

VOTING AGE OF 18 YEARS. ADOPTED BY THE DANISH FOLKETING, REJECTED BY THE POPULAR REFERENDUM

During the entire postwar period the question of the voting age has cropped up in the Danish public debate at short intervals. According to Denmark's previous constitution in force until 1953, the voting age for elections to the lower house was 25 years, and to the upper house 35 years. In drafting the new unicameral constitution, which came into force in 1953, a compromise was reached. The voters, through a referendum, were to decide whether the voting age should be 23 or 21 years. But the voting age, which was thus established, could be amended in the future only if the proposed amendment was subjected to popular referendum and was not rejected by a majority made up of at least 30 % of the *eligible* voters.

The outcome of the popular referendum in 1953 was that the voting age was set at 23 years. In 1961 the voting age was lowered to 21 years with relative ease, both in the Folketing and the referendum. Within a short time, however, the demand was put forward to lower the age to 18 years, particularly by the Socialist People's party.

When the matter was considered in the early part of 1968, four standpoints emerged: The Socialist People's party and the Left Socialists advocated that the voting age be lowered immediately to 18 years. The Social Democrats recommended the same age as an eventual goal but would be content with lowering the age to 20 as a first step. Spokesmen for the government and the Liberals only came out in support of the voting at 20 years, without mentioning anything about future reductions. The Conservative and Radical spokesmen expressed themselves more vaguely, but on the whole were very positive toward reductions. They mainly stressed the need for studies.

The matter was considered again during the 1968/69 legislative session, both in the form of a government bill calling for a voting age of 20 years and a private bill for 18 years. During the first reading of the government bill, a significant change in position occurred. The Social Democrats now supported the demand to lower the voting age to 18 years immediately, and one of their arguments — that the matter had been widely discussed among party members — is especially noteworthy.

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report the committee urged that the party's voters' associations be politically activated. They were to become more involved in formulating day-to-day policies. As a result, the party began to send out proposals for a broad discussion by the members, after which the voters' associations sent in reports on the results of the discussions. On the question of lowering the voting age the result was an overwhelmingly positive attitude toward 18 years and this caused Social Democratic spokesmen no longer to be so apprehensive about an immediate reduction to 18 years. On the other hand this prompted comments on the principle of whether members of the Folketing were bound to follow the opinion of the voters' associations.

As yet there were no decisive changes among the non-Socialist parties. All party spokesmen declared their support for the government bill. But it was a well-known secret that opinion was divided and the government presented the matter for consideration free from party discipline.²

Consideration in committee was very short. On 4 June 1969 the second reading occurred, and two days later the third and final reading. Now a major reversal occurred. A committee majority, composed of representatives of both the opposition and governing parties, proposed an immediate reduction to 18 years.

The shift was most pronounced among the Radicals. The party spokesman backed the amended proposal, and parallel to his Social Democratic colleague during the first reading, he referred *inter alia* to his party's voters' association: the party conference had recommended 18 years.

During the final vote he received the support of a clear majority of his party. Only a small minority of the Conservatives deserted the government, and only one Liberal.

The members of the government voted as a body against the proposal —

Figure 1. Voting during the Second Reading on 4 June 1969*

	For 18	Against 18	Absent	Total
Socialist Labor Group	2	0	0	2
Left Socialists	2	0	0	2
Socialist People's party	11	0	0	11
Social Democrats	60	0	3	63**
Radicals	17	8	2	27
Conservatives	9	28	0	37
Liberals	1	28	5	34
Faroese Independent	0	1	0	1
Greenland MPs	1	0	1	2
	103	65	11	179

* During the second reading — but not during the third — a recorded vote was taken. The differences between the two votes were minor. During the third reading 101 voted for, 66 against and 12 were absent.

** Includes 1 Faroese representative.

except a Radical minister who was absent — but they did not regard the defeat as a vote of no confidence. It had been a free vote, but even without party discipline party lines had played a decisive role. Only 18 members had opposed the predominant view in their party while 148 had voted in support of the party line.³

During the entire consideration of the matter — from the first reading — the parties referred to the expected reaction of the voters during the mandatory popular referendum. Especially those who opposed a voting age of 18 pointed constantly to the possibility of rejection, and finally urged the electorate to vote against the law. The importance of the electorate as a participant in the decision-making process was particularly evident, however, in a statement by the Radical spokesman during the first reading, when he still favored a voting age of 20: If the majority for 20 years was sufficiently large, it would be possible to try to introduce a reduction to 18 years very quickly — before the local elections in 1970.

This concern for the electorate's reaction received a more concrete background after the consideration of the matter in the latter part of 1968 in the form of a Gallup poll. This revealed quite depressing figures for the proponents of a substantial reduction. 45 % of the respondents favored 21 years, 48 % 20 years, while 7 % answered "do not know". So far so good. The government bill had a substantial chance of being accepted.

But this was not the case with a further reduction. Supporters of a voting age of 20 years were additionally asked about their attitude toward a choice between 21 and 18 years. Of those who were asked this additional question, 35 % favored 18 years, 59 % desired 21 years, while 6 % answered "do not know".

In the total population, the opinion in favor of 18 years was ostensibly quite limited, and it may be correct to say that the probable reaction of the electorate did not influence the majority proposal for a voting age of 18. However, it cannot be denied that the popularity factor inhibited some MPs from supporting 18 years and may in particular contribute to explaining the hesitancy exhibited by several parties to support lowering the voting age that far. If this line of reasoning is correct, it can be said that the attitude of the party organization was the most influential factor. The statements by the spokesmen of the Social Democrats and the Radicals also point in this direction.

The Folketing's adoption of the proposal to lower the voting age to 18 did not have any decisive effect on popular opinion. This was confirmed by a new Gallup poll on June 22 — two days before the referendum. 27 % of the respondents favored 18 years, 64 % were against, and 9 % answered "do not know". Opposition varied quite naturally in relation to the age of the voters in the younger age groups. In the older age groups, the opposition was more uniform.

According to the Gallup poll, a majority of at least 30 %, irrespective of age, wanted a rejection of the proposal. Only the extent of the rejection varied.

This was also true when the results were classified according to party, except

Figure 2. *Public opinion according to age*

Age	21—24 %	25—29 %	30—39 %	40—49 %	50—64 %	65 and over %
I Against 18	51	60	62	68	71	71
II For 18	43	34	29	21	24	18
III Don't know	6	6	9	11	5	11
I — II	8	26	33	47	47	53

Figure 3. *Public opinion according to party preference*

	Socialists (SF)	Social Democrats	Radicals	Conservatives	Liberals
I Against 18	46	56	72	81	92
II For 18	46	34	23	13	4
III Don't know	8	10	5	6	4
I — II	0	22	49	68	88

for the Socialist People's party (SF), in which opposition and support were equal.

It ought to be noted, however, that although the rejection was quite general in all the parties, there was a clear variation in the electorate's attitude related to the parties' positions in the Folketing. The parties opposing the proposal in parliament also had the largest percentages of opponents among their voters.⁴

The actual referendum on June 24 confirmed the Gallup polls' picture of antipathy, if not to say "over-confirmed". In all 126 constituencies, a majority was against a voting age of 18 years, and for the country as a whole the rejection was overwhelming:

For 18 years: 444,724 voters (14 % of the eligible voters)

Against 18: 2,095,412 voters (50 % of the eligible voters)

The requirement that a majority made up of at least 30 % of the eligible electorate vote against the law proposal in order that it be vetoed was thus amply fulfilled.⁵

The final results also exhibit, however, a correlation with party affiliation. Computed by constituencies, the correlation between the working class parties' share of the votes cast in the 1968 election (the very parties entirely in favor of the reduction in the Folketing) and the *negative* referendum votes was to .82.⁶

During the legislative session 1969/70 the government, with general support, reintroduced its proposal to lower the voting age to 20 years.

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NOTES

- ¹ *Folketingsårbog 1967—68*, Copenhagen, 1968, pp. 562—64.
- ² *Folketingstidende 1968—69*, col. 1598—1632.
- ³ *Ibid.*, col. 7710—7741 and 7747—7753.
- ⁴ *Berlingske Tidende*, 22 June, 1969.
- ⁵ *Statistiske Efterretninger 1969*, para. 789.
- ⁶ Ole Riis. "Folkeafstemningen om 18 års valgret", *Økonomi og Politik*, 1969, p. 223.