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Statement of Senator Mansfield - Action of Congress to Extend Vote in National Elections to 18, 19, and 20 Year Olds

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Mr. President:

The Supreme Court has just ruled Constitutional—at least in part—the action taken by Congress to extend the vote in national elections to all citizens 18, 19 and 20 years old. In my judgment, that opinion will live as one of the most—if not the most—significant decisions the high Court has handed down in its long history.

There is no doubt that when Congress voted to extend the franchise of the ballot there were legitimate questions raised about the constitutionality of such action. Those questions have now been resolved. There was never any question, however, about the importance of the action in bringing young people into the "system." That is where they belong.

Up to now the youth of today had a legitimate grievance. For all their interest, for all their work and effort, for all the opinions they expressed; nothing counted. Nothing they did or could do for that matter made much difference. They were denied the ballot. They could not vote. They could not directly influence policy decisions at the polls.

Up to now those 18, 19 and 20 were told to fight our wars even though they themselves had no right to choose the officials who made the decisions that led to war.

Up to now, at 18, a young adult was treated by our courts as fully responsible for his legal actions—both civil and criminal—and were made to suffer the full penalties of the law. Yet they could not pass judgment on the men chosen to enact those laws. They got married. They paid taxes, too, but had no real voice in the imposition of those taxes. In short, up to now the full responsibility has been on us, the other generation. We have borne the full
burden of our actions as they have affected young people. And our actions affected young people to a great extent.

Now much of that has changed. With this opinion, the Supreme Court has opened the way for joining the youth of today with the youth of yesterday. With this opinion, the Supreme Court has shifted the burden and placed it where it belongs—on the young people themselves—on those who have raised their voices and pointed their fingers, on those who decried and criticized for being saddled with responsibilities and obligations that in many cases they neither sought nor sanctioned.

I welcome their fresh approaches; their criticisms; their interest and concern. The fact that some young people exhibit disdain for certain of our institutions should in no way reflect upon the great majority of our youth. With the vote they will establish themselves quickly for what they are: alert, interested, mature and concerned. Henceforth their judgments cannot be ignored. Given the vote, these young people have been challenged to prove their worth and the value of their contributions to our system. I am confident that they will meet that challenge. On their behalf, I welcome it.