

SOONER MAGAZINE

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Affairs of the State:

Should 18-year-olds Vote?

By ROBERT S. WILSON

WORN and dog-eared though it is, the argument "old enough to fight, old enough to vote" may receive new impetus when a constitutional amendment for lowering the voting age to 18 is presented to the 20th Oklahoma State Legislature which convenes at the Capitol in January.

Of all arguments advanced in favor of the change perhaps the least important—though most attacked—is the "old enough to fight . . ." proposition. It is agreed that the qualities which make youth a better fighter do not in themselves make him a wise voter. But this does not mean that a youth of 18 is unqualified to vote with reasonable intelligence. He may have other qualities than those of the fighting man; and upon these, as well his contributions to the defense of democratic institutions, should rest his claim to the rights of an elector.

In the first place there is no valid or scientific argument for the maintenance of the traditional and arbitrarily founded dividing line—age 21. Science shows conclusively that chronological age is no key at all to physical or mental maturity. Simple observation of those surrounding you will bear this out.

On the other hand what advantages may be gained by lowering the voting age to 18? Why is there a concerted effort to effect this change? A limit must be set somewhere!

First, it should be noted that we have made tremendous progress in the processes of education. Thanks to tremendous enrolments in high schools and colleges, the youth of 18 today is far better informed and better trained in civic affairs than the youth of 21 at the turn of the century.

Why then, it may be asked, should there be any age limit? Why discriminate against 17-year-olds?

This question is best answered by Governor Arnall of Georgia in testimony before a house subcommittee when he stated that Georgia chose 18 rather than 17 because this is the age when most boys and girls finish high school and assume greater responsibility in life.

"At this time civics, social science, and matters of government are fresh in mind. Since it is not possible to exercise this knowledge for three years, the young person is likely to lose interest," he said.

Governor Arnall suggests that participation in voting privileges will not only stimulate interest but increase initiative and provide invaluable incentive and training for better citizenship.

A second argument put forth by advocates of 18-year-old suffrage is the increasing age of voters in the United States—now estimated at 45.

The older a people become, it is said, the more they are disposed to cling to conventional ways of doing things. All would be well if social relations remained static. But invention, scientific discoveries, technological advancement

combine to give us a society of swift and unending changes.

There is, of course, no prospect that the tempo of change will be less rapid in the future; and if governments on all levels meet the needs of the people with dispatch called for by new situations, it appears eminently wise to include in the electorate the freshness, intelligence, and idealistic enthusiasm of a younger age group.

It would be unfortunate, obviously, considering their want of experience, if only youth could vote; but there is also potential danger in an electorate grown progressively older, and therefore progressively less inclined to make those adjustments which, sooner or later, a dynamic society renders mandatory.

Since Georgia is the only state thus far to reduce the minimum voting age to 18 it might be well to consider the background of this successful movement.

In the latter part of the notorious regime, political meddling resulted in the black-listing of the University of Georgia. Students, all of whom stood to lose their academic credits, were deeply aroused, and even without the right to vote, campaigned so effectively over the state that they were credited with defeating the long-entrenched Talmadge machine and the election of Governor Arnall.

The Governor, deeply impressed by their energy and understanding, as well as grateful for their support, submitted the amendment lowering the voting age, which the people of Georgia, notably conservative in most matters, approved by a vote of two to one.

There is a "wise" old proverb which states—"Young men for war, old men for counsel." This, and elaborations upon it, are frequently advanced by those opposing the new trend.

But when we consider the plight of the world today, it can at least be questioned whether world affairs, now governed almost exclusively by the old, are so wisely handled.

Circumstances and situations, breeding wars and conflicts, are forever being created, with youth always called upon to give their blood (not to mention a most valuable portion of their years). It seems to some of us that "wisdom," which goes with age, the realism and experience of the "practical" man have been sold to us at a forbiddingly high premium. We feel too, that forthright idealism has been sold short in America.

Perhaps not too far in the future youth will speak with a stronger voice in the affairs of state. When they do, it is entirely reasonable to suppose that the public affairs will in no way suffer from the impact. And as for youth "being easily susceptible to influence," what starry-eyed youngster could be more uncritically devoted to any "screw-ball" theory than most of you oldsters or midsters are to many absurdi-

ties and stupidities in the status quo? You need not leave your county or your state to discover political practices and procedures which offer no guarantee except that inadequate public services shall be rendered at excessive costs.

Ed's Note: The series on problems of Oklahoma government, written by Professor H. V. Thornton, was interrupted this month to present a short commentary on a topic of timely interest to Oklahomans. Mr. Wilson, junior student in the University from Muskogee, returned to the campus after serving two years with the Signal Corps in the states and Alaska. (See story on page 5.)

The Cover

Mildred Andrews, '37fa, assistant professor of music, is one of the leading organists and teachers of organ in the nation. Photo by Richard Meek.

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