

WHAT DOES THE 26TH AMENDMENT MEAN TO ME?

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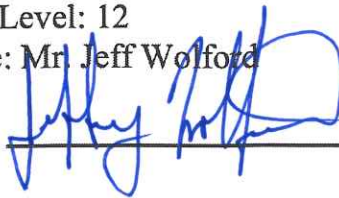
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It was December 24, 1944 in the midst of World War II. That Christmas Eve, the ship *Leopoldville* “had the task of ferrying troops of the 66th Division U.S. Army from Southampton, England, to Cherbourg, France” (Andrade 63). The 2,235 soldiers making the nine hour trip across the English Channel would serve as reinforcements in the Battle of the Bulge. After a paltry dinner, soldiers gathered on deck and sang Christmas carols (Andrade). Then, around 6:00 p.m., their celebration came to a tragic end when the ship was hit by a torpedo from a German U-486. In total, 763 American patriots were killed (“The Sinking”).

My great grandfather was never supposed to be on the *Leopoldville*, but was reassigned at the last minute from another ship. When the *Leopoldville* sunk, he and a fellow soldier grabbed a piece of debris and floated in the 48 degree water for three hours until rescued. After recovering, he was sent to the front lines in northern France, where he was stabbed in the mouth with a bayonet by a German soldier. My great grandfather received a Bronze Star with valor for his service in World War II. He was 19 years old.

In 1944, the legal voting age was 21. Ironically, my great grandfather could shed blood in the name of our great nation, but could not cast a vote to decide who would lead it. When I think about what the 26th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution means to me, I think about seven of my family members who served in either World War II or the Korean War, all before the age of 21. Two of my great-great uncles died in World War II, before they even had the chance to cast their first vote in an election.

The fact that American soldiers could die in war but not vote became a social issue during World War II. The slogan “Old Enough to Fight, Old Enough to Vote” became a rallying

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cry that reached all the way to Congress. Federal legislation to lower the voting age was first introduced in 1942 by Jennings Randolph, a Democratic congressman from West Virginia (“The 26th Amendment”). Randolph’s rationale behind his proposal was that he believed that young people “possess a great social conscience, are perplexed by the injustices in the world, and are anxious to rectify those ills” (“The 26th Amendment”). However, it wouldn’t be until almost three decades later that the movement for lowering the voting age would make significant strides under the law.

It was the Vietnam War that reignited the intense conversation about the federal voting age and set the stage for the 26th Amendment. “Youth voting rights activists held marches and demonstrations to draw lawmakers’ attention to the hypocrisy of drafting young men who lacked the right to vote” (“The 26th Amendment”). Against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, Congress lowered the voting age to 18 in all federal, state, and local elections as part of the Voting Rights Act of 1970 (“Historical Highlights”). However, in *Oregon v. Mitchell (1970)*, the constitutionality of the provision was brought before the U.S. Supreme Court. In a 5-to-4 vote, the Court ruled that “Congress had authority to lower the voting age in federal elections, but lacked power to do so for state and local elections” (Benson & Morley). Thus, it remained legal for states to independently decide whether or not 18 to 20 year olds could vote in state and local elections.

Pursuant to the ruling in *Oregon v. Mitchell*, the right of 18 to 20 year olds to vote in elections at all levels—federal, state, and local—would not be uniformly permitted unless an amendment to the Constitution was proposed and ratified. In response, Congress proposed the 26th Amendment and after a favorable landslide in both chambers, the amendment went to the

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state legislatures for ratification. Section I of the 26th Amendment of the U.S Constitution reads: “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.” Section II establishes that Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation (*The Constitution*). In 1971, the necessary three-fourths of state legislatures ratified the 26th Amendment in four months, the shortest ratification period of any constitutional amendment (Benson & Morley).

Flash forward to modern times and we see the power of the 26th Amendment realized in the 2020 election when young people voted at historically high rates. According to Tufts University 2020 Election Center, “52%-55% of eligible young people ages 18-29 voted in 2020,” a jump of 10 percent from the 2016 election. Eligible young voters not only participated at historical rates in 2020, but were able to “keep up” with older voters more than ever before and had a major influence on the electorate (“2020 Election Center”). The youth of America are energized by the opportunity to have a voice in our democracy by researching, campaigning, and supporting candidates like never before.

Although the 26th Amendment is a relatively young piece of legislation, it has a rich and complex history that makes it significant to every American for various reasons. It means that I have the opportunity to honor my relatives who came before me and made unimaginable sacrifices in the name of our nation but could not vote. It means that my Congressional representatives had the wisdom to amend the Constitution to give young people the right to participate in the democratic process earlier in life. It means that young people like me can take up the mantle of democracy in the coming decades and use our votes to uphold the Constitution

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of the United States. To vote, is to love our country. After all, as American businesswoman Pat Mitchell once said: "If we don't vote, we are ignoring history and giving away the future."

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