



384 pages | Cloth | 9781479811328

History | Politics | Law

www.nyupress.org

“LET US VOTE!”

Youth Voting Rights and the 26th Amendment

BY JENNIFER FROST

Instructor's Guide

The fascinating tale of how a bipartisan coalition worked successfully to lower the voting age

“*Let Us Vote!*” tells the story of the multifaceted endeavor to achieve youth voting rights in the United States. Over a thirty-year period starting during World War II, Americans, old and young, Democrat and Republican, in politics and culture, built a movement for the 26th Amendment to the US Constitution, which lowered the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen in 1971. This was the last time that the United States significantly expanded voting rights.

Jennifer Frost deftly illustrates how the political and social movements of the time brought together bipartisan groups to work tirelessly in pursuit of a lower voting age. In turn, she illuminates the process of achieving political change, with the convergence of “top-down” initiatives and “bottom-up” mobilization, coalition-building, and strategic flexibility. As she traces the progress toward achieving youth suffrage throughout the '60s, Frost reveals how this movement built upon the social justice initiatives of the decade and was deeply indebted to the fight for African American civil and voting rights.

2021 marks the fiftieth anniversary of this important constitutional amendment and comes at a time when scrutiny of both voting age and voting rights has been renewed. As the national conversation around climate crisis, gun violence, and police brutality creates a new call for a lower voting age, “*Let Us Vote!*” provides an essential investigation of how this massive political change occurred, and how it could be brought about again.

 NYU PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

"We're old enough so let us vote" (1-10)

The introduction opens with a 1969 song by pop musicians Tommy Boyce and Bobby Hart released "L.U.V. (Let Us Vote)." It was the campaign theme song for a grassroots student organization, Let Us Vote, founded that year in California. The song and the organization are evidence of the multifaceted campaign for youth voting rights in the United States, and this book tells the story of how that campaign emerged and succeeded. Over a thirty-year period from World War II to the "turn of the seventies," Americans, old and young, Democrat and Republican, in politics and culture built a movement and momentum for the 26th Amendment to the US Constitution. This amendment gave the right to vote to 18, 19, and 20-year-olds in 1971, and it was the last time that the US significantly expanded voting rights. The author provides a brief overview of how and why proponents of youth suffrage succeeded with an emphasis on the 1960s as the crucial decade for progress. She also offers an explanation for why historians of the 1960s have not paid much attention to the youth franchise movement.

Questions for Discussion

- How did the efforts, campaigns, and movement for youth voting rights develop over time and what characteristics help to explain their success?
- Why did the movement's "multiplicity" matter?
- Why has the youth franchise movement usually not been seen as a "sixties movement" and how does viewing it so change our perspective on the 1960s?

Classroom Activities

- Tommy Boyce and Bobby Hart's song, "L.U.V. (Let Us Vote)", is available on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxGdAZPh_Q). Key lyrics are included on pp. 1 & 182 and full lyrics can be found online. Students can listen to the song, read the lyrics, and consider the song's melody and style. What arguments does the song make for youth voting rights? Why might this song be appealing to young people, especially high school students, in 1969?

Part I

"It's been a long time gettin' here,"

1942-1962 (11-77)

During the first phase of the effort in the 1940s through the early 1960s, a few prominent figures and organizations pushed for youth voting rights nationally and locally. From the start, interactions between "top-down" and "bottom-up" forces, between proponents with political power and at the grassroots, shaped the effort. Proponents of the effort garnered bipartisan support and began coalition-building. The foundational argument for the 18-year-old vote was "old enough to fight, old enough to vote," that is, the voting age should match the military draft age of eighteen. To achieve their goal, proponents pursued constitutional amendments at both the state and federal levels. With the modern civil rights movement as the foundation, the advent of the "baby boom" generation and the election of the youngest president ever, John F. Kennedy, in 1960 advanced the 18-year-old vote.

CHAPTER 1

Franchise of Freedom

In 1942, during the first year of US involvement in World War II, Congress lowered the draft age to eighteen, and calls for lowering the voting age spread through Congress, the states, and among the general public, including students.

Questions for Discussion

- Who were the prominent proponents of youth voting rights during World War II? Why were they motivated to lower the voting age to 18?
- What arguments did they make and why was the "foundational argument" so important?
- How did earlier amendments to the US Constitution lay the foundation for youth suffrage? Why does the relationship between states' rights and federal power make legislation to expand voting rights challenging?
- What does the story of Georgia's passage of the 18-year-old vote reveal about the expansion and limits of voting rights in the 1940s?

CHAPTER 2

Youth's Own Future

The Cold War intensified appeals for and opposition to youth voting rights. Although opponents stayed strong in the first half of the 1950s, new proponents emerged with positive developments for the effort.

Questions for Discussion

- What arguments did opponents make against lowering the voting age to 18?
- How did proponents in politics and the press reshape their arguments to fit the new Cold War context?
- Why did President Dwight D. Eisenhower come out in favor of the vote for 18-, 19-, and 20-year-old Americans, and what resulted from his support?
- What happened in the first congressional debate and vote on youth suffrage in the Senate in May 1954, and what did it reveal?

CHAPTER 3

Make Democracy Live

The modern civil rights movement built the foundation for youth voting rights, with important gains in the second half of the 1950s. Meanwhile, the activities and voices of members of the “baby boom” generation and their older siblings further fueled the effort to win the 18-year-old vote.

Questions for Discussion

- How did Congressman Charles C. Diggs, Jr. represent the vital connection between voting rights for African and young Americans?
- How did developments in the states and territories in the second half of the 1950s expand the base of support for youth suffrage?
- In what ways were young Americans in the 1950s preparing for full citizenship? Why did they think they deserved the right to vote?
- How did youth culture in the 1950s contribute to a generational consciousness among young Americans, and what media stereotypes did they face?

CHAPTER 4

Change is in the Air

The election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 and his famous call to service in his January 1961 inaugural speech inspired many Americans. On the question of lowering the voting age, they began to have their voices heard in Washington, DC.

Questions for Discussion

- What was John F. Kennedy's position on youth voting rights and how was it shaped by the conflict between states' rights and federal power?
- In the early 1960s, what legislative, legal, and constitutional developments occurred to expand and protect voting rights?
- What arguments for the 18-year-old vote were made at the 1961 Senate hearings on electoral reforms, and who made them?
- How did JFK's Presidential Commission on Registration and Voting Participation contribute to the advancement of youth voting rights?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Part I

To explore the place of voting rights in the US Constitution, students can closely read the texts of Article 1, Sections 2 & 4, as well as the 14th, 15th, 17th, and 19th Amendments. What role do the states have in setting suffrage qualifications? What role does the federal government have in regulating elections? How do these four amendments expand and protect voting rights? How does the “negative wording” (p. 21) of the 15th and 19th Amendments limit their scope? These suffrage amendments, along with the 14th Amendment, share a final enforcement clause; why might this be important?

The four chapters in Part I provide a good overview of key proponents and opponents and their arguments for and against lowering the voting age to 18. The political careers of two men—Jennings Randolph and Emanuel Celler—span the thirty years covered in this book. They were there at the start and the finish of the achievement of the 26th Amendment. Who were they, and what did they think of youth suffrage at the start of this effort? Students also can make a list of pro and con arguments covered thus far and discuss which ones they find most convincing.

PART II

"A change is comin' and it's very near,"

1963-1967 (79-146)

The sixties generation came of age, went to college, and participated in campus and community activism during a period of liberal reform. In the middle years of the decade, the civil rights movement and President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society achieved transformative civil and voting rights legislation and an expansion of the welfare state. Young Americans were inspired to participate in these liberal reform efforts and, in the process, came to feel the effects of their disfranchisement until age twenty-one more deeply. The American war in Vietnam accelerated this process and catalyzed a historic antiwar movement. "Old enough to fight, old enough to vote," the foundational argument for youth suffrage, alongside other arguments, was voiced by young proponents and their adult allies. New student-led, single-issue organizations sprang up during this second phase of the struggle for youth voting rights and worked for amendments to state constitutions.

CHAPTER 5

Agenda for a Generation

Student activism on- and off-campus flourished during the 1960s, on the political left and right, as well as in the liberal middle. In the midst of this ferment, Vindication of Twenty-Eighteen Suffrage (VOTES), founded in 1962 in Connecticut, demanded that their state lower the voting age.

Questions for Discussion

- What was VOTES and what did it set out to do? What motivated the leaders? Why was their organization significant?
- What impact did events and campaigns like the student sit-in movement, Mississippi Freedom Summer, and the free speech movement have on participants and politics?
- What were the values and goals of key student organizations, like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and Young Americans for Freedom (YAF)?
- What political activities did future founders of the youth franchise movement—Paul Minarchenko (now Myer), Carolyn Quilloin (now Coleman), and Les Francis—participate in as students?

CHAPTER 6

Consent of the Governed

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 are considered the pillars of America's "Second Reconstruction." They also spurred proposals for and showed the political process needed to achieve the 18-year-old vote.

Questions for Discussion

- What did this historic civil and voting rights legislation achieve?
- How did bottom-up pressure from the civil rights movement work together with top-down action from politicians in Washington to pass these laws?
- Why did President Johnson decide not to include youth suffrage in the Voting Rights Act? How were other proponents advancing youth voting rights in 1965?

CHAPTER 7

Challenge of Citizenship

LBJ's Great Society included new policies and programs to benefit Americans, such as the "war on poverty," but his escalation of the war in Vietnam in 1965 undercut these. These two developments crucially affected young people, and they demanded that their voices be heard.

Questions for Discussion

- What kinds of programs and activities associated with the Great Society, especially the war on poverty, did students take part in?
- How did young people respond to the Vietnam War?
- How did Michigan students build their 1966 campaign for the 18-year-old vote? What arguments did they make? What was the new "safety-valve argument"?

Chapter 8

This Is Democracy?

As the Vietnam War ground on and draft calls grew, youth voting rights rose to the top of the political agenda at the federal and state levels in 1967. An apparent “generation gap” both contributed to and hindered these efforts and campaigns.

Questions for Discussion

- What was the generation gap, and how did it affect the arguments of proponents of youth suffrage, like Robert F. Kennedy, as well as opponents?
- What was happening in the civil rights movement, the war on poverty, the antiwar movement, and youth counterculture in 1967?
- How was the student movement advancing youth voting rights?
- What happened with the state-level efforts and campaigns that year?

Classroom Activities

Part II

The four chapters in Part II introduce a few of the founders and leaders of the youth franchise movement at the state and national levels: Paul Minarchenko (now Myer), Carolyn Quilloin (now Coleman), and Les Francis in Chapter 5; Rosalyn Hester (now Baker) and James Graham in Chapter 7; and Edward J. Forand in Chapter 8. Students can review the biographical material presented about these six people and explore how their backgrounds, experiences, or words help to explain what motivated them to support and organize for lowering the voting age. Students can add to these portraits as they read about their and others' involvement and leadership in later chapters.

The Bill Mauldin cartoon, published originally in the *Chicago Tribune* and reproduced on p. 124, appeared in the student newspaper the *Michigan Daily* alongside an article in favor of Michigan's 1966 youth suffrage referendum. Students can analyze this cartoon as visual historical evidence. What message is this cartoon conveying? Consider both the image and the caption. Who was the intended audience? How does this cartoon support the foundational argument for youth voting rights?

New arguments for youth voting rights emerge in the middle years of the 1960s: the safety-valve argument and an argument based on the generation gap. What were these arguments? How did opponents respond to these arguments and turn them to their own ends? Students can add these to their list of pro and con arguments from Part I.

PART III

"It's time that we all made a contribution,"

1968-1969 (147-222)

Only in the third phase of the struggle did a youth franchise movement emerge. 1968 was the turning point. Events and developments during the year, including the Democratic National Convention, accelerated momentum. National, multi-issue associations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and National Education Association, committed new people and resources, while new groups dedicated solely to the 18-year-old vote launched. The formation of the Youth Franchise Coalition (YFC) in February 1969 provided a crucial catalyst at the national level, and a broad, bipartisan coalition gathered under its umbrella. Organizing in the states also continued, using old and new strategies: from constitutional amendments to citizen initiatives and lawsuits. Referendum campaigns in Ohio and New Jersey in 1969 focused attention. It was the movement's moment.

CHAPTER 9

Turning Point '68

It's a truism that 1968 was a turning point, globally and nationally. Although Americans responded in a variety of ways to the tumult and tragedy of the first half of 1968, proponents of youth voting rights mobilized.

Questions for Discussion

- What significant events occurred in the first half of 1968, and what impact did they have?
- What political activities were young Americans taking part in?
- What arguments for and against lowering the voting age were expressed at the 1968 Senate hearings, chaired by Birch Bayh?
- Why did President Johnson come out in favor of the vote for 18-, 19-, and 20-year-old Americans, and what resulted from his support?
- Both the Democratic and Republican parties included youth suffrage in their platforms that year, but how did they differ? What had changed in the parties' positions since 1961, and why?

CHAPTER 10

We Can Vote Them Out

The second half of 1968 was equally momentous for the nation and for youth voting rights. New strategies, organizations, and impetus emerged across the country, spurring proponents into action.

Questions for Discussion

- What significant events occurred in the second half of 1968, and what impact did they have?
- What political activities were young Americans, especially those working for youth voting rights, taking part in?
- Why did Janie Greenspun take the state of Nevada to court? On what basis did she and her lawyers argue that disfranchised young Americans faced discrimination?
- What defeats did youth voting rights suffer at the national and state level in late 1968? What were the various ways that young proponents responded?

CHAPTER 11

It’s About Time

The formal establishment of the Youth Franchise Coalition (YFC) in February and the NAACP National Youth Mobilization to Lower the Voting Age in April took earlier efforts and state campaigns for youth voting rights to the national level.

Questions for Discussion

- What did the YFC founders hope to achieve? What were their strategies and arguments?
- Who were their allies among national politicians, and what did they urge the YFC to do about the media stereotype of young Americans?
- Which organizations joined the YFC? Why didn’t the Young Republicans?
- Why was the NAACP National Youth Mobilization significant?

CHAPTER 12

Where It's At

Paralleling national developments, action in the states signaled the arrival of the youth franchise movement in 1969. This chapter focuses on organizing in California, New York, and Connecticut as well as New Jersey and Ohio's referendum campaigns.

Questions for Discussion

- What motivated the leaders of the movement at the state-level?
- What strategies did they pursue?
- The 1969 referendum campaigns had all the hallmarks of the larger youth franchise movement; what were these? Why did they fail?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Part III

The four chapters in Part III present the 1968-1969 actions and activities of familiar leaders of the youth franchise movement and introduce new leaders at both the national and state levels. Joining Paul Minarchenko (now Myler), Les Francis, and James Graham in national organizing were Mel Myler (Chapter 9) and Ian MacGowan (Chapter 11). Joining Edward Forand in state organizing were Renny Cushing (Chapter 9), Patricia Keefer (Chapter 10), Dennis Warren (Chapter 10), Dennis King (Chapter 12), and Stuart Goldstein (Chapter 12). Students can add to their portraits of leaders from Part II, as well as review the biographical material presented about these seven new leaders. Students can explore, compare, and contrast the backgrounds, experiences, and motivations of this group. How did the Vietnam War, in particular, affect this new group of leaders?

Another new argument for youth voting rights emerged in 1968 and 1969: that disfranchised young Americans faced discrimination. Students can discuss how proponents began to use the 14th Amendment, especially the Equal Protection Clause, to advance this argument, and add this argument to their list of pro and con arguments from Parts I and II.

Additional strategies—beyond state and federal constitutional amendments—were also tried in 1968 and 1969. Students can explore how voter initiatives and lawsuits work to bring about legal change and discuss why proponents turned to these strategies.

In 1968 and 1969, proponents produced lots of materials to educate and mobilize Americans to support the youth franchise movement. Some of these materials are discussed and pictured in the book: the “L.U.V. (Let Us Vote)” song lyrics (p. 182); the YFC, NEA, and NSA’s pamphlets (pp. 195-196); the NAACP’s publicity for the National Youth Mobilization (pp. 197-199); and Vote 18 New Jersey and Vote 19 Ohio campaigns (pp. 218-219). Students can examine these different kinds and styles of materials. Which do they think were the most persuasive, with which audiences, and why? How might the mix of styles have been a good thing for the movement?

PART IV

“Come on and let us vote—it’s a solution,”

1970-1971 (223-298)

1970 turned out to be the youth franchise movement’s most consequential year. A complex series of events came in quick succession. In the Senate, hearings were held again on lowering the voting age. To achieve this goal, innovative congressional legislation passed with lobbying by the YFC and its allies, especially the NAACP. In a major victory, the Voting Rights Act of 1970 renewed the landmark 1965 Act and added the 18-year-old vote and other measures. President Richard M. Nixon signed the Voting Rights Act of 1970, but he called for a speedy constitutional test. The Supreme Court’s decision in *Oregon v. Mitchell* (1970), overturned part of it, necessitating immediate action. Within the first three months of 1971, Congress passed the 26th Amendment, and, within six months, three-quarters of the states ratified it.

CHAPTER 13

The Hour is Striking

During the first three months of 1970, the Senate was busy with hearings on the voting age and negotiations over the renewal of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the YFC successfully pressed for the inclusion of the 18-year-old vote.

Questions for Discussion

- How did developments in the states, recent government reports, and polling among college students contribute to momentum for the youth franchise movement in 1970?
- Why was new leadership from Rosalyn Hester (now Baker) and Patricia Keefer important, especially at this historical moment?
- What arguments for lowering the voting age were expressed at the 1970 Senate hearings, chaired by Birch Bayh, and how were they updated to fit the contemporary context?
- How did a legal article by Archibald Cox lead to the new statute strategy for proponents of youth voting rights? What criticisms were voiced?
- How did the legislative process over extending and amending the Voting Rights Act of 1965 proceed in the Senate?

CHAPTER 14

Enfranchised?

From March to June 1970, the House of Representatives took up the Senate's voting rights bill with a new Title III lowering the voting age to 18. Proponents in Congress and the YFC worked to overcome the opposition and, combined with the urgency of protecting black voting rights, compelled its passage.

Questions for Discussion

- What role did Emanuel Celler play in these events?
- Why did President Nixon oppose the inclusion of Title III, and what did he do about it?
- What did public opinion polling in 1970 reveal, and why did it matter?
- What happened with Oregon's referendum campaign, and what worried leader Earl Blumenauer?
- How did the legislative process over extending and amending the Voting Rights Act of 1965 proceed in the House?

CHAPTER 15

A Step Forward

This rapid pace of events around youth voting rights continued in the second half of 1970, with a constitutional test of the new act, a Supreme Court decision, and responses and referenda in the states.

Questions for Discussion

- What did members of the public think about the Voting Rights Act of 1970, and how did the states respond?
- Where did the 1970 referendum campaigns in the states and territories succeed, and why? What lessons did proponents take away from the failures?
- How did the Supreme Court justices decide *Oregon v. Mitchell* (1970)? Why does the author consider this an “extraordinary” decision?

CHAPTER 16

On Account of Age

The daunting prospect of two different sets of voting regulations drove the 26th Amendment, and, by July 1, 1971, with 38 states ratifying, the new amendment was the law of the land.

Questions for Discussion

- How did the burdens of “dual-age” voting required by *Oregon v. Miller* propel proponents and persuade many opponents to change their minds?
- Why did other opponents at the national and state levels continue in their stances?
- In the race for ratification, how did the states contend for the first and thirty-eighth place?
- What systems and campaigns emerged to register as well as deter new young voters?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Part IV

The Senate hearings of 1970 are available online. Students can read and analyze the testimony and statements of select witnesses, as well as do research on who these witnesses were. What arguments did they make for lowering the voting age? What did they think of the new statute strategy? Of note among the witnesses were representatives from national and state youth suffrage organizations, including Ian MacGowan from the YFC; James Brown Jr. and Philomena Queen from the NAACP; Charles Gonzales from Student NEA; Clark Wideman and Jerry Springer from Ohio; Earl Blumenauer from Oregon; and Bruce Marsh and Jim Chiswell from New York. Students can discuss why their voices were so important for these hearings.

At stake in *Oregon v. Mitchell* (1970) was once again the relationship between states' rights and federal power. Students can connect the opinions in this case with their earlier discussion of the place of voting rights in the original Constitution and the 14th and 15th Amendments

The text of the Twenty-sixth Amendment states: "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." Students can discuss how this wording follows that of the 15th and 19th Amendments, as well as take note of the enforcement clause: "The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."

CONCLUSION

"Talking 'bout you and me changin' things peacefully" (299-308)

The youth vote loomed large in 1972 as President Nixon sought re-election against Democratic challenger, Senator George McGovern. The popular assumption that young voters would overwhelmingly turn out and vote for the liberal McGovern did not come to be. The youth vote among Americans aged 18-29 supported the incumbent. Moreover, only about half of young voters turned out to vote. This outcome presaged developments over the last fifty years, leading some scholars to downplay the achievement and the significance of the 26th Amendment. The author makes a different case, emphasizing the intrinsic value of youth enfranchisement, the challenges of amending the US Constitution, and the legal implications of its prohibition on age discrimination in voting. The 26th Amendment also matters historically, especially for how we view the 1960s, liberalism, and the process of political change, and it means much for the future of American democracy.

Questions for Discussion

- Do you agree with the author's assessment of the importance of the 26th Amendment? What do you think about the emphasis on low youth vote turnout or impact in the assessments of other scholars? How do you think we should view the amendment?
- Why has Jennings Randolph rightly earned the title of "Father of the 26th Amendment"? Who else deserves credit for this achievement?
- How do participants in the youth franchise movement view their experiences and what they accomplished?
- What do you think about lowering the voting age to 16?

Classroom Activities

- Across the United States as well as the world, young people are working to lower the voting age to sixteen. [There are lots of materials available for students to research and debate this contemporary issue.](#) Many of the arguments for and against the 16-year-old vote echo those made earlier with the 18-year-old vote. There are other connections as well in terms of public opinion and strategies that students can explore.

Supplemental Materials

- The author has collected [resources and ideas for teaching this topic](#) that are available online and designed a [lesson plan using primary sources from the New York Times.](#)