Should 18 year olds have the right to vote?

Be prepared to debate in class Friday, 9-17, the question above.

Use specific details from the text or supplied materials, to support your point in class. You will not know whether you are going to be in favor or oppose 18 year olds voting until you get to class. Be prepared to support either side. You will be graded based on your participation and the quality of the supporting information that you use.

Below are two articles for and against 18 year olds being able to vote.

There is also a brief description of a Supreme Court case that addressed the issue.
Should We Take Away the Voting Rights of 18 Year Olds?

By Timothy Furnish

Mr. Furnish, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of history at Georgia Perimeter College in Atlanta.

President Nixon is usually denigrated for Watergate, his “enemies list,” even his participation in post-World War II anti-Communist fervor. But there was a blunder committed by the 37th president that far outstrips all his others combined. That was signing the 26th Amendment into law in 1971, giving 18-year-olds the right to vote.

Lowering the voting age such that all college freshmen, and even many high school seniors, could help choose the Republic’s leaders was undoubtedly one of the dumbest things ever done in this country’s history. We can’t totally blame Nixon, since this misguided movement had been supported earlier by Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson and, of course, practically the entire Congress in Nixon’s time. May they all fry in one of Dante’s lowest circles of Hell for this transgression against political sense.

What is wrong with such young folks voting? Doesn’t democracy work better when the franchise is extended to as many Americans as feasibly possible? And isn’t it true that “old enough to die, old enough to vote?”—as the amendment’s supporters argued during the Vietnam War?

To answer these questions in reverse order: no, no and ARE YOU KIDDING?! Democracy works when KNOWLEDGEABLE citizens vote, as was recognized as long ago as Plato’s and Aristotle’s time. Can any rational member of the human species watch Jay Leno’s “Jaywalking”—in which he roams the streets of Southern California, interviewing folks who don’t know the vice president’s name, which hemisphere they live in—and possibly think it’s a good idea for these people to be left alone with a voting machine of any kind?

As a college history professor, I can cite examples of 18- and 19-year olds’ ignorance that make the Jaywalkers look like the Founding Fathers. One of my students recently announced that he’d received a draft notice in the mail (can anyone say “Stripes?”). No one in an entire modern world history class this term knew when the American Revolution began. When I queried my classes “what is the approximate size of the U.S. budget for the upcoming fiscal year?” most replies ranged between a few hundred million dollars and a few billion (the actual figure is about $2 and 1/2 trillion). Most of my students thought that the African-American population made up “30 or 40 percent” of the U.S., whereas it’s actually 12.5 percent. Many of my students have written, on tests or papers, that
Jesus is worshipped by the Jewish people and that Muhammad lived before Jesus. (Shouldn’t voters know something about the world’s major religions?) And I have had many students who thought that Nazi Germany used nuclear weapons in World War II (in which case wouldn’t we all be goose-stepping and speaking Deutsche?).

My point is not to score cheap points at my students’ expense. (Almost all of them, after all, went to public school in Georgia—the state that ranks 49th in SAT scores—and most of us college professors here have resigned ourselves to the fate of repairing the damage done by secondary school teachers—which might be worth contemplating the next time public school teachers are demanding yet another pay raise.) The point is that we allow such uninformed people to vote! Indeed, we encourage it: MTV’s “Rock the Vote,” P. Diddy’s “Vote or Die.” There’s even an organization, “Youthrights.org,” that demands we lower the voting age to 16! (Just what we need: presidential candidates taking stands on their preferred anti-acne medication.)

Now there is no guarantee that a 30-something voter will be more informed than one just out of high school—but it’s a good bet. As Michael Barone points out in his book Hard America, Soft America, this nation’s 18-year olds are, on average, coddled, spoiled and ignorant; but by the time they hit their third decade, most of them are extremely competent and productive (thanks to good colleges, the business world or the military).

So I won’t go as far as my wife, who cites Barone to advocate 30 as the minimum voting age. I’ll settle for raising it to 20—with a major caveat, addressing the “old enough to die, old enough to vote “ argument. The late science-fiction writer Robert Heinlein, in his book Starship Troopers (try to pretend you’ve never seen the horrible movie, Denise Richards notwithstanding), posited a futuristic world government which worked extremely well because of one thing: only those who had proved their dedication to the collective good, by volunteering for the military, could vote. So let’s set up a similar system, with both a military and civil volunteer component (in the latter those opposed to warfare could help with international disaster relief, for example), requiring a two-year minimum stint. Thus one could join right out of high school, at 18, and then when the term of service was up at 20 the right to vote would follow. Two years in such an environment would not only demonstrate the individual’s seriousness about citizenship, it would almost undoubtedly educate them beyond the level of the modern Jaywalker or college undergrad.

If that smacks too much of social engineering, let’s at least institute a qualifying quiz for voters, of perhaps three questions: 1) what’s the square root of 16? 2) who is your current congressional representative? 3) what part of the U.S. is now being referred to as “Jesusland?” Or devise your own questions—but we need some litmus test that demonstrates the prospective voter knows SOMETHING and has not
just been demagogued into believing that the GOP wishes to starve senior citizens or that the Democrats want Bin Ladin to move into the Oval Office.

We dodged a bullet in this election, when the ignorant youth masses turned out in record numbers (51 percent of the 18-29 year olds voted; figures for subslice of that pie that includes only 18-20 years olds is unavailable), which broke for Kerry by about 10 points. Only the fact that most other age groups voted in even larger numbers drowned out the callow masses’ otherwise influential cluelessness. One would like to think that even Democrats “win at any price” desperation stops just short of encouraging Know Nothings to support them. So I say: dock their vote! Repeal the 26th Amendment before President P. Diddy is sworn in.
Twenty-five Years of 18-Year-Old Voting

By Jonathan Karl/CNN

WASHINGTON (June 28) -- Imagine being called to fight, kill and even die for your country, but not being allowed to vote. Many people had good a reason to protest the Vietnam War.

Throughout most of American history, 18-year-olds fought in our wars, but you had to be 21 to vote. That changed 25 years ago this week, when President Nixon certified the 26th Amendment, lowering the voting age to 18.

"The reason I believe that your generation, the 11 million new voters, will do so much for America at home is that you will infuse into this nation some idealism, some courage, some stamina, some high moral purpose, that this country always needs," President Nixon said in 1971.

Nixon invited 500 newly eligible voters to the White House for that signing ceremony. Today their peers -- those first affected by the 26th Amendment -- include a high-profile Democrat in Congress, a top Republican player and President Clinton's press secretary. Spokesman Mike McCurry turned 18 just two weeks before the 1972 presidential election. "If we were old enough to go to Vietnam, we were certainly old enough to choose the president who might send us," McCurry said.

Today Mary Matalin is a combative Republican partisan, but as an 18 year old she didn't exercise her newly won right in the '72 election. She says she would have voted for Nixon, "Because I was pretty much ... that's hard to say, I was pretty much a liberal hippie chick in those days. I might have voted for McGovern, who knows?"

Says Congressman Joe Kennedy (D-MA), "It was a very, very tearing, sort of gut-wrenching issue of the time." Kennedy was 18 when the 26th amendment passed. His father, Bobby Kennedy had championed the lower voting age a decade earlier.

"The young people's movement in America became something that some politicians felt very comfortable with and others felt very threatened by," Kennedy stated. "My father happened to feel very comfortable with it."
Even as 18, 19 and 20 year-olds were sent off to fight in Vietnam, opponents argued that they were simply too young to be trusted with the right to vote. In 1970, nine states rejected proposals to lower the voting age.
But in 1971, it took just over two months for the required 38 states to ratify the 26th Amendment -- the quickest ratification in history.
Most observers thought the new voters would cast their ballots for Democratic challenger George McGovern, an opponent of the Vietnam War. But Richard Nixon ending up winning 49 states in one of the biggest landslides in American history.
"After Nixon won in 49 states," Kennedy chuckled, "those that were the drivers behind the movement said, 'Oh well, next time!'"
Today registering to vote is basic rite of passage for most high school seniors:
"I get my voice," said one young voter. "Yeah, I'm excited. I was excited when I got my registration card."
"I feel it's something that I've been waiting to do for about two years," another said. "It's a privilege."
"I registered through my school and I sent the papers and that's about it," said a more blase young voter.
And politically minded 18 to 20 year-olds do more than just vote. They play important roles in political campaigns, and when organized can demand the attention of top political leaders.
"The most important thing we have to do is invest in the mental capability of young people," declared Rep. Richard Gephardt, the House Minority Leader.
At their recent national convention in Washington, the College Democrats conducted workshops on the nuts and bolts of campaigning. They also met with Vice President Al Gore and held rallies on Capitol Hill. Before the 26th Amendment most of these college students would not even have been able to vote.
Jennifer Parkinson of the College Democrats says, "I do consider myself not just part of the political process, but I am the political process. It's more than just voting -- I like to put the candidates that are important to me in office."
But the legacy of the 26th Amendment is mixed. Youth turnout has steadily declined since 1972, when 50 percent of 18 to 24 year-olds voted. By 1988, youth turnout plummeted to 36 percent. It rebounded a bit in 1992, but remains well behind the turnout of older voters.

Kennedy says the low voting rates have cost young people dearly: "If the politicians in Washington today thought they'd have to pay a price for sending the deficit to our kids, there'd be no budget deficit -- we'd solve the budget deficit."

But election expert Curtis Gans of the Center for the Study of the American Electorate says that, despite the disappointment, the 26th Amendment has had a major impact on American politics during its first 25 years.

"The result of 25 years if nothing else is for several million young people to have gotten their minds, their bodies and their ballots engaged in American politics," Gans stated.

This story originally appeared on CNN's *Inside Politics.*
Case Summary
Oregon, Texas, and Idaho brought suit in the Supreme Court against the United States and Attorney General John Mitchell to challenge the Voting Rights Act Amendments of 1970. They claimed that only the States, and not Congress, have the authority to establish qualification rules for voters in State and local elections.

The Court's Decision
The Supreme Court held, with considerable disagreement, that the federal 18-year-old voting age requirement is valid for national elections, but not for State or local elections. Justice Hugo Black announced the Court's judgment in an opinion that expressed his own views. Four justices agreed with Justice Black that the Constitution gives Congress broad powers to regulate federal elections. These four justices, but not Justice Black, thought Congress also could do so in State elections. They argued that the States have no legitimate interest in excluding 18 to 21-year-old voters, and that the Equal Protection Clause supports the right of people in this age group to vote.

Four other justices agreed with Justice Black that Congress could not regulate the minimum age in State and local elections. These justices thought Congress also lacked the power to set the voting age for federal elections. They argued that under the Constitution, only the States have the right to set voter qualifications.

All justices agreed that Congress can prohibit the use of literacy tests or other requirements that discriminate against voters based on their race in all elections. In upholding the ban on literacy tests, the Court accepted Congress's findings that the tests tended to disqualify a disproportionate number of minority voters.

More on the Case
The decision in Mitchell may look like a victory for the States, but it actually left them with a serious potential problem. Because the Supreme Court upheld the lowered national voting age in federal elections but not in State elections, States were faced with the complexity and expense of keeping track of who was allowed to vote in various elections. For example, a nineteen-year-old might be allowed to vote for President and Vice President but not for State officials who were up for election at the same time. In 1971, at the urging of the States, Congress adopted a proposed constitutional amendment setting a uniform national voting age of eighteen in all elections. The States promptly ratified it.

The Twenty-Sixth Amendment states:

Section 1. 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 2. The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

This was not the first time a constitutional amendment was adopted in order to resolve a national voting issue. The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, prohibits abridgment of the right to vote on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude. The Nineteenth Amendment, ratified in 1920, prohibits denial of the right to vote on account of gender. The Twenty-Fourth Amendment, ratified in 1964, restricts States from imposing a poll tax as a requirement for voting in federal elections.