

Mark Davis: At what age does a child become an adult? Try to find a consistent answer in politics

By Mark Davis

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As various high-schoolers have called for stricter gun control to solve mass shootings, some have naturally become favorites in certain corners of social media. A common sentiment from like-minded adults has been that these kids are so bright that we might be governed better by their generation than by the current Congress.

Lovely compliment. But I'm guessing such fawning would not be extended to high schoolers favoring armed teachers over disarming law-abiding gun owners.

But the point is that whether this admiration is genuine or a product of political opportunism, the suggestion is that there are some high-school-age kids out there showing laudable adult wisdom. How curious, then, that so many praising these kids would deny young people a basic constitutional right.

Welcome to the gun-buying age debate.

It begins with the basic concept of adulthood. When does it begin? The best answer is the one we know from experience: It varies from person to person, and for some it never really kicks in. But there are many laws that apply only to adults, so we have to figure out when we become one. Any number we choose will be arbitrary, giving too much credit to some and too little to others.

The additional problem is, we have grown uncomfortable with establishing a single moment that opens the doors of adulthood. After the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1971, various states began to roll back their drinking ages from 21, on the logic that anyone who can choose our leaders ought to be able to drink a beer.

There was, of course, a fairly immediate increase in drunken driving deaths, leading to states swinging back to drinking ages of 21. Voting age and virtually every other vestige of legal adulthood remained at 18. If curbing DWI is our only motivator, we can raise the driving age to 30, and death tolls would drop at once. We will never do that, of course, because we would never strip driver's licenses from all Americans in their 20s.

But we gladly tell adults between the ages of 18 to 20 that they cannot drink. And we may be about to tell them they cannot buy a gun, either. The difference is that there is no constitutional right to drink. Prohibition failed, but it was not unconstitutional.

The lunge toward telling law-abiding Americans that they do not have Second Amendment rights until they turn 21 must be rejected on its face. This overreaction is sadly happening with the assistance of some Republicans (like Florida Gov. Rick Scott and maybe even President Donald Trump) who think caving on this core value earns them points as reasonable people. They need to rethink.

We are understandably mortified by the prospect of a 19-year-old shooting up a school, yet we salute and encourage the 19-year-old with even heavier armament if he is deployed with the military. The weapon is not the issue in this comparison, it is the 19-year-old.

Some 19-year-olds should not be able to buy guns. Some 50-year-olds should not be able to buy guns. But if we have decided that the 18th birthday is when the mantle of adulthood applies, there is no argument that can be made for denying those Americans one of our most basic rights.

If there is an unshakable American will to establish a gun-buying threshold of 21, there is only one way to justly make that change: return the voting age to 21 as well.

Since that won't be happening, let's stop punishing responsible, law-abiding young Americans for the evils of a tiny few.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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