



# CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

## The 50th Anniversary of the 26th Amendment

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how "We the People" interact with the government and each other. Let's help each other expand our civic literacy.

July 1, 2021 will mark the 50th anniversary of the [26th Amendment](#), which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. From start to finish, it took just 100 days for this amendment to be added to the [U.S. Constitution](#), making it the fastest to be ratified in U.S. history, but why?

In the late 1960s, the U.S. was deeply involved in the unpopular Vietnam War. Young men, beginning at age 18, were eligible for the [military draft](#). This meant that an 18-year-old male was old enough to fight for his country but was not old enough to vote for its elected leaders, including members of Congress who used their Article I power to "raise and support armies" and "provide and maintain a Navy". Responding to ongoing protests denying young men a voice in selecting their representatives, Congress lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 as part of the [1970 Voting Rights Act](#).



However, it was not long before this provision of the Act was challenged in court. In a [5-4 decision](#), the U.S. Court upheld the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18, but only for federal elections. This meant that the states were not required to lower the voting age for state and local elections.

Without uniformity in the voting age, confusion as to [who could and could not](#) vote in certain elections would arise, and with the Supreme Court's ruling, the only way to address this problem was with a constitutional amendment.

What was proposed in the Congress [reads](#) quite simply: "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. The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."

So, on March 10, 1971, by a vote of 94-0, the U.S. Senate proposed the amendment and the House of Representatives followed suit two weeks later, on March 23, voting 401-19 in favor of the amendment. With these votes, both chambers secured more than the two-thirds vote needed to propose the amendment. By July 1 that year, the needed three-fourths of the state legislatures ratified the proposed amendment and the 26th Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution.

**To Think and To Do:** Despite being denied voting rights at age 18, young men were obligated, as citizens, to serve in the military if drafted. What about employment law? In many states it is legal to work in jobs subject to federal income tax (and possibly state income tax) beginning at age 16. Noting that paying taxes, including income taxes, is a citizen obligation, should 16 year olds have the right to vote? Explain your thinking.

### Learn MORE about the 26th Amendment

- [The WWII Roots of the 26th Amendment](#), from The National WWII Museum
- [26th Amendment is passed by Congress](#), from C-SPAN Classroom



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