

Washington: The Eighteen-Year-Old Vote

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, June 18 — When the House of Representatives voted 272 to 132 to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 in all Federal, state and local elections, it raised some fundamental questions for the President, the Supreme Court and the young people of this country.

First, was the vote constitutional? Would this decision, previously approved by the Senate, be signed by the President, and approved by the Supreme Court? And, oddly enough, did the young people of the country—even the troubled and militant university students—really understand the significance of the vote?

The answers to these questions are not at all clear. Strangely, despite all the political uproar on the campuses against old policies and old politicians, there has been a surprising indifference among university students to this legislation for the 18-year-old vote.

The Student Indifference

The bill now going to President Nixon for approval would give the vote to eleven million young Americans — probably enough to make the difference between victory or defeat in

the next Presidential election —yet, oddly enough, even the political activists on the university campuses have paid relatively little attention to this legislation.

In the last few weeks since the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, they have been coming to Washington to protest and lobby against the intervention of American forces, and to complain about the indifference of the politicians to their views, yet they have protested against almost everything except their inability to vote on the great issues of public policy.

Even James MacGregor Burns, the distinguished American historian at Williams College, has recently been wondering about this contrast between student militancy on the one hand and student indifference to vote on the other. It is, he says, the most interesting paradox and cop-out of the student movement. He is one of the most influential advocates of student protest in the country, yet is baffled by what he regards as student indifference to the right of the 18-year-olds to vote.

The British have given the vote to the 18-year-olds this year for the first time, and there is some evidence that they have voted, not so much for

the Conservatives, but against what has been and for something new. Accordingly, this issue of the 18-year-old vote in the United States could, if it is approved by the courts—where it must go before it is valid—be decisive in the critical elections of America in the next few years.

The Young Vote

It will be interesting to see what President Nixon does with the 18-year-old vote bill when it comes to him for signature. Aside from his political interests, he clearly has sincere doubts about whether the issue can be settled by the Congress, or whether it must be determined by a constitutional amendment, which would take a great deal of time, maybe beyond the 1972 election.

Still, he has argued that his young critics in the universities should work "within the existing political system" and not take their grievances into violence in the streets, and the guess here is that he will not veto the measure, but let it be settled in the courts.

There are clearly high political stakes involved here—maybe even the control of local, state and Federal elections in the next few years—but the philosophic argument between

the generations may prove in the end to be more important than the political argument between the Republican and Democratic parties.

As Representative John B. Anderson, Republican of Illinois, said during the debate on the floor of the House, "Young people are afflicted with a sense of powerlessness. We tell them to work within the system, but the system prevents them from participating."

President Nixon is now up against this point. The mathematics of the House vote are against him: Over two-thirds of the House members voted for the 18-year-old vote. Fifty-nine Republicans joined 165 Democrats in giving 18-year-olds the vote, and though he has made partisan arguments on the issue, he clearly does not want to go against the coming generation.

Besides this, the private evidence here is that he doesn't really want to fight the young or the future, whatever his arguments about Vietnam in the past. He is looking to the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. He has moved beyond his old political arguments of the past, and with this vision of 1976, he needs the young even more than he needs the old.