

The Changing Definition of Adulthood

The year is 1971 and the 26th Amendment was created allowing all American citizens age 18 and up to vote in elections. However, this amendment was forged through years of dedication by young adults.

During the previous decade, the country faced great political unrest. Young adults played a critical role in these protests related to racism, war, voting rights, and school regulations. This generation of adults propelled society forward into the future.

Young adults by this time were more educated, independent, and mature than their predecessors. They could have an unrestricted driver's license, marry without parental consent, be tried as an adult in criminal courts, deal with more taxes, and males could be drafted for war. All of the commitment young adults had led to 18-year-olds finally being allowed to vote. The meaning of adulthood had changed and so had their responsibilities.



Nixon signing the 26th Amendment.



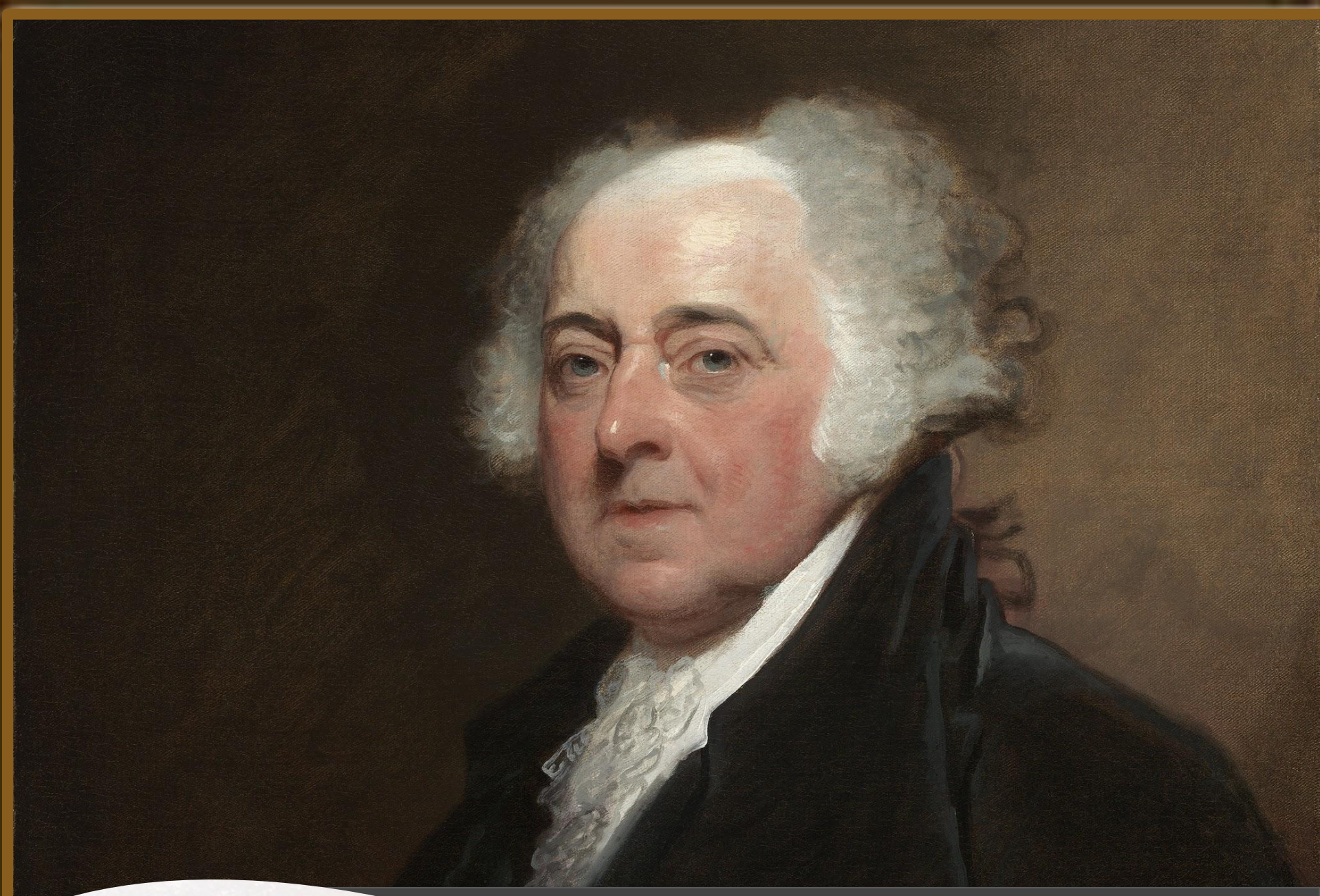
A person getting the lottery ticket for the draft.

The Original Voting Age:

A Glimpse into the Initial Voting Age in the U.S.

The voting age in the United States is currently set to 18 years, however it was not always the voting age. The original voting age was actually 21 during the country's founding.

There were several reasons as to why 21 was chosen as the voting age. The English were worried about corruption among politicians in the colonies and therefore raised the voting age to limit those in office. In addition, politicians such as John Adams could not agree on an age for all to vote. John Adams himself, tried to convince many to lower the age, and many citizens wanted the voting age lowered in order to gain more power to break away from Britain.



President John Adams pushed for a lower voting age.



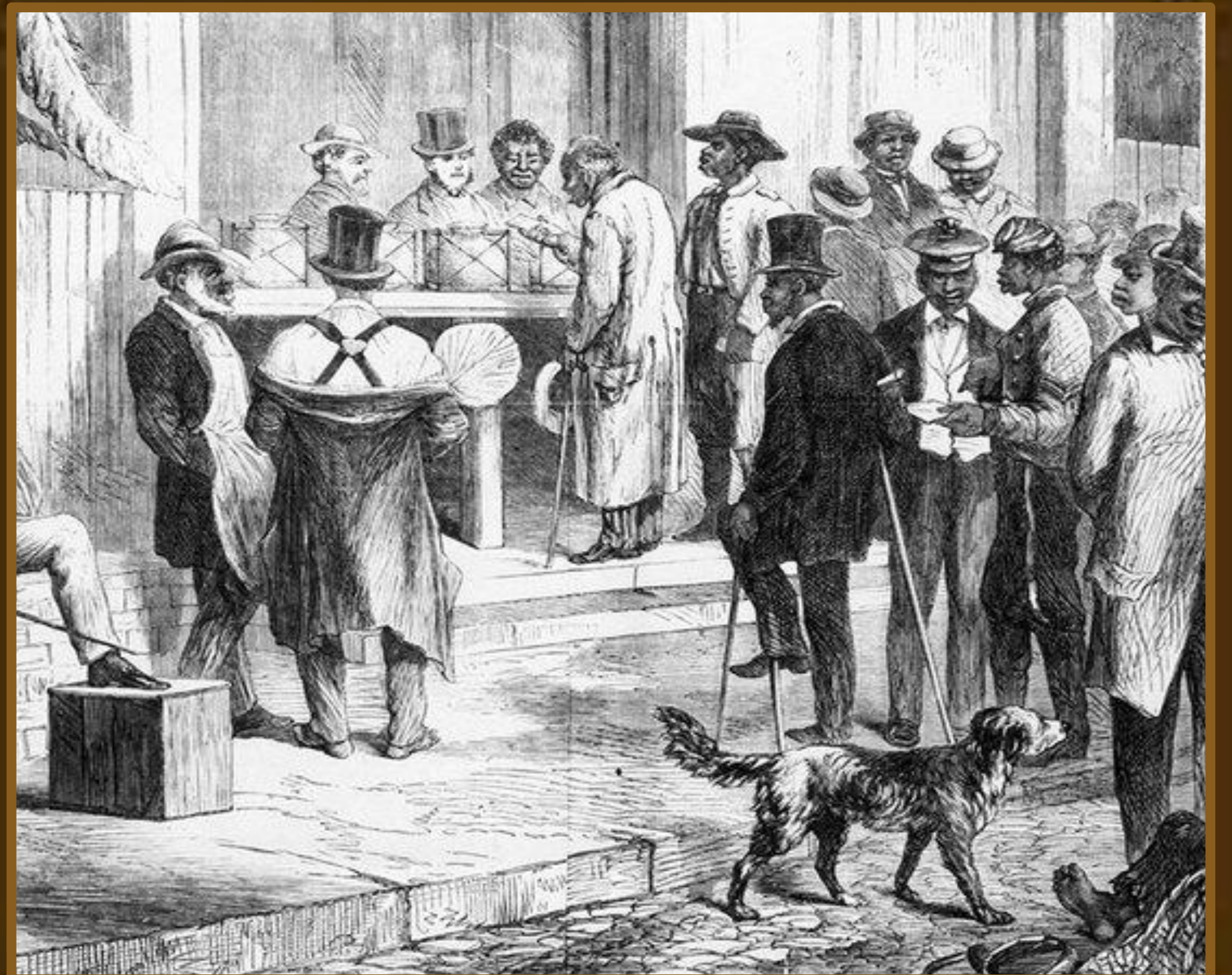
The Constitutional Convention, where many politicians argued over which voting age was right.



Nineteenth Century Efforts to Lower the Voting Age

During a large portion of the Nineteenth Century, only **white men older than twenty-one who owned property were allowed to vote in elections**. Although, there were notable attempts to lower the age of voting for this small demographic. Some of those attempts includes:

- The territory of Missouri when drafting its state constitution. The budding state made an attempt to lower the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen but the decision was declined by one legislative vote.
- New York's 1821 attempt to lower the voting age during the state's constitutional convention. The state, however, decided against the idea because "they [men under twenty-one] do not possess mature understandings, and therefore have not a right to enjoy this privilege."



The Long Struggle for the Vote:

How Those Who Were Forgotten Got Their Rights

Votes for Women! We Demand Voting Rights Now! Both phrases were used to push important social movements in the United States.

The Suffrage Movement was a battle fought hard by suffragist Susan B. Anthony and others like her, a fight that was monumental in US history as it shaped the lives of women everywhere. This battle was won in 1920 with the passing of the 19th Amendment. African Americans' fight for the vote is a topic of conversation every year. African Americans were forced to endure literacy tests, poll taxes, and intimidation to prevent them from voting. This would become illegal with the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Native American faced the same troubles during this time. They fought for their basic human rights until they were recognized as citizens in 1924, gaining the right to vote in 1965 as well.

These battles led to the rights that people have today, and laid the foundation for the youth voting rights movement.



Trixie Friganza, behind sign, and three other suffragists.



Marchers with their signs during the 1963 March on Washington.



Generating Support:

Public Opinion and the Arguments That Swayed It

Public opinion in support of lowering the voting age reached a consistent majority in 1953. In theory, a democracy represents the people and logically one would assume that the voting age should have been lowered at this point. However, it would be another two decades before any legislation would pass.

The arguments presented by Vote 18 were very influential and enjoyed popular support among the young and middle-aged groups. Arguments included citing the age of military entry and pointing out the higher educational achievements among youth in the contemporary era in comparison to twenty years prior.

As influential as those arguments were, opponents of the Vote 18 movement still enjoyed formidable support among older groups that represented the majority of voter turnout. Arguments against lowering the voting age included stereotyping youthful irresponsibility and calling into question the capacity of youth to competently comprehend politics.



The young and influential Senator Ted Kennedy (D) supported the 18-year-old vote.



Representative Emanuel Celler (D) was responsible for much of the resistance in Congress against lowering the voting age.



Draft Age: 18 | Voting Age: 21

The phrase, “old enough to fight, old enough to vote,” gained popularity during World War II, after the draft age was lowered to 18 in 1942.

During the 1940s, Americans were divided over the voting age. But, when the draft age was lowered, more Americans favored lowering the voting age. Dissenters, however, did not want the characteristics of a soldier to carry over into civic duty. They argued that the new draftees were soldiers because of their physical ability and obedience, not their mental capacity.

“Before World War II in 1939, only 17 percent of the population was estimated to favor lowering the required age for voting.”

- R. Spencer Oliver, Young Democrats

“To my knowledge, the draft age and the voting age are as different as chalk is from cheese. The thing called in for in a soldier is uncritical obedience, and that is not what you want in a voter.”

- Emanuel Celler (D-New York)



Registration of the 18-to-20-year-olds at the Jefferson Junior High School last June. —Star Staff Photo.

VOTING AGE DROP IS NOW PROPOSED

Vandenberg Wants Youths
To Be Given Vote If
Called For Service

WASHINGTON, Oct. 19.— (AP) —

Progressive States

Some states had a lower voting age before the 26th Amendment passed:

- **Georgia** lowered its voting age to **18** in **1943**, the first state to do so.
- **Kentucky** passed a law in **1955** for an **18-year-old** voting age.
- **Alaska** had its vote lowered to **19** as part of its state constitution, which was ratified in **1956**.
- **Hawaii** compromised between voting age extremes and had a voting age of **20** in **1957**.

Though these laws were only for state and local elections, they impacted the debate over lowering the voting age by proving that youth voting was tested and possible. These states were also among the first to ratify the Amendment, as well as **Connecticut, Delaware, Tennessee, and Idaho**.



Senator Jennings Randolph (D) of WV spearheaded the voting age movement.



President Eisenhower (R), who gave a speech for youth suffrage that would influence votes for later voting laws.



How the Civil Rights Movement Lowered the Voting Age

Did you know the Civil Rights Movement helped lower the voting age? The Civil Rights Movement was a time when African Americans addressed racial discrimination and attempted to change the country. As a result, a platform to address many social issues, like youth voting, was provided.

In the heat of the Civil Rights Movement, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This act made “discriminatory voting practices,” including literacy tests, illegal as a requirement to vote.

Building on this success, NAACP members James Brown Jr. and Miss Philomena Queen stood before the U.S. Senate five years later to testify in favor of lowering the voting age. Brown believed that the NAACP and its “long and glorious history of seeking to redress grievances of the blacks, the poor, the downtrodden, and the ‘victims’ of unfair and illegal actions and deeds” had to protest the “disenfranchisement of approximately 10 million young Americans” as a requirement to vote.



The Selma to Montgomery March (1965)



President Johnson shaking hands with civil rights activists after signing the Voting Rights Act of 1965



Revolts went worldwide, as seen with these American students in London.



Protests sprung up nationwide in small rural towns and big urban cities.

The 'Nam Bomb

The Vietnam War acted as a catalyst for the voting age debate to reach the interest of the general public. The conversation would be sparked by the US allowing 18-year-olds to fight in Vietnam, but not allowing them to vote in the land they were sworn to protect. This hypocrisy would ignite a wave of rallies and the creation of voter education programs by youth across the country. Newspapers reported the activism, making citizens aware of the issue. The protests would result in the passing of the 26th Amendment in 1971, lowering the voting age to 18.





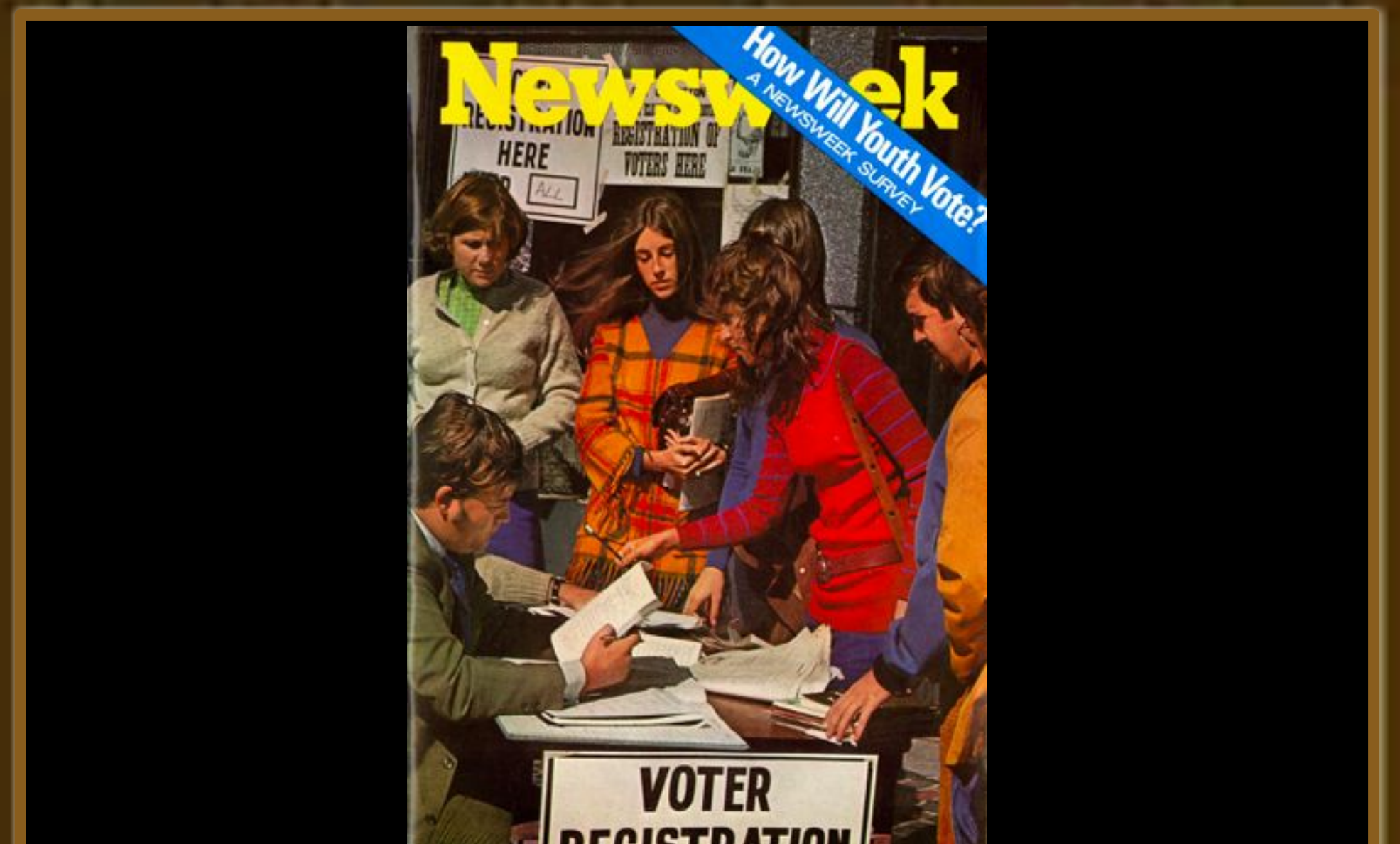
Youth Representation

The youth's representation through media has always depicted a vigorous group with passionate goals and desires. Protests became one of young people's primary strategies for expanding awareness about social and political issues. Driven by the tumultuous social movements of the 1960s, university campuses became hotbeds of activism, and student unions were extremely engaged. For the younger generation, political involvement was popular because it was necessary, showcasing how impactful the youth could be as voters.





This image from a newspaper displays the 26th Amendment becoming a law in the United States.



A Newsweek cover showing teens lining up to register and participate in their first ever election after the passing of the 26th Amendment.

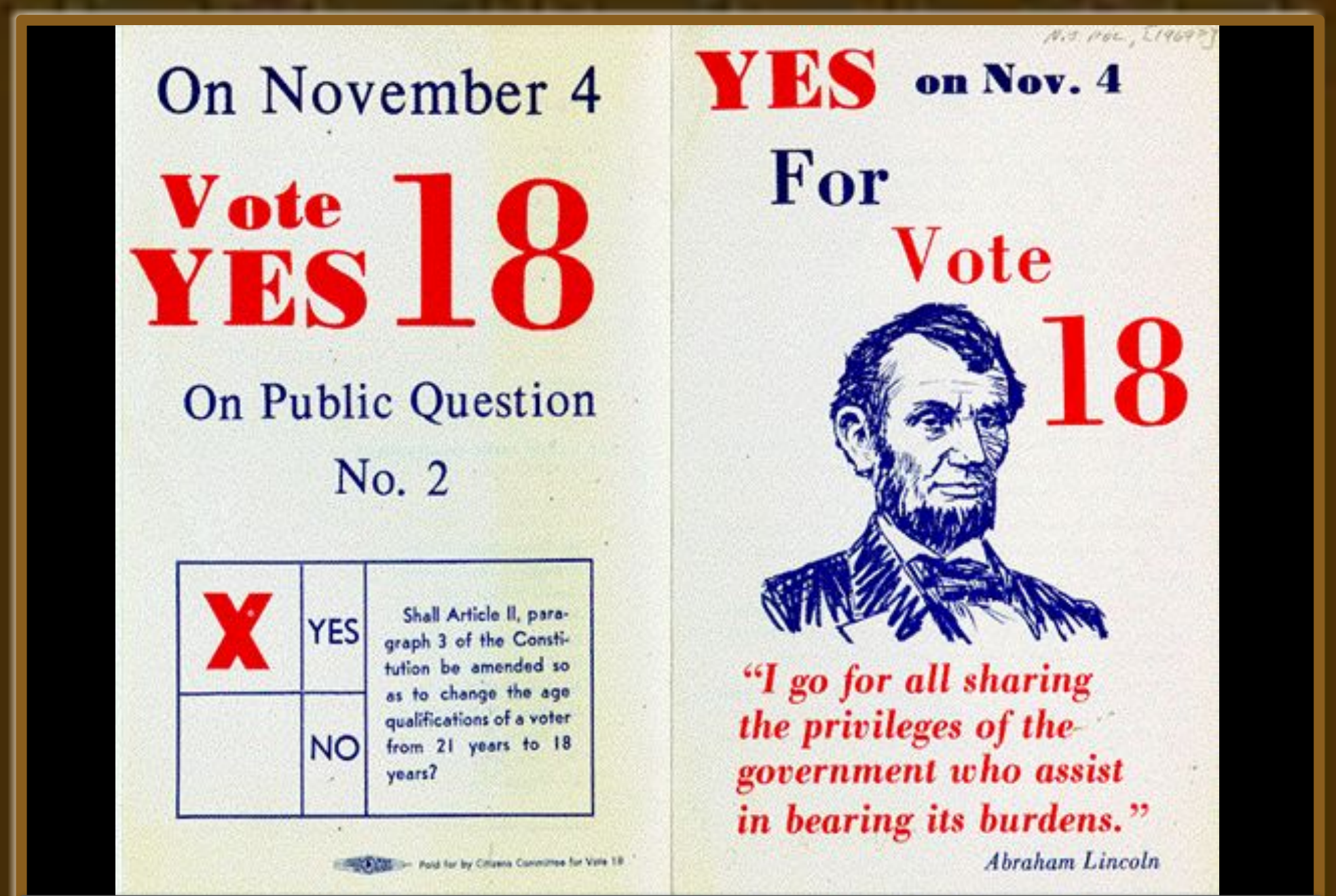
Media Coverage on the 26th Amendment: Responsible Youths or Reckless Children?

The media coverage on the 26th Amendment showed both sides of the argument. One side presented young people as responsible, better educated, and much more aware of the voting issues that confronted the public. The other side offered statistics from the Motor Vehicle Department as proof that 18 to 21-year-olds were reckless when it came to driving. If they could not be trusted to drive, how could they be trusted to vote? The media was able to show both sides of the 26th Amendment fight and how divided the American people were on this topic.





Senator Randolph (D) speaks at a ceremony honoring the WWII destroyer the USS STUMP in 1978.



Flyer promoting the YES vote for the 26th Amendment in West Virginia 1971.

Jennings Randolph: Father of 26th Amendment

If you voted as an 18-year-old, you owe a thank you to the 30+ years of work by West Virginia Senator Jennings Randolph. Raised by politicians, young Jennings pursued civic duty, running for Congress at just 28 years old. Known as one of the last "New Dealers," Senator Randolph worked closely with President Roosevelt and first proposed lowering the voting age in 1942 in Congress. After 11 attempts by Randolph, the voting age finally lowered to 18 years old in 1971. Senator Randolph personally drove hundreds of first-time voters to register in 1972.



91st CONGRESS
2D SESSION

H. R. 4249

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MARCH 4, 1970

Ordered to lie on the table and to be printed

AMENDMENTS

Intended to be proposed by Mr. MANSFIELD (for himself, Mr. MAGNUSON, Mr. KENNEDY, Mr. BIBLE, Mr. JAVITS, Mr. PELL, Mr. STEVENS, Mr. INOUE, Mr. RANDOLPH, Mr. TYDINGS, and Mr. BAYH) to the amendments in the nature

The Voting Rights Act of 1970 was introduced in the House on January 23, 1969. The Senate rejected this measure, and began their own version of the bill.



The Voting Rights Act of 1970 was signed into law by President Richard M. Nixon (R) on June 22, 1970.

The Voting Rights Act of 1970

The fight against voter discrimination continued with the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1970. This act was an amendment of previous legislation and strengthened the ban on devices that unfairly prevented citizens from voting, such as literacy tests, which can curb the voting potential of marginalized populations.

Special provisions were added to the Voting Rights Act of 1970, including a provision that allowed those that are 18 years of age or older to vote in elections. This act passed through the Senate 64-12, with 24 not registering a vote on the matter.





Senator Birch Bayh (D) is known for his passionate work on both the 25th and 26th Amendments.



The Supreme Court case *Oregon vs. Mitchell* (1970) was brought forth by states advocating for their rights.

A Constitutional Challenge: The 26th Amendment

Can the federal government regulate state elections?

Despite early support from President Eisenhower, the eventual passage of the 1970 Voting Rights Amendment proved troublesome. The Supreme Court case of *Oregon vs. Mitchell* (1970) challenged the law, emphasizing states' rights and successfully proving that local elections did not have to afford 18-year-olds voting rights. Local elections would then, at great expense, need separate ballots for citizens who were 21 or older.

Ongoing arguments of this nature led to the conclusion that a Constitutional Amendment should be passed. This tense period of time ultimately ended with the 26th Amendment, which was "ratified promptly" and brought the fiery discussions to a close, ushering in a new age of youth suffrage.





Young women fighting for their right to vote in Washington, DC.



Inspire US staff Olivia Hubbard and Olivia McCuskey work with schools all across West Virginia.

Youth Voter Participation

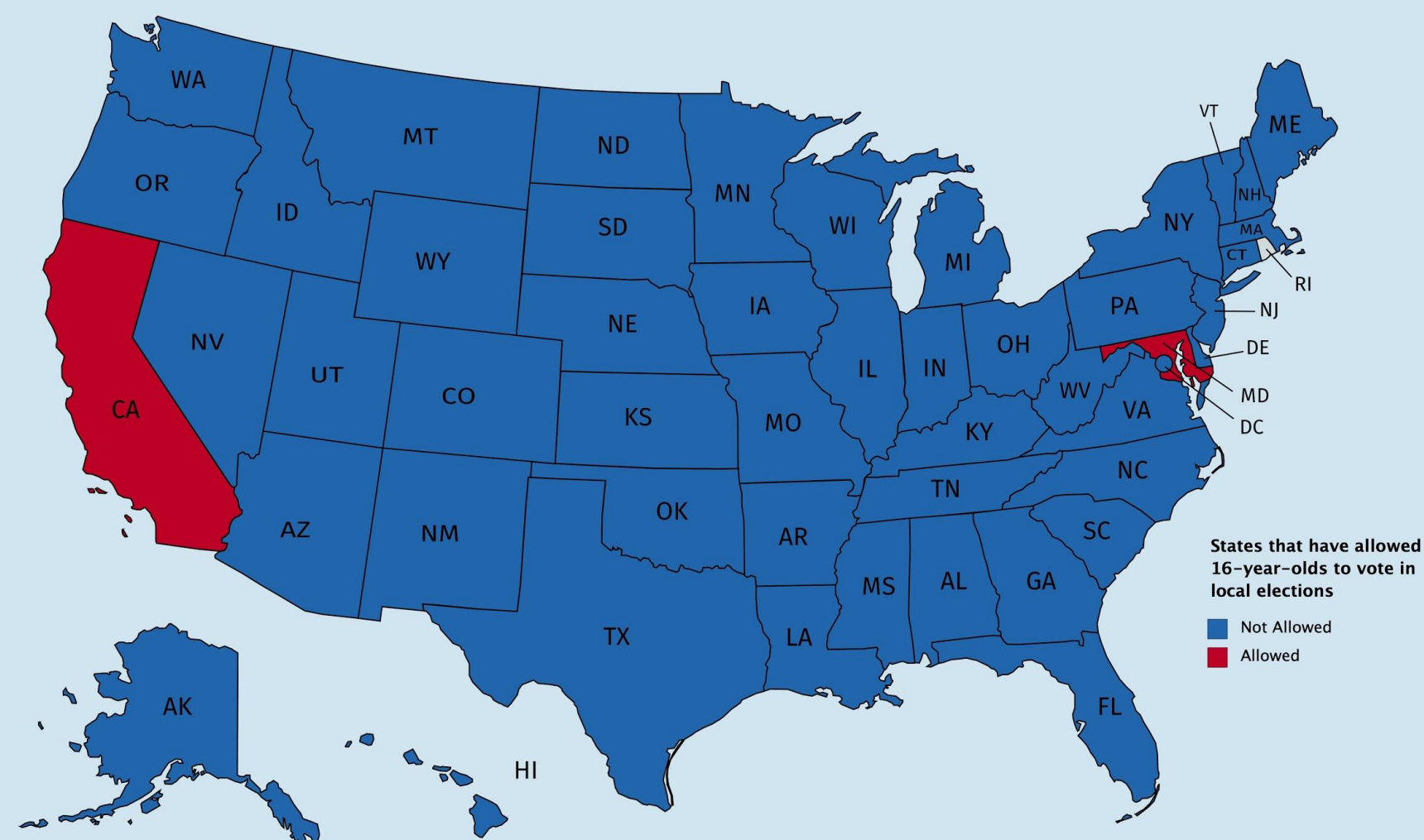
Ever since the 26th Amendment was ratified on July 1st of 1971, individuals between the ages of 18 and 21 have been able to vote in America.

Unfortunately, a majority of these voters will not “cross through the door” while they are considered to be young voters. In fact, the United States is one of the countries with the lowest rates of youth voting in the world at about 43% of eligible voters actually participating.

This can be blamed on quite a number of factors, such as: lack of interest in politics, voter registration difficulty, physical inaccessibility of voting, and the 26th Amendment not being fully realized. All of these issues can be solved with both education and action, which is needed to increase youth voting.

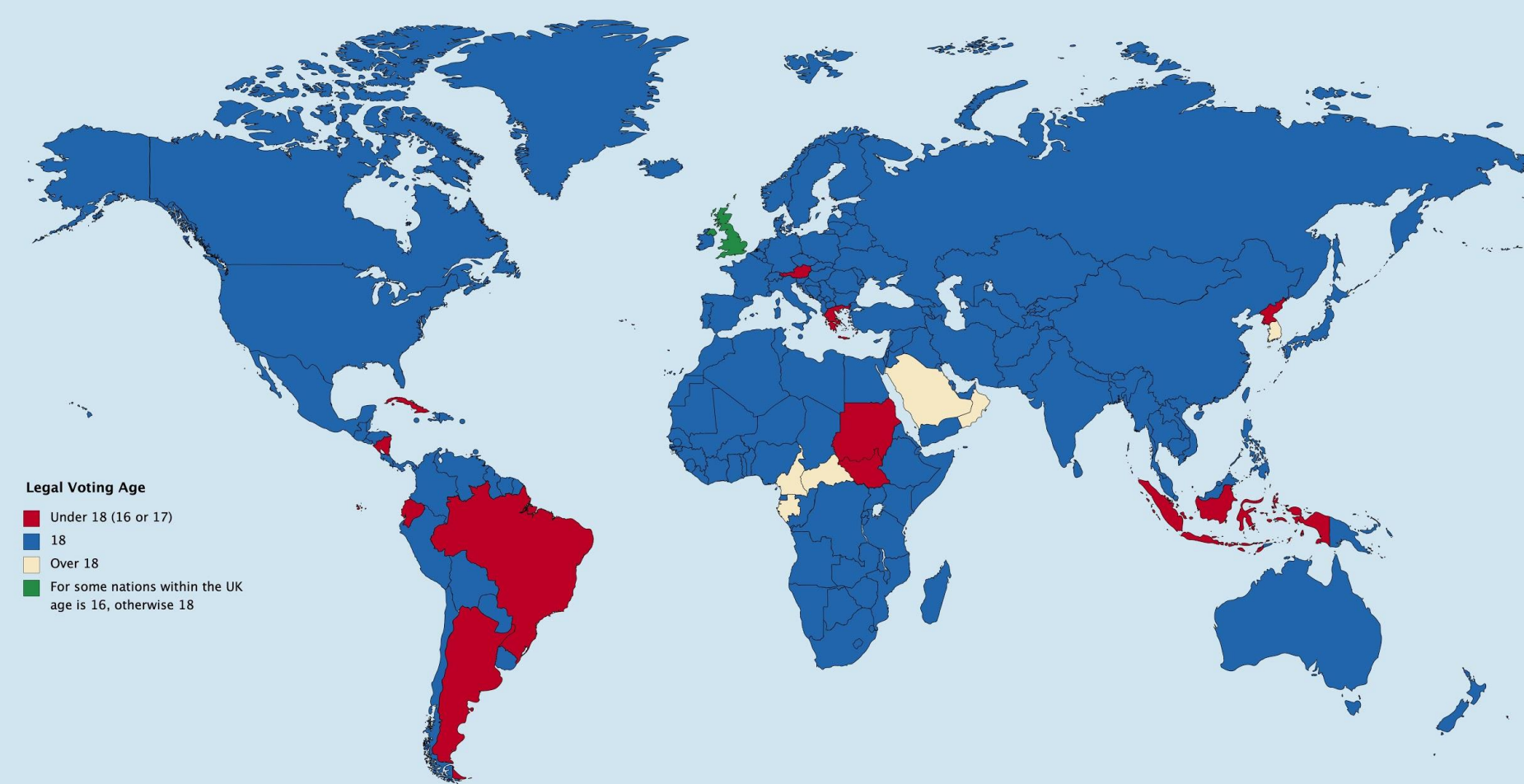


Legal voting age for local elections in the US



The legal voting age in federal elections is 18, but some cities and states legally allow 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote in local elections.

Legal voting age around the world



Most countries have a legal voting age of 18, but some have extended the vote to 16-year-olds, while other countries restrict suffrage to 25-year-olds.

Youth Suffrage: The US and Abroad

All over the US, citizens celebrated as youth suffrage ended its nearly four-decade struggle with the ratification of the 26th Amendment, but was the struggle truly over? The amendment followed suit after several European countries extended suffrage to young adults 18 and older. Recently, multiple nations around the world have lowered their voting age to 16. America's underage youth has started to demand a voice at the polls, with some states allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in local elections. Will the struggle for youth suffrage in the US continue? Only time will tell.



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