



# DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

## PART TWO

## THE POWER TO PARTICIPATE

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Today, when much is made of youth voter apathy, few remember that 30 years ago 18 to 21-year olds did not have the right to vote. The year was 1971, a conflict raged in Vietnam and violent protests threatened to divide the United States over our role in that conflict. Yet out of this troubled time in our nation's history came an important result - the 26th Amendment to the United States Constitution that lowered the voting age to 18. While the debate over Vietnam raged, Congress engaged in a debate about whether 18- to 21-year-olds should have the right to vote. Suddenly young Americans were protesting against the war and challenging laws that

drafted young men to fight in a war in which they had no say. According to Department of Defense statistics, 983,000 of the 3.5 million members of the armed forces were under 21, and almost half of the American service men that died in the Vietnam War were under 21.

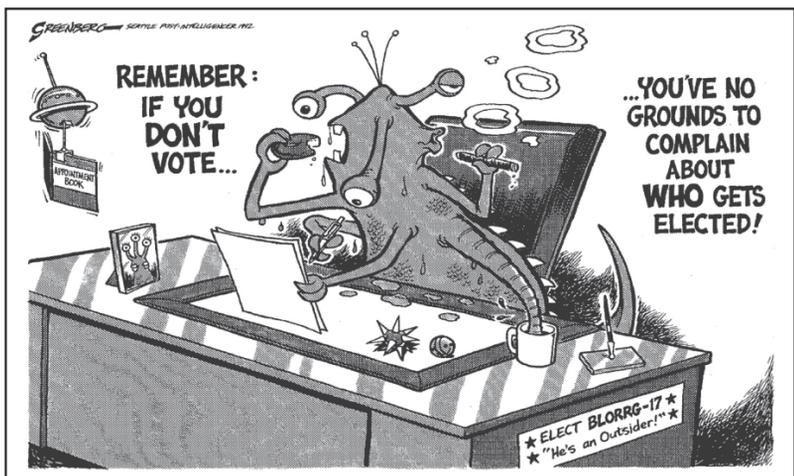
While America's youth were fighting in Vietnam, or against it, Congress was taking serious steps to reduce the age for eligible voters to 18. Senator Birch Bayh made the case for consistency. "If we are concerned about due process and equal protection, we have to be concerned about the fact that half of the young men who die in Vietnam are not old enough to vote. All of them, and all

young people, pay taxes; they are tried in our courts; and yet they do not have a voice in shaping policy." In addition, 18-year-olds were legally able to marry, drive, own a gun and consume alcohol. A common theme at anti-war protests was "if they're old enough to fight, they're old enough to vote." As it would turn out, the majority of Congress and the American people would agree that the age should be lowered. Opinion polls at the time showed between 60 and 80 percent of the people favored lowering the voting age to 18. Yet there were opponents of lowering the voting age. University of Florida Professor William Carleton summed up the opposition's view that those under 21 were immature, idealistic and easily influenced by saying "Youngsters have not yet assimilated their educational experience; they have not yet discovered their true values and real interests; they have not yet fused their secondary experience with an actual worldly one."

Some were concerned about the power it would give young voters. New Hampshire Attorney General Warren Rudman said, "Students lack practical knowledge of community affairs. It is unfair to have a town's future determined by a new group every four years." And unlike Richard Nixon, who supported lowering the age for voter eligibility, Harry Truman thought it made more sense to raise the voting age to 25 than to lower it to 18. Ultimately the major debate

would not be over the merits of lowering the voting age, but whether it would be done statutorily through a law passed by Congress or by a Constitutional Amendment ratified by the states. The Senate proceeded on a legislative course by amending the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to include a provision that lowered the voting age to 18. Despite the controversy over changing what had been viewed as a state prerogative since 1787, the amendment passed and subsequently became law.

That, however, is not the end of the story. Given the Constitutional significance of this action by Congress, the law was immediately challenged and reviewed by the United States Supreme Court. In the case, Oregon v. Mitchell, the Supreme Court found that Congress acted within its power to lower the voting age to 18 for federal elections, but did not have jurisdiction to lower the age for state and local elections. Faced with the prospect of having to implement two different election systems, a Constitutional Amendment was passed shortly after the Supreme Court decision and sent to the states for ratification. On July 5, 1971, the 26th Amendment of the United States Constitution was declared ratified. Today, "The right of citizens of the United States, who are 18 years of age or older, to vote, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of age" is the law of our nation.



### IF YOU DON'T VOICE YOUR VOTE, YOUR VIEWS WON'T COUNT

In 1971 the 26th Amendment to the United States constitution was passed to reduce the voting age from 21 to 18. The Vietnam War was raging and young people argued that if they were to be the ones to risk their lives fighting in the war it was only right that they be given the power to help choose the leaders who were to make the decisions about war and peace. Lowering the voting age meant that there were 10 million new eligible voters. Many people speculated that the new voting block would force politicians to pay special attention to young people and their issues. The 1972 election

showed a very strong turnout among this new group of voters. 50% of 18- 24 year olds turned out - as compared to a 65% turnout among voters over the age of 24. It seemed that political candidates

*Your vote is your voice. Don't be silent!*

now had a new group of voters to consider. Unfortunately, the pundits were wrong. Today, politicians need not worry about what 18-29 year olds think because they are not a significant voting block. Out of every 10 young adults, only 2 to 3 voted in the last mid-term election. In that same election, over 5 out of 10 adults aged 30 and older voted, and even more of them voted in Vermont. You can see the

result of the low participation of young voters almost every time you see or hear a candidate for president speak. Visit the candidates' websites and view their television ads. You'll find that they both focus quite a bit on healthcare, prescription drugs, and other issues that are of special concern to seniors. If you were running for president and you knew that most voters were of a certain age group, wouldn't you make sure those voters knew where you stood on their issues? The easiest way to get politicians to focus on the issues facing young people is for young adults to vote. The more young people speak out about the issues they care about, and the more young people get out and vote, the more effect they will have on the national debate.

### WHICH RIGHT IS MOST IMPORTANT

In the United States it is easy to take for granted the rights guaranteed to us in the Bill of Rights. This exercise is designed to get you to think about these rights, and to consider how these rights are important to a free society.

It is the year 2055 and you are a citizen of a small section of the planet Mars that has been colonized by humans. The small Mars nation has a government and constitution that gives the same rights to its citizens as we have in the United States.

A Martian dictator has recently invaded and taken over the nation. Not wanting to alienate the people, the dictator has decided to permit the citizens of Mars to keep 5 of the 10 rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights.

You and your group have been chosen to represent the citizens of Mars. It is your job to decide which 5 of the 10 rights to keep. Be sure to research and explain why you believe these rights are the most important.

#### TEN GUARANTEES IN THE BILL OF RIGHTS:

- Freedom of speech
- Freedom of the press
- Freedom of religion
- Freedom to assemble
- Right to bear arms
- Protection from unreasonable searches and seizures
- Protection from self-incrimination
- Right to jury trial
- Protection from cruel and unusual punishment
- Access to legal counsel

#### DID YOU KNOW?

**Only 26% of 18-29 year olds voted in the last mid-term election.**

#### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

**Since the youth voter turnout is so low, should the voting age be raised?**

Visit [VermontVotesforKids.com/vtvotes/dia.shtml](http://VermontVotesforKids.com/vtvotes/dia.shtml) to answer.

#### TALK BACK

Here are the results of last week's question: "Should non-citizens be allowed to vote?"

**20% Yes 80% No**



*"Always vote for principle and, though you may vote alone, you may cherish the sweetest reflection that your vote is never lost."*  
— John Quincy Adams

