

# Twenty-sixth Amendment

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(1971)

## WHAT IT SAYS

Section 1. The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age.

Section 2. The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

## THE YOUTH VOTE IN THEIR FIRST ELECTION

The first election following the ratification of the Twenty-sixth Amendment took place in 1972, when President Richard M. Nixon ran for reelection against Democratic senator George McGovern of South Dakota. The Vietnam War continued that year, despite Nixon's earlier promise that he had a plan to end the war. Senator McGovern campaigned on the slogan "Come Home, America," pledging to withdraw all American combat troops.

During the course of the war, the military draft had grown increasingly unpopular. Some students burned their draft cards, some refused to be inducted, and some left the country to avoid the draft. Other young men were drafted or volunteered. As the antiwar movement grew, with large rallies and demonstrations, a consensus developed that those old enough to fight for their country should have the right to participate in the democratic process and elect those who would set the policies that would affect their lives.

As the election approached, the Census Bureau estimated that there could be 25 million possible new votes in the election with the lowered voting age. On Election Day, however, fewer than half of the potential voters between eighteen and twenty-one came to the polls. This reflected an overall decline in voting, with only 55.6 percent of the eligible voters participating. Those between the ages of forty-five and sixty-four had the highest participation, with 71 percent voting. The turnout disappointed Senator McGovern, who had aimed much of his campaign at the youth vote, especially among students. Polls showed that those students who did vote cast their ballots about evenly between McGovern and Nixon. President Nixon won reelection in a landslide, and on election night he declared that he had accomplished what most people had considered impossible: "We won a majority of the votes of young Americans."

Although the youth vote often trailed behind older voters, it rose significantly in the Presidential election of 2004, when more than half of all registered voters between ages eighteen and thirty went to the polls. Younger voters favored the Democratic candidate, John Kerry, by a margin of 54 to 44 percent over President George W. Bush.

## WHAT IT MEANS

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The unpopularity of the military draft during the Vietnam War raised questions about why young men between eighteen and twenty-one should be qualified to fight for their country but not to vote for the leaders who made decisions about war and peace. The Twenty-sixth Amendment lowered the voting age to eighteen. It was a continuation of a movement toward democratization that began with efforts to remove property qualifications for voting, and expanded to include African Americans and women. Along the way other obstacles such as poll taxes, literary tests, and residency requirements also fell to constitutional challenges and change.

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*“The failure to vote is a national disgrace. You wonder how the high schools and colleges fail to put an emphasis on voting. The 18-year-olds are not voting, and their mothers and fathers are not doing much better. This worries me. If the decline continues, we will elect a president by a majority of the minority outvoting the rest of the minority.”*

—West Virginia Senator Jennings Randolph, the chief sponsor of the Twenty-sixth Amendment, in a *Washington Post* interview, October 14, 1984

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