

The United States should lower the voting age

Key Terms

Enfranchisement
Suffrage
Ratify a Constitutional Amendment
Military Draft
Voter turn-out
Electorate

Sources

National Youth Rights Association
<http://www.youthrights.org/voteproposal.html>
The Movement to Lower the Voting Age Has Begun
<http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2003/4/15/213112/673>

Fact Set

- The voting age in federal elections was lowered from 21 to 18 by the 26th Amendment to the Constitution ratified in 1971. This change was made largely in response to the Vietnam War, in which young people were drafted into military service but were not yet old enough to vote.
- 18-24 year olds do not vote frequently in federal elections. For example, in the 1996 Presidential election, turnout of this age bracket had only a 32.4 percent turnout, compared to 54.2 percent of the voting-age population.
- In the Supreme Court case of *Oregon v. Mitchell*, the court held on a 5-4 decision that the federal government could lower the voting age in federal elections without a Constitutional amendment, but to lower it in state elections an amendment was necessary.

Arguments in favor of lowering the voting age

- Allowing younger people to vote would encourage them to get involved in the political system early and make them more involved citizens later in life. It would also encourage politicians to take care of younger voters' concerns.
- Other nations have already lowered their voting age, including Brazil and Nicaragua where the voting age is 16 and the Philippines where it is set at 15. These nations have not seen disastrous consequences of these low voting ages.
- Because many teens work and pay taxes before age 18, they should be able to vote.
- Seventeen year olds can register for military service. The idea that young people that might die in the military should be able to vote was persuasive enough to lower the voting age to 18 during the Vietnam War.
- Many decisions made by state and local governments-especially on education spending-directly impact students and so younger people should have a voice in how those decisions are made.

Arguments against lowering the voting age

- It is not clear that nonvoters have different policy choices than those that vote today. Election outcomes might not be influenced by the inclusion of younger voters.
- Younger Americans might not pay much attention to public policy issues. They might cast less informed ballots than other voters. They might also be more vulnerable to peer pressure and pressure from their parents.
- Lowering the voting age would put pressure on legislators to lower the drinking age as well. This might lead to more drunk driving accidents or cause more students to become dependent on alcohol.
- Amending the Constitution is a significant step that should not be taken lightly. The warrants for lowering the voting age do not justify further tinkering with the Constitution.

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Discussion Questions

- How was the current voting age set? Who is responsible for setting the voting ages in various local, state and federal elections?
- How should the voting age correspond to other legal standards of adulthood?
- What unique concerns might people of a lower age be able to express by voting?
- What changes in policy might be expected if younger people could vote?
- How does voting make elected officials more responsive to the electorate's needs?
- How many young people would exercise their right to vote?
- How might voting at a younger age impact voting habits later in life?