

Franchise at 18?

by John Filliter

What is the franchise? The answer to this question lies at the very heart of democracy. Democracy is a political system designed to substitute a more civilized procedure for the use of naked force in the pursuit of individual objectives.

Certain interests common to all men are embodied in the law as rights. People are permitted to seek goals other than these basic needs through peaceful political activity. The method of deciding which interests shall be given first attention in the election. Thus majority rule decides government policies while minority and social interests are safeguarded by law.

In an election, every adult has one vote; he has influence in the decision equal to that of any other individual. Degree of interest and intelligence are not taken into consideration. However, the system assumes the exercise of the right to vote by every citizen; voting entails responsibility as well as privilege. Thus democracy is an ideal which is only imperfectly realized; less than 40% of the electorate voted in the recent New Brunswick civic elections, bribery is an accepted thing, and apathy is rampant. It is true that there is less identification of the individual with the system when he is dwarfed by numbers, but every not cast is a blow to the democratic ideal.

The right to vote should theoretically be granted to every citizen. Practical considerations have prevented this, fortunately; obviously babes-in-arm are not capable of voting in an intelligent and responsible manner. The purpose of qualifications on the voting age is to limit the participants in a decision to mature individuals. The problem arises in applying the principle to practice. Who are "mature individuals"? Since not all people agree on the answer, is there an impartial body which can deal with the question? Assuming that an examination for maturity could be devised, is there anyone qualified to interpret the results? Since no acceptable judging authority is available we have accepted the need for some indisputable criterion which is related to maturity. Age cannot be disputed, and has some correlation with maturity. Despite such defects as the fact that different people mature at different rates and that there is little difference in maturity of an individual between the last day he is twenty and his twenty-first birthday, the arbitrary age criterion has been accepted. Having accepted that age is to be the qualification, the question arises as to what age. The difference in opinion on this matter is evident from that fact that of the ten provinces of Canada, four (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario and Manitoba) have adopted 21, three (Newfoundland, Alberta and British Columbia) 19, and three (Prince Edward Island, Quebec and Saskatchewan) 18. The Federal voting age is 21.

What is the measure of Maturity? This is a very difficult question to answer, but among the factors to be considered are intelligence, responsibility, and experience. Intelligence includes many things; knowledge, understanding, perception and sound judgment. Interest is essential if a person is to seek information. How impressionable is youth? How responsible are young people? Are they serious? Sensible? Sensitive? Are they willing to accept more responsibility? Are they seeking a chance to prove themselves? Are they worthy of trust? What of experience? Obviously time is required to acquire that wisdom which comes from doing. However, how can anyone gain experience if denied the opportunity to participate? To what degree have young citizens been accepting adult roles and responsibilities?

What is the role of youth in politics? It must prepare for future leadership. It has much to offer . . . idealism, imagination, energy, a fresh approach. Just what role should it play?

These are just a few of the questions raised by the issue. To further complicate matters, people accept the proposal to varying degrees. Some claim the change would be too drastic. Others point out that the chance of voting once more in one's life is only sixty percent, by way of minimizing the change. What do you think? Are eighteen year olds mature enough to vote? Personally I believe that they are, though improvements in political education should accompany the lowering of the voting age.