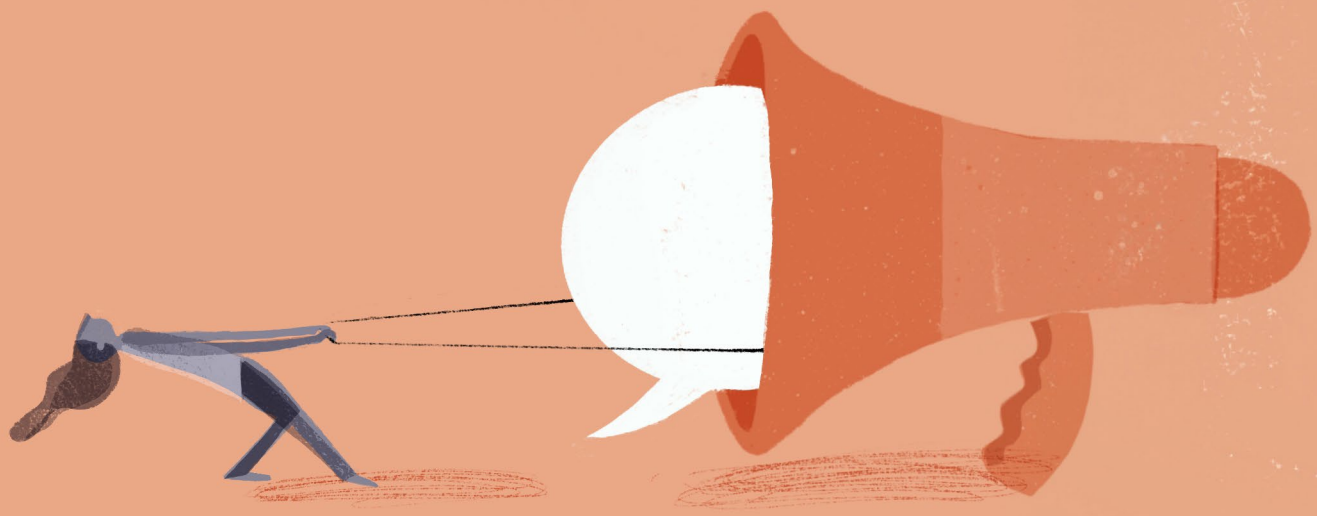
The Choice That Matters

Why children should have the right to vote



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Foreword.

My name is Charlotte. I am 15 years old and I live in Oklahoma, in the United States of America. When I was nine years old, I was elected Kid Governor of Oklahoma, and I served for two terms until I was 11.

As Kid Governor, I gave speeches, met with lawmakers and talked to many adults. That experience taught me something important: grown-ups are doing a terrible job taking care of kids! On issues like climate change, gun violence, health care, education and criminal justice, adults keep making decisions that hurt our future. And even when I spoke directly to them about these issues, no one really listened.

Adults treated me like a mascot. They took pictures with me and told me I was adorable – but they didn't act. I realised then that when it comes to real decisions, the people in charge listen to other adults – those who can vote for them or against them. Kids are not treated seriously because we don't have the right to vote. We don't have real power.

That is why children's suffrage matters to me.

Above all, it's an issue of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that voting is a fundamental human right. Are kids not humans? Democracy is supposed to mean one person, one vote. Am I not a person?

It's also silly to say kids can't vote because they might make bad choices. There's no magical age when people suddenly start making good decisions. Adults make terrible decisions all the time, like starting wars.

Children also have to abide by the law, and those who work have to pay taxes – even though legislating and taxation without representation is unfair.

Letting kids participate in democracy would send a powerful message: that our voices matter. Voting would become a habit if kids grew up doing it, making for more informed, engaged adult citizens. That alone could change the world.

While some adults support lowering the voting age to 16, they ignore younger kids entirely. Giving children opportunities to share opinions is not enough. And it shouldn't matter if kids vote like their parents or are influenced by their communities... all voters are.

It's the choice that matters. *That* is democracy.

I hope this report inspires adults to think differently and take action. I also hope it inspires children to recognise this truth: without the right to vote, politicians will not listen to us.

Because real power means having the right to vote.

An invitation.

CRIN wants to encourage a new debate on children's right to vote. This report explores and challenges myths used to deny suffrage to children, outlines the fundamental principles supporting children's voting rights and proposes practical approaches for their implementation.

We invite you to join the discussion. If you would like to comment on the report or need further information on children's right to vote, please reach out to us at info@crin.org.

That the right to vote is predominantly regarded as an adult-only privilege is so deeply entrenched that any challenge to it is typically met with ridicule or dismissal. When it comes to advocating for children's right to vote, the prevailing view is that – purely based on their young age – children are incompetent, irrational and lack the judgement to vote. However, the arguments that underlie these claims often apply to adults as well, which makes them untenable. Despite this, children continue to be disenfranchised the world over, and the impact this has is serious, with many children reporting that they feel increasingly disillusioned with democracy and decision-making. It has become clear to them that their needs and interests – particularly long-term ones – are being ignored. As today's largest population group to be denied the right to vote (a core aspect of citizenship) children are, in effect, second-class citizens.

This report challenges this status quo by arguing that children are political beings and their right to vote needs to be taken seriously. Although well-studied within academia,[i] the idea of children's suffrage is still neglected in mainstream discourse and among children's rights organisations. Responding to this deficit, CRIN is launching this report in the current context of a growing momentum for children's right to vote – where half a dozen countries have already lowered the voting age by a year or two, and campaigning for this change exists in a dozen more. While these developments illustrate change in the right direction, this report instead makes the case for the right to vote for *all* under-18s. In other words, CRIN is arguing for arbitrary age limits on suffrage to be eliminated entirely.

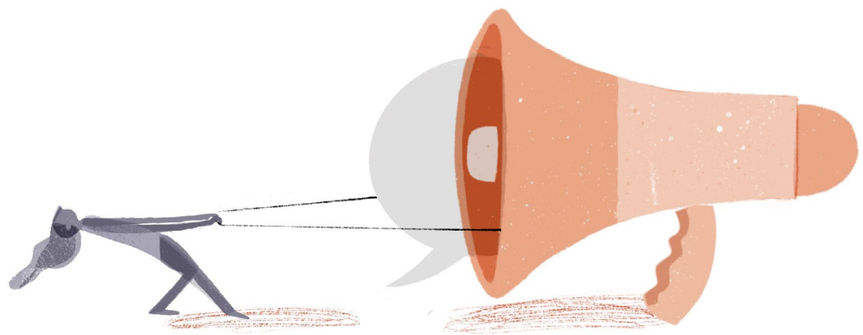
To this end, this report examines the main international human rights instruments and argues that – although they do not explicitly confer the vote to children – when properly interpreted, they provide support for it. It then sets out and debunks the myths used to deny

[i]Scholars in childhood studies, social science, political science, economics, philosophy, history, law and medicine have advocated for ageless voting.

See: Children's Voting Colloquium, *Children's voting resources* (childrenvoting.org) https://www.childrenvoting.org/resources.

children the vote, by comparing children's experiences with adults, before explaining why lowering the voting age to 16 (as many campaigners propose) may not be enough. The report then explores how ageless voting could be achieved in practice, before finally placing children's vote in the broader context of democratic reform.

It is clear that we need to employ considerably greater imagination when considering the models by which children participate in and contribute to democratic processes.[1] This report is an invitation to question long-held assumptions and aims to encourage an earnest debate. After all, if every child could vote, wouldn't this benefit both children *and* democracy?





Why children's right to vote and why now?.

Over the course of centuries, the right to vote, once limited to a privileged few, has gradually expanded to include the majority of the adult population.

In 1893, New Zealand became the first country in the world to give women the vote on equal terms with men. Universal suffrage had arrived. Or had it? Almost 130 years later, the country's Supreme Court found that the current minimum voting age of 18 is discriminatory.[ii] In 2022, young activists in New Zealand sought to reform the law to extend voting rights to under-18s – following in the footsteps of Malta, Argentina, Austria, Ecuador, Brazil, Nicaragua and Cuba. And while this case made global headlines, campaign groups, lawmakers and governments in more than a dozen other countries already supported child suffrage, and currently continue to do so.

The right to vote for under-18s is becoming a new front in civil and political rights, questioning whether our democracies truly include and work for all of their citizens.

So, why children's right to vote and *why now?*

Because children's needs are ignored by politicians

Children account for around 30% of the world's population, yet politicians give under-18s little importance when formulating their policies. A 2024 analysis of the European Union (EU) election manifestos and policies proposed for children showed that, while young adults

[ii] The Supreme Court of New Zealand declared that preventing 16- and 17-year-olds from voting is unjustified age discrimination and in breach of the Bill of Rights Act.

See: *Make it 16 Incorporated v Attorney General* [2022] NZSC 134, http://www.nzlii.org/nz/cases/NZSC/2022/134.html; Make it 16, 'Court Case' (makeit16.org.nz) https://www.makeit16.org.nz/thecourtcase.

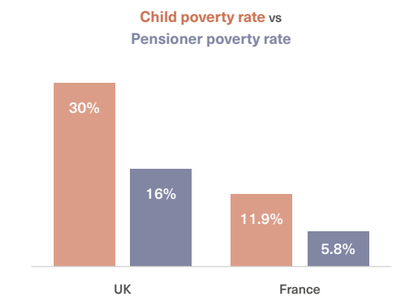
are largely reflected in the party manifestos, under-18s receive less attention.[2] India has the world's largest child population, but children's issues are mostly absent from election manifestos; parties tend to group children together with women and youth, downplaying their specific needs.[3] Meanwhile, in the United States, polls show that 32% and 24% of respondents believe that babies and children, respectively, are not represented in the political system at all, compared to only 5% of respondents believing that middle-aged and older adults are not represented.[4] Similarly, in the United Kingdom, only 9% of 8- to 17-year-olds feel politicians care about the needs of all people equally, with working-age adults and the elderly being seen as the priority demographic.[5]

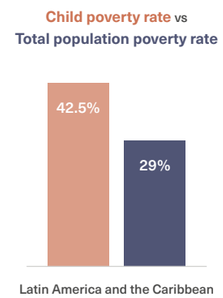
One reason for this situation is that politicians are incentivised to skew their policies towards those most likely to vote for them. And because children can't vote, politicians who ignore their needs are unlikely to lose an election.[6] Without the power to elect political representatives, children systematically lack the power to influence economic and other policies.[7] The executive and legislative bodies are not accountable to them.[8] Children also lack access to key resources and spaces – they generally do not earn a living, belong to unions, run organisations or participate in other fundamental avenues of influence.[9] Beyond protests and civil disobedience, and occasional inclusion in policy consultations, children have little opportunity to make their voices heard.

As a result, children's political inclusion largely relies on the discretionary goodwill of adults.[10] When children and their issues do make it onto the political agenda, this is commonly due to emotive, and often paternalistic, societal perceptions rather than a rights-based approach.[11]

Because children are often worse off than adults – and this is not a coincidence

In many countries, child poverty greatly exceeds elderly poverty. In the UK and France children are around twice as likely as elders to live in poverty – the UK's child poverty rate is 30% (compared to 16% for pensioners)[12]; in France 11.9% of children live in poverty (in contrast to 5.8% of those over 66 years old). Spain and Italy also have child poverty levels that are considerably higher than for the elderly.[iii] In Latin America and the Caribbean, 29% of the population is living in poverty – but when only under-18s are considered, the percentage rises to 42.5%.[13] This is happening despite strong evidence that the lack of early childhood investment has an irreversible negative impact on children's wellbeing, ultimately harming society and the economy in the long run.[iv] Economists suggest that this consistent, well-documented underinvestment across much of the world correlates with children being one of the last constituencies without voting rights.[14]





The opposite links have been made with the elderly, who are by far the most active voters, at least in some of the world's oldest democracies.[15] Academic literature consistently shows that elderly voting turnout has a significant relationship to the pattern of public expenditure, in contrast to the lack of evidence of the role of non-voting population groups like children.[16] This imbalance leads to intergenerational inequity, particularly – but not only – in ageing democracies,[v] where public resources are disproportionately allocated.

Because children's long-term interests are especially disregarded

Politics is often short-termist, with parties formulating policies within election cycles spanning just a few years.[17] In our consumption-driven societies, which are focused on the present, children are unable to advocate for or defend their immediate, near or – most critically – long-term interests. Children's present-day political exclusion can be disadvantageous in ways that will not necessarily be compensated for or rectified later.[18] Public debt and the environmental crisis are prime examples. These challenges are often seen as distant concerns by politicians, as they frequently clash with immediate political priorities and agendas. Yet, it is the consequences of these issues that will have a profound impact on the lives of today's children once they are older.

[iii] In 2012, in Spain, the State invested 113% more in people over 65 than in children up to 19 years of age.

See: Ana Torres Menárguez and Celia Fernández, '¿Están preparados los jóvenes de 16 años para votar? [Are 16-year-olds ready to vote?]', *El País* (2 March 2022) https://elpais.com/sociedad/2022-03-02/estan-preparados-los-jovenes-de-16-anos-para-votar.html.

[iv] A growing body of research shows that what happens in early childhood – in terms of quality of health and nutrition, material deprivation and poverty, lack of parental care and a poor emotional environment – has a profound and enduring influence on educational and economic achievements in a child's life and in adulthood. Any deprivation suffered by a child is likely to have consequences for the rest of their life, which worsen with time rather than improving. Early public policy investments in children can lead to improved outcomes, ranging from higher achievement in schooling and better health to lower contact with the criminal justice system, and thus to significant savings for governments and society at large.

See: Luigi Campiglio, 'Children's right to vote: The missing link in modern democracies', *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth*, vol. 12 (2009), 229–230, https://doi.org/10.1108/S1537-4661(2009)12; UNICEF, *Too Little, Too Late: An assessment of public spending on children by age in 84 countries* (UNICEF Innocenti, 2023), 14, https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/2851/file/UNICEF-Too-Little-Too-Late-Report-2023.pdf.

[v] For the purpose of this text, this definition includes currently ageing and aged democracies.

See: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), *World Social Report 2023: Leaving No One Behind in an Ageing World* (UN DESA, January 2023) https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2023/01/2023wsr-chapter1-.pdf.

Because children are political

Children of all ages are organising and pushing for change on critical issues worldwide – from climate change,[19] to education and peace,[vi] gun control,[vii] LGBTQ rights and labour rights.[20] A global study of nearly 10,000 Gen Z participants found that 70% are involved in a social or political cause,[21] with much of this generation's activism being driven by feelings of frustration, anxiety and hopelessness about societal issues and political decisions.[22]

Despite this, the vast majority of countries do not deem it necessary to empower under-18s to be politically minded or allow them to it exercise their civil and political rights in general, let alone vote in national elections. Child human rights defenders report that they are often not taken seriously by adult-led organisations, government institutions, intergovernmental bodies and society at large.[23] This is despite the fact that the ability to engage in politics does not form suddenly upon turning 18 years old; for many it develops sooner.

There is a well-meaning, but unrealistic, belief amongst some that political thinking should be nurtured in children but that children should be mainly shielded from the messy practice of politics. Thus, the restrictive world that adults have created for children often gives children no choice but to be political. It is clear that children's political engagement is the reaction to the unfairness of their disenfranchisement. Denied the fundamental right to vote (and rarely given the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes), children engage in politics as much as their circumstances allow – for instance by participating in protests, acts of civil disobedience, boycotts and volunteering.

Because democracy needs children

While children are disenfranchised, youth are often outnumbered and ignored in the political process. In the context of global democratic backsliding, this is alarming. The largest ever global dataset of public opinion on democracy shows that youth satisfaction with democracy is declining not only in absolute terms, but – importantly – also relative to how older generations felt at the same stage in life.[24] This is due to youth's economic exclusion or disappointment with democratic performance on important issues like education, employment and opportunity.[25]

Children and youth's disillusionment with democracy, if left unaddressed, will continue to contribute to a crisis of democratic values across the world. Granting under-18s the right to vote is a way to reinvigorate the current democratic system, as expanding the electorate makes sense amidst declining voter turnout globally.[26] Broader enfranchisement would make democracy more inclusive and lead to better representation of children's interests

[vi] For examples on issues related to education and peace, see: Malala Fund, 'About Malala' (Malala Fund) https://malala.org/; PeaceTalks, 'Bana Alabed' (PeaceTalks) https://www.peacetalks.net/pt/bana-alabed/.

[vii] For examples related to gun control, see also: March for Our Lives, 'March for Our Lives' (marchforourlives.org) https://marchforourlives.org/.

and perspectives in the political landscape. In turn, as adults, they would be more empowered and connected to the political process, rather than feeling disengaged.

Additionally, the legitimacy of elections and elected representatives would be strengthened as they would be chosen by a broader electorate. This would result in a more balanced intergenerational influence on decision-making, such as bringing new issues to the political agenda and the adoption of public policies with long-term benefits.[27] All in all, granting children the right to vote is a win-win solution for both children and democracy.



Because children's needs are ignored by politicians

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Because children's long-term interests are especially disregarded

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The human rights argument.

Although there is no explicit provision in international human rights instruments that sets out the right to vote for children specifically, by interpreting the main relevant documents at the international level, we can make a strong case for this right.

When approaching international human rights texts, it is important to keep three factors in mind. One, they are the product of diplomatic negotiations and political compromise, accounting for different national legal systems and priorities – so their wording is often broad by design. Two, a treaty or convention must be interpreted "in good faith, in accordance with the ordinary meaning of terms in their context, and in light of its object and purpose".[28] And finally, human rights documents are not meant to fossilise standards; they are "living instruments" which advance rights in an ever-changing society,[viii] so interpretation can legitimately lead to results which were not foreseen or agreed upon when the document was drafted or ratified.[29]

In light of these considerations, this section examines three key international human rights instruments relevant to children's right to vote: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC). It argues that all three instruments can provide a foundation for the recognition of children's right to vote.

[viii] For an accessible explanation, see: British Institute of Human Rights, 'The Living Instrument & Margin of Appreciation Principles' (BIHR) https://www.bihr.org.uk/get-informed/legislation-explainers/the-living-instrument-margin-of-appreciation-principles.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR),[30] although not legally binding, is a foundational text in international human rights law and can be read as providing support for the recognition of children's right to vote.

Article 21 states that "everyone" has the right to participate in politics and recognises that government authority derives from the sovereignty of "the people", whose will is expressed through "universal and equal" suffrage. The wording here is very broad and is not age-specific. While Article 21 does not include a minimum age within the right to vote, it potentially could have,[31] given that it does set one for the right to marry, which applies to those "of full age".[32] While it is true that the drafters of the Declaration did not envisage children's suffrage in 1948, advocates have noted that the original signatories had, at the time, minimum voting ages of at least 21 – and some denied the vote to women and ethnic minorities. Since then, the understanding of human rights as advanced by the Declaration has evolved,[33] including by extending suffrage to more people. The Declaration confers human rights from birth and emphasises equality in the enjoyment of rights,[34] and guarantees these rights without discrimination "of any kind" based on "other status" – a catch-all term which can include age.[35]

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is a legally binding treaty and the most significant international human rights instrument regarding individuals' civil and political rights. Interpreting it as a living instrument can provide support for children's right to vote.[ix]

Article 25 sets out the right to vote by "universal and equal suffrage" and provides it to "every citizen", "without unreasonable restrictions". As in the case of the UDHR, the text of Article 25 of the ICCPR does not restrict the right to vote in terms of setting a minimum age. On the other hand, the Human Rights Committee,[x] in interpreting this article almost 30 years ago, stated that "the right to vote [...] should be available to every adult citizen" and that a reasonable restriction would be "setting a minimum age limit" – though it did not specify what that minimum age should be.[36]

This interpretation, however, is not in keeping with the spirit or logic of the ICCPR. The ICCPR, for instance, prohibits distinctions based on "race, colour, [...] or other status".[37] By this ruling,

[ix] To read the text of the ICCPR, see: UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (16 December 1966) https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights; for the list of States that have ratified or signed the ICCPR, see: UN Treaty Body Database, 'ICCPR' https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?Treaty=CCPR&Lang=en.

[x] The Human Rights Committee monitors the implementation of the ICCPR by its State parties; for further information, see: UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Human Rights Committee' https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/ccpr.

young age could certainly fall under grounds of age discrimination.[xi] While children as a group are not mentioned in Article 25, the instances that the ICCPR does refer specifically to children is almost always within a logic of protection,[38] for example regarding their rights in the justice system,[39] within the family,[40] and the prohibition of the death penalty.[41] The right to marry, which carries a minimum age on protectionist grounds as standard across the world, is recognised by the ICCPR only for those "of marriageable age".[42] Clearly, in cases where the ICCPR envisages treating children differently, it is in order to protect them in their full enjoyment of their rights, not because they are somehow lesser citizens than adults.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the most widely ratified human rights treaty and the main international framework setting out the human rights of children.[43] The CRC includes civil and political rights – such as freedom of expression,[44] freedom of thought, conscience and religion,[45] and freedom of association and peaceful assembly.[46] However, the CRC does not mention voting rights and does not explicitly address children's participation in politics.

The CRC has helped to shift the perception of children from objects of protection to subjects of rights: seeing children as rights holders, not in the future, but in the present.[47] The Committee on the Rights of the Child has acknowledged that the CRC is a "living document",[48] and – beyond the strict wording of the text itself – the Committee has issued dynamic, progressive interpretations in the form of General Comments in response to emerging developments.[xii] It has tackled controversial issues and extended States' obligations where there was no international consensus because the CRC was not explicit – for example regarding the minimum age of criminal responsibility, the use of corporal punishment or children's rights in the digital environment.[49]

With increasing calls to extend voting rights to children – which advocates have called the "missing right" of the CRC – it is an opportune moment to explore how the CRC could be employed to this end.[50]

The text of the CRC

There is support for children's right to vote in the text of the CRC, particularly the right to be heard (Article 12), freedom of expression (Article 13) and the four general principles of the Convention.

[xi] In the context of youth discrimination more broadly and specifically, see: European Convention on Human Rights (1950), art 14, https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG; Aoife Daly, 'Climate Competence: Youth Climate Activism and Its Impact on International Human Rights Law', *Human Rights Law Review*, vol. 22, no. 2 (June 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/hrlr/ngac011; Aoife Daly, Pernilla Leviner, Rebecca Thornburn Stern, 'How children are taking European states to court over the climate crisis – and changing the law', *The Conversation* (8 April 2021) https://theconversation.com/how-children-are-taking-european-states-to-court-over-the-climate-crisis-and-changing-the-law-158546.

[xii] For a full list of General Comments issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, see: UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'CRC General Comments' https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc/general-comments.

The right to be heard (Article 12)

The right to be heard is a basis for children's right to vote, especially in light of the Committee's interpretation of it, which has undergone a significant evolution in the context of children and politics. This right is also one of the general principles which underpin the CRC (see more below), meaning that it is engaged across the full range of other rights and sits at the core of a children's rights approach.

According to the CRC, the right to be heard applies to "all matters affecting the child". This is a very broad provision, which undoubtedly should include political decision-making. The right applies to the child who is "capable of forming [their] own views" and these must be given "due weight" according to the child's "age and maturity".[xiii] The most serious problem is that these limitations do not apply to adults exercising the vote : Article 25 of the ICCPR prohibits unreasonable restrictions on voting, and adults' capacity is not tested to qualify for the right to vote.

The Committee's interpretation of the text has evolved significantly over the years. In 2002–2003 the Committee simply acknowledged that children do not have the vote,[51] and in 2009 it recognised that "no general political mandate was intended" for children.[52] The Committee further argued in 2006 that the "new and deeper meaning of [this] right is that it should establish a new social contract".[53] In its General Comment on children's right to be heard (2009), it drew connections between children's participation and political life, saying that the right to be heard is "closely linked with" civil rights and freedoms,[54] and States "should consider children as a group to be heard" and should "exert all efforts [...] to seek the views of those children speaking collectively".[xiv] The Committee welcomed examples of children's "formal representative participation in local government" through "local youth parliaments, municipal children's councils and ad hoc consultations".[55]

In its General Comment on adolescence (2016), which focused on the period of childhood from 10–18 years, the Committee recognised that children "can negotiate and advocate for [...] their rights and hold States accountable", and "can engage in political processes and increase their sense of agency to make informed decisions".[56] The Committee additionally saw participation as "a means of political and civil engagement" and key in developing active citizenship.[57] The Committee called on States which decide to lower the voting age to invest in measures to support adolescents as active citizens, including through civic education and by addressing barriers to their participation.[58] It also called on States to "ensure that adolescents are involved in the development, implementation and monitoring of all relevant legislation and policies", including at local and national levels.[59]

[xiii] For a discussion of children's capacity to form views and the right to vote, see Katherine Walton, 'Votes for children: the case for universal suffrage', *Amnesty International UK Children's Human Rights Blog* (6 October 2019) https://www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/childrens-human-rights-network-blog/votes-children-case-universal-suffrage.

[xiv] See: *General Comment No. 12*, para 10.

The Committee supported "a broad definition of [the] matters [affecting children], which also covers issues not explicitly mentioned in the [CRC]" (para. 27) and referred beyond "individual children and clearly defined groups of children" to "children in general who are affected directly or indirectly by social, economic or cultural conditions of living in their society" (para 87).

The Committee has also addressed the voting age under the right to be heard as part of its Concluding Observations to States Parties. In 2012, the Committee welcomed Austria's move to give the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds.[60] It encouraged Ireland in 2016 and again in 2023 to implement its plan to hold a referendum on lowering the voting age to 16.[61] It has also noted, in 2016 and 2023, the increasing demand for voting rights for 16- and 17-year-olds in the United Kingdom, and recommended that the country consult with children on this.[62] Also in 2023 – following an unsuccessful attempt to lower the voting age in Liechtenstein – the Committee asked the State to conduct consultations with children on the topic.[63] In its Concluding Observations to Liechtenstein, but also in those regarding New Zealand (where the minimum voting age had been challenged in court), the Committee recommended that, if the voting age is lowered, this should be supported by active citizenship and human rights education.[64]

Freedom of expression (Article 13)

According to the CRC, children have the right to express their views and obtain and impart information and ideas. The Human Rights Committee has shown that there are strong links between freedom of expression and political participation, saying that free expression includes political discourse and commentary on public affairs,[65] which forms a basis for the enjoyment of many other civil and political rights, and is integral to the exercise of the right to vote.[66]

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that freedom of expression is necessary for enhancing children's participation in society and that it covers the expression of political views.[67] In 2019, in response to restrictions of civil and political rights in the Republic of Korea, the Committee recommended "promoting child participation and considering lowering the minimum age of voting and membership in political parties, currently set at 19 years".[xv] Given the Committee's mandate, it arguably intended this to be extended to (at least some) under-18s.[68]

The general principles

Children's vote is supported by the general principles of the CRC: non-discrimination (Article 2); the best interests of the child (Article 3); the right to life, survival and development (Article 6); and the right to be heard (Article 12).

The Convention prohibits discrimination based on children's "political or other opinion", recognising that children can hold political opinions. Although it does not refer specifically to age discrimination, Article 2 contains the catch-all wording of "[discrimination based on] other status". Meanwhile the Committee has directly addressed age discrimination against

[xv] This is a rare example of the Committee addressing the voting age under freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly instead of the right to be heard, by contrast with Ireland, UK, New Zealand, Liechtenstein. This might be because the Committee was looking more broadly at the State's legislation and school regulations regarding these freedoms, instead of specific attempts to lower the voting age in the country.

See: UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of the Republic of Korea*, CRC/C/KOR/CO/5-6 (24 October 2019), para 24, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FKOR%2FCO%2F5-6&Lang=en.

children, namely in its periodic review of the UK in 2016, in which it expressed concern about the exemption of children from legislation that protects against age discrimination.[69] Despite this, children are often subject to age-based restrictions which can impact their ability to engage politically. For instance, they are excluded from joining political organisations or attending demonstrations,[70] and they are affected by rules on curfews, disobedience and anti-social behaviour.[71] Denying the vote to children as a group clearly engages the prohibition on discrimination and courts have begun to recognise it as a form of age discrimination.[xvi]

The best interests of the child is a broad concept, which has sometimes been used to argue that children's engagement in politics is not beneficial to them.[72] The Committee has noted, though, that this principle supposes a rights-based approach and cannot be used to infringe children's civil and political rights.[73] Indeed, as this report will explain later, the claim of protecting children from political engagement is untenable. Children's best interests are advanced by recognising their political agency and giving them the opportunity to engage in decision-making, including by voting.

The right to life, survival and development is future-oriented,[74] and for that reason relevant to children's political participation. The Committee has drawn links between this right and free expression, free association and the right to be heard.[75] It has also emphasised that child human rights defenders must be able to exercise their civil and political rights safely.[76] Moreover, children's political engagement (including by voting) is one way to advance their right to development.

The voting rights case before the Committee

In 2020, faced with a case directly targeting the exclusion of children from the vote, the Committee seemed to imply that the minimum voting age can be challenged in court based on the CRC.

Committee on the Rights of the Child

D.C. v Germany (Communication 60/2018, decided on 4 February 2020)[77]

A 16-year-old Spanish citizen who was living in Germany was denied the right to vote in local elections because he did not meet the minimum age requirement (18 years old) set in local election law. Before the Committee, the child argued that excluding under-18s from the vote:

- Infringes their right to freely express their political views on matters affecting them (CRC, Article 12 (1));
- Violates the principle of non-discrimination (CRC, Article 2), particularly since some federal states in Germany and some EU Member States have lowered the voting age to 16;
- Cannot be in the best interests of the child (CRC, Article 3).

The child argued that "immediate legislative action" should be taken to lower the voting age at least to 16. The Committee considered that the case was inadmissible for procedural reasons and did not examine the substance of the child's claims. The Committee's reasoning, however, seems to suggest that the CRC could be used to challenge the minimum voting age in national courts.

The Committee dismissed the case because the child had not appealed to the constitutional court of his state to give it the chance to interpret the Constitution in light of the child's claims and the CRC. There is no need to exhaust domestic avenues if "they objectively have no prospect of success",[78] but the child had not brought evidence that an appeal would be unsuccessful. According to the Committee, an appeal should not be bound to fail "simply because of the current constitutional texts and a few general precedents".[79]

Some children's rights advocates argue that this reasoning seems to imply both that the CRC "should be addressed and interpreted by national courts when deciding on children's right to vote" and that constitutional texts and legal cases excluding under-18s from voting "do not necessarily 'block' an appeal for change, where it is based on the CRC".[80] In effect the CRC could be used to challenge the minimum voting age.

The need to further develop the issue of children and politics

Human rights law is still developing around children's participation in politics. It is "possible, legitimate and timely" for the Committee to explore the meaning and scope of the full range of rights set out in the CRC and how they are implemented in practice in this context.[81] This could be done in the Committee's interpretive work and jurisprudence through Concluding Observations, decisions under the communications procedure, as well as wider exchanges in Days of General Discussion which should include children, and General Comments on the issue.[82] This work is necessary to keep the CRC relevant and continue advancing the children's rights approach in emerging developments across society.

[xvi] See: *Make it 16 Incorporated v Attorney General* [2022] NZSC 134.



Legal challenges and growing momentum.

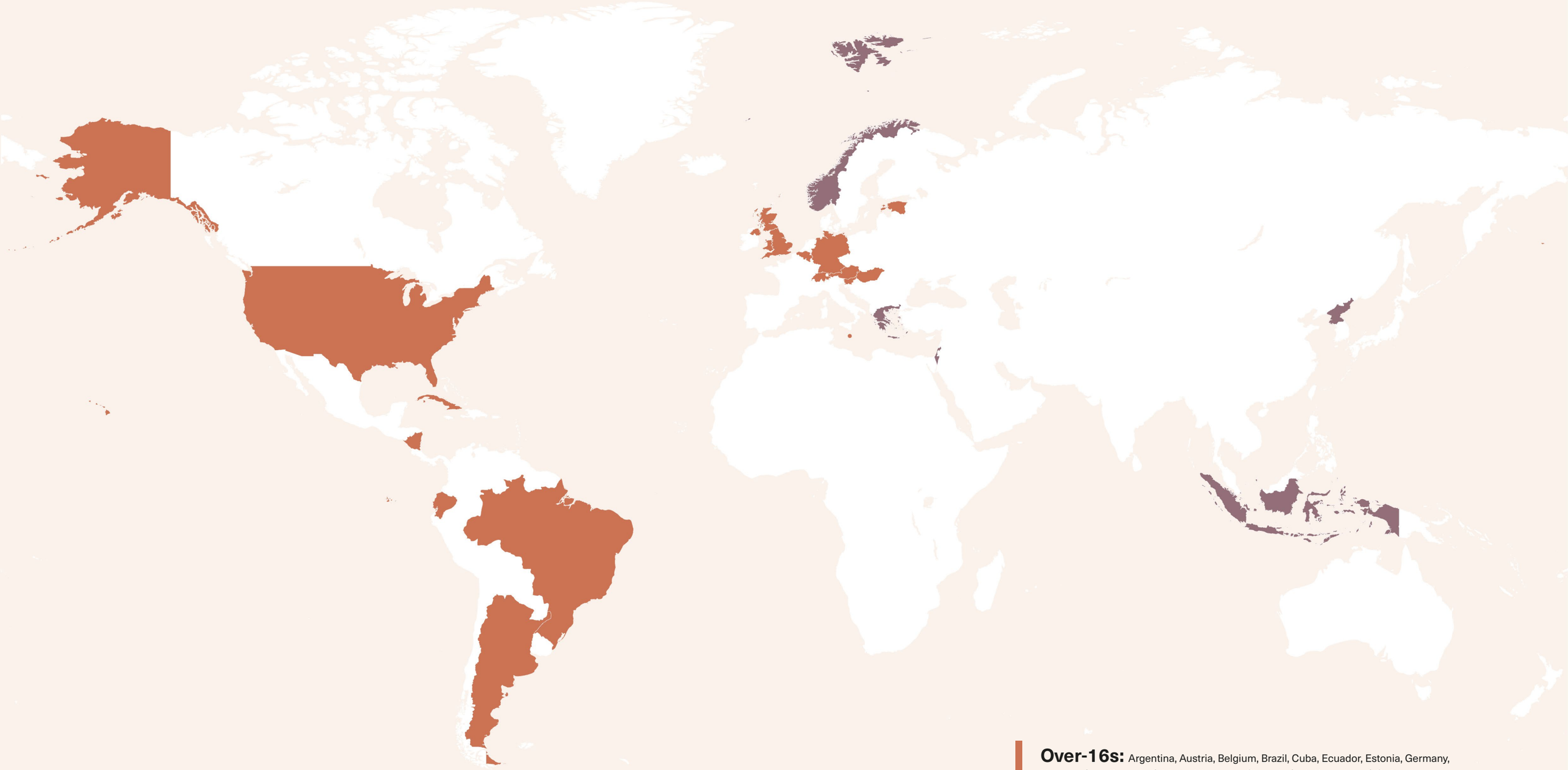
Lowering the voting age

In recent decades, we have seen a greater desire to expand the right to vote to under-18s. Seven countries allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote unconditionally in all elections – five of them in Latin America.

The circumstances in which this change has happened are diverse, from democratic transition processes to initiatives by political parties or growing support from the general public. Cuba, Nicaragua and Brazil were pioneers in including some under-18s as voters in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2007, Austria became the first country in the European Union to lower the voting age to 16 as part of a broader electoral law reform initiated by a government coalition. Similarly, Ecuador lowered the voting age to 16 in 2008 (following a referendum), and Argentina did so in 2012 after debates in Congress led to the passage of a new law. And, in 2018, Malta became the latest country to lower the national voting age to 16.

Contributing to this growing momentum are also other countries that have lowered the voting age (though only in certain circumstances). For example, in Norway, children can vote in national elections if they turn 18 in the election year. In other countries, under-18s can vote if they reach a significant social status like marriage (e.g. Hungary, Indonesia) or employment (e.g. Slovenia, Croatia). In other countries the voting age is lowered only for local elections (e.g. Estonia, Israel, as well as some parts of Germany, Switzerland, the US and the UK).[xvii] Additionally, some countries with higher minimum voting ages have recently lowered the voting age to 18, such as Japan (from 20) and Malaysia (from 21).

[xvii] It is important to note that these practices are problematic as they discriminate between children based on status and where they live.



World map of children's voting rights.

Over-16s: Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Estonia, Germany, Hungary *(only if married)*, Malta, Nicaragua, Slovenia *(only if employed)*, Switzerland *(only in local elections)*, the United Kingdom – Isle of Man *(local elections)*; Guernsey *(local elections)*; Jersey *(local elections)*; Scotland *(local and Scottish Parliament elections)*; Wales *(local and Welsh Parliament elections)* – and the United States *(local elections in some municipalities; can vote in primary elections if they turn 18 in the year of the general election)*.

Over-17s: Greece, Indonesia *(only if married)*, Israel *(only in local elections)*, North Korea, Norway *(only if they turn 18 on the year of election)* and Timor-Leste.

Legal challenges to the minimum voting age

In some countries, young activists have used rights-based arguments to challenge the minimum voting ages directly. In the 1990s, two activists in Germany – a 13-year-old and a 16-year-old from the children's rights group K.R.Ä.T.Z.Ä. – objected to the national minimum voting age of 18 by filing a constitutional complaint; however, it was rejected for procedural reasons.[83] Responding to the decision, young activists then applied to be included in the electoral register. When their application was rejected, they appealed to the Berlin Administrative Court, though their lawsuit was dismissed as the court cannot interfere in federal elections. Members of K.R.Ä.T.Z.Ä. then petitioned the German Federal Parliament to invalidate the 1998 federal election, arguing that under-18s' voting rights were violated. The Federal Constitutional Court rejected their complaint, stating that limiting the right to vote by age is permissible for "compelling reasons", which the group criticised as neglecting the fact that the constitution is dynamic and its meaning evolves over time.

More recently, progress was made in New Zealand. In 2022, the Supreme Court found that the voting age of 18 is inconsistent with the New Zealand Bill of Rights, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of age – noting that, under the Bill, the prohibition on discrimination on the basis of "age" applies from 16 years.[84] Significantly, the Supreme Court referred to Article 12 of the CRC on the right to be heard in its judgment. Following the Supreme Court's ruling, the then-government promised to draft legislation to lower the voting age to 16. However, due to the change of government, this recommendation was rejected.[85] Meanwhile in Canada, a number of young people aged between 12 and 18 are currently pursuing a case at the Ontario Superior Court, challenging the constitutionality of barring under-18s from federal elections. They argue that the minimum age of 18 violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees the vote to all Canadians regardless of age,[86] and prohibits age-based discrimination.[87]

Growing support for ageless voting

There is also increasing global interest in abolishing the voting age altogether. Established in 2019, the Children's Voting Colloquium is a global collaboration of researchers, academics, activists, child-led and adult-led campaign groups, policy-makers and politicians working to abolish the voting age.[xviii] It has over 200 members (and growing), and the wealth of resources on their website offers a critical, thorough and interdisciplinary examination of arguments for abolishing the voting age – with contributors to the Colloquium including scholars in childhood studies, political science, philosophy, history, law, medicine and economics. A group of activists from the Colloquium have launched a global campaign to enfranchise children, by pledging to give their own votes to a child until the voting age is abolished.[88]

There are also active grassroots movements and organisations advocating for removing minimum ages to vote. This includes child activists as young as nine years old, from the USA

[xviii] See: Children's Voting Colloquium (childrenvoting.org, 2025) https://www.childrenvoting.org/.

to Germany, who are advocating for ageless voting alongside adult-led organisations. Notable groups championing the cause include K.R.Ä.T.Z.Ä. (Germany), We Want the Vote (Germany), Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations (Germany), Amnesty International (UK), Children's Human Rights Network (UK), Children's Voice Association (Finland), Freechild Institute (USA), the Childism Institute (USA) and Minor Power (USA).[xix]

Existing research on children's voting

Children's views on voting

While children want their voices represented in laws, policies and strategies,[89] their interests often remain largely unknown to the wider public. Data on children's views on voting is extremely scarce and those under 16 are almost never consulted on the issue. A small UK study of primary school children, for example, revealed that a substantial proportion of children aged 6–11 years old wanted to vote, even if not always in the same way as adults.[90] Many expressed policy views on issues such as climate change, homelessness and online bullying, often diverging from mainstream adult perspectives, proving that children are a constituency with their own independent interests and ideas that deserve political representation.[91] However, the lack of rights-based civic education in schools or other settings often means that children are not even aware that they are excluded from voting.[92] Many children are surprised to learn about the historical expansion of voting rights to the majority of the adult population over centuries.[93] Significantly, more comprehensive studies of children's political attitudes and thoughts on voting is needed, especially of younger children.

While children are not consulted on their views about voting, extensive data is available on adult perspectives on child suffrage. Surveys show that the older people are, the less likely they are to support lowering the voting age, with the least support found among those over 65 years old.[94] Young adults are less likely to support lowering the voting age compared to 16- and 17-year-olds themselves.[xx] When asked, 10-year-olds consider it reasonable that they should be able to vote, but believe four-year-olds should not.[xxi] These findings, however, may partly be a reflection of how ingrained the status quo is – as data from countries that have adopted a voting age of 16 conversely show that, over time, public support for lowering the voting age increases significantly.[95]

[xix] See: Kraetzae http://kraetzae.de/; Wir Wollen Wählen [We Want to Vote] http://www.wir-wollen-waehlen.de/; Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations, 'Voting age' (intergenerationaljustice.org) https://www.intergenerationaljustice.org/topics/voting-age/; Amnesty International UK, 'Childrens Voting Rights' (10 September 2020) https://www.amnesty.org.uk/knowledge-hub/all-resources/childrens-voting-rights/; Children's Voice Association https://www.facebook.com/childrensvoiceassociation; The Freechild Project https://participedia.net/organization/the-freechild-project; Childism Institute https://www.childism.org/; Minor Power https://www.minorpower.org/.

[xx] Of the 572 young people that voted, the vast majority were in favour of lowering the voting age, with those in the lower age bracket (16–18 years old) more likely to be in favour of having the vote at 16: 87.6% voted yes to this, compared to 71% of those aged 18+.

See: European Youth Forum, 'Young people overwhelmingly in favour of lowering the voting age to 16' (European Youth Forum, 13 May 2014) https://www.youthforum.org/news/young-people-overwhelmingly-in-favour-of-lowering-voting-age-to-16.

[xxi] The Year 6 participants thought it reasonable that children their age (10–11 years old) be allowed to vote. However, they said that four-year-olds are too frivolous and superficial.

See: Bennett Institute for Public Policy, *Do children want the vote? Lessons from a primary school*, 18.

Strengthening democracy

There are significant findings that indicate how children's voting can have positive effects on the functioning of the democratic state. In Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Ecuador and Nicaragua, researchers could not find any negative effects of lowering the voting age on young people's engagement or on civic attitudes. Instead, it boosted long-term voter turnout – with 16- and 17-year-olds showing greater political interest, trust and support for democracy compared to older voters.[96] Researchers suggest that these positive effects may at least partially be retained throughout further years of life.[97] It also boosts the confidence of new voters, gives them a sense of agency and a chance to directly impact the future of the country.[98]

Research shows the benefits of allowing school-aged children to vote: with rights-based civic education being crucial for political awareness at a younger age to encourage more political involvement.[99] Researchers suggest that voters under 18 may actually have higher turnout rates because they learn about voting while in school, in a more sheltered setting.[100] The Eurobarometer survey found that the longer people stay in formal education, the more likely they are to vote: 50% of those who left education at 15 years old have voted, compared to 80% of those who left at 20.[101] In addition, civic education can also help engage children from lower socio-economic and ethnic minority backgrounds while they are still in school – the groups that are less likely to vote as adults.[102] Research has shown that participating in citizenship-related activities at school (such as mock elections) makes children more likely to have positive attitudes towards political participation and future civic engagement, even when accounting for factors like education level.[103]

Another argument is that when children do not participate in democracy from an early age, they may be more susceptible to authoritarianism.[xxii] A 2023 global survey across 30 countries with a combined population of over 5.5 billion people showed that, while democracy remains popular among young people, only 57% of those aged 18–35 thought it was preferable to any other form of government.[104] Moreover, studies on political socialisation in adolescence reveal the exclusion of young people from political decision-making as the cause of extreme political positions.[105] If you spend your formative years being told you are unfit to take part in politics, it's no surprise that democracies are struggling with voter apathy and rising populism.[106]

While research to date cumulatively makes a strong case for extending the right to vote to under-18s, much of the delay and continued opposition is rooted in generalisations, assumptions and biases that prevent proposals from moving forward.

[xxii] For more on this, see: Michael S. Cummings, *Children's voices in politics* (Peter Lang, 2020) – introduction, chapters 9 and 10.





Debunking the myths against children's suffrage.

Across the world, the exclusion of under-18s from voting rests on a series of arguments (or, rather, assumptions) about children's presumed immaturity, their presumed disinterest in voting and adults' presumed need to "protect" them from the perceived burden of voting and any undue influence.

These arguments and others continue to hold ground with little justification – even though they carry little substance or logic – in large part because they apply equally to adults as well.

What's more, some of the same arguments used today to deny children the right to vote have been used in the past to deny the vote to the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, colonised peoples and women.[107] The right to vote associated with adulthood is a relatively new concept, which only emerged in the early twentieth century when women gained the right to vote.[108] At the root of the denial of voting rights for children is an adult-centric view of society. Much in the same way that extending suffrage to servants, former slaves and women challenged a society built for wealthy men, children's suffrage today would challenge the exclusive political power of adults.[109]

Excluding children from voting rests on a series of arguments which we have listed below. To determine whether these reasons carry any real substance, CRIN looks at how adults measure up by comparison.

Examples of Voting Rights: A Historical Timeline[xxiii]

Sixth Century BCE
Athens
Free men, aged 20+ (≈3% of population)

1265
England
Aristocrats and wealthy freemen

1789
USA
Male landowners

1848
France
Male citizens 25+

1856
USA
White men 21+ (non-whites restricted until 1960s)

1893
New Zealand
Men and women 21+

1902
Australia
Men and women 21+ (Indigenous people included in 1962)

1918
Canada
Men and women 21+ (First Nations included in 1960)

1946
Czechoslovakia
All 18+

1952
Poland
All 18+

1976
Cuba
All 16+

1984
Nicaragua
All 16+

1988
Brazil
All 16+

1994
South Africa
All 18+

2007
Austria
All 18+

[xxiii] CRIN is grateful to John Wall for permission to adapt the argument from his book *Give Children the Vote: On Democratizing Democracy (2021)*.

Still excluded from voting: **under-16s**, **non-citizens** and, in many cases, **persons under legal guardianship** and some **prisoners**.

Debunking the main arguments to deny the vote to children, by comparing children and adults[xxiv]

Children are too young to vote

On similar age-based grounds, imagine denying the right to vote to people considered "too old". Does the argument now feel and sound any different? The truth is that everyone, regardless of their age, should be allowed to vote if their interest and involvement motivates them to do so.

Children aren't mature or competent enough to vote

If maturity and competence were really requirements to vote, many adults would not qualify because these are qualities that are not always bound by age; many adults make "immature" decisions and a younger person may be more mature than an adult by virtue of their circumstances, lived experience or interests. The truth is, democracies function when voters of many different competencies, ages, experiences and perspectives cast their vote. And none of them are tested to prove their maturity or competence.

Children do not understand politics

This argument suggests that all adults universally understand politics simply because they are over the voting age, and that under-18s do not because they are *under* the voting age. If political knowledge were truly a voting requirement, proficiency tests would exist – *but they do not*. If a lack of political knowledge were the issue, then this could be fixed by introducing citizenship education – not only in schools so that children understand how democracy works, but also for adults, because we are never too old to learn.

Children would vote frivolously

This argument applies to adults, too, with many casting a last-minute vote or basing their decision on trivial reasons. While it is possible that some children (and adults) might choose to vote for the sake of voting or spoil the ballot, ultimately it would be unfair to deny the right to vote to a person who is motivated to do so, regardless of how they might use it.

Children would vote for non-conventional or "radical" parties

Whether someone votes for a mainstream, well-established political party or a newer, less well-known or even "radical" party should not determine one's right to vote. There is no such thing as a right or wrong vote; this applies to adults and children alike.

Children's interests are already represented by their parents

This is a paternalistic argument that fails to recognise children as rights holders. While parents are legally responsible for their children's welfare and education, their role is to support them in exercising their rights and making decisions according to their evolving capacities. Unlike politicians, parents lack the political authority to advocate for children's interests. Meanwhile, politicians have little incentive to address children's concerns, as they are not voters. A clear solution is to allow children to represent their own views on political issues by enfranchising them.

Children will make bad decisions against their own interests

Adults may fear that if children were allowed to vote, they might advocate to end compulsory schooling or lower the minimum age for drinking, smoking or getting tattoos. But, by the same logic, adults could vote to lower the retirement age to an unaffordable level. However, concern that the public – both children and adults – could make unwise decisions is not a reason to deny the vote.

Children should not worry about politics; why should we burden them with too much responsibility?

This argument suggests that voting is a burden only adults can handle. But suffrage is not a burden; it is a right. Extending suffrage to children creates an opportunity for them to participate where they were previously unfairly excluded. It does not prematurely impose adult responsibilities on them. Moreover, in countries that have lowered the voting age, voting is not compulsory for those under 18.

[xxiv] The arguments listed were inspired by the work of the following authors: Mike Weimann, John Wall, Harry Pearse, David Runciman and Aoife Nolan.

Children would be treated as adults and would lose their protections

Extending voting rights to under-18s would not turn them into adults or mean that all other age limits would be lowered too. The general purpose of minimum ages at 18 is to protect children from harm (e.g. hazardous labour, army recruitment, criminal responsibility) and to provide a benchmark for presumed capacity (e.g. admission to employment, sexual consent).[xxv] But when no harm is posed, then imposing a minimum age inappropriately restricts rights and freedoms (e.g. access to justice, voting, freedom of expression or assembly).

Children have fewer responsibilities, so why should they have more rights?

The right to vote is a basic human right, independent of any duties or responsibilities. Rights are held by everyone, without requiring them to earn or justify having them. Moreover, children already bear legal responsibilities, including compulsory education for school-aged children. They must also abide by the law, just like all citizens, including labour laws and traffic laws (created by lawmakers whom they never had the opportunity to vote for).

Children do not pay taxes, thus should not vote

Whenever children buy things in shops, they pay a goods and services tax, just like any other [adult] consumer. And in countries that allow non-hazardous work for under-18s, including from 13 years old, their earnings are subject to taxation. Also, if the right to vote were conditional on paying income taxes, then people receiving state benefits would be disenfranchised, which does not happen anywhere.

Child participation in policy-making is increasing, so there is no need to vote

Adults also engage in participatory processes, in addition to having the right to vote. Efforts to collect children's views, like children's advisory councils and consultations with policymakers, are growing worldwide. But whether these views are considered in policy decisions is another matter, with the Committee on the Rights of the Child criticising this gap. While giving children a platform to express their views is important, it means only the selected number of children who take part are represented. The most effective and inclusive form of participation for real impact is the vote.

[xxv] See CRIN's previous report: *Age is arbitrary: Discussion paper on setting minimum ages* (April 2016) https://archive.crin.org/en/home/what-we-do/policy/minimum-ages.html.

Children probably would not vote anyway

Many adults already do not vote: many abstain or are apathetic. But this argument is beside the point, as the right to vote is not obtained based on one's likelihood to vote. In most democracies, voting is not compulsory, so only those motivated to vote will do so. And in the few countries with compulsory voting (such as Argentina and Brazil), voting by under-18s and the elderly is voluntary anyway.

Parents or teachers might unduly influence children's electoral choices

Anyone can be influenced by their family, colleagues and peers, including adults – and including when it comes to voting. Regarding children, some may vote similarly to their parents or guardians, but they are also exposed to a variety of perspectives from conversations at home, school, with peers and through the media. Even if children did vote like their parents or guardians, it would be their choice and would not harm democracy. As for undue influence from teachers, there should be legal requirements in place to ensure political impartiality in schools.

Children may be exposed to political manipulation on social media

This is an argument pointing to the need for better regulation and more thoughtful use of social media – but not for denying children access to social media nor to the vote. Both children and adults are susceptible to manipulation online, which can be mitigated through education. What's more, tighter regulation should apply to political advertising and also to advertising aimed at children. Social media is a fundamental space for democratic participation and is a way of engaging children in politics. Both parties and candidates need to learn to use it well, respecting the law.

Do children even *want* to vote?

Some under-18s may want the vote, others may not be interested, and some may be against it. As a human right, suffrage does not depend on majorities; even if most children opposed it, that would not justify denying it to those who wish to exercise it. A century ago, many women opposed their own enfranchisement – but no enfranchised group has ever surrendered its right to vote.

Political parties may bribe children with "lollipops" so they vote for them

Whether it is lollipops for children or gifts for adults, if the aim is to "buy" a voter's ballot, then it is probably illegal anyway.

Will babies vote too?

With no minimum voting age, voting becomes a birthright – much like the right to protest, exercised only by those with enough understanding and interest. Ageless voting would also remove the potential for further age discrimination with the setting of another arbitrary – even if lower – age limit. In practice, while babies and young children are unlikely to vote themselves, older children and adolescents might be interested in voting, and should therefore be given the opportunity. But just because someone is not yet able to vote does not mean they should be explicitly banned from doing so.

How would children even register to vote?

More countries are adopting automatic voter registration; alternatively voters can register by post or online. The latter option gives children an advantage, as they are more technologically adept than many adults. And should a first-time voter require any guidance in the process, then the adults in their lives (parent, guardian, teacher, older sibling) or specially trained polling station staff could assist them. As for election day itself, voting usually takes place in public buildings, often schools, libraries, halls, etc. – all places children regularly visit.

Will children be eligible to run for public office too?

Abolishing the voting age does not imply abolishing the candidacy age. Voting and governing are distinct, as not all voters are fit to govern. While there are reasons to set a higher age for political candidates, the parallels between denying children the right to vote and restricting young people's opportunities to run for public office reflect society's perceptions of those under 18 years old and young adults.

Letting children vote will incur huge costs for the government

Denying voting rights due to cost is a concerning precedent that could just as easily justify denying other rights that come with expenses, like accessibility for people with disabilities. Extending voting rights to children is a long-term investment, bringing better life outcomes for children and, as a result, benefiting the economy and democracy. Adding more voters is not impossible: India manages with nearly 1 billion voters and 1.5 million polling stations. And, from a human rights perspective, the principle of universal suffrage always outweighs any expenses.

Giving children the vote would destabilise the status quo

Extending voting rights to children will not mean they will take over the world or vote for excessive welfare benefits that would bankrupt the state. Similar fears were raised about women's suffrage, with some arguing that since women outnumber men, it would threaten "state sovereignty". However, in democracies with ageing populations, decisions will still primarily rest in the hands of adult voters. If anything, giving children the vote will help relieve intergenerational inequality by bringing in forward-looking policies instead of political systems that favour the older electorate.

Children are capable of voting… but capacity is *not* a requirement

One of the main arguments excluding children from voting is that they are not competent or do not understand politics. Despite the fact that neither competence nor capacity are prerequisites for voting, imposing blanket restrictions on under-18s' right to vote on this basis ignores that the ages up to 18 encompass an enormous range of skills, competencies and rights. A 12-year-old, for instance, is likely to have more in common with a 16-year-old than a three-year-old but, according to conventional accounts, all under-18s are equally incompetent. Instead, competence suddenly develops once a person reaches the age of majority.

Generally speaking, the idea that the ability to vote requires certain adult-like skills is flawed.[110] We do not know precisely which competencies voters require and which of those are missing within the entire span of childhood, which leads to a vague and overly simplistic assessment based on age.[111] While cognitive ability can be evaluated through testing, it is unclear how these capacities relate to voting and how an average adult would perform.[112] Imagine imposing an IQ test for voting – it would be highly discriminatory, akin to "literacy tests" that historically disenfranchised Black voters in the United States and South Africa. Furthermore, there are no rules requiring voters to have reading or writing skills. For example, countries with high illiteracy rates (such as the world's largest democracy, India) even use symbols and photos of candidates alongside their names on voting ballots.[113]

Neuroscience has been increasingly used to bolster arguments that the teenage brain is developed enough to vote. Experts argue that "cold cognition" reaches adult levels around age 16, as well as the ability to make decisions at a measured pace. And, where consultation with others is possible, this ability at 16 matches the maturity attained in adulthood.[114] Research also demonstrates that the brain continues to develop through childhood and adolescence and even into the 20s and 30s in some brain regions.[115] However, neuroscience alone cannot define when someone is politically competent, as it does not factor in the various circumstances, relationships, experiences and culture that shape a child's evolving capacities.[xxvi] A child who has to work to support their family may have a more informed perspective on poverty than an adult who hasn't experienced it. Furthermore, our brains continue to change throughout our lives – but cognitive decline in older age does not justify excluding the elderly from voting.[116] It is also important to note that neuropsychology – a scientific field that studies the connection between the brain and behaviour – does not support the idea of arbitrary age thresholds, and calls for more individualised assessments of age-related abilities depending on the specific requirements of a particular right or responsibility.[117]

Yet, if it were necessary to demonstrate that young children possess competencies to qualify for voting, there are numerous examples indicating this is the case. Children as young as seven

[xxvi] Some children live in poverty, others face serious illnesses or endure discrimination, bullying, or abuse. Many interact with government institutions, whether through alternative care or the justice system.

See: Wall, *Give Children the Vote*, 58.

years old have been involved in complex policy consultations through citizens' assemblies in Scotland, Ireland and England on issues like climate change and biodiversity loss.[118] Ten-year-olds advocate for policy goals alongside a cabinet of peers in the Kid Governor initiative in the US.[119] Furthermore, there are democratic preschools and nurseries where children as young as three, four and five years old regularly vote on how the settings are run.[120] Finally, mock elections have long proven that school-aged children, even in primary school, can vote with results often mirroring those of mainstream elections.[121] One such example is the long-running Scholastic Student Vote in the USA, involving children as young as five, which has correctly predicted all but two presidential winners since 1940.[122]

Nevertheless, cognitive development alone is insufficient for voting: motivation, political interest and understanding one's social role are key to this process.[123] The best indication of someone's ability to cast a meaningful vote is simply their desire to vote. This desire reflects two essential factors: the ability to form preferences and the understanding that voting is a way to express those preferences.[124] A guide for assisting elderly and cognitively impaired adults in voting, prepared by the American Bar Association, states that, "if a person can indicate a desire to vote, he or she can also indicate a choice among available ballot selections". And, it clarifies: "Capacity to vote is much like the capacity to ride a bicycle, which can be determined accurately only by allowing the individual to mount a bike and start pedalling. If capacity is lacking, the task just won't be completed."[125]

Children are influenced by others… but so are adults

In order to additionally justify denying children the vote, there is also the common argument that, if granted the vote, children would simply vote like their parents. The same claim was made about women a century ago, claiming they would simply vote as their husbands instructed.[126] Denying the right to vote based on the assumption of how a person might use their vote is, however, a poor argument, as it assumes that every ballot cast by an adult voter is deeply informed by policy rather than the people they live with. But, in reality, adults are often swayed by the opinions of others – be it their immediate family or even factors irrelevant to public policy, such as a political candidate's personality and dress sense.

Extensive social science research shows that voters across different demographics – regardless of age or education – frequently base their political choices on loyalties, identities, and peer influences, rather than a thorough assessment of policy proposals.[127] For example, studies have shown that people are more likely to vote conservatively if voting takes place in a church, and more liberally if it occurs in a school.[128] Slogans, too, such as "Build the Wall" in the 2016 US election and "Take Back Control" in the UK Brexit referendum show that adults can be affected by vague, emotionally powerful messaging.[129] Furthermore, misinformation targeting voters on social media during elections can also influence them. For example, outcomes were influenced by Cambridge Analytica's misuse of personal data in the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum; this highlights how targeted psychological profiling can shape voter behaviour.[130]

All that said, democracies do not bar people from voting just because they might be manipulated or influenced into voting a certain way. If they did, it would be a classic case of punishing the victim rather than the perpetrator. And because children already lack political power by not having the right to vote, the best way to challenge any potential political manipulation would be to extend the right to vote to children and to defend it vigorously.[131]

Children don't seem to want the vote – but that's neither proven (nor the point)

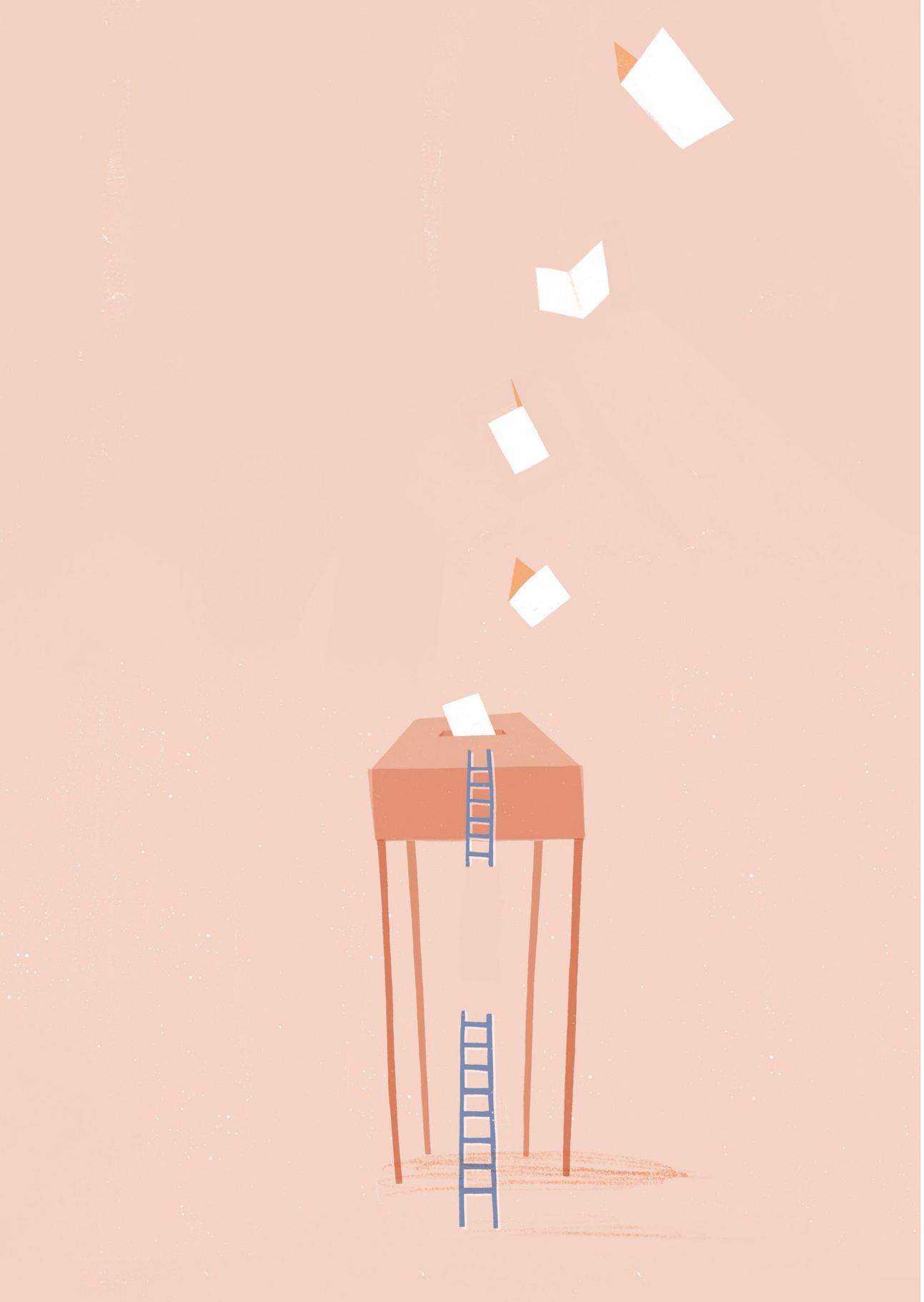
Another of the main arguments denying children the vote is the assumption that they are not concerned by their disenfranchisement because most of them are not protesting about it. This is highly speculative, as there is a major gap in data on children's views regarding voting – and it places the onus on children taking to the street to express their views. Yet, fundamental human rights exist irrespective of what the majority of a group wants; everyone is *entitled* to them without discrimination. A parallel can be drawn to the right to peaceful assembly: no one has to exercise it, but it remains a fundamental right in democratic societies, for children included.[132]

What's more, casting a vote in a booth poses fewer personal risks compared to participating in a protest.[xxvii] And children's voting is not dangerous for society. As argued above, the current exclusion of children from voting cannot be justified on any of the typical grounds often cited for limiting freedom of expression – such as protecting the rights of others, ensuring national security, maintaining public order, or safeguarding public health or morals.[133] When it comes to political representation, the clear argument is that lacking rights is more harmful than having them.[134] Denying children a say in elections means silencing an entire group whose future is shaped by policies they have no input on.

[xxvii] Some may also argue that children who want to participate in a peaceful assembly should be potentially barred from doing so in case the gathering turns violent. However, the rights-based response to such a concern should not be to stop children participating but for governments to take additional measures to remove the threat.

See: Child Rights Connect, *The Rights of Child Human Rights Defenders: Implementation Guide* (Child Rights Connect, 2020), 17, https://www.childrightsconnect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/final-implementation-guide-the-rights-of-child-human-rights-defenders-forweb.pdf; UNICEF, *Free and safe to protest* (UNICEF, August 2023) https://www.unicef.org/reports/free-and-safe-protest.





Why lowering the voting age is not enough.

A generational shift occurred in the 1970s whereby most countries lowered the national voting age from 21 to 18. A similar scenario is unfolding today, with suggestions to lower the voting age further (with 16 being the lowest age currently proposed).[xxviii] But if there is already a history of lowering the voting age, and if doing so has proven benefits for democracy... then why stop at 21, or 18 or 16? In other words, *why set a minimum age at all?*

In the previous chapter, we critiqued the flawed, paternalistic argument that all individuals below a certain age uniformly lack the maturity or competence required for participation in the electoral process. But, if the history of lowering the voting age shows us anything, it is not that everyone above a new age threshold suddenly manifests competence when they come of age; rather, the age at which competence is believed to emerge has been adjusted.[135] Following this pattern, if more countries lowered the voting age to 16, this age would become the new threshold at which competence would be presumed to have developed.[136]

This history of shifting the minimum age to vote – as well as the shifting assumptions that go with it – calls into question how arbitrary setting *any* minimum age to vote can be. What is also concerning is that the same arguments that continue to be used to deny under-18s the right to vote are now being used to deny it to under-16s. But why stop at 16? Are 15-year-olds really so different from 16-year-olds that a line has to be drawn between them?

The arguments used for campaigning to lower the voting age from 18 to 16 apply equally to younger children, but this group is being excluded from the current debate. What's more, since elections are typically held every four to five years, many of today's enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds would not have the opportunity to vote anyway.

As the right to vote movement keeps gaining momentum worldwide, we need to think critically about the right to vote for children in *all* age groups. On the next page, we examine some arguments about lowering the voting age to 16 years old (and whether they contribute to children's overall enfranchisement).

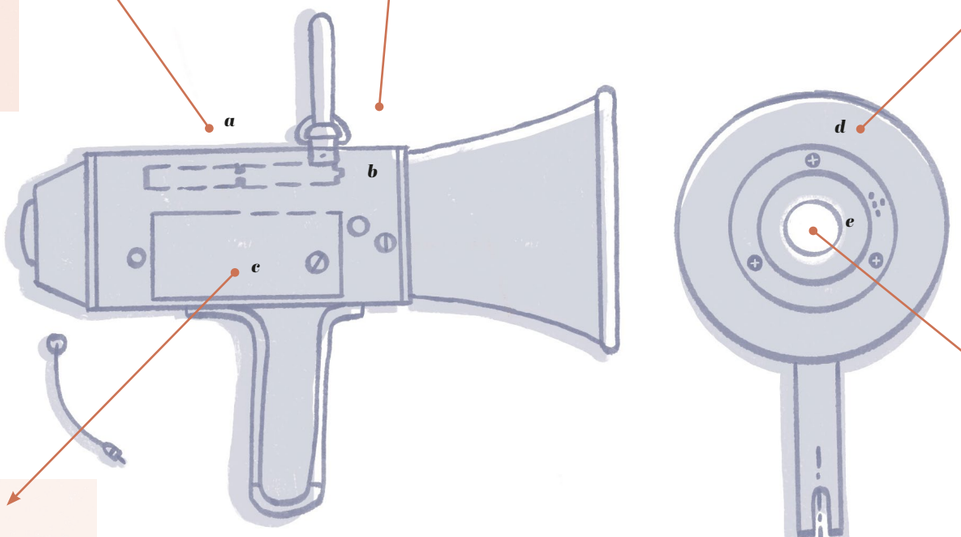
[xxviii] With the exception of Iran, the only country in the world that allowed 15-year-olds to vote in national elections between 1980 and 2007. See: Syracuse University, 'Voting age', *Iran Data Portal* (Syracuse University, January 2007) https://irandataportal.syr.edu/voting-age/.

16- and 17-year-olds are already politically engaged: advocating for issues such as the environment, education, health, equality, the economy and many others.

So are under-16s, with younger activists having played a prominent role in advancing climate action, education, peace, LGBTQ rights, and labour rights all over the world.[xxix] Catering to the needs of 16- and 17-year-olds only entrenches the paternalistic logic that younger children are not capable of having political views.

16- and 17-year-olds are just as affected by decisions made by governments as adults.

So are 15-year-olds, 10-year-olds and 5-year-olds… but they have no say in the political decisions that govern their lives.



Giving the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds is the first step towards lowering the voting age further.

Lowering the voting age by a couple of years is easier than abolishing it altogether, but there are limitations. Changing the voting age could require constitutional amendments, making repeated adjustments unlikely in the near future. Before the 1970s, 21 was the universally accepted voting age worldwide. If progress continued at this same rate, it could take 50 or more years to lower the voting age further from 16 to 14 years old.[137]

16- and 17-year-olds can already work and pay taxes, drive or make some medical decisions.

In many countries, younger children also do these things. For example, children as young as 13 years old can legally work in some cases and pay taxes, consent to medical treatment at 14 or have a learner's driving permit at 15.[xxx] In many cases, young children from deprived backgrounds work to support their families and care for their siblings. Actual voting ability should not be confused with the age at which children start these activities.

Giving 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote would increase youth turnout at elections and improve their influence over the political agenda.

Allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote would likely increase the turnout, but it would do little to improve the overall voting power of children and young people. In Europe alone, enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds would add approximately 16 million new voters (compared to an existing 300 million voters aged 50+).[138] Even if all 16- and 17-year-olds arrived at the ballot box, governments would still have an incentive to prioritise the interests of adult voters.

[xxix] For prominent examples, see: Kalima, '"I want to be a champion of the earth"'; 'Malala Yousafzai', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (updated 25 August 2025) https://www.britannica.com/biography/Malala-Yousafzai; 'Bana Alabed', *PeaceTalks* (2025) https://www.peacetalks.net/pt/bana-alabed/; Bruesehoff, 'Sometimes I Feel Like I Live in Two Different Worlds'; ProNATs, 'Movements of working children and youth'.

[xxx] In the UK, children aged 13 and above may be employed in light work typically on an occasional basis. In Latvia, children as young as 14 can consent to medical treatment without parental consent. And some states in the United States allow 15-year-olds to obtain a learner's permit.

For examples, see: UK Government, 'Child work permit (England and Wales)' https://www.gov.uk/find-licences/child-work-permit-england-wales; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 'Consenting to medical treatment without parental consent', *Mapping Minimum Age Requirements Concerning Rights of the Child in the EU* (FRA, 2017) https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/mapping-minimum-age-requirements-concerning-rights-child-eu/consenting-medical-treatment-without-parental-consent; Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), 'Graduated licensing laws' (IIHS, July 2026) https://www.iihs.org/research-areas/teenagers/graduated-licensing-laws-table.

The voting power gap in ageing societies

The overall trend worldwide is towards enfranchisement rather than disenfranchisement: 16 as the minimum voting age will likely become more accepted. However, merely lowering the voting age by a few years will not sufficiently balance the voting power across age groups, nor will it ensure that issues important to under-18s receive greater attention from politicians. In ageing societies – where adults and older individuals significantly outnumber children and young people – political parties are increasingly incentivised to skew their policies towards older generations simply because of voting demographics. In the next three decades, the situation will largely continue, as the proportion of children and young people is projected to fall and the proportion of older people to double in all regions except Africa.[xxxi] This risks children being marginalised in political processes more than before in the coming decades.

Argentina lowered the voting age to 16 in 2012, with 16- to 18-year-olds currently making up only 3.3% of the electorate.[139] By contrast, people over the age of 70 comprise nearly 12% of the country's electoral roll – *almost five times* the number of 16- and 17-year-old voters.[140] Argentina is projected to become an aged economy by 2038 when, for the first time in its history, older adults will consume more of all goods and services (both public and private) than children and youth.[141] While the decision to lower the voting age to 16 has allowed more young people to participate in elections, their influence on political and economic decisions remains limited. And, given the country's ageing population, this influence will diminish even further in the coming decades.

Germany is currently one of only five "super-aged" societies in the world.[xxxii] More than 23.7 million people in Germany are over 60 years old, while the number of children and adolescents stands at 13.6 million – meaning there are roughly two older people for every child or adolescent.[142] Voters aged 18 to 29 make up 14% of the population, while those aged 60 to 69 represent *nearly three times* that at 38%.[143] If 16- and 17-year-olds were allowed to vote, the electorate would grow by only about 1.5 million voters, compared to the existing 60.4 million voters over 18.[144] This small increase would do little to boost the voting power of the younger generation.

[xxxi] Except for current ageing regions like North America and Europe, where the population of people over 65 will increase, but not as significantly as in other regions. All other regions, except for Africa, between now and 2050 will experience a rapid rise in the median age, thus contributing to ageing societies.

See: UN DESA, *World Social Report 2023: Leaving No One Behind in an Ageing World* (UN DESA, January 2023), 18–21, https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2023/01/2023wsr-chapter1-.pdf.

[xxxii] A country where more than one in five of the population is 65 or older is considered "super-aged".

See: 'World will have 13 "super-aged" nations by 2020', *Financial Times* (11 August 2014) https://www.ft.com/content/f356f8a0-1d8c-11e4-8f0c-00144feabdc0.

Germany's population of those aged 65 and older is projected to grow by 41 percent to 24 million by 2050, accounting for nearly one-third of the total population. At the same time, the population ages 15 through 64 will shrink by 23 percent – from about 53 million in 2015 to about 41 million by 2050.

See: AARP International, 'Aging readiness and competitiveness: Germany' (AARP International, 2019) https://www.aarpinternational.org/initiatives/aging-readiness-competitiveness-arc/germany.

In the UK, population ageing has altered the country's demographic makeup so much that even if 100% of younger voters (18- to 24-year-olds) had turned out to vote for the country to leave the EU in 2016 – or if the voting age had been lowered to 16 – it would not have altered the result.[145] In the so-called "Brexit" referendum, over two-thirds of 18- to 24-year-olds voted to remain in the EU – and it is estimated that if 16- to 18-year-olds had been allowed to vote, they would have aligned with this younger group, making the margins smaller.[146] However, Vote Leave (most popular with those over 50) would still have maintained the lead.[xxxiii]

Austria, the first European country to lower the voting age to 16 nearly two decades ago, has generally seen higher turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds than among 18- to 20-year-olds.[147] In 2024, 16- and 17-year-old voters accounted for approximately 2.7% of the electorate.[148] Despite being eligible to vote for almost twenty years, there is no evidence that Austrian political parties have shifted their agenda to better address the interests of the youngest voters.[149]

However, if we look at countries with larger younger demographics, the picture is very different. Political parties are increasingly engaging with the youth vote – especially in those where its size could determine election results. For example, in Indonesia's 2024 presidential election (in the world's third-largest democracy), voters aged 17 to 39 made up the majority of the electorate (approximately 60%) – making them a key demographic for politicians' attention.[150] All three presidential candidates promised more jobs and better access to quality education as well as pledging to tackle climate change – the top issues relevant to young people's lives.[151] In an effort to engage this demographic, politicians increasingly embraced social media, as young Indonesians largely consume news online and are among the heaviest mobile phone users in the world: a 2022 study found that 59% of those aged 17 to 40 reported getting their information primarily from social media.[152] To court millennials and Gen Z voters in the latest presidential elections, politicians turned to TikTok live streams, posted campaign clips on YouTube and put forward younger candidates – including the current Indonesian vice-president, who was just 36 when elected.[153]

In Australia, the 2025 federal election marked a significant shift, as Gen Z and Millennial voters outnumbered their older counterparts for the first time, making up almost 50% of the electorate.[154] Australia is one of the few democracies in the world where voting is compulsory, which has led both major parties to tailor their policies to issues important to younger voters – such as housing affordability, climate change, education and economic inequality.[155] With younger Australians increasingly disengaged from traditional media, major political leaders have moved the battle for votes to social media, with TikTok being the most utilised platform, making the 2025 election Australia's first truly social media-led election.[156]

[xxxiii] Sixty percent of 50–64-year-olds and 64 percent of those aged 65+ voted 'Leave' in the Referendum.

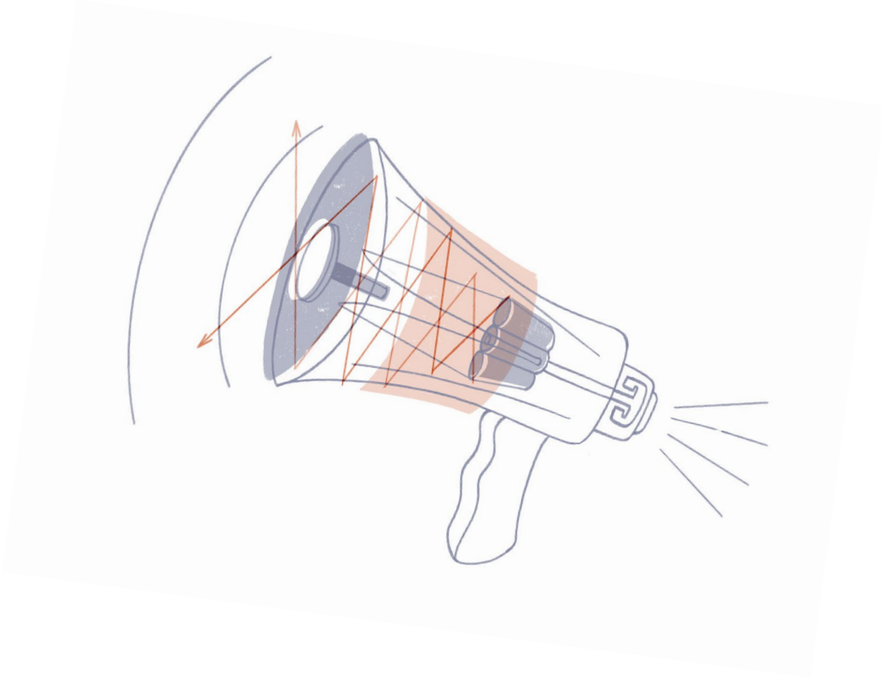
See: YouGov, *EU Referendum Vote: Remain or Leave* (YouGov UK Survey, June 2016), 1, https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/EUFinalCall_Reweighted.pdf; Population Europe, 'That (Demographic) Ship has Sailed'.

In this context, it is concerning that both Australia and Indonesia are now spearheading social media bans for children.[157] This is a disproportionate approach which infringes children's rights. In particular, it restricts their opportunities for full participation in spaces relevant for democratic life.

Meanwhile, as seen in the 2024 EU parliamentary elections, young people claim that traditional parties are not listening to their concerns.[158] Only 11% of all election-related social media posts focused on young people.[159] This leaves a gap that fringe parties exploit effectively, investing heavily in social media strategies to engage with and mobilise younger audiences – with the far right parties being the most active.[160]

These examples illustrate that empowering young voters can strengthen and bring equality to ageing democracies. This would push political parties to place the interests and priorities of younger voters on their agendas, just as they already do with older voters who comprise the majority of the electorate in ageing democracies.

There is a strong case to make the youngest generation's voice matter by enfranchising under-18s and abolishing the voting age... but *how would this work in practice?*





What would abolishing the voting age look like?.

It is one thing to say that voting should have no age limits, but it is another to explain how it would be implemented in practice.[161] Would babies be taken to polling stations to vote? How would children register to vote? Would giving children the vote destabilise the political system? And how much would it all cost? While the blueprint on ageless voting does not exist, this chapter offers a starting point of what it could look like in practice.

Voting from birth

If all children are allowed to vote, what is the best way to organise it? And how can we ensure that the needs and interests of children of all ages are served? There are various models to consider,[xxxiv] but we will focus on three. In all these scenarios, a child holds the right to vote from birth – but it is exercised differently and provides varying degrees of agency to the child across each three models.

1. Vote by proxy until a child reaches legal adulthood

Under this model, children are considered to have the right to vote but require a proxy to cast their vote for them until they reach the age of majority. Often called “Demeny voting” (after the demographer Paul Demeny),[162] parental proxy voting – where the parent or legal guardian votes

[xxxiv] There have also been proposals to give parents extra votes for their children, or to use weighted voting to give more influence to younger populations (e.g. children receive a share of an adult vote that increases with age). However, these approaches violate the principle of ‘one person, one vote’, so this report will not focus on them.

on behalf of the child – is not a new concept and dates back to at least 19th century France.[163] Recently, European countries such as Germany,[164] Italy,[165] Hungary and Sweden,[166] as well as some politicians in Japan and the USA,[167] have entertained the idea of proxy voting for children. These proposals, however, did not find much traction within their national legislatures.

Academics, politicians and other experts favouring proxy votes for children mostly refer to parental proxy: arguing that parents (or legal guardians) already make financial, medical and other decisions on children's behalf; therefore, it would make sense to assign them the proxy role.[168] However, they do not generally elaborate on other practicalities.

For instance, a children's rights-based approach is crucial to making proxy voting work. The proxy needs to respect the evolving capacities of the child they are representing, supporting the child in making their own decision where possible and acting in accordance with it. If we look at a real-life scenario, the role of a proxy could be automatically attributed to parents or guardians at the birth of the child. And, when an election takes place, the proxy would cast the vote on the child's behalf and with the child's name on the ballot. This comes close to the current practice of adult-to-adult proxy voting.[xxxv]

Where possible, a child should be able to choose the parent who they wish to cast the vote on their behalf. In cases where the parents are not best placed to realise the child's right to vote (e.g. situations of domestic abuse), when the parents are not alive or present (e.g. a child is living in foster care), or in any other case where the child deems it necessary, the proxy should be transferred upon the child's request to a legal guardian or a trusted adult. Children's living situations vary: their parents may be going through custody disputes, one parent may not be recognised officially in countries where same sex marriage is not legal, or a child may simply have a better relationship with their next of kin or a teacher than with their actual parent or guardian. In countries where proxy voting is available, just like adult voters can amend their proxy voting arrangements, children should be able to do so, too. There also should be an opportunity to opt out of the proxy arrangement when a child has no interest in politics and does not want their vote to be used.[xxxvi] This is why CRIN prefers the term "child voting by proxy" to "parental proxy voting", because it identifies the vote as belonging to the child.

Proxy voting is not standard in modern democracies due to the difficulty in maintaining vote secrecy and ensuring proxies vote as instructed.[169] In many cases, parental proxy voting is advocated by those who do not see voting as the expression of individual (the child's) decisions, but still think the interests of children should be taken into account with a greater weight than

[xxxv] The only difference is in the adult-to-adult scenario the voter holds the right to vote but can't attend in person, whereas in children's case it is the question of 'capacity'.

See: Miklós Könczöl, 'Parental proxy voting and political representation', *Revus: Journal for Constitutional Theory and Philosophy of Law*, no. 51 (2023), para 9, https://doi.org/10.4000/revus.9753.

[xxxvi] There should be an accessible and age-appropriate mechanism to support children to choose a proxy, amend a proxy, opt out of the proxy voting and opt back in. In countries where voting is compulsory, this should never be the case for children, as is in cases of Argentina or Brazil for example.

is currently given at elections.[170] Giving children the vote through a proxy increases the risk of not seeing children as political beings with their own rights. In this system, a parent acting as a proxy may decide to act faithfully on the political preference of the child – so the child essentially "votes" from the moment they express a preference until they reach adulthood when they can vote without the parent. And, on the contrary, even though the child holds the vote in the legal sense, the proxy may make a decision in the child's name but which may not reflect the child's actual political preference. This may be partially mitigated by making it a requirement to have both a child and their proxy assisting them in the voting booth; however, this does not remove all risk of the proxy appropriating the child's vote.

Case study: Proxy voting among people with disabilities[171]

Currently in Europe, eight countries allow proxy voting – in most cases restricting it to special circumstances like old age or disability.[xxxvii] A study in the Netherlands (where proxy voting is allowed) showed that only 10% of citizens with physical disabilities and 14.5% of citizens with learning impairments preferred proxy voting to voting in a polling station.

According to researchers, proxy voting may be unpopular because it implicitly excludes citizens with disabilities from public life. In other words, participating in elections is a way of participating in the social rituals shared within a shared public life, which includes casting one's vote. Removing this possibility, or even encouraging citizens with disabilities to opt for proxy voting, can implicitly communicate that they are not equal members of – or desired members of – public life.

Pros:

+ Compared to the status quo, where children have no say in elections, proxy voting provides an alternative to children's complete lack of representation.

+ Proxy voting gives political standing to infants who otherwise would be excluded from the political process. While infants cannot vote themselves and young children are likely to vote in very small numbers, the proxy should understand that they are not "voting twice"

[xxxvii] These countries are the UK, Switzerland, Sweden, Poland, Netherlands, Monaco, France, and Belgium.

See: Thomas Heinmaa, 'Special Voting Arrangements in Europe: In-Country Postal, Early, Mobile and Proxy Arrangements in Individual Countries', *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* (IDEA, 19 October 2020) https://www.idea.int/news/special-voting-arrangements-svas-europe-country-postal-early-mobile-and-proxy-arrangements.

for themselves or voting for a future generation. Instead, the proxy vote serves to exercise a right on behalf of children now, so the proxy must strive to represent their needs and interests.

+ It may be more suitable in countries where voting by proxy is already a part of the electoral system or in countries and cultures with strong community and family ties

Cons:

- With voting already being highly paternalistic – because control over who gets to vote is in the hands of adults – proxy voting does little to change existing power dynamics, as voting on behalf of children remains under the control of the adults in their lives.

- There is high potential for misuse – namely: if a proxy does not take into account the needs, interests or express wishes of the child and instead votes for their own political preference. A proxy may also abstain from voting, in which case the child's vote is squandered. Or the child may not be interested in voting at all, but the parent still chooses to vote on their behalf – breaching their child's will and trust.

- Proxy voting could amount to plural voting (when a single voter casts multiple ballots).[172] Proponents of proxy voting do stress that even though proxies would be able to cast more than one vote, the additional votes would not be their own.[173] However – in situations when the child does not make the decision (in case of abuse of trust on behalf of the proxy) or cannot make a decision yet (in case of proxy voting on behalf of an infant) – the adult will essentially have two votes. Once voting becomes a system of proxies, it loses the simplicity and clarity of "one person, one vote" and opens the door to the risk of plural voting.[174]

- The idea of proxy voting has been increasingly used by populist and far right politicians to promote "extra" votes for parents and may be used to weaken the rights-based narrative of children as individuals with their own independent rights.[xxxviii]

2. Proxy-claim vote: A child claims the right to vote when ready

Some academics argue that the best way to ensure maximum democratic inclusion of children is to combine a proxy vote with the right to claim it for oneself as soon as the child chooses to do so.[175] As with the pure proxy model, children are regarded as having the right to vote from birth exercised by a proxy, which would be automatically annulled once the child registers to vote themselves. This model allows children more independence as they can amend their proxy voting arrangements if they are not happy with them – and they can choose to vote themselves directly instead.

[xxxviii] See the examples of Hungary, Japan and the USA in 'Vote by proxy until a child reaches legal adulthood' in the first model of this report, page 52.

Registering to vote serves as a key indicator of a person's capacity to vote, since it requires the same abilities as voting itself: competence to make political choices, understanding of political alternatives and independence to act for oneself. In countries with automatic voter registration, ending the proxy arrangement would notify the authorities that the child is ready to vote on their own behalf; the proxy consent would not be needed in this case.[xxxix] The age at which a child can vote may vary due to differences in their development, circumstances and interest, but in order to vote they will need to be able to understand the process. To prevent parental misuse, safeguards similar to those in domestic abuse cases should be implemented. These could include informational campaigns to educate children about their voting rights and civic education in schools. Additionally, it should be illegal for parents/guardians to prevent a child from claiming their vote. As with the pure proxy vote, there should also be a possibility for children to opt out of the proxy arrangement without claiming the vote for themselves when, for any reason, they may not wish to participate in elections.

Pros:

+ It gives children more agency than the pure proxy vote and boosts their political independence from a young age.

+ Similar to the pure proxy vote, this model gives political representation to infants who otherwise would be marginalised in the political process, but requires careful consideration of the needs and interests of this group of children.

Cons:

- While the chance of misuse here is lower than in a pure proxy model, it can still occur. For instance, if a child is not interested in politics and does not want to claim their vote, parents might continue to vote on their behalf to ensure the votes are not "unused". Unless they are against their parents using their vote, many children will not bother opting out. Additionally, if a child develops independent views that differ from their parents at a young age, the parents might apply emotional pressure to discourage the child from registering to vote – believing the child is not ready or thinking they know what is best for their child.

- The proxy-claim vote could amount to plural voting. As in cases with pure proxy voting – where the child does not make the decision (e.g. the child is not interested in claiming their vote) or cannot make a decision yet (e.g. in cases of proxy voting on behalf of an infant) – the adult will essentially have two votes at their disposal, which breaches the equality principle enshrined in the law.

[xxxix] There should be an accessible and age-appropriate mechanism to support children to end the proxy arrangement.

3. No proxy: A child holds the right to vote from birth

In this model, a child can exercise their right to vote once they are able to register to vote in an election. Registering indicates a person's ability to vote, similar to the proxy-claim vote model. In countries with automatic voter registration, such capacity would be indicated by the act of voting itself.[xi] Babies and toddlers are unlikely to register, but older children and adolescents may wish to do so at different ages depending on their circumstances, experience and interests.[176] If a first-time voter needs help, parents, guardians or other significant adults (like teachers or older siblings) can assist. Additionally, there should be civic education introduced in schools as early as possible in order to ensure children know their rights and are aware of political processes, as well as services such as helplines for those needing extra support. On the election day, if children need help and no parent or guardian is available to accompany them, they can be assigned an assistant (either a trusted person or polling station staff), similar to services provided to people with disabilities wishing to exercise their right to vote.[177]

While this model suggests the right to vote from birth, infants and younger children or those without any capacity to vote will not use this right – and would technically become the only major group without the vote.[178] Potential solutions to overcome this hurdle could include establishing a permanent office with sufficient power within decision-making bodies to represent such groups, as well as using participatory democracy channels where representatives of those individuals who are not able to vote (such as parents of very young children or caregivers of individuals with complex disabilities) can directly feed into parliamentary agendas.

Pros:

+ This model gives children the highest level of agency and independence: they are seen as political beings on a par with adults.

+ There is no legal dependence on adults: a child starts voting whenever they are interested in doing so, and there is no need to claim the vote from either parents/guardians, or to amend or opt out of the proxy arrangements.

+ The principle of "one person, one vote" is adhered to, respecting the right to equality in constitutional law.

Cons:

- This model excludes infants and younger children, who are the least likely to vote because of their young age; they would become the only major group who would not use their right to vote, becoming even more profoundly marginalised.[179]

[xi] As discussed in the section on debunking myths about children's voting, the best indication of someone's ability to cast a meaningful vote is simply their desire to vote. This desire reflects two essential factors: the ability to form preferences and the understanding that voting is a way to express those preferences.

- Unlike in proxy voting cases, the birth right model carries the lowest risk of adults misusing a child's vote, but it can never be ruled out.[xii] Young children are highly dependent on their parents/guardians and would need their help to cast their vote, which can lead to manipulation. Parents or guardians might apply emotional pressure to discourage the child from registering or voting early, even though the child feels ready. In any case, children should not be deprived of their right to vote because of the illegal actions of others.

All three models have pluses and minuses, but it is not up to adults to decide which model is right. The only truly democratic way to find out is to ask children themselves what they prefer. Any voting system that incorporates children, needs to be co-created with the intended users, where children themselves – of all ages – can take part in decision-making about the conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation of voting systems intended for them. Such consultations would be a truly democratic and empowering way to find the right system to include children in the political processes and ensure the electoral system is tailored to their voting needs.

Reforming voting systems: Barriers, safeguarding and costs

1. Legal reform

How ageless voting is introduced will depend on each country's legal system. Reform might mean amending the national constitution, which would typically require a special procedure – for example, a greater level of support than simple majority by the legislators or public approval in a referendum. Change could also be made by amending specific laws – the national electoral law most obviously – but others possibly as well, such as anti-discrimination provisions.

It would be crucial to gain political support to make the change, from lawmakers and the public. The history of voting and its progressive expansion shows that political will made the change possible. Advocates should focus strategically on whose support is likely needed in light of the current legal arrangements and the national political context. Looking at cases where the voting age has been lowered to 16, this could be a top-down process directed by the government (e.g. Cuba) or driven by internal party dynamics (e.g. Germany, Austria). It could be a more bottom-up approach induced by civil society, with young people visible in campaigns (e.g. Nicaragua, Brazil), or it could be a complex interplay between civil society and central government (e.g. Estonia, Scotland).[180] When debating which avenue is most likely to succeed, advocates should remember that each approach faces different challenges,[181] and also that the process does not happen in isolation from other discussions – for example, on socialisation and civic education,[182] participation and inclusion.[183]

[xii] For more on this, see: 'Scenario: A quantitative estimate of the voter misuse risk if under-18s are granted the right to vote in Germany' on page 63 of this report.

2. Electoral reform

There should be as few obstacles as possible to give the opportunity for children to exercise the right to vote and make voting more accessible, secure and inclusive of young voters.

Registering to vote

Voter registration systems should be reformed and updated to make them secure and accessible to children. Ideally, there should be an automatic voter registration system linked to civil registers, or a system where citizens would only have to register once in their lifetime and then the voting documents would be sent to them automatically.[xlii] Registration should not involve documents that only adults are likely to have, like proof of address or paid bills, and requirements for ID should be relaxed, such as allowing under-18s to use their birth certificates. Aside from registering to vote in person or by post, many countries should also allow people to register online.

Polling stations

In countries with already aged populations, extending voting rights to under-18s would only increase the number of votes by an estimated maximum of 15%.[184] Most polling stations will be able to cope with the expected additional workload given the usual turnout.[185] Assigning more voters to polling stations would not be an impossible task in countries with high and relatively young populations either – the largest ever democratic election held in India in 2024, with nearly 1 billion voters and 1.5 million polling stations, shows that it can be done.[186]

As for election day itself, voting usually takes place in public buildings, often schools, libraries, community halls, etc. – all places children regularly visit. Adequate consultation with children prior to relocating polling stations should happen to avoid situations of inaccessibility, for example placing voting stations in places only accessible by cars. Evidence shows that young people would prefer to be able to vote in more places like in shopping malls or libraries.[187] There should be flexibility for children to go to a different polling station if they need to, and in remote locations mobile ballot boxes could be used. These extra measures to improve accessibility would benefit overall voter turnout, not just for children.

Non-in person voting

Any electoral system that enfranchised children would also have to introduce new electoral technologies aimed at making it easier for them to actually exercise their right to vote. Evidence shows that young people believe that the electoral process should be reformed and modernised; for example, they believe that the time frame to cast your vote should be extended but, also, that one should be able to vote online via a secure app or website.[188]

[xlii] Automatic voter registration is quite common in Europe. This system is based on individual citizenship and age information, provided from either civil registry records or residents' rolls compiled at local government levels.

See: Electoral Knowledge Network (ACE Project), Cost of Registrations and Elections' (ACE Project) https://aceproject.org/ace-en/focus/core/crc/crc02.

There is conflicting evidence whether online voting increases turnout;[189] however, it could be a promising way forward. If this model is taken forward, voter authentication methods for voting online should be accessible to children.[xliii] If online voting is not available, and children cannot attend in person, they should be able to apply for a postal vote – just like everyone else.

3. Reducing informational barriers

Children's informed decisions at the ballot box will depend on learning about democracy, human rights, civic engagement and how electoral processes work. Children's current level of preparedness for voting is influenced by the fact that they mostly live in societies in which they do not vote until they are 18 years old, as well as the fact that no institutions see it as necessary to prepare them to exercise the right to vote at an earlier age.[190] If children had the right to vote, several changes would ensue: parents and guardians would take their views more seriously, schools would educate students about democracy and elections, electoral commissions would adapt processes for young voters, political parties would engage more meaningfully with children and youth, and media would be more incentivised than they presently are to provide more information relevant to young voters' decision-making.[191]

The role of parents

Discussions about the right to vote can often start at home. Parents and guardians would need to receive guidance on supporting their children's participation in civic life.

Different approaches will exist for different age groups – from fun activities that cover the basics for younger children to answering questions from school-age children about why we vote, how it is done, and its impact on services like local libraries or climate-related policies. Parents can have these conversations over time to help children build a solid understanding of the political process, to ensure children do not feel pressured to vote (especially if it is their first time or they feel unsure) and to help them cope with disappointment if their chosen candidate does not win by reminding them there will be future opportunities.

The role of schools and education settings

Schools will have to provide compulsory rights-based education on civic engagement starting from primary or elementary levels into the high school both through lessons and informal participatory exercises, such as mock elections.[xliv] There are examples of civic and political education tools tailored to children as young as four years old, showing that it can be done.[xlv]

[xliii] Cantons in Switzerland have been experimenting with internet voting, where reliance on ID cards is avoided; instead, a unique security code is sent by post after pre-registration.

See: Meredith Applegate, Thomas Chanussot and Vladlen Basysty, *Considerations on Internet Voting: An Overview for Electoral Decision-Makers* (IFES, April 2020), 11, https://ifesukraine.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/IFES-White-Paper-Applegate-Chanussot-Basysty-%E2%80%98Considerations-on-Internet-Voting%E2%80%99-Mar-2020-Eng-1.pdf.

[xliv] For an example of mock elections in 112 schools in the UK, see: Democracy Classroom, 'Our Generation. Our Vote: Results' (Democracy Classroom) https://www.democracyclassroom.com/our-generation-our-vote-results [accessed: 15 September 2025].

[xlv] For examples, see: Democracy Classroom, 'Resources for ages 4–7' (Democracy Classroom) https://www.democracyclassroom.com/filter-age-group/4-7yrs.

Embedding critical thinking and media literacy in the curriculum will also help to protect children from misinformation online.

Learning about democratic participation is also important, and there are multiple positive examples of involving children in school governance. Teaching the principles of democracy can be done from an early age – there are democratic schools, preschools and nurseries where children regularly vote on how these settings are run.[xlvi]

Finally, the act of voting has an important pedagogical dimension in itself. Having the right to vote will foster children's interest in the political process, democracy, and in thinking about their position, views and interests.[192]

The role of election management bodies

Election management bodies would be tasked with making information about electoral processes accessible to children, covering the *when*, *where* and *what* of voting, and explaining election procedures and candidate information.

Accessible information about the election process would benefit not only children, but adult voters too. Studies in the US have shown a discrepancy between the literacy skills of the average voter and the readability of election materials.[193] Additionally, studies on participation of citizens with disabilities in elections in Europe found that living in a country with a high degree of election information accessibility increases the likelihood of having voted in the last national election, not only for citizens with disabilities, but all citizens.[194] Thus, more accessible election information benefits the entire electoral community, including potential child voters.

Specially adapted tools can be used to inform children about electoral procedures and help them plan and participate safely and effectively. Smart voting is another online tool that helps citizens of all ages evaluate their political preferences and match them with those of the candidates.[xlvii] There are many practical solutions designed to help people with disabilities vote that could be used, too. These include easy-to-read guides, civic education apps, voter helplines, online films about elections, training programmes and mock elections that offer voters a chance to "practise" casting their vote ahead of election day.[195] Furthermore, election materials could be made more accessible for younger children through picture books, cartoons, games and "edutainment".

The role of political parties and the media

Allowing children to vote would make children's rights more central to the democratic process. Ignoring children's interests would become costly for politicians, as children would have an

[xlvi] See an example of a democratic school in Israel: Participedia, 'Democratic School of Hadera', case no. 967 (Participedia) https://participedia.net/case/967 [accessed: 15 September 2025]; for an example of a democratic preschool in Switzerland, see: 'For Swiss preschoolers, democracy is child's play', *France 24* (21 January 2021) https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210121-for-swiss-preschoolers-democracy-is-child-s-play; for an example of a democratic nursery in Germany, see: Philip Oltermann, 'Put to the vote: German nursery where children make the decisions', *The Guardian* (11 August 2017) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/11/german-nursery-children-make-decisions-vote-dolli-einstein-haus.

[xlvii] For example, see: Smartvote https://smartvote.org/.

equal footing with adult voters and the ability to influence elections. Politicians would not only pay more attention to early childhood issues and education in their party manifestos but also expand their programmes to address intergenerational equality, public debt, and other pressing issues for children and future generations. Politicians and parties will need to clearly articulate their plans, timelines and reasons for their policies. Although many children (and adults!) may not grasp detailed explanations of complex topics like budget intricacies, party manifestos will still feature clear and relevant points that are easy to grasp.[196] The general public would also greatly benefit from political parties using clear and accessible language. Ultimately, what benefits the youngest voters will likely benefit the wider electorate, fostering a more informed, engaged and dynamic political landscape.

The interests of children will be increasingly considered by the media, affecting both presentation style and topics. Political talk show hosts will require guests to use clear, accessible language, making complex discussions more understandable for younger audiences. Media outlets will produce child- and youth-focused analyses of political accountability reports and programmes, and publish opinions from young voters.[197] Surveys will be conducted not only on elections but also on various societal issues, highlighting where children see problems and suggesting ways to address them.[198]

Political parties will need to find ways to appeal to children and young voters online and address their unique concerns. While social media is not accessible to all children due to disparities in connectivity and platform age restrictions, many children who do have access to social media and are interested in politics, follow news through these platforms.[199] Social media can convey political messaging in an accessible and engaging way, increase its visibility, and help it instantly reach children from diverse backgrounds, including those who are disadvantaged and marginalised. Needless to say, politicians will need to be more transparent, authentic and responsive in their communications with children to show that their issues are treated seriously. But social media can also fuel mis- and disinformation, act as a vector for violence and threaten children's mental health. It is a powerful tool, and is fundamental for democratic participation. Politicians should not ignore it or ban children from accessing it.[xlviii] Instead, they should find ways to regulate it better.

4. Safeguarding and other considerations

Potential misuse of the vote

Enhanced protections would be needed to ensure children can vote safely in-person. If children need assistance and no parent or guardian is available on election day, they should be assigned a trusted adult of their choice or polling station staff to help them cast a vote.[200] However, these scenarios (as well as proxy voting) can compromise voting secrecy and increase the risk of undue influence. It is worth noting that undue influence or vote misuse rates are potentially

[xlviii] Banning children from social media infringes their fundamental rights.

To learn more about how children's rights in the digital environment are impacted by social media bans, seeSee CRIN's Big Debates series: https://home.crin.org/the-big-debates.

higher in non-in-person voting and, in cases of people with intersecting identities, having their vote appropriated in some way.[xlix] As for children being "impressionable", the similarities between the limited capacities of young children and those of vulnerable adults (such as individuals with learning disabilities or low literacy) suggest that existing rules for vulnerable adults can be adapted for children.[201] Where possible, reasonable adjustments that safeguard the independence and secrecy of voting should be favoured, rather than enabling a voter to be assisted by another person in casting their vote.[202]

Even if misuse occurs in the booth on election day, or in the case of postal votes when the number of such votes is particularly high – or through online voting methods where misuse could involve digital manipulation – legal consequences remain the same. Obstruction of voting, violation of voting secrecy, voter coercion, deception and bribery are all punishable by law.

Scenario: A quantitative estimate of the voter misuse risk if under-18s are granted the right to vote in Germany[203]

Mike Weimann, a German activist and academic, suggests a simple exercise to see how much the election outcome would be affected if children were deceived by a parent or a poll worker when casting their vote. Weimann estimates that the proportion of children who need assistance to cast their vote will be roughly 75% of the group of five- to eight-year-olds. In the German case, that is around 3,000,000 people. Assuming that only 10% of this subgroup actually votes, that leaves around 300,000 voters at risk of abuse nationwide. If one in ten of these children – a deliberately high estimate – is misled by the influence of a parent or poll worker, that is 30,000 wrong votes out of around 40 million nationwide, assuming a deliberately low voter turnout of 50%. This results in an error of 0.075%, i.e. not even a tenth of a percent. This figure only refers to the case of reckless use of power by adults. Therefore, even the minimal risk of manipulation does not justify excluding all people aged under 18 from voting, as this would result in significant disenfranchisement of a demographic that could otherwise contribute meaningfully to the democratic process.

Safeguarding

Clear and comprehensive safeguarding guidelines must be developed to ensure children's safety when exercising their voting rights. Electoral bodies should invest in training poll

[xlix] For example, a study on engaging Indigenous peoples in elections showed that assistants may not reliably mark ballots for Indigenous persons with disabilities or low literacy, while men may pressure Indigenous women to vote for a particular party or candidate.

See: Rebecca Aaberg, Pratima Gurung, Christine Kandie, Lin Valenzuela Méndez and María Velásquez Xón, *Engaging Indigenous Peoples in Elections: Identifying International Good Practices through Case Studies in Guatemala, Kenya, and Nepal* (IFES, 22 February 2024), 21, https://www.ifes.org/publications/engaging-indigenous-peoples-elections-0.

workers' on safeguarding protocols for children. If polling stations are located in schools, election day should fall on a weekend or be designated as a day off to prevent disruption to children's learning (and to avoid adult voters entering premises where only children are present). Alternatively, early voting options could be introduced to allow children to vote during school hours. In schools and other public buildings used as polling locations, rules for election campaign materials (such as posters and booklets) should be enforced to ensure equal opportunities for all candidates and to prevent undue pressure on those who choose not to vote.[204] Young voters' personal information should be protected within voter databases and, in countries where the electoral register or voter list is public, all children should be automatically opted out of a public register. Similarly, in countries where voting is mandatory, children should not be subject to penalties if they decide not to vote. Finally, safeguarding provisions should be designed to support all under-18s – including those from marginalised communities, children in care, children with disabilities and others.

All these measures are feasible if we look at children's participation that is already happening in deliberative democratic processes – such as citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting processes – and other initiatives where, with the right safeguards, meaningful participation is possible.

5. How much will it all cost?

It is difficult to say precisely how expensive including children in elections would be. Election costs vary widely due to factors like the responsibilities of electoral bodies, the number and timing of elections, and personnel and operational expenses. Election costs in stable democracies tend to be the lowest; in transitional democracies and post-conflict countries, they will be higher.[205] Election expenses usually consist of several high-cost processes which we have to bear in mind when extending the franchise to children.

Voter education: The provision of voter education may be shared by electoral authorities, political parties and civil society organisations, however there will be extra spending on civic education in schools which presumably will be drawn from the government education budget.

Voter registration: As children represent a new cohort of voters that will need to be registered, the budget needs for this will depend on specifics of each country. The single most important cost-cutting measure in voter registration costs is establishing a permanent registry which is regularly updated rather than requiring voters to re-register.[206]

Actual polling: There will be additional costs for public outreach to new voters. Depending on the country's demographics, more polling stations and counting centres may need to be established. Extra expenses will include additional polling materials and equipment, such as ballot papers, ballot boxes or electronic voting machines.[l] There will also be costs for training polling staff on safeguarding of children, as well as for hiring extra staff for polling stations, counting and transmitting results.

[l] In very large democracies, as India's example shows, electronic voting machines are more cost effective than printed ballot papers and reduce the time and resources needed to count the votes.

These extra measures may seem significant, but they are only a fraction of the actual election costs.[li]

It is worth noting that proxy voting is generally more cost-effective in terms of direct expenses compared to other assistive voting tools or postal voting.[207] However, according to evidence on voting preferences among people with disabilities, any voting method providing citizens with a sense of political agency and participation in public life should be considered as a priority.[208]

Extending voting rights to children should not be viewed as a rights-versus-costs model, but rather as a long-term investment. From a human rights perspective, additional costs are not a valid argument, as the principle of universal suffrage outweighs any expenses. From an economical perspective, extending the voting rights to children would lead to policies favouring stronger economic support for them, which – in turn – would lead to better outcomes in their lives and greater social mobility in the future. In this case an increase of expenditure would be repaid, at least partially, by more economic growth.[209] Therefore, the benefits of enfranchising children extend beyond financial considerations, contributing to both social justice and economic development.

6. Would anything really change?

While the inclusion of children's voices would empower them, it would not suddenly lead to a shift in the status quo. In democracies with ageing populations, decisions would still largely depend on adult voters.

Scenario: A quantitative estimate of election outcomes if under-18s were granted the right to vote in the UK[lii]

In the UK, official figures indicate that there are around 67.6 million people (with 13.9 million under the age of 18, who make up to 20.6% of the population).[210] Not all eligible under-18s would actually vote and, if only those aged six and above are considered, this leaves roughly two-thirds of under-18s (who make up about 14.2% of the population). In certain electoral systems, where representation within the legislature is possible, even with around 10% of the vote a new voting cohort representing approximately 14% of the electorate could give rise to entirely new political parties.[211] However, as with any demographic, it is unlikely that this cohort would be united. So, although enfranchising under-18s would change the behaviour and policy coverage of established parties, it would not change an election outcome or indeed cause the "evolutionary disruption" that many may fear.[liii]

[li] For an example of elections cost breakdown, see: Anne-Sofie Holm, 'A global survey on the cost of registration and elections and electoral budgeting' (EC-UNDP Joint Task Force on Electoral Assistance, 5 December 2008) https://www.ec-undp-electoralassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ec-undp-jtf-38-our-trainings-2008-brussels-day-5-7.pdf [accessed: 1 September 2025].

[lii] Calculations based on Mike Weimann's Germany example.

See: Weimann, *Wahlrecht für Kinder – Eine Streitschrift* [Voting Rights for Children – a polemic].

In Global Majority countries with predominantly younger populations, the political status quo is still hard to challenge due to systemic barriers to political participation. In recent years, young voters emerged as a powerful electoral force in Malaysia,[212] Indonesia,[213] and Kenya,[214] where millennials and Gen Z constitute the electoral majority; however, we do not see any sort of disruption to the political system in these countries. If children were granted the right to vote, youth-centric parties might gain traction in such countries – and parties may increasingly choose younger candidates for MPs, a trend that is already emerging.[215]

Additionally, we are increasingly seeing how young voters in both Global Majority countries and elsewhere are likely to vote based on policy concerns rather than political allegiances.[216] Younger generations will replace their older counterparts over time in the electorate, likely shifting to more apartisan stances.[217] This means that, in the future, mainstream parties will have to reinvent themselves to accommodate the interests of younger generations of voters whether children are granted the right to vote or not.



[liii] *Ibid*.

How else can we strengthen democracy?.

While this report has made a case for granting under-18s the right to vote, child suffrage should be seen as one part of a broader, more holistic reform of democratic systems.

This is because even if child suffrage were to become a reality around the world – and children's needs, concerns and priorities became a standard feature of election manifestoes – casting one vote every four or five years does not in itself create a flourishing democracy. Extending the right to vote to under-18s would also not be a panacea for the problems children face or the issues they are concerned about. Therefore, voting rights for under-18s must be seen as sitting alongside the likes of participatory democracy, engagement in political processes and access to justice, among others, which – together – form part of a broader effort to strengthen democracy.

Children should be able to participate

In response to the exclusion of children from consultations on public policies – including decisions directly affecting them – there has been a strong push in recent years by children's rights advocates for States to adopt national policies that systematically and meaningfully involve children in decision-making processes.[218] This can be achieved through laws to protect young human rights defenders and the establishment of children's advisory bodies, or cooperation with national child and youth councils, as well as reaching out to individual children online and offline.[219] At the UN, efforts to enhance children's participation have gained momentum, too. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has been actively involving children in their work, while the Secretary-General's Guidance Note on Child Rights Mainstreaming (2023) now provides a framework for integrating children's rights across all UN activities.[220]

At the same time, many countries have seen significant developments in democratic innovations that allow citizens to contribute meaningfully to policies. *Participedia*, a global network on public participation, lists 373 democratic innovation methods – with citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting and online town halls, just to name a few.[221] Like adults, children are impacted by a wide range of policies, and these participatory democracy mechanisms should not arbitrarily exclude children simply due to their age. Promisingly, there is a growing practice demonstrating how to effectively include them.

In Denmark, Ireland and the UK, children as young as seven years old have joined citizens' climate assemblies alongside adults.[222] Citizens' assemblies use a democratic lottery system for randomly selecting members, which is a valuable approach for children's participation as it shows that anyone can be involved in political decision-making – not just those who know the given topic well. This offers an alternative to commonly-used nomination, election or other forms of selecting children to be members or representatives of child-led advisory councils or child and youth parliaments.[223]

In participatory budgeting, community members decide how to spend part of a public budget, and there are examples of involving children as young as eight in such initiatives.[liv]

There should be a bridge between child-specific participation mechanisms, like children's advisory councils, and adult participatory mechanisms: children *can* and *should* be involved in both. At the same time, child participation mechanisms and the right to vote have to go hand in hand. Adult citizens' participatory initiatives are never presented as an alternative to the vote.[224] Extending the right to vote to under-18s would greatly broaden access to formal democratic processes for those children who cannot take part in youth councils or parliamentary consultations. Simply participating in decision-making processes is not enough.

Children should have access to politics

Political representation extends beyond the right to vote and participatory mechanisms; removing barriers to children's participation in political parties and enabling young adults to run for public office is equally important.

Many political parties impose age restrictions for membership or active participation, often setting a minimum age tied to the legal voting age of 18, which automatically denies access to politics for under-18s based solely on their age – irrespective of their interest and engagement in politics. Children as young as 14 or 15, for instance, are members of the youth

[liv] Examples include a primary school in England where children jointly decide on the school budget. Citizens' deliberations on the budget of a local council in Edinburgh, Scotland, included the participation of children as young as eight. In Paris, France, 100 million euros are allocated annually through a citizen-led process with no age limit.

See: Participedia, 'Everyone counts: Youth participatory budgeting, Walsall, West Midlands, UK' https://participedia.net/case/everyone-counts-youth-participatory-budgeting-walsall-west-midlands-uk; Participatory Budgeting Scotland, 'Let's leave age limits in the past: Voting ages and PB' (PB Scotland, 26 March 2018) https://pbscotland.scot/blog/2018/3/26/lets-leave-age-limits-in-the-past-voting-ages-and-pb.

wings of political parties in countries such as the UK,[225] South Africa,[226] or Canada,[227] proving their interest and engagement. But these groups often lack full autonomy and funding, and struggle to influence the broader party agenda when disagreements arise with the main party leadership.[228]

While young adults are enfranchised, only 2.6% of parliamentarians in the world are under the age of 30.[229] Running for office requires substantial networks and financial resources, creating significant challenges. Some countries are addressing these by lowering candidacy ages and enacting laws to support youth participation in political parties, but these efforts remain limited.[230]

Political systems must prioritise opportunities for meaningful representation and leadership for children and young adults; otherwise, they will continue to face underrepresentation, further exacerbating their disillusionment with democracy.

Children should have access to justice

It has been argued that, because children cannot currently take part in elections, there is a greater need for children to have access to the judicial system (especially on issues of intergenerational justice like the climate emergency).[231] For at least 30 years, children have been advocating for legal standing in courts on matters affecting them, with climate litigation being a key example.[lv] However, children still face serious barriers to filing complaints or providing evidence due to presumed lack of legal capacity.[232] No country perfectly protects children's access to justice – and CRIN believes that children should have the right to initiate legal proceedings independently on *all matters* affecting them, as well as the right to act through a representative of their choosing, when they wish to do so.[233] That said, children should not be at the mercy of the justice system to protect their interests. Simply put, they should be able to both: go to court and vote to defend their rights.

We should give the right to vote to other disenfranchised groups

Children are by far the largest disenfranchised group. However, they are not alone: people with disabilities, non-citizens (such as migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and stateless individuals, as well as prisoners, in some cases) also face disenfranchisement.

However, there is a stark parallel between the disenfranchisement of children and persons with mental disabilities, with both being largely thought to lack mental capacity – as opposed to neurotypical adults who are thought to have the cognitive capacity to vote.[234]

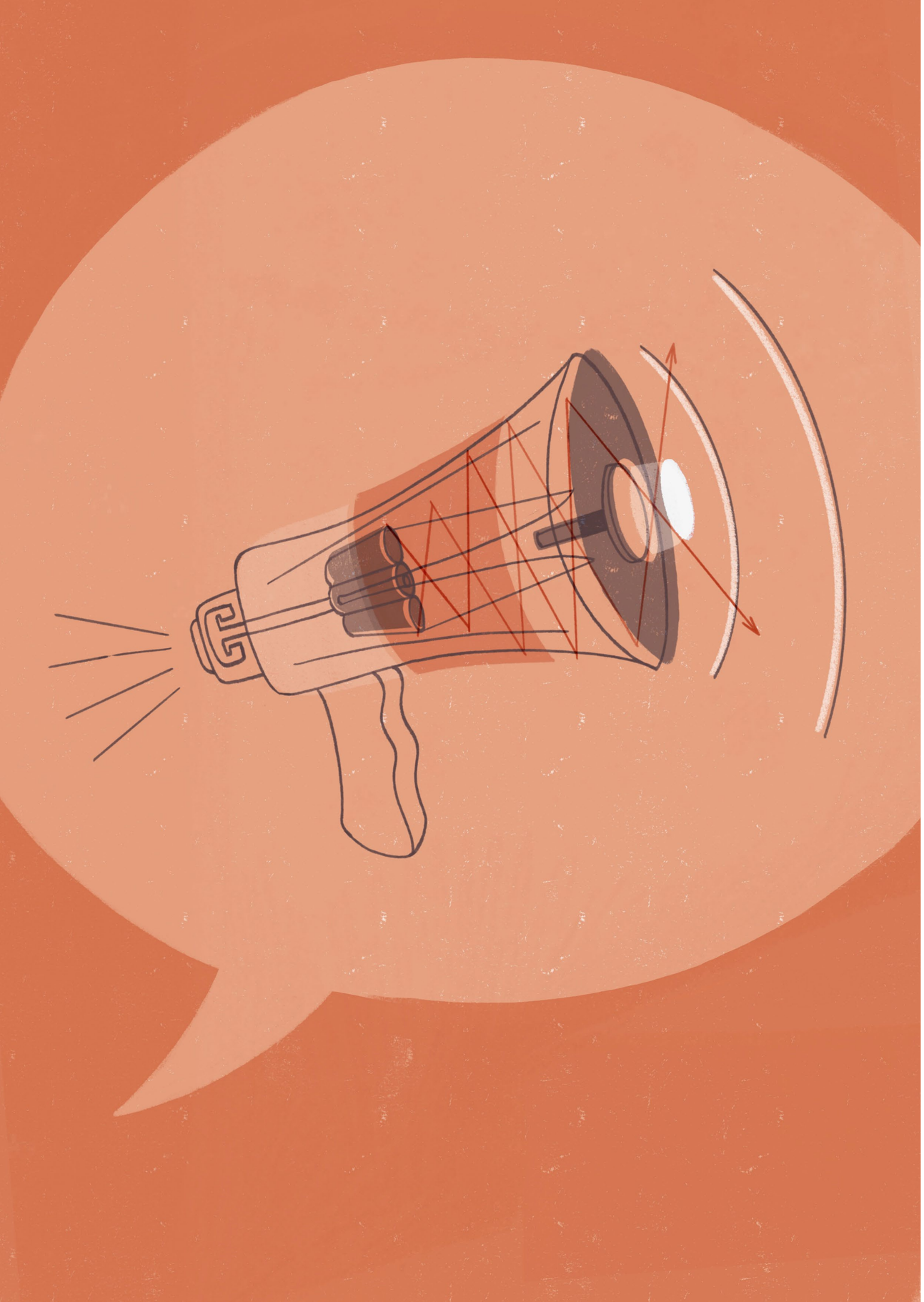
[lv] One of the notable first cases: *Minors Oposa v Secretary of the Department of Environmental and Natural Resources* (Supreme Court of the Philippines, 1993) https://legallibrary.crin.org/minors-oposa-v-secretary-of-the-department-of-environmental-and-natural-resources/.

The voting situation for individuals with disabilities varies across different jurisdictions. In seven EU countries, persons with mental disabilities are denied voting rights – in most cases as a consequence of having had their "legal capacity" restricted or removed.[235] However, there are laws that ban voting restrictions based on capacity in the USA, Canada and the UK, for instance.[236]

Furthermore, international and regional human rights law (such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) commits States to guarantee political rights for disabled individuals, including the right to vote.[237] The European Court of Human Rights has soundly rejected the automatic disenfranchisement of persons with mental disabilities.[238] It has emphasised that they are a particularly vulnerable group who have been historically discriminated against and socially excluded.[239] Crucially, the Court has called into question the treatment of persons with mental disabilities as a single class,[240] as well as the "legislative stereotyping" which does not account for the "individualised evaluation of their capacities and needs".[241]

Given the obvious parallels in how people with disabilities are viewed by society, it is not surprising that child activists are looking to the efforts of disability rights advocates in support of their demand for the vote.[242] The main reason given for disenfranchising children – lack of capacity – is ableist and threatens the voting rights of people with disabilities.[243] Therefore, disability rights activists and children's rights activists have shared ground on which to work together to promote universal voting rights.[244] Ultimately, the goal should be to foster more diverse representation in elections and broader participatory mechanisms, not just for those currently excluded but for all marginalised groups.





This isn't radical: So what comes next?.

History has shown us that lowering the minimum age to vote is a staggered process, with every half a century or so the age being brought down by a couple of years. Enfranchisement is undoubtedly positive for human rights and democracy, but this rate of progress is painfully slow. If things continue at the current pace, and a minimum age of 16 to vote were to become the new global norm, it would mean having to wait another 50 years before the minimum age is lowered further to 15 or 14... So, why wait? Why not remove a minimum age to vote altogether and be done with arbitrary age limits and age discrimination? As one scholar hopefully puts it: "The twentieth century showed that we could defeat many discriminatory biases in voting rights based on gender or race; the twenty-first century may be the one in which we overcome those of age."[lvi]

To this end, this report has defended the case for extending the right to vote to *all* under-18s. It argues that international human rights law provides a basis for equal, universal and non-discriminatory access to suffrage. It also challenges readily-held myths used to deny children voting rights by demonstrating how they apply to adults, too. Finally, the report explores how ageless voting could look like in practice. But what are the immediate next steps toward making this a reality?

In short, we all have a part to play in making this essential right a reality.

With child suffrage still considered by many as a radical idea, and ignorance around questions of capacity abounding, a necessary first step is to mainstream advocacy on children's right to vote. This would require a mix of awareness raising, international collaboration, peer-learning and support, as well as funding – inviting a variety of actors to come together, with each leaning into their respective strengths.

[lvi] This scholar is Nicolás Brando, see: Brando, 'Why should children have the right to vote?', *Justice Everywhere* (15 April 2019, updated 16 April 2021) https://justice-everywhere.org/democracy/why-should-children-have-the-right-to-vote/.

Children and activists already campaigning for child suffrage in different countries can connect internationally, raise awareness together, work with mainstream media to spotlight the issue and pressure their politicians to engage on the issue. Useful parallels can also be capitalised on with child activists involved in different political actions – such as those in children's parliaments, climate organisers and those working with children's movements – to discuss how the right to vote potentially complements their activism.

As for **parents and guardians**, they should take inspiration from activists who have pledged to give their votes away to children and do the same in the next election.[245]

Civil society organisations focused on democratic reform and innovation, as well as human and children's rights can develop work to dismantle children's exclusion from the franchise and advocate for their inclusion. There are still many biases against voting rights of under-18s – some of which are even held by children's rights advocates. These biases can be challenged through workshops which address hidden and explicit biases, as well as surveys and focus groups that gather the views of children from different ages and backgrounds on voting and democracy. Fundamentally, organisations should be making a space in their work to campaign on children's civil and political rights.

However, any change of this scale requires resources – and **philanthropic organisations** can take a key role in actively supporting advocacy on child suffrage and democracy. They, too, can incorporate children's civil and political rights into their thematic agendas.

Finally, **governments**, in particular, should prioritise the introduction of compulsory civic and democratic education from the early school years. They should also fund and lead research initiatives to better understand children's perspectives on voting. **Schools** should use existing methodologies to conduct workshops to explore the idea of children's voting.[lvii]

In the debate about children's right to vote, ultimately, this is what it all comes down to. We know the history, and how the tides have turned in the favour of the disenfranchised. We can sort the myths from the facts. We know the legal arguments in favour of children's suffrage, and we can predict the impact of its implementation. So what's stopping governments from granting children the right to vote, or politicians from advocating for its importance? More than that, what's preventing everyday citizens from believing in it?

Does our hesitation to expand the right to vote reveal something deeper about how we understand democracy – whether this 'we' stands for our identity as politicians, as human rights workers, or simply as enfranchised citizens? What does it say about what we want for children? As for the readers of this report who are under 18, we wonder what their takeaways should be if, despite all logic, adults continue to exclude them from a system they're told to believe in. If we still conclude that their choices don't matter.

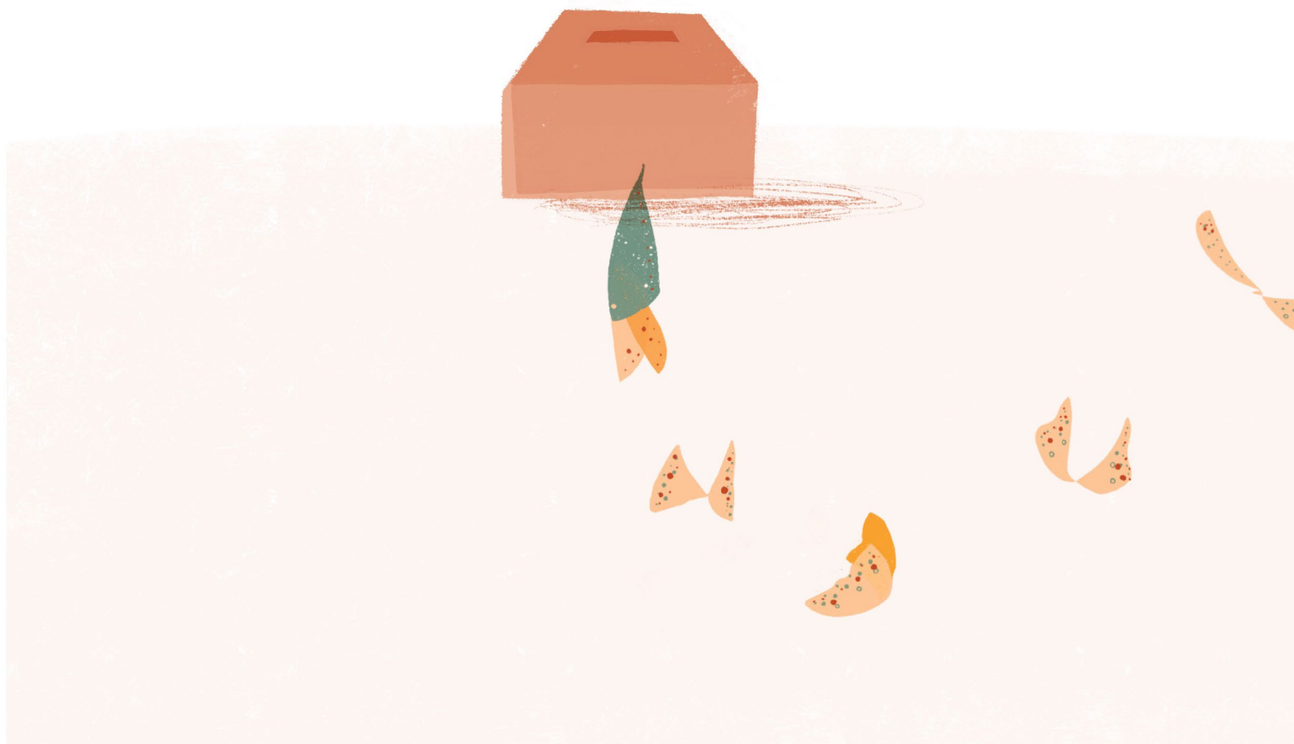
[lvii] For an example of a methodology of a workshop conducted in a primary school by the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, see: Harry Pearse, *Do children want the vote? Lessons from a primary school* (Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 23 April 2023) https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Do-children-want-the-vote.pdf.

Claiming to care about children's opinions, voices and perspectives means little if the care does not translate into autonomous action – where children's ideas become independent decisions that carry political weight. Should children remain disenfranchised, we risk casting ourselves only as judges or arbiters of children's views, cherry-picking what does and does not serve our own agendas.

As Charlotte rightfully points out in her Foreword, "Adults keep making decisions that hurt our future. And even when I spoke directly to them about these issues, no one really listened."

Is children's right to vote going to be another thing that adults ignore?

At the beginning of this report, CRIN extended an invitation to all readers to question arbitrary age limits on suffrage and to consider a world with ageless voting. This request was a practice of imagination, but it is our hope that what we imagine can carry on into action and law. The choices we make impact everyone, so we should all be involved in making those choices. Children should have a say in the societies they live in, and adults should be supporting their right to be heard. "Because real power means having the right to vote." By coming together and letting everyone participate in democracy, just like Charlotte, we believe that that alone could change the world.



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“The only way children can have political rights is if they have the right to vote”.

Charlotte is a 15-year-old suffragist from the United States and a member of the Children’s Voting Colloquium. In this conversation, we discuss how she began to advocate for children’s right to vote and what needs to be done to fully realise children’s civil and political rights.

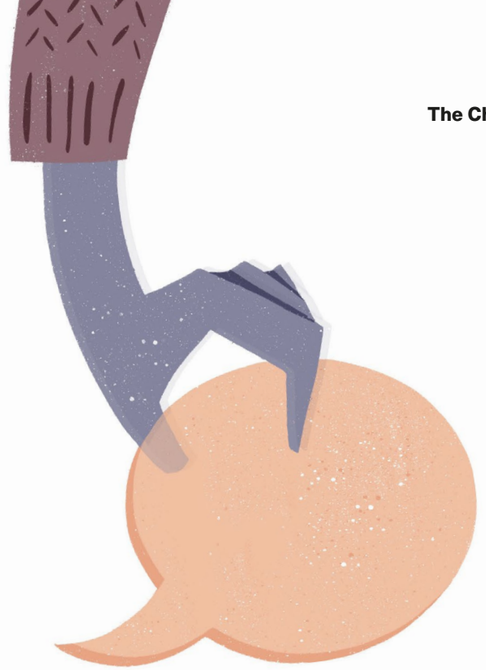
CRIN: Could you tell us how old you were when you began advocating for children’s right to vote, and why? What would you say have been the key highlights of your advocacy work?

I was 10 years old when I started. At the time, I was Kid Governor of Oklahoma (USA) – and I saw that adults were failing kids on issues like climate change, gun violence, health care, education and justice. I was invited to speak to a local women’s group in my town and was told the topic should be voting. I think I Googled ‘kids voting’ and discovered that there are people who think kids should be allowed to vote. I reached out to one of them, Professor John Wall at Rutgers University. We talked about it, and I wrote my speech and started doing advocacy work off of that conversation. And now I’m part of the Children’s Voting Colloquium.

I think some key highlights were definitely when I was keynote speaker at Amnesty International UK’s annual conference on children in 2022. And then I also spoke at Tufts Frontiers of Democracy Conference in 2025, which was also pretty fun.

Programmes like the Kid Governor, child-led advisory councils or children’s parliaments aim to give children a voice in policymaking but some argue they don’t go far enough in giving children real power or decision-making authority. What’s your take on that?

I agree with that. I feel like they don’t give children real power or a voice, and they kind of treat us as an adorable mascot. In my experience, the Kid Governor program gave me a title and a platform to speak at their fundraisers and commercials… but I wasn’t actually making any changes.



Children are engaged in issues like climate, education, health and efforts against gun violence. Do you think this is driven by a sense of unfairness because they lack formal avenues to influence decisions that affect them?

I feel they speak out because they notice all the issues that adults don’t see or that adults ignore because they are too concerned about money and power, and not about the future. Children act in the only way they can, which is speaking out. But I think it also illustrates that kids are competent and have the capacity to understand and handle policy – because they have unique experiences and perspectives, and they lack the unimaginative outlook of adults. I feel that speaking is the only way [children] can do something about the issues that matter to them. *Because* they can’t vote.

Many children and young people openly say they feel disconnected or disillusioned with politics and how governments work. In your view, what’s driving that? What could be changed?

I think there are two things that drive [children’s] disconnectedness with politics. First, right now, the world isn’t that great at handling the climate crisis, gun violence and other issues – and it is bleak. Second, the lack of voting rights means that kids have never had the agency to do anything about it. And it’s hard to get energised when you have no method to exert power or control.

If kids could vote from birth, they would be raised to pay attention to politics and would know how governments work. They just need the right to vote and the message that their voice matters in order for them not to feel disconnected or disillusioned.

How do you think the amount of civic education children receive influences their awareness of being excluded from participating in democracy – for example, by not learning about how voting rights have expanded over centuries for almost every population group, except children?

I do think it’s a problem that kids aren’t taught about suffrage movements, because I don’t think that most of them have ever considered that they are disenfranchised or that there is an alternative. I certainly didn’t until I was Kid Governor and started actively paying attention

to government policies – and even then I felt ignored and patronised. I didn't consider that there was an alternative until I was asked to give a speech on voting and I came across an article about kids voting.

If children were taught civic education at a younger age, I feel they would have more awareness. But I don't think that is enough. Personally, I had a very rebellious mind at age six, so I had a lot of ideas about things that weren't very common for other kids. But I think part of that was that I was taught – by my parents and my church and books and teachers – to think critically and question authority. And that second step – learning to view the world as a place that can always be made better – seems necessary to connect historical suffrage movements to the world today.

We see a lot of opinion polls asking adults what they think about 16-year-olds voting, but we almost never see children – especially those under 16 – being asked what *they* think about voting. Do you think that's fair?

I think this happens because kids don't get to vote.

Yes, under-18s are almost always excluded from political opinion polls about election or voting behaviour, since only the citizens above 18 can vote, so pollsters restrict samples to them.

Kids should be asked, because otherwise there is no one to represent their interests. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that a fundamental human right is the right to vote – and kids are human, too. In these opinion polls, it is too easy for adults to dismiss children's right to vote because they do not have a vested interest in children voting. And if kids don't get a say, adults can simply argue: 'Well, they're not here and we don't think they should vote.'

International groups that protect children's rights actively ensure that children can share their ideas and are heard when decisions are being made about them. They engage children through various avenues so that their voices help shape policies. These organisations are also beginning to support the idea of allowing children to vote at 16.

If you could talk to these groups, what would you tell them about how they can ensure the full implementation of children's civil and political rights?

The only way children can have political rights is if they have the right to vote, because they won't fully be heard until they can vote. Otherwise, there's no incentive for political leaders to listen – because it's not like kids can vote them out of office. Their power won't suffer from ignoring the voices of kids. And I think children's suffrage should be a part of the work these organisations do. Children won't ever have full political rights unless they have the right to vote.

And regarding support for voting rights for those age 16 but not younger, I would say those are the same arguments that were made against women voting and other suffrage movements – that they were 'not educated enough' or that 'they would be the pawns of their husbands'. And yet it turned out fine!

Children of all ages are able to understand policies and form opinions to vote, and the movements for climate change and against gun violence have proven that children *care*. No one is saying they should be forced to vote. But it wouldn't hurt to give them the option, because they can do it just as well as anyone else. They might need a little help, but some grown-ups do too.

Many adults feel disillusioned with politics, with some groups facing barriers to being represented and heard. To address this, governments, municipalities and community organisations are introducing participatory methods like citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting. But these efforts usually focus on adults, not children – and children's rights are rarely part of the discussion.

If you could speak to those working on these participatory forms of democracy, what would you say about how they could ensure all children's voices are heard and represented?

I think these adults still have the right to vote – and if they are disillusioned, that's on them. Getting kids the right to vote should be the main priority.

Just injecting kids into the participatory systems without true political power will dilute the power of these programmes, because people will dismiss them as being over-inclusive and not representative of actual constituents.

Unlike climate activism, there doesn't seem to be a visible global movement of children advocating for the right to vote for *all* children. Why do you think that is the case and what can be done about that?

First, there is a lack of awareness, because kids and adults don't even think about it or consider that kids voting is a legitimate proposal. People laugh at me when I mention that I think kids should be able to vote from birth. The social norm is children not getting a say, so kids don't really think about it.

Second, there's a unique problem with children's suffrage and building strong activism. Kids age out of the problem of not having voting rights, so building a real movement is hard when individuals are only temporarily impacted. You can't have longevity in the movement because, by the time kids get fully invested, they suddenly are no longer children who can't vote.

We need to increase awareness. We need bigger audiences to hear this message and take it seriously. And it's time for you adults to step up and lock in. This is how you make up for all the terrible things you have done in the past: give us the opportunity to be the change.

With all these challenges, how do you see children and adults supporting this movement together? And what role do you think children themselves can play?

I think adults need to get the movement running, but they should not be the main player. We need adults, and their political power, to actually change voting laws. But kids are the best positioned to make the arguments and prove their own competence. If kids aren't involved in the movement or in the lead, then it sends the message that their voices don't matter. It feels more like paternalism. So the main role of adults is to teach kids the whole truth, give us a platform and then listen. And learn and find ways to amplify our voices.

How would you respond to adults who say that if children aren't protesting for the right to vote, they don't really want it?

First, that's really just a lack of awareness. In my experience, when given the opportunity to talk about it and consider the reasons for it, people quickly see children's right to vote as worth considering.

Second, civic education makes a big difference because adults don't tell kids their voices matter. They definitely don't tell kids that anyone has ever suggested that kids could have voting rights. Kids would immediately want the right to vote if they knew it was an option.

Also, it's important to remember that giving kids the right to vote doesn't force them to use it. Children can still decide not to vote if they don't want to. This simply gives them the option and shows them that their voice matters. Even if they don't want to vote right now, they still have the opportunity to do so later – once they see that their voices count.

What support do you need in your advocacy?

Just a bigger audience, I think. I would love to speak to the UN. I feel like when I explain my reasons for why kids should vote, people consider it and ask good questions, and I've had some great conversations and debates!

If every child woke up tomorrow with the right to vote, what kind of changes do you think we'd see in politics or society?

I think it would be beneficial to everyone. We would see so many policies improve, like those addressing climate change, gun violence prevention, poverty and education – and I also think the level of civic involvement would change the world. People would be much better citizens if they realised children actually matter in society.

Are there any drawbacks at all to children voting?

No.

What are your plans for the future?

I'm considering writing a children's book about the right to vote. I'm 15 and still in high school, so I plan to graduate. I'm competing in policy debates and planning to go to debate camp again next summer. I have my permit and I'm learning to drive. I want to go to college on the East Coast or maybe in the UK. I want to study history or political science or international affairs.

I want to change the world for the better.

Continuing the conversation...

With this report, CRIN wants to encourage a new debate about children's right to vote. But you cannot spark a conversation without community.

To bring this work forward, we created a series of 'book club' questions which any reader can use – whether on their own or gathered as a group.

We would love it if you brought them into your organisations, your team meetings, classrooms, debate clubs, associations and community groups, or even for discussion at the dinner table with your family and friends.

Do *you* think children should have the right to vote?

Book club questions

1. Do you think children should have the right to vote? Why?
2. If *yes*, would you set a minimum age for voting or remove the age restrictions entirely? If *no*, why were you not convinced?
3. Had you ever thought about this issue before?
4. What children's voting model would work best, in your opinion?
5. What barriers are there in giving children the right to vote? How can we overcome them?
6. How do you think the world would change if children could vote?
7. How do you think the world would be different if children had been able to vote 5, 10, 25, or 50 years in the past?
8. Children's disenfranchisement is a violation of their human rights. Discuss.
9. What is the role of education in children's right to vote?
10. What action can you take today to support the children and young people who want to vote?

Whether you agree, disagree or land somewhere in the middle, we hope you share your thoughts with friends, family, colleagues – or even with a child or young person you know.

One of the biggest challenges that our research highlighted is that we don't know enough about what children themselves think about having the vote. What do you think they might think about their own voting rights?

We are also very open to hearing your feedback, reflections and ideas. You can contact our team at CRIN at info@crin.org. You can also tag us on LinkedIn or Instagram (@crin_org).



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