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Conversations about Life

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Eighteen-Years-Old or Twenty-One-Years-Old? When Are We Truly Adults in the United States as Defined by US Laws

Adulthood in the United States is something that many people believe is easy to define: one is an adult in the US when he or she turns 18-years-old. By the time one is 18 (in Ohio), he or she can legally drive a car (after getting a license), see both Rated-R and NC-17 movies without a parent, sign legal documents and forms, buy cigarettes, purchase lottery tickets, enlist in or be drafted by the military, be Tried as an adult, perform jury duty, vote in elections, consent to sex, and get married. However, turning 18 does not immediately guarantee certain rights in the US. One must be 21-years-old to drink, gamble, book a hotel (for must hotel chains), and obtain a credit card (depending on certain conditions) and be 25-years-old to rent a car (from most rental agencies). With the discrepancies between legally being an “adult” and legally being able to do activities associated with being an adult, the question of when one is truly an adult in the US is raised.

Before there can be an examination of what makes one an adult in the US, the definition of adult, in general, must be stated. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an adult is “[someone] having reached the age of maturity; grown-up”[[1]](#footnote-1) and “mature in attitude, outlook, behavior, etc.; emotionally and mentally grown-up.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Another aspect of what constitutes when someone has entered adulthood is the chemistry of the brain and the time in which it has fully developed and matured. Laurence Steinberg[[3]](#footnote-3) states, “…some brain regions and systems do not reach full maturity until the early or mid-20s,” meaning that someone is not fully physically developed in his or her “prefrontal regions”[[4]](#footnote-4) until a few years after 18 years of age. Similar research is usually used as a justification for the high drinking and gambling age laws; yet, if this research was used fully, then many things 18-years-olds can legally do should not be allowed until they are 21-years-old. Steinberg notes, “Age boundaries are drawn for mainly political reasons, not scientific ones. It’s unlikely that brain science will have much of an impact on these thresholds, no matter what the science says,” meaning that laws that include age requirements are made for more arbitrary reasons.

One has to be 21-years-old to gamble, but only has to be 18-years-old to purchase lottery tickets. While lottery tickets do not require the same amount of money and have less of a risk of losing money, they can still prey on young people and invite them to spend their money for a chance to gain more money- just like gambling. The lawmakers believe that one has to be mature enough to gamble as gambling could cause debt for addicted gamblers or people who do not necessarily understand risk and reward (such as anyone under the age of 21), but accept that a lottery ticket is not the same as betting one’s money for the chance of monetary gain. Therefore, gambling is an “adult” activity, while scratching lottery tickets is something that less mature people can legally do. The differences between the two laws are major in the impact, but perhaps invoke some confusion about what is legal and appropriate at what age. This law difference is just one of the examples of laws that can be a bit contradictory when age requirements are involved.

A person in the state of Ohio can drive a car without a parent before he or she can see a Rated-R[[5]](#footnote-5) movie without one. In Ohio, a woman 16 years of age can get married[[6]](#footnote-6) without the consent of her parents or guardians before she can see a Rate-R movie without them (“Ohio’s Marriage Laws”). While the Motion Pictures Association of America’s rating system is not law, it reflects the contradictory elements of US laws concerning age requirements. People in the US accept that a young person can handle driving a motor vehicle and being married before he or she can handle hearing the word ‘fuck’ more than once.[[7]](#footnote-7)

These laws seem to both underestimate and overestimate the capabilities of someone 18-years-old. While these have logical reasons for their age requirements (one has to be 16 years of age to legally work, so getting a license at 16-years-old allows for a person to drive to work; marriage has, in tradition, always involved woman that were 14-years-old or older (sometimes younger) when they got married), they still add to the confusion of when someone is truly and legally an adult in the United States. More recent[[8]](#footnote-8) law changes involving age requirements have their roots in events and situations that brought about movements to change the laws.

When the voting age was lower to 18-years-old from the original 21-years-old (the 26th Amendment), the reason was not that Congress and the Supreme Court recognized 18-years-olds as mature, competent decision makers. The decision was made because they realized that they had been drafting young soldiers that could not even vote for the people sending them into war (Cheng).[[9]](#footnote-9) The 26th Amendment, however, made 18-years-olds the equivalent of adults, as they now had equals rights.[[10]](#footnote-10) Through this final act, 18-years-old became the United States’ definition of legally being an adult. A couple decades later, however, that definition began to lose its meaning as people became less trustworthy of young Americans and lobbied for a new law that would ultimately restrict being a full legal adult until one is 21 years of age.

The drinking age is perhaps one of the most controversial laws in the United States. Many see it as an ineffective law that merely encourages people under 21-years-old to hide their drinking and partying; others see it as a way to prevent drunk driving and any damage to the prefrontal regions due to the effects of alcohol consumption. The differing oppositions have logical reasons for their stance on the drinking age. While the law is unlikely to change in any recent time[[11]](#footnote-11), there is an importance in looking at the law that essentially prevents people over 18-years-old and younger than 21-years-old from being considered full adults.

In the mid-1980’s, fatalities caused by drunk driving was very high, and people began to look for a cause and a solution (Streeter). The cause some people found was that many people between 18-years-old and 21-years-old drank and drove, so the solution became to raise the legal drinking age. While drunk driving has gone down since the law was passed, this decline is more connected with educating people (of all ages) on drunk driving and the dangers and risks involved than with raising the drinking age (though that did have some effect) (Streeter). The law has been mostly ineffective in preventing most people under 21-years-old from drinking; underage drinking has become so rampant that it is considered the norm on most college campuses. At the University of Cincinnati, almost 5[[12]](#footnote-12) out of 1000 crimes reported are alcohol related (CampusDiscovery.com). Even though 96% of University of Cincinnati students “party safe,”[[13]](#footnote-13) there are dangers with anyone drinking excessively (“UC Alcohol and Other Drug Statistics”). With the constant underage drinking (much of which involves binge drinking), “3,000 Americans under the age of 21 are dying every year of alcohol-related causes other than driving including homicide, suicide, and alcohol poisoning” (Streeter). Some of these deaths are believed to have been preventable, but people did not call the police or ambulance for fear of being caught drinking underage.

So if drinking underage can endanger one’s life, why would he or she drink? The answer is quite simple: drinking is seen as a social norm and a sign of maturity. With drinking being about the only thing an 18-year-old cannot do, it becomes something seen as exclusively for more mature adults. Some younger people believe that they have so many things that they are legally allowed to do once they turn 18-years-old that they should be allowed to drink as well; thus, the law is seen as unfair and illogical, so it is easy to justify ignoring it. John McCardell[[14]](#footnote-14) summarily states, "Why don't we trust these young adults to make the same kind of responsible decisions about alcohol that we believe them capable of making in the voting booth, in the jury box, on the battlefield?" (Streeter).

The drinking age almost undermines what it means to be an adult in the United States. Laws (in Ohio) allow for someone 16 years of age to consent to having sexual intercourse with someone 18-years-old and older, meaning that the US believes a 16-year-old can make more logical decisions about sex than he or she can about drinking. Does that not make drinking a more “adult” thing to do than having sex? At 18-years-old, a person can make the decision to enlist in the military and fight for the US- a decision that could have great emotional, mental, and physical consequences- but cannot make the legal decision to drink alcohol. The US is expressing the idea that decision to drink is more serious and necessitates more maturity than risking one’s life for his or her country.

Attending college and earing a degree is often seen as something quite mature and adult, so the reality that underage drinking is so prevalent on college campuses is not very surprising. Those who attend college have made the decision to earn a degree for the betterment of their future and, therefore, see drinking as a way to express their maturity. Despite the law, the underage drinking will continue, as the law is not viewed as something taken that seriously. Underage drinkers know the risks of being caught, but consider the reward of drinking more favorable than the unfavorable legal consequences. Attempting to make people that are considered adults abstain from drinking is completely ridiculous. The law is ineffective and could use some major adjustment in order to make it both logical and applicable.

One proposal for changing the law that I believe would be effective is the idea that 18-years-olds should take alcohol education courses and be given a drinking permit (similar to a driver’s license). McCardell proposes that “licensing would work like drivers education[[15]](#footnote-15) — it would involve a permit, perhaps graduated, allowing the holder the privilege of purchasing, possessing and consuming alcohol, as each state determined, so long as the holder had passed an alcohol education course and observed the alcohol laws of the issuing state” (NYTimes.com). By allowing students to take control of their ability to drink, educating them on alcohol, and providing consequences for improper actions (buying for minors could get one’s permit revoked), this licensing could greatly impact younger people’s drinking habits for the better. While this new arrangement would still not bring 18-years-olds back to the equivalent of full adults, it would bring more equality and consistency in lawmaking and age requirements.

I believe the best use of laws that have age requirements is for effective prevention. The drinking age does not help prevent underage drinking, but, rather, makes underage people more secretive and dangerous with their drinking. Disallowing people under 18-years-old from smoking prevents people from becoming addicted to cigarettes when they are most susceptible to being influenced into smoking. Making gambling illegal until someone is 21-years-old can prevent younger people from going into debt at such a young age. Along the same line of this last point, in February of 2010 a new law was passed that would also help prevent younger people from going into debt. The new law means someone under 21-years-old cannot “get a credit card unless they have an independent source of funds to pay the bills…or they’ll need a parent to co-sign the application (and submit written permission before the credit limit can rise)” (Lieber). By protecting young people from entering into debt, the law helps prevent people under 21-years-old from making poor financial decisions.

But even with prevention laws, the question still is: at what age are we adults in the US? With the malleability of adulthood when laws and age requirements are involved, determining when we become adults can be almost impossible. I would say that at 18-years-old we are almost adults, but at 21-years-old we become full adults in connection with the laws. While at 18-years-old we can get married, vote, sign legal forms, and numerous other things, we cannot drink. Drinking is not something that completely exemplifies what it means to be an adult, but it is an important aspect of adulthood in the United States. Drinking is often associated with pleasurable experiences (weddings, group meals, parties, etc.) and a sign of maturity in some cultures. Through raising the drinking age, lawmakers took away this aspect of maturity from people between 18-years-old and 21-years-old. 21-years-old became the age of adulthood through the law change. I would rather say that we are not truly adults until our brains have fully matured, but then that age would be indeterminable as brain maturity happens at different times for everyone. So if 21-years-old is when we are truly adults, then why do most legal milestones happen when people are 18-years-old?

When someone is 18-years-old, he or she will typically graduate high school and enter into a career or college. Making laws that allow people more freedom just as they leave high school makes sense for society. Even if someone’s brain is not mature until he or she is 25-years-old, it is still developed enough to help some drive a car, understand legal forms, understand the consequences of sex, and other “adult” attributes and activities. At 18-years-old, a person can make sound decisions and think independently. Regardless of all 18-years-olds’ abilities and capabilities, they are still seen as people who are immature and behave less “adult” than older people. Adult is a flexible term that is shaped not only by laws, `but also by society’s views of maturity, scientific evidence for brain development, and numerous other aspects in a country’s culture and identity. In the US, with all our cultural understanding and comprehension of science, adulthood is ultimately defined by the changing views on when someone should no longer be restricted by law because of his or her age. That age would be 21-years-old.

1. Definition 1.a [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Definition 2.b [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Laurence Steinberg is a professor of psychology at Temple University [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The prefrontal regions “…are important for planning ahead, anticipating the future consequences of one’s decisions, controlling impulses, and comparing risk and reward” (Steinberg). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rated-R means that anyone under 17-years-old must have an adult accompanying him or her [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A man can get married without consent at 18-years-old (“Ohio’s Marriage Laws”). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Use of more than one sexually derived expletive makes a movie automatically Rated-R [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Recent meaning within the last 50 years [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. -“…in modern America 18-year-old voting has become unmoored from one of its more important original justifications, which was matching the minimum age for draft eligibility” (Cheng) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The drinking age was 18-years-old at the time the 26th Amendment was passed [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 64% of Ohioans strongly oppose changing the law; 56% of Ohioans ages 18-29 strongly oppose changing it, with only 21% strongly favoring changing it in 2009 poll (Rademacher). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Technically, 4.89/1000 according to CampusDiscovery.com [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Partying safe means University of Cincinnati students marked on box on a checklist of things that constitute safely partying, including using a designated driver, eating before or during drinking, and keeping track of drinks (“UC Alcohol and Other Drug Statistics”). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John McCardell is the president of the University of South in Sewanee, Tennessee and has started a movement to return the drinking age to 18-years-old. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “What (McCardell) does mean is mandatory classes in high school that would include the chemistry of alcohol, the physical consequences of abuse, and sitting in on AA ([Alcoholics Anonymous](http://www.aa.org/)) sessions. Passing an exam would result in a license to drink” (Streeter). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)