



Background Reading for Should the Voting Age Be Lowered?

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/>)