



Should the Voting Age Be Lowered?

Uses Vote Worthy Part 2 (Podcast 4), the question from Karen Armstrong Cummings (at about 29:20) [Listen](#)

Background Reading

The right of citizens to vote is one of the basic rights that defines a democracy, but this right was not explicitly stated in the original text of the U.S. Constitution. The first mention of the right of citizens to vote was made in the 14th Amendment, ratified in 1866. This amendment stated that if the right to vote was denied to any male inhabitant of a state, “being twenty-one years of age, and citizens of the United States,” the basis of representation for that state would be reduced. This set the stage for the 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870. There were two sections to this amendment:

Section 1

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

Section 2

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

Some states found a way around allowing all citizens to vote by imposing a “poll tax” for the right to vote. It wasn’t until 1964 that this practice was made unconstitutional by the 24th Amendment. In the meantime, after decades of advocacy, women had finally gained the right to vote when the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920.

Even though the 15th Amendment stated that citizens of the United States could not be denied the right to vote on the basis of race or color, Native Americans were not entitled to vote until the passage of the Snyder Act in 1924, which granted citizenship to all Native Americans born in the U.S. The Constitution had left it up to the states to decide who could vote, and the Snyder

Act was not a constitutional amendment. It was not until 1964 that all the states allowed Native Americans to vote.

During World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt lowered the age for the draft into military service to 18. People began advocating for the voting age to be lowered to 18 as well, reasoning that if young men were old enough to be drafted to fight in a war, they were old enough to vote. Two states, Georgia and Kentucky, changed their voting laws to allow voting by 18-year-olds in 1943 and 1955 respectively, but it was not until the 26th Amendment was ratified in 1971 that the voting age was lowered to 18 nationwide.

There is now a national movement advocating for another Constitutional Amendment to lower the national voting age to 16. But making an amendment to the Constitution is not an easy process. First, both the U.S. House of Representative and the U.S. Senate must pass a resolution by a two-thirds majority. A proposed Constitutional Amendment does not require the signature of the President. Instead, the document is sent to the National Archives and Records Administration. This office creates information packages and sends them to the governors of each state. At the state level, the amendment can be ratified by the state legislature or by a constitutional convention. A proposal becomes an amendment when it has been ratified by three-fourths of the states (38 out of 50). So far, a proposal to lower the voting age to 16 has failed to pass in the House of Representatives, but it could be only a matter of time before 16- and 17-year-olds are allowed to vote in all state and national elections. In fact, in some communities, 16- and 17-year-olds can already vote in some local elections.

To learn more about the debate and see a status report on youth voting, visit the National Youth Rights Association website. (<https://www.youthrights.org/issues/voting-age/voting-age-status-report/>)

Discussion Questions

1. What reasons might there be to lower the voting age?
2. What reasons might there be to NOT lower the voting age?
3. Would you support lowering the voting age? Why or why not

Key Vocabulary

abridged: diminished or reduced in scope

advocacy: public support for a cause or policy

Amendment: an addition or to the U.S. Constitution

constituents: voters

denied: refused

Draft: mandatory enrollment of individuals into the armed forces

poll tax: tax of a fixed sum on every liable individual regardless of income or resources. Prior to 1965, payment of a poll tax was required in order to register to vote in a number of states.

ratification: formal confirmation

Teaching Tips

While the process of amending the Constitution is complex, the amendments related to voting are refreshingly straightforward, making it an easy topic to discuss. Unfortunately, politicians do not always set a positive example of civil discourse. If you have not already done so, you may want to establish norms with your class before doing the activity. Consider using these educational resources from the website of the United States Courts:

- [Civility Self-Reflection Exercise - Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions | United States Courts \(uscourts.gov\)](#)
- [Setting Ground Rules - Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions | United States Courts \(uscourts.gov\)](#)

Suggested Activity

Role-Play a Constitutional Amendment: Explain to students that they are going to pretend that a proposal for an amendment to lower the voting age has been passed by the U.S. Congress and sent to the states for ratification. They will role play the process of a state legislature in deciding whether to ratify the proposed amendment. Each student will be a state representative and the teacher will be the Speaker of the House.

Project this proposed amendment:

Right to Vote at Age 16
Passed by Congress x.xx.xxxx
Proposed Amendment

Section 1

The right of citizens of the United States, who are sixteen 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.

As Speaker of the House, introduce this proposed amendment and explain that it has been passed out of the appropriate committee at the state legislature and is ready to be debated on the House floor. Tell the “representatives” that you will give them a week to prepare for debate. Explain to students that although representatives are not required to consult their constituents on each measure that comes up for a vote, it is their job to represent their constituents (and constituents often contact their representatives to voice their opinions). Assign your “representatives” to conduct a survey of at least five people regarding their opinions about lowering the voting age. They should collect not only information about how many of their “constituents” support or oppose the bill, but at least one reason for each opinion, including one direct quote.

Engage students in creating criteria regarding how this information should be compiled and presented. They might create a chart or printed document or a slide show to share with the class. In addition, they need to articulate their own opinion with at least one argument to support it. Their opinion does not have to reflect the opinion of a majority of their constituents.

To begin the debate after opinions have been collected, provide each representative a set amount of time to make their presentation. As Speaker of the House, you will lead and guide the discussion. You may also determine if the bill must be passed by a 2/3 majority for ratification or if a simple majority is adequate. You could have students vote by raising their hands or conduct a secret ballot.

After the vote, lead a discussion about the process. Did any “representatives” change their own initial opinions after hearing from their constituents? Were they influenced by the presentations of their colleagues? Which presentations were the most compelling? Why?

Discuss whether there is a way that you might share what you have learned from the project with classmates or the community as a voter education project.

Kentucky Academic Standards

Social Studies

HS.C.CV.2

Assess how the expansion of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights and human rights influence the thoughts and actions of individuals and groups.

HS.UH.CE.5

Evaluate the ways in which groups facing discrimination worked to achieve expansion of rights and liberties from 1877-present.

HS.C.I.CC.1

Engage in civil discussion, reach consensus when appropriate and respect diverse opinions relevant to compelling and/or supporting questions in civics.

HS.C.I.CC.2

Engage in disciplinary thinking and construct arguments, explanations, or public communications relevant to meaningful and/or investigative questions in civics.

HS.C.I.CC.3

Engage in disciplinary thinking and apply appropriate evidence to propose a solution or design an action plan relevant to compelling and/or supportive questions in civics.

Reading and Writing Literacy Practices

Recognize that text is anything that communicates a message.

Employ, develop and refine schema to understand and create text.

Utilize receptive and expressive language arts to better understand self, others and the world.

Engage in specialized, discipline-specific literacy practices.

Apply high level cognitive processes to think deeply and critically about text.

Reading and Composing Guiding Principles

Students will integrate and evaluate content presented in print/non-print forms of text found in diverse media and formats.

Students will compose informative and explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Students will use a variety of strategies to determine or clarify the meaning of words and phrases, consulting reference material when appropriate.

Students will acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening to be transition ready.

Resource created by Judy Sizemore, education consultant