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Problems of Suffrage: Past or Present?

Many of us know all about the famous women’s suffrage heroes: Susan B. Anthony, Alice Paul, and Elizebeth Cady Stanton. These brave suffragist heroes stood for their beliefs, eventually winning their right to vote. However, few know the story of Mabel Ping-Hua Lee. On the surface, Miss Lee was an ordinary 16 year old, daughter of a Chinese American pastor. A deeper look shows Miss Lee, as a potential student, ready to enter Barnard College, with an interest in American institutions. She finds one major defect in American institutions: “She thinks that [the limited franchise] should be extended to women” (NYT 8). The New York Times and New York Tribune wrote articles in 1912 about Miss Lee and her advocacy for women suffrage and against the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which prevented Chinese immigrants from attaining citizenship. Miss Lee went on to participate in the 1912 women’s suffrage march up Pennsylvania Avenue. At the age of 16, she rode “on horseback, in Miss Annie R. Tinker’s brigade of horsewomen (NYT 8) In addition Miss Lee went on to write an essay titled “The Meaning of Woman Suffrage,” in 1914.

Just like Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, youth today often lead the charge for social on social and civil issues. Frequently, protest and walkouts are organized by teenagers and students. These protest are often the only outlet available for these individuals to express their political concerns, since they are unable to vote until the age of 18. Young voters often wonder why the franchise of voting excludes them, as so many political topics directly affect their future. It is easy to say the problems with suffrage are behind us, however, a close look unveils evidence to the contrary.

One of the biggest problems with the American voting process is the lack of participation, as fewer and fewer people are voting in elections. Low voter turnout results in a far less accurate representation of the people. If only some voices are heard through the voting system, not everyone’s interest are served. Today’s youth are educated on civic and political issues, are tax payers who fund the federal government, and, if allowed to vote at an earlier age, will boost voter turnout. The right to vote should be lowered and extended to citizens at the age of 16.

The extension of voting rights to teens would provide a hands on opportunity to apply civic knowledge learned in government classes. Critics of this proposal claim today's youth are not educated or motivated enough to vote responsibly, and therefore should not vote. However, in the USA, sixteen year olds are just as knowledgeable about civics and political issues. Sixteen year olds have the same ability to make as good voting choices as older voters do. In fact, a peer-reviewed study published by *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* measures the civic capability of youth comparative to adult counterparts and shows youth are mature enough to follow political matters and vote. The study researched the individual’s following of national news, ability to write a letter to a representative, etc. “On measures of civic knowledge, political skills, political efficacy and tolerance, 16 year olds, on average, are obtaining scores similar to those of adults…Adolescents in this age range are developmentally ready to vote” (Hart Atkins 212-213). Throughout history, developmentally ready youth can be seen demonstrating their civic knowledge and political skills by participating in political movements, from the Civil Rights movements to Vietnam protests youth have been vital advocates. A contemporary example, 16 year old Greta Thunberg sailed from Sweden to Europe to address the United Nation's Climate Change Conference. Another modern day example is Malala Yousafzai, who famously advocated for women’s education in Pakistan, leading up to an assassination attempt on her life at the age of 16. In summary, youth today are seen, at political rallies, marches, and protests; they are active in government affairs to the extent they are allowed to be. They would gladly accept and exercise the right to vote if granted to them. These young adults are prepared to vote.

The system of taxation without representation, that our founders denounced, is still plaguing current youth. Much of youth’s current political motivation is driven by the financial resources contributed by youth. The youth, however, currently have no voice in elections. Critics claim older voters feel their ballot is cancelled out by youth who pay very little taxes; while youth might pay less in taxes than adults, they pay the same percentage (Alberts 1). Today, large numbers of youth are entering the workplace and contributing to taxes collected from income to our national government. If teenagers are earning taxable income, should they not have the same right to vote as their adult counterpart? This argument was prevalent in the women’s suffrage movement, and today’s youth are working at a higher rate (thereby paying more in taxes) than the women in the late 1910s. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics found roughly a third of American youth, between the ages of 14-19 years old, are entering the workforce (Leon 3). In fact, “Sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds work and pay taxes on their income and are affected by the decisions of elected officials today and for the rest of their lives, on issues from education policy to public works projects” (Vote 6). These teens are required by law to pay for a service that they have no say in. Women, who were granted voting rights in 1920, did not generally pay taxes because they often earned less that $3,000, which was below the federal income tax bracket. “Federal income taxes began that year [1914] for people earning more than $3,000 (which is equal to about $71,000 in today’s dollars)” (Leon 9). Dr. Atwater, an authority during the women’s suffrage movement, stated, “I protest against a system of taxation without representation — a system that our forefathers fought against in 1776” (Atwater 6). It is ironic that today the youth of America continue to be a part of this system of taxation without representation, fought for not only by the founding fathers but also by women’s suffragists. With a larger population than ever before, the third of working youth have a greater impact simply due to sheer numbers on the collection of money through federal tax. As a whole, the youth of America are generating more tax dollars for the federal government than women in the 1910s, and therefore should have representation. Women of the early 1900s were granted voting rights without being taxed nearly as much. How can this system fair for today’s working youth?

Taxation without representation is another problem the American voting system faces. Fortunately there is an easy first step to resolving this problem. Lowering the voting age can be a positive first step in increasing voter turnout for elections. Others argue that the evidence suggest otherwise “the proportion of young people who said that they were registered to vote (46.7%) was lowest over the past forty years among 18- to-29-year-olds” (Circle 2). Lowering the voting age would boost the number of voters in the short and long term, and also develop the habit of voting for youth. Recently, only about 64% of the U.S. voting-age population (and 70% of voting-age citizens) were registered for 2016 election, according to the Census Bureau report. This is very low compared with 91% in Canada (2015) and the UK (2017), 96% in Sweden (2014), and 99% in Slovakia (PEW 4). Other countries seemingly average an astonishing 50% higher rate of voter registration! To make matters worse, of the 64% of registered voters only 56% of the U.S. voting-age population cast ballots in the 2016 presidential election, which means 8% of the voting age population registered but failed to vote (PEW 1). An organization who seeks to remedy this behemoth of a problem is the National campaign lead by Generation Citizen, Vote16USA, found that lowering the voting age did increase habitual voting for youth. Vote16USA completed an analysis of the long-term effects of lowering the voting age across five countries, such as Brazil, Austria, and Germany. They found an average increase in turnout of 5 percent in the 20 years following the change in voting age (Vote 5). While this will in no way bridge the gap between the USA and other major democratic countries, lowering the voting age is the first step to developing habitual voting, thereby increasing voter turnout.

Skeptics wonder why individuals do not learn habitual voting naturally when they turn 18. If allowed to vote 16- and 17-year-olds would have the support of teachers and parents to help them with typical obstacles for first-time voters. Research shows that voters who vote when they first reach voting age are more likely to become a habitual voter later in life. Lowering the age of voting to 16 would provide young voters with multiple layers of support, as they learn about the voting process in high school government and civic classes.

Other skeptics, such as David Davenport, JD, question the maturity and civil discipline of today’s youth. Davenport states his concern:

“My concern is if 16-year-olds were allowed to vote on any kind of broad scale, what we’d actually be doing is bringing the least politically informed, the least politically experienced, the least mature in terms of making long-term judgments and trade-offs, directly into and potentially affecting our voter turnout and results” (Rafols-Nuñez 2).

Skeptics also reference a study "drawing on empirical data collected in nationally representative surveys, we argue that the weight of such evidence suggests that young people are, to a significant degree, politically less mature than older people, and that the voting age should not be lowered to sixteen” (Chan 1). Today, youth often learn about government and civics in school. They will learn and discuss the latest political issues in the classroom. This can often result in students being more informed on political topics than their parents. Stuart Goldstein, an activist of lowering the voting age to 18 just 50 years ago, stated his support support of the current effort to lower the voting age in an interview, however he is concerned the effort “could lead to 16-year-olds serving in the military” (Astor 2).

Despite critics of lowering the voting age evidence still suggest that the outcomes would be beneficial. Some argue that youth are not capable of developing long term voting habits, and others argue the youth are immature not capable of making reasonable decisions and thereby should not vote. However, in an analyses, by psychologist Laurence Steinberg, looked into the cognitive development of individuals, finding that the cognitive ability to reason logistically is matured by 16 (Steinberg 586). The concept of maturity, in the context of voting and government matters, is often confused with emotional maturity which typically is not developed until the 20’s (Steinberg 586). Cognitive skills combined with today’s education, more than equip youth to vote with the same skill as adults. As for maturity, that is hard to measure, no matter what your age, as maturity is developed by experience gained, rather than a numeric age value.

In the final analysis, youth are more and more politically involved, and have been since the suffrage movement: Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai, and Mabel Ping-Hua Lee have proven youth are prepared to have their voices heard. In 2020, we have seen youth all across the country kneel in protest at their own graduations and high school sporting events for racial equality, amidst George Floyd. With so much at stake for teens—income, roads, schools, climate change, racial equality—how can our political institutions continue to deny them the right to vote Unfortunately despite their education, investments, and the overall benefits to American democracy, the US government still inhibits today’s youth from partaking in the political process. Youth, whether America is ready or not, are becoming more politically engaged. They deserve a vote in representation. After consideration, the voting age should be lowered to 16 years old.

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