

1971: 18-Year-Olds Get the Vote

With the Vietnam War as a backdrop, the 26th Amendment to the Constitution lowered the voting age from 21



U.S. SOLDIERS from the 1st Air Cavalry in South Vietnam, 1965

THE STATES RATIFY FULL VOTE AT 18

The New York Times, July 1, 1971

BY ADAM LIPTAK

The explosive youth movement of the 1960s was born in the civil rights era and blossomed into a full-blown counterculture on college campuses and at music festivals like Woodstock in 1969. Young people believed they had a lot to say in the 1960s, but the voting age in those days was 21, and so one place they could not speak out was in the voting booth.

That changed 35 years ago this summer with the ratification of the 26th Amendment, which lowered the voting age to 18. There were many forces behind the change, but it's clear that the unpopular war in Vietnam helped make the case.

Between 1965 and 1973, millions of American soldiers—many of them under 21—were drafted or volunteered to fight in Vietnam. More than 50,000 died in what would turn out to be a failed effort to prevent a Communist takeover of the Southeast Asian country and its neighbors.

While “old enough to fight, old enough to vote” was one of the catchphrases of the 1960s, the sentiment behind it had been expressed decades earlier during both World War II and the Korean War. But for many years there was opposition to lowering the voting age, including from *The New York Times*, which repeatedly argued against it. “The requirements for a

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good soldier and for a good voter are not the same," said a 1967 *Times* editorial. "For the soldier, youthful enthusiasm and physical endurance are of primary importance; for the voter, maturity of judgment far outweighs other qualifications."

But a growing youth movement started to chip away at that view. Young people had begun to assert themselves politically during the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, taking part in demonstrations against racial segregation and poverty. By mid-decade, America's continued involvement in Vietnam proved increasingly unpopular on college campuses, where students marched, held sit-ins, and occupied school buildings to protest the war and challenge authority.

SWIFT RATIFICATION

"Students are in rebellion around the country," Fred P. Graham wrote in a column for *The Times* in 1968.

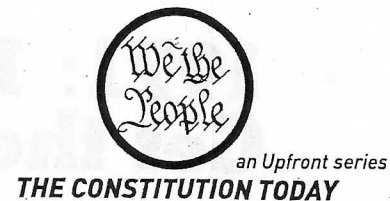
"These energies might better be funneled into political participation."

When the 26th Amendment was approved by the House of Representatives and Senate and sent to the state legislatures in March 1971, it rocketed into the Constitution at record speed: The required three quarters of the states ratified it in just 107 days.

Four days after Ohio provided the crucial 38th ratification vote, President Richard M. Nixon signed a document certifying the amendment at a White House ceremony, surrounded by teenage members of a choral group called Young Americans in Concert. Many of the group's members, along with 11 million others, had just gained the right to vote.

The clean-cut young singers around Nixon, dressed in blue blazers and crisp white shirts, looked nothing like the hippies and activists who were marching against the war.

But even the young people selected to visit the White House in 1971



acknowledged that it was a difficult time in the nation's history. A *Times* reporter asked David Van Dyke, a 17-year-old from New Jersey, whether he would cast his first vote for Nixon in the 1972 presidential election. "Depends on if we're out of Vietnam," he replied.

One of the reasons for the quick ratification of the 26th Amendment was that Congress had already approved lowering the voting age to 18 in 1970, partly in response to the Vietnam protests.

But the Supreme Court ruled later that year that the Congressional action applied only to federal elections, not to state elections. The 26th Amendment was meant to sort out

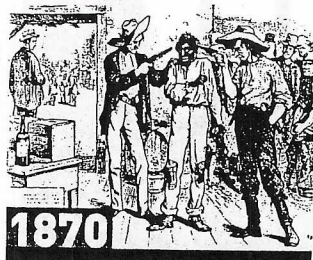
Who Gets to Vote in America?

It took two centuries before men and women of all races were able to vote in the United States. A look at the evolution of voting since America's birth:



> SUFFRAGE FOR SOME

Only white men with property could vote in most states. New Jersey briefly allowed women with property to vote but rescinded the right in 1807.



> THE 15TH AMENDMENT

This post-Civil War amendment said that race or status as a former slave could not disqualify anyone from voting. But it wasn't enforced throughout the U.S. until the 1960s.



> THE 19TH AMENDMENT

Passed in 1920 after a decades-long campaign by women's suffrage proponents, it extended the vote to women in all states; in 1924, Congress gave American Indians the right to vote.



> CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 banned literacy tests and other tactics used in the South to keep blacks from voting. Poll taxes were abolished the previous year.

The Youth Vote Since 1972

Young people have depressed overall turnout in presidential elections for the last three decades.

Year	Presidential Election	Voter Turnout		
		18-24	25 & Older	All Voters
1972	Nixon/McGovern	52%	68%	55%
1976	Carter/Ford	44%	65%	54%
1980	Reagan/Carter/Anderson	43%	69%	53%
1984	Reagan/Mondale	44%	69%	53%
1988	Bush/Dukakis	40%	66%	50%
1992	Clinton/Bush/Perot	49%	71%	55%
1996	Clinton/Dole	36%	62%	49%
2000	Bush/Gore/Nader	36%	63%	51%
2004	Bush/Kerry	47%	66%	55%

SOURCES: FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION; CENSUS BUREAU; CENTER FOR INFORMATION & RESEARCH ON CIVIC LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT

the confusion and save the states the expense of having to run, in essence, two sets of elections, for younger and older voters.

Amending the Constitution, however, is much more complicated than passing legislation: The Founding Fathers simply didn't want it to be that easy to make changes to their work. As spelled out in the Constitution, amendments must first be passed by two-thirds majorities of both the House and the Senate, and then sent to state legislatures for ratification. This cumbersome process explains why, in more than 225 years, the Constitution has been amended only 27 times.

1789 TO 1992

The previous record for the fastest ratification of an amendment was just over six months, in 1804, for the 12th Amendment, which provides for separate balloting for the president and the vice president. (Prior



SEAN COMBS on MTV just before the 2004 election, urging young people to vote

to that, the candidate who received the second-highest vote tally became vice president.) The amendment that took the longest to be ratified is the most recent one, the 27th, which bars pay raises for federal legislators from becoming effective until after the next general election: It was proposed in 1789, and adopted more than two centuries later, in 1992.

The 26th Amendment was the last of several amendments that expanded

the right to vote (*see timeline, p. 25*). But it did not have the impact some had hoped for: Young people didn't vote in great numbers in 1972.

Nor did those who went to the polls vote as a united group: Among 18-year-olds, the vote was split almost evenly between Nixon, a Republican, and Democrat George McGovern. Nixon won re-election in a landslide, though he resigned in 1974 following the Watergate scandals. (In the most recent presidential election, voters 25 and younger favored Democrat John Kerry over Republican George W. Bush, 56 percent to 43 percent.)

WEAK TURNOUT

But turnout among young voters has consistently been weak (*see chart*), which means they have had a limited impact on the outcome of elections. "The fact is," Richard L. Berke wrote in 1991 in an essay in *The Times*, "the vaunted youth vote never became the electoral force that some expected."

In the 2004 election, groups like Rock the Vote, Declare Yourself, and New Voters Project worked hard to mobilize young voters.

"It is men and women my age who are fighting the war in Iraq and dying in it," one student, Amelia Hershberger, wrote to *The Times*. "Students who vote can claim a voice in a system that ignores youth concerns."

In the end, though, as columnist John Tierney wrote mockingly after the election, the results of these efforts were underwhelming.

"The unprecedented get-out-the-vote campaigns turned out so many young Americans," he said, "that their share of the electorate went from 17 percent in 2000 to 17 percent in 2004." **D**

American Government
26th Amendment Discussion Questions
Mr. Faulhaber

1. a) What is an amendment? b) How did the 26th Amendment to the Constitution change voting?
2. What segment of the population originally was able to vote in the United States (3 qualifications)?
3. a) Give one argument that supported and one that opposed the ratification of the 26th Amendment? b) Which one do you believe was more valid? Explain your answer.
4. a) How is an Amendment proposed? b) How is an Amendment ratified? c) What state confirmed the adoption of the 26th Amendment?
5. a) How many Amendments are there in the Constitution? b) What are the first 10 collectively referred to as?
6. A group of students in California recently advocated lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. a) What justification would they have for lowering the voting age? b) Do you agree or disagree? Explain?
7. a) What difference is there in the voting turnout for 18-24 year compared to the rest of the voting population in the last presidential election? b) What do you believe there is such a gap?
8. According to a recent Time poll, 35% of Americans believe votes on American Idol matter as much, or more, than votes in a Presidential election. Do you agree or disagree?