media. And if youth start voting earlier — while they're living in their home communities — they're actually more likely to start voting with an eye toward real issues.



A National Youth Rights Association member rallies to lower the voting age in Berkeley, CA.

Opponents of lowering the voting age argue that youth aren't responsible enough to vote.

And yet, in this country, people as young as 14 are permitted to drive automobiles, and people as young as 12 are tried as adults in court. Youth are held to similar standards of responsibility as older

Americans, but not given equal rights.

Opponents of lowering the voting age argue that youth aren't interested in voting, or that they don't understand how government works.

And yet, 80 percent of youth have held jobs before graduating from high school. Youth pay billions of dollars in sales, income, and payroll taxes, and they interact with the direct effects of government every day through the schools they attend, the roads they travel on, and the air they breathe. All these things are regulated by a government that youth have no say in choosing.

Opponents of lowering the voting age argue that young people's brains are not fully developed or not trained enough to reason about complex issues.

And yet, Congress, in the 1965 Voting Rights Act, declared that "any person [...] who has completed the sixth grade [...] possesses sufficient literacy, comprehension and intelligence to vote in any election."

It's patently hypocritical to refuse youth the right to vote on grounds of "immaturity," when our own laws prohibit imposing tests of maturity, intelligence, or responsibility for voting.

All the arguments used to deny voting rights to youth have been used before, against women and minorities. They were wrong then, and they're wrong now.

It's time for the United States to step forward in the advance of equal rights. It's time to lower the voting age.

Seth Anthony is a student at Rocky Mountain College in Fort Collins, CO. This piece was adapted and reprinted with permission from the Rocky Mountain Collegian, where it originally appeared on February 14, 2008.

Want to read another opinion? Chris Demers, a student at Bristol Community College in MA, is opposed to lowering the voting age. Visit <www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras>.