

Leave the Voting Age Alone

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The 26th Amendment, ratified in 1971, establishes 18 as the minimum voting age for both state and federal elections. Like all lines that divide legal childhood from adulthood, the voting age is essentially **arbitrary**. Indeed, in modern America 18-year-old voting is no longer connected to one of its more important original **justifications**, which was matching the minimum age for **draft eligibility** (itself also an arbitrary line). Despite this, raising or lowering the voting age, as some groups have suggested, seems a waste of time at best.

Interest in improving young adults' political participation should get rid of **barriers** like **residency** requirements that **exclude** college students and voter ID laws that disfavor young and mobile voters. The American colonies mostly set their voting ages at 21, like it was in British law. This requirement remained unquestioned until World War II, when several members of Congress suggested amending the Constitution to lower the age to 18. Between 1942 and 1970 federal legislators introduced hundreds of such proposals, but the issue lacked momentum until the late 1960s, when several factors, including the war in Vietnam, pushed 18-year-old voting closer to the surface of the national political agenda.

Tying voting to soldiering was always problematic, though, and it is even more so today. The contemporary U.S. military is an all-volunteer force and only a small fraction of Americans ever serve. Selective Service registration applies only to males and the possibility of an actual draft is small. Yet there is no life moment to which the voting age might be more obviously connected, and any age limit will seem unfair to some.

If we want to increase young adults' political participation, we should look at residency requirements that exclude college students and voter ID laws that disfavor young and mobile voters. More broadly, young Americans have from the same problems with voting for representatives that many in our country have. The voting age is the least of their problems.

Vocabulary

- arbitrary: determined by chance or whim
- justification: showing that something is right or reasonable
- draft: recruitment for military service
- eligibility: qualified or entitled to be chosen
- barrier: something that keeps people or things apart or prevents communication or progress
- residency: the fact of living in a place
- exclude: to leave out