THE CONSTITUTION WITH CARL

Volume 27 - The Twenty-sixth Amendment - Old Enough to Vote at Eighteen

Old Enough to Vote at Eighteen

Central question: If you are old enough to be drafted, are you old enough to vote?





For most of American history, the voting age was twenty one. A young man of eighteen, nineteen, or twenty could be ordered into the Army, trained, and sent across an ocean to fight for his country, and he still could not cast a ballot for the leaders who sent him. During the Second World War the draft age fell to eighteen, and a short sentence began to travel the country: **old enough to fight, old enough to vote**. It was an argument about fairness that almost anyone could understand in one hearing, and for nearly thirty years it would not go away.

This book tells how that argument finally won. One state acted alone in 1943. A President asked Congress for an amendment in 1954. Congress tried a shortcut in 1970, a law instead of an amendment, and the Supreme Court split the shortcut in half: yes for federal elections, no for state and local ones. So the country did the job the lasting way, with an amendment, and then did it faster than any amendment before or since: one hundred days from proposal to ratification. The Twenty-sixth Amendment is short, just forty eight words, and this book reads every one of them.

For ages 7 to 11. Level Up boxes reach to age 13.

START HERE

Meet Carl and the Four Strands

Carl the Cardinal is Young Voter Carl in this volume. He stands tall at the entrance of a polling place, a blank ballot held up in one wing. The ballot is blank because Carl's vote, like yours one day, belongs to the voter and to no one else. He wears his green neckerchief and his gold compass medallion, as he does in every volume, and he is not dressed as a soldier. That is on purpose. The young people in this story were asking for a citizen's tool, the ballot, and Carl carries the ballot.

The four strands, kept separate

Strand	What it is
THE WORDS	The amendment itself, both sections complete, in ORIGINAL WORDS, plus a PLAIN LANGUAGE EXPLANATION set apart from it.
THE HISTORY	Georgia in 1943, the draft in two wars, a President's request in 1954, the statute of 1970, and the hundred day ratification of 1971.
COURTS HAVE SAID	Oregon v. Mitchell (1970), the split decision that helped spur this amendment, told honestly: no single opinion spoke for a majority of the Court.
STILL DEBATED	Real questions that remain, such as proposals in some cities to let sixteen year olds vote in local elections. Stated fairly, never as settled fact.

How to use this book

- Read the words aloud first. Then read the explanation.
- Write, draw, point, or dictate your answers. All of those count.
- Watch for the difference between a **law** and an **amendment**. Congress tried the law first in this story, and the difference between the two is why this book exists.
- Watch, too, for the words **federal** and **state**. This amendment covers both, and page 4 sets it beside the Twenty-fourth Amendment, which covered federal elections only.

CARL'S ONE SENTENCE

Carl keeps one sentence in front of him through the whole book: **a right important enough to protect for everyone must be written where a simple law cannot be split in half.** In 1970 Congress set the voting age at eighteen by statute, and within six months the courts had cut that statute into two pieces, one that stood and one that fell. The amendment that followed could not be cut that way. It speaks to the United States and to every state in the same words, and it has stood unchanged ever since.

Did You Know? The Twenty-sixth Amendment is the fastest amendment in American history. Congress proposed it on March 23, 1971, and the thirty eighth state ratified it on July 1, 1971. Count the days yourself on page 17: March 23 to July 1 is exactly 100 days. Source: National Archives, "Amending America," Prologue magazine, Winter 2015: the Twenty-sixth Amendment "was ratified faster than any other amendment, in only 100 days."