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Political Paternalism and the National Minimum

Drinking Age Act of 1984

Abstract

In July 2008, a coalition was formed by "chancellors and presidents of universities and colleges across the United States" to actively question the 21 year-old drinking age. Known as the Amethyst Initiative, the membership invites "unimpeded" debate on current alcohol policies in order to reform dangerous drinking behaviors. My research informs this discourse by explicating the function of language in the congressional hearing leading up to the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984. I argue the transcribed lexicon and syntax makes it apparent that this legislation was enabled by a paternalistic point of view and a general moral panic consisting of what one Senator called "the national interest in protecting our young people." A close textual reading of transcribed testimony demonstrates that the justification for this discriminatory policy hinges on "the tenuous concept that adults can drink properly but youths cannot or should not" (Males 1996). Therefore, a discussion of the drinking age must address the historical infantilization of college-aged youth as well as the problematization of underage drinking culture to serve as an alibi for a national drinking problem.