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Exploring Children's Suffrage

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Ageless Voting

Edited by
John Wall

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ISSN 2731-6467 ISSN 2731-6475 (electronic)
Studies in Childhood and Youth
ISBN 978-3-031-14540-7 ISBN 978-3-031-14541-4 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14541-4

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Children's Suffrage Studies

John Wall

Children under 18 make up a third of the world's population. There are as many people under 18 on the planet as there are either women or men. This means that children, so defined, have significant stakes in democratic life. They are just as impacted by democratic policies and laws as anyone else, often more so. They rely on healthy democratic systems to support their well-being, educations, families, economic security, health, and futures. In addition, young people actively contribute to democracies by protesting, organizing, assisting election campaigns, being consulted on policies, and pressuring representatives. In many countries, children engage in formal democratic procedures such as youth councils, child and youth parliaments, political organizations, and consulting with children's commissioners, special ombudspersons, and government agencies.

While children have always played active roles in democratic life, these roles have become especially visible in recent years. Malala Yousafzai began blogging and protesting at age 10 about the growing exclusion of girls from education in Pakistan, eventually becoming the youngest ever Nobel Peace Prize winner for her work at age 17. Teenagers David Hogg, X

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J. Wall (ed.), *Exploring Children's Suffrage*, Studies in Childhood and Youth, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14541-4_1

González, and their classmates, after a mass shooting at their high school in Parkland, Florida, led the most effective gun control movement in the United States in many years. Greta Thunberg at age 15 created the largest and most powerful global campaign in history to fight the climate emergency, teaming up with other climate activists like Xiuhtezcatl Martinez who had been protesting on the issue since as young as 6. Bolivian child laborers and union organizers successfully pressured their national government to lower the legal working age to 10. Young people around the world have organized and marched in Black Lives Matter protests. Child parliaments in India and at least 20 other countries have effectively mobilized children as young as 5 to change policies around education funding, street sanitation, environmental degradation, discrimination, and much else.

Despite these evident capacities for democratic engagement, however, and despite the impact of democratic decisions in every area of their lives, children are almost universally denied the right to vote. There are, it is true, now 19 countries with national voting ages of 16 (and many more regions and cities). Most countries, however, set the voting age at 18, some even higher at 20 or 21. The international consensus is that democracies can legitimately establish bars to voting rights at an established age of majority. The only other broadly accepted exclusion from the franchise is non-citizenship. It largely goes without question in international discourse and academic scholarship that "universal" suffrage means "adult" suffrage. This assumption is for the most part simply taken for granted. Suffrage is for those who happen to have existed on the planet for at least 18 years.

Exploring Children's Suffrage puts this widespread assumption into question. It does so by developing a critical and interdisciplinary scholarly discussion around the meaning and possibilities for children's rights to vote. To this end, the authors bring their diverse expertise to four central questions running throughout the volume: What intellectual, historical, and other assumptions underlie the exclusion of children from the franchise? Is children's suffrage compatible with democratic ideals? What effects would children's suffrage likely have on children, adults, societies, and democracies? And what might children's voting rights look like in practice? These and other questions open up an intellectual space to think carefully and multidimensionally about children's suffrage beyond the usual historical and scholarly norms.

Let me be clear: The discussion in this book is about voting rights for *all* children, starting at birth. There is already a significant literature on

lowering voting ages to 16. The present volume is instead about what it might mean to eliminate voting ages altogether. It puts into question the very notion of using age as a barrier. The debate about lowering voting ages by two or so years often revolves around how much older youth are similar in their democratic capacities to adults. But in this book, we examine the more difficult and radical question of what it means to rethink voting rights beyond the normative model of adulthood. This exploration requires a different and more profound critique of democratic life. It puts into question the very notion of the adult as the proper marker of enfranchisement. A similarly profound rethinking took place when voting rights were extended to other groups like the poor, minorities, and women. The question then was not whether such groups are sufficiently like wealthy white men. The question, rather, was whether democratic norms themselves needed to be rethought. In this book too, the authors ask, not whether children are like adults or not, but whether children can be included as children in the democratic franchise.

The following chapters do not presume that suffrage is the only democratic value. Suffrage is merely one democratic right among others. Children are already exercising many democratic rights that are often more powerful and effective: rights to organize, protest, speak freely, use mass media, access information, campaign for change, lobby representatives, and much else. Teenage climate activists like Thunberg have exercised a stronger influence in global politics than most adults and politicians could dream of. What is more, voting rights vary widely in their actual usefulness. Only 6.4 percent of the world's population is currently estimated by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (2021) to live in a "full democracy" with free and fair elections and responsive governance. A further 39.3 percent live in a "flawed democracy" that contains systemic democratic deficiencies, and 17.2 percent in a "hybrid regime" that is partly authoritarian. Voting in the vast majority of the world's democracies has little real influence in otherwise flawed and corrupt political systems.

Nevertheless, it is also the case that the right to vote is central to democratic life, indeed arguably the most fundamental democratic right. This is why non-wealthy men, minorities, and women over history have fought and sometimes died to gain it. However effectual or not it may be, and however much it is actually used, few who have the right to vote would voluntarily give it up. At the very least, possessing the right to vote invests the holder with democratic dignity. It names you as a full rather than

second-class citizen. And it puts pressure on those in power to take your group's interests into greater consideration than they are otherwise likely to do. It is at the least rather disingenuous for adults to claim that children do not need suffrage because it means little anyway.

This book brings together authors who have been writing on the topic of children's suffrage for some time. All are prominent researchers in their respective fields. They are international experts in childhood studies, political science, philosophy, history, economics, medicine, and law. The aim is to bring these so far fairly isolated explorations together into a broad and rich conversation that can establish the foundations for a new scholarly field of children's suffrage studies. Such a field would explore children's rights to vote as a critical academic subject. Like, for example, critical race studies or queer studies, it would unite disparate disciplines around a common set of concerns. And it would embrace both interdisciplinarity and intersectionality. It would seek to engage not only scholars' own fields of study but also new fields that can shed different kinds of light on the issues at hand.

The present volume also grows out of a series of discussions among its authors, other scholars, and child and adult children's voting activists at the Children's Voting Colloquium. This online organization, co-founded in 2020 by myself and children's suffrage activist Robin Chen, is a global community of around a hundred researchers and activists. It meets online monthly to share ideas, hear from experts, and support initiatives. It has worked with numerous organizations advocating for children's suffrage such as Amnesty International UK, Children's Voice Association (Finland), the National Youth Rights Association (NYRA) (US), KRÄTZÄ (Germany), Neighborhood Children's Parliaments (India), YouthLaw Aotearoa (New Zealand), the National Large Families Association (Italy), and Freechild Institute (US). And it has maintained a lively and ever-growing discussion of the question of children's enfranchisement through its website (https://www.childrenvoting.org), blog posts, media, and listserv.

What these discussions make clear is that there is growing interest in the question of children's suffrage from many directions in many parts of the world. But equally clear is the fact that such explorations are taking place largely in isolation—isolation from one another and isolation from research and social communities. It is eye-opening to hear new arguments about, for example, children's voting as a potential factor in longer-term economic policymaking. And it is inspiring to learn, for example, how

child-led groups like KRÄTZÄ in Germany fought numerous campaigns for children's suffrage in the 1990s through the courts and local legislatures. But these developments are taking place often separately. The issue time and again makes little headway because it is confronted with profound historical assumptions and fears that block critical reflection. A more complex discussion demands wider intellectual and cultural change as well as more careful and integrated scrutiny. The conversation needs to be broadened and deepened.

The purpose of the present volume, then, is to explore children's suffrage in critical and interdisciplinary depth as a meaningful possibility for democratic societies. The chapters take up diverse aspects of the issue and come to different and sometimes competing conclusions. But in each case, the attempt is made to shed as much scholarly light as possible on children's age in relation to the franchise. In this regard, the volume parallels early debates that took place within the past two centuries about enfranchising the poor, minorities, women, and younger adults. As then, the issues arise from movements on the ground but also engage philosophical, legal, economic, and other kinds of analysis. As often then also, democracies today are in significant peril, facing fundamental threats from authoritarianism, corruption, and neoliberalism. Rethinking the franchise in light of another marginalized group might once again help to save democracy from itself.

The Intellectual Context

It is safe to say that children's suffrage is almost never contemplated in mainstream political, philosophical, legal, historical, sociological, or any other type of scholarship. It is largely neglected even in the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies, despite that field's dedication to understanding children's agency and power. Nevertheless, since the 1970s there have been increasing attempts to explore the issue from various disciplinary perspectives. These attempts cannot be said to constitute a broad conversation, taking place as they often do separately from one another. But they do demonstrate a slowly rising interest in the question over the past half century and a growing conviction in some quarters about the importance of the matter. In order to understand the discussions that take place in this volume, it is helpful to have a sense of this prior intellectual context.

Critical scholarship on children's voting can be traced to two influential books published in the United States in 1974: Richard Farson's *Birthrights:*

A Bill of Rights for Children and John Holt's *Escape from Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children*. Both Farson, a psychologist, and Holt, an educator, devote a chapter in their respective books to arguing on behalf of suffrage for all children. For both, the right to vote is a matter of children's dignity. Farson focuses on children's right to "liberation" from an oppressive politics that systematically ignores their concerns: "Because they are unable to vote, children do not have significant representation in government processes. They are almost totally ignored by elected representatives" (1974, 177). Holt describes children's suffrage in a similar manner as a matter of justice: "To be in any way subject to the laws of a society without having any right or way to say what those should be is the most serious injustice. It invites misrule, corruption, and tyranny" (1974, 99). Also in 1974, the US legal scholar Patricia Wald makes a brief reference to lowering voting ages to 12 or 13, since "many adolescents are astonishingly well-versed in politics" (22). All these arguments equate children's suffrage to larger civil and political liberation movements taking place in the US at the time and insist that children have a right to be treated with equal justice.

Little further discussion of the question is found until two publications in 1986. One, by the British journalism scholar Bob Franklin, draws on Farson and Holt but is primarily concerned to explain in detail why it is unjust to exclude children from rights to vote on grounds of their supposed incompetence. "The presence or absence of rationality does not justify the exclusion of children from political rights but the exclusion, if anyone, of the irrational" (1986, 34). It is demonstrably untrue, Franklin claims, that adults vote competently and children would not. "It is adults who have chosen to pollute their environment with industrial, chemical and nuclear waste, fought wars, built concentration camps, segregated people because of the colour of their skin. … Since we do not believe that adults should be denied rights because they make mistakes, it both inconsistent and unjust to argue for the exclusion of children on this ground" (33). In the same year, the demographer Paul Demeny makes his famous argument for extra "proxy" votes on behalf of children by their parents. Now sometimes referred to as "Demeny" voting, the idea here is that, given children's large demographic stake in political decisions, each child deserves a proxy vote via their parents so that their interests are equally influential over representatives (1986).

In the 1990s, the discussion of children's suffrage starts to diversify into new fields of political science, economics, and law, as well as to peek

through into public discourse. The US political scientist Paul Peterson makes the claim, for example, that children's voting is the best way to address their rising rates of poverty, by forcing governments to think with longer term economic horizons (1992). The Italian economist Luigi Campiglio, also an author in the present volume, argues that "the lack of political representation of the young distorts resource allocation to their disadvantage in addition to being, of course, contrary to the very nature of democracy" (1997, 207; see also Campiglio, 2005, 2009). Somewhat similarly, the Belgian political economist Philippe van Parijs contrasts children's political power with that of the elderly to show that children would end up significantly better off economically with a proxy vote used by their parents (1999, 309). Other economists have pursued this line of thinking more recently as well (Vaithianathan et al., 2013; Kamijo et al., 2019).

The 1990s also sees the issue taken up in detail in the field of law. The Australian legal expert Robert Ludbrook develops an extensive consideration of diverse arguments against children's suffrage and concludes that all children deserve their own direct voting rights: "Young people have different life experiences and a different perspective than adults. If our political leadership and our political and social policies are to truly reflect the views of all sections of our community, young people should have the opportunity to be part of that process" (1995, 27). The US legal scholar Jane Rutherford suggests along somewhat different lines that children are significantly harmed because of their lack of democratic representation, and so should be provided "proxy votes" by their parents "permitting them to be proportionally represented in the political discourse" (1998, 1525). Likewise US legal expert Robert Bennett claims that "extra votes for parents on account of their children could help put American democracy into a semblance of liberal order" (1999–2000, 30).

It is also in the 1990s that children themselves, as well as the occasional adult, first start agitating publicly for all children's rights to vote. In 1991, the US 16-year-old Vita Wallace publishes an article in the widely read magazine *The Nation* arguing that it is "discriminatory" and hence "unconstitutional" to ban children from voting, and that "children of all ages must be given the same power to elect their representatives that adults have, or they will continue to be unfairly treated" (439). In Germany, the child-led activist organization KinderRÄchTsZÄnker (KRÄTZÄ) sues for children's rights to vote in 1995–96 and 1998 in the courts, insisting that, "We demand our right to vote because we think that everyone has a right to take part in decisions. Everyone concerned by

decisions must have the chance to influence them. People under 18 years still lack this opportunity" (1997). Also in Germany, a group called Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations (2022) is founded in 1997 by young people in part to fight for "rights to vote from birth," a mission it continues to this day. A Brown University organization called the Association for Children's Suffrage is formed in 2007 to "generate momentum for children's suffrage" (1997). Adult activists also begin to write on the subject, though on the whole more conservatively. Stein Ringen, a UK professor of sociology and social policy, for example, writes in an op-ed in the *New York Times* that, to combat child poverty, "mothers should have two votes, their own and one for their children" (1996).

The conversation broadens somewhat in the 2000s, both in the academy and beyond. The most notable change is that much of the debate over children's suffrage moves into the field political philosophy. Arguments against are made in detail, for example, by the German political theorist Karl Hinrichs, who claims that children's voting is neither beneficial nor demanded by equal justice, children's interests being better served by finding ways to "strengthen future-regarding policies" (2002, 53–54). Matthew Clayton argues that children under 18 should not have a right to vote because "democracies require voters who understand the political system and the pertinent social and economic issues that are the subject of political deliberation" (2006, 193). David Archard suggests that "we do not know what a child would choose if possessed of adult rational powers of choice because what makes a child a child is just her lack of such powers (her ignorance, inconstant wants, inconsistent beliefs and limited powers of ratiocination)" (2003, 53). And Philip Cowley and David Denver oppose any lowering of the voting age because even adolescents "have little experience of life beyond family and school, and no memory of governments or public affairs going back further than two or three years at most" (2004, 61).

However, other political philosophers argue in contrast that most children are in fact rational enough to vote and that ageless democracy would help to realize children's rights to political equality. The Swedish political philosopher Stefan Olsson claims, for instance, that contrary to Enlightenment ideas of democracy, children's voting would add knowledge and constitute "a way to guarantee that the people who really are deciding on the laws, the elected officials, do not forget to consider all interests equally" (2008, 74). Canadian political scientist Steven Lecce suggests that children's full inclusion in voting would actually improve

their political competence, as it would "encourage children to take a more active interest in the values, processes and results of political decision-making" (2009, 137). The German philosopher Benjamin Kiesewetter—previously a co-founder at age 13 of KRÄTZÄ—argues that "the right to vote is grounded in a fundamental claim of human beings to equal participation and, therefore, can be denied only for severe and cogent reasons," reasons that do not hold up to close analysis (2009, 252). And German educator Mike Weimann writes a short book titled *Suffrage for Children—A Polemic*, in which he argues that "children should have the right to vote … [because] those who have the right to vote have a say in the politicians and the parties that govern the country" (2002 [my translation], 5).

Also noteworthy at this time is a significantly wider visibility of the issue in the public arena. For example, the Freechild Project (later the Freechild Institute) is founded in 2001 to advance children's social and political rights including voting (Fletcher, 2004). The 21-year-old president of the US group NYRA, Alex Koroknay-Palicz, argues that "to turn back [the present] attack on youth rights, young people under 18 are now demanding a voice and a vote" (2003). The international children's rights organization Plan International sets as one campaign "target" children's "right to vote for national political offices" (Conrad, 2009, 72). In addition, the German Parliament's cross-party Children's Commission twice developed widely discussed proposals, in 2003 and 2008, to grant infants from birth proxy votes by parents to be handed to their children whenever parents see fit (de Quetteville, 2008). This proposal was ultimately rejected on the constitutional grounds that a proxy vote could not be personal, secret, and free (Wall, 2021, 31). A report by the think tank Demos proposes similarly that UK parents should have proxy votes for children up to the age of 14 when children should then exercise their vote themselves (Thomas & Hocking, 2003; Thomas, 2003; BBC 2003a, b). And other proposals for combined proxy votes and lowered voting ages are made by the Council of Europe (Schmitter & Trechsel, 2004), US medical researchers (Pantell & Shannon, 2009), and a French demographer (Barrusse, 2001).

The discussion up until recently has grown, then, from one involving occasional academic incursions to one that includes a broad range of scholarship and diverse political actions. The scholarship expands into wider questions of philosophy, politics, law, and economics. And public activism spreads in several countries and into a range of legislative, judicial,

and organizational projects. For the most part, however, apart from a widespread knowledge of the founding texts from Farson and Holt, these efforts still remain largely isolated and occasional and cannot be said to constitute a broadly shared discussion.

The Conversation Today

The past decade has seen the conversation on children's suffrage grow at a faster rate. My own understanding of the literature yields two main conclusions. First, the preponderance of scholarship on the issue—though far from all of it—is now found in the fields of political philosophy and law. Other disciplines like economics, history, sociology, and childhood studies are also making contributions, though not as many. And second, public discourse on the question has grown significantly. Arguments for all children's rights to vote are now made with a somewhat surprising frequency in newspapers, magazines, white papers, Ted Talks, and blogs. And numerous organizations worldwide have either taken up the cause of universal children's suffrage or been created specifically to advance it. None of this is to say that children's voting has entered the scholarly or media mainstream. Far from it. But the issue has lately gained quite a bit more traction and in a more integrated fashion.

In political philosophy, a field I take here to include both philosophy and political science, children's suffrage is now discussed in relation to two main issues: competence and consequences. On the question of competence, Claudio López-Guerra argues, for example, that the "franchise capacity" is held by most children (as well as adults who are mentally impaired, felons, and resident non-citizens) on the grounds that it depends, not on some abstract autonomous competence for reason, but rather on "the ability to experience the benefits of enfranchisement and the harms of disenfranchisement" (2014, 6; see also 2012). Nicholas Munn, an author in this volume, claims that excluding children for incapacity is unjust because "the accepted standard for capacity for political participation is minimal, and many of those excluded in virtue of their age could in fact satisfy the standard if they were subject to the same restrictions as adults" (2018, 613–614; see also 2012). And Eric Wiland suggests that, on competency grounds, "any citizen who does show up at the polls attempting to vote should have the right to do so, or at least to try to do so, *even* if they are old, physically disabled, easily confused, do not speak English very well, cannot pass a literacy test—or, if they are young"

(2018, 223). These and other contributions deconstruct widely accepted views about voting capacities and show that the real abilities needed to vote are not properly associated with adulthood.

Competence issues have also been examined in terms of political justice. Joanne Lau claims, for example, that to be consistent about capacity grounds, "we ought either to disenfranchise the elderly, if we do not enfranchise children, or enfranchise children of an age group that has the same proportion of capacity as the elderly" (2012, 873). Jörg Tremmel and James Wilhelm argue that "[i]t has been demonstrated with reference to the history of ideas that the current exclusion of young people and children from the franchise is a last, anachronistic bastion of epistocratic thought which contradicts democratic principles" (2015, 144). Philip Cook shows why voting competence is too difficult to define to legitimately exclude children (2013). And Lachlan Umbers suggests, among other things, that "if relational equality requires equal opportunities for political influence, and children have claims to be treated as social equals, it is hard to escape the conclusion that children have claims to enfranchisement" (2018, 17). The presumption of children's voting incompetence, absence stronger justification, is democratically unjust.

On the question of consequences, political philosophers have explored what might be the benefits and harms of children's suffrage for children themselves, adults, societies, and democracies. Some argue that children's suffrage would "adultify" children's childhoods (Silbaugh, 2020), undermine the responsibilities of parents and teachers (Guggenheim, 2005), or inflict uninformed ideas on societies (Scarre, 1980). Michael Cummings, however, another author in this volume, argues in his recent book, *Children's Voices in Politics*, that not only do democracies need voting by children, but "the civic disengagement and loss of social capital plaguing democracies today is rooted in the systemic silencing of people's political voice during their early years" (2020, 288). Democracies slide into dysfunction and authoritarianism because they teach their citizens in their formative years that their voices do not count. From a different angle, Maura Priest uses the political liberalism of John Rawls to suggest that children's voting would advance children's rights more broadly, since voting "is a basic condition of the fundamental rights of persons who all have an equal say in shaping the laws by which they are governed" (2016, 231). And Jakob Hinze shows that "ageless democracy" would overcome current epistemic biases in democracies and thereby "promote intergenerational justice" (2020, 173).

My own work, combining political philosophy with childhood studies, pursues the idea that ageless voting would benefit not only children and adults but also democratic societies. In *Give Children the Vote: On Democratizing Democracy* (2021), I argue that not only are children generally competent to vote, but their enfranchisement would "make politicians accountable to the real complexities of children's lives" (139). This genuinely universal accountability would in turn not only systematically benefit children but also help adults, who would thereby "live under policies that are better informed by the realities and diversities of the children with whom their lives are bound up," and in addition would render democratic processes "more fully accountable to the people's diversity of grassroots experiences" (167) (see also Wall 2012, 2014a, b, and Wall and Dar 2011). From what I call a childist point of view, analogous to other critical perspectives like feminism and anti-racism, the question is not just whether current democratic structures can be extended to children, but whether children's equal inclusion can inspire new democratic structures that are better responsive to all.

In the field of law, questions are being raised about children's rights to freedom of expression and against political discrimination. Some focus on specific national contexts. Samantha Godwin, for example, makes a case for children's voting in the US based on anti-discrimination law: "the basis for children's liberation exists within U.S. constitutional law, and is necessitated by a rigorously consistent application of the established equal projection jurisprudence" (2011, 301). Legal scholars Robert Goodin and Joanne Lau use the legal concept of "suretyship" in Australia to suggest that "all the voters are 'co-signatories' with regard to electoral outcome," so that child voters would add to the pool of competencies and "actually improve [a democracy's] overall performance" (2011, 165). These arguments about democratic discrimination are often taken up, as we see shortly, by children's voting activists.

Other legal scholars focus on international law, particularly Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which ensures children's "right to express [their] views freely." For example, Aoife Daly supports children's enfranchisement by framing Article 12 as an issue of discrimination, arguing that, at present, "we fail to permit children the right to political influence, and we fail ourselves by imposing a lack of diversity on the civil processes in which we engage" (2012, 290). Aoife Nolan criticizes the CRC and its Committee on the Rights of the Child for erasing the possibility of children's suffrage by defining children's freedom

of expression in entirely apolitical terms (2010, 138). And Katherine Walton claims that CRC Article 12 "should be rethought to include the right to vote … [as] an effective mechanism for improving children's well-being and the driving force in the realisation of all children's rights" (2018, 11). International law itself nowhere explicitly mentions children's right to vote. However, neither does it bar it and in some instances could be said to require it. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 21.3, states, for example, that "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage." And the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 25, reads: "Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity … to vote and be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage." Such statements imply, both legally and logically, extending suffrage to children.

In the public sphere, recent years witnessed a quite significant uptick in media and organizations speaking out on behalf of all children's suffrage. This uptick is related to an increasing visibility of campaigns for votes at 16; but, unlike such campaigns, it entertains the possibility of eliminating voting ages altogether. Throughout the 2010s, numerous global and national organizations start to take up the issue. The international NGO Children's Rights International Network (CRIN) publishes a report advocating ageless voting (2010). The National Large Families Association, in Italy, presents a bill to the national senate calling for a universal proxy vote for all children (2014). We Want the Vote, a German group of children and youth makes official complaints against children's voting discrimination in 2015 to the Federal Constitutional Court and in 2018 to the UN Commission on the Rights of the Child (2022). In Finland in 2016, a group called Children's Voice Association is founded with the specific mission that "all citizens should have voting rights independent of age" (2016). And Amnesty International UK's Children's Human Rights Network publishes "Votes for Children: The Case for Universal Suffrage" that makes a detailed argument for all children's suffrage (Walton, 2019). It is also worth mentioning that in 2011 the Hungarian government proposes, but does not pass, legislation to give mothers extra votes for their children (Phillips, 2011).

This increasing involvement of activist organizations is accompanied by increasing media interest. Among the more high-profile arguments for eliminating all voting ages are op-eds by Jonathan Bernstein in the *New*

Republic (2011); Joshua Gans in *Forbes* (2012); the Deputy Prime Minister of Canada, Chrystia Freeland, on behalf of Demeny voting in the *New York Times* (2013); Matthew Yglesias in *Vox.com* (2015); Laurence Pevsner in the *Washington Post* (2016); Ross Douthat on proxy voting in the *New York Times* (2018); David Runciman, a contributor to this volume, in *Talking Points* (2018); and a PBS Storyboard radio roundtable discussion with children (2018). Neena Modi, another contributor to this volume and at the time president of the UK's Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, publishes two prominent commentaries on universal proxy suffrage as vital for lifelong child and adult health (2018, 2020). Miles Corak, a Canadian economist, gives a Ted Talk laying out the case for ageless suffrage (2013). And the proposal is made in many other media venues as well (Bayer, 2013; Fletcher, 2014; Wiland, 2015; Brando, 2019; Hobson, 2019; MacKenzie, 2019; Peebles, 2019).

These developments lead up to what might be considered a banner year of 2020. New organizations spring into being and public discussion spreads quite widely. US activist Robin Chen, for example, creates a Facebook group called Represent MA Children 2020, which a year later becomes the non-profit organization Kids Can't Vote, to integrate diverse organizations and resources in a campaign to eliminate all voting ages in the US state of Massachusetts (Chen, 2020, 2021). Chen also teams up with me to found the already mentioned organization out of which this volume grows, the Children's Voting Colloquium, which launches its website and holds its first meeting in July 2020. As its website states, "The Children's Voting Colloquium is a global collaboration of researchers, activists, child-led and adult-led organizers, policy-makers, and others dedicated to eliminating voting discrimination according to young people's age" (Children's Voting Colloquium, 2020). For the first time, children's suffrage becomes the sole focus of a large network of diverse academic and activist participants from every continent.

In the same year, the National Youth Rights Association (NYRA) holds a conference on "Age of Youth" in which youth and adults discuss ageless voting rights as an urgent concern (2020). Amnesty International UK holds a Children's Rights Festival that includes a panel of youth on "Child Voting Rights" (2020). A child directly asks the South African Parliament (2020) for children's rights to vote. A teacher Tom Hobson publishes an argument for "giving children the right to vote" (2020). And the above mentioned activist and philosopher Benjamin Kiesewetter proposes in an interview "that people, regardless of their age, be allowed to vote as soon

as they register their interest with an appropriate authority" (2020, my translation).

Since 2020, this conversation has continued to grow. The 10-year-old Kid Governor of Oklahoma, Charlotte Anderson, for example, gives a speech to the Edmond Democratic Women arguing that voting ages should be eliminated (2021). Children hold an online debate in a French magazine on "for or against the right to vote for children" (Anonymous, 2022). Adam Fletcher, founder of the Freechild Institute, publishes "My Call to End the Voting Age" (2021). The *New York Times* features two op-eds claiming the voting age should be zero (Holterman, 2021; Stone, 2021). *The Guardian* publishes a widely debated opinion piece by the historian David Runciman proposing a voting age of six (2021). Runciman and Wall (2021) conduct an extensive interview on children's enfranchisement on BBC Radio 4 (2021). In these and many other instances, the notion of eliminating voting ages is broached across diverse locations and media.

These indications show that the conversation over children's suffrage is now more complex and widespread than at any time in history. It involves voices from multiple disciplinary perspectives as well as a rich array of child- and adult-led organizations. It has infiltrated international policy think tanks and major media channels. At the same time, such developments are still largely unknown in the wider academic and public spheres. The children's suffrage movement arguably stands in much the same place as the women's suffrage movement did a century and a half ago, that is, at early stirrings such as the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. There are many open questions about what ageless suffrage might mean, whether it is justified, and how it might be realized. Children's voting is still anathema to most. Much work remains to be done for the possibility to be thoroughly and critically explored. And yet it is now an issue with an internal momentum that is unlikely to dissipate.

The Present Volume

This volume of essays develops upon the existing conversation by both extending ongoing lines of thought and developing new ones. Its aim is to demonstrate that children's suffrage is a vital and important field of study-inviting new questions across a range of disciplines. Each of the authors in this volume takes for granted that children's suffrage can be discussed as a meaningful possibility. The usual reasons given against ageless voting are

taken seriously but also subjected to critical reflection. At the same time, chapters approach the possibility of children's enfranchisement from a variety of disciplinary angles and come to a range of different conclusions. The volume does not offer a single solution. Rather, it presents an in-depth interdisciplinary exploration of the hard and complex issues that children's suffrage raises for scholars and societies.

The following chapters are divided into three parts. Part I, "Theoretical Frameworks," examines the underlying issues involved in the children's suffrage debate, exploring questions around competence, harms and benefits, justice, and the nature of democracy. Part II, "Historical Contexts," unpacks diverse influences on children's suffrage arising from the past, such as other suffrage movements, de-colonizing processes, power dynamics, and changing political realities. And Part III, "Practical Considerations," extends discussions of children's enfranchisement into fields such as economics, law, and medicine, exploring such questions as economic consequences, legal challenges, consent, and implementation.

Part I, "Theoretical Frameworks," begins with a chapter by the US political scientist Michael Cummings, a renowned expert in American political thought, utopian studies, and children's politics. His chapter, "Silence is Poison: Explaining and Curing Adult 'Apathy'," argues that children's equal suffrage is the necessary cure for contemporary democracies' toxic lack of engagement and rising authoritarianism, a systemic dysfunction built on citizens having been disenfranchised throughout the most formative years of their lives. This is followed by a chapter by the New Zealand political philosopher Nicholas Munn, a theorist of democratic marginalization among groups like the young, persons with disabilities, and criminals. His chapter, "How Low Can You Go? The Capacity to Vote Among Young Citizens," unpacks exactly what constitutes the capacity to vote and suggests that it is sufficiently broad that no harm is done by opening suffrage to everyone regardless of age who wishes to participate in it. The final chapter in this part is by the US political philosopher and childhood studies scholar John Wall, a poststructuralist theorist of politics and childhoods. He argues in "The Case for Children's Voting" that universally ageless suffrage would create stronger democracies that are more fully responsive to the people and hence better positioned to form just and healthy societies.

Part II, "Historical Contexts," starts with a chapter by the UK historian David Runciman, a scholar of the modern practices and theories of democracy and of generational and educational divides in contemporary politics.

His chapter, "The Enfranchisement of Women vs the Enfranchisement of Children," shows how women's and children's suffrage, while different in many respects, raise similar questions of discrimination, paternalism, voice, and democratic inclusion. The next chapter is by the Indian childhood studies anthropologist and sociologist Anandini Dar, an expert on teen lives in India and the Indian diaspora as well as childhoods in South Asia. Her chapter, "De-Colonizing Children's Suffrage: Engagements with Dr. B R Ambedkar's Ideas on Democracy," argues that the Dalit activist and political thinker Ambedkar offers resources from India's history of democratic liberation for theorizing and de-colonizing children's suffrage rights today. Part II ends with a chapter by two Swedish childhood studies scholars, the historian of childhood Bengt Sandin and the sociologist of children, migration, and politics Jonathan Josefsson. Their chapter, "The Reform that Never Happened: A History of Children's Suffrage Restrictions," examines the reasons why voting ages were not reduced in an otherwise progressive period in Sweden over the twentieth century because of a combination of institutional, policy, and political barriers.

Part III, "Practical Considerations," begins with a chapter by the Italian economist Luigi Campiglio, an international expert in political economics, and Lorenza Alexandra Lorenzetti, an Italian economic theorist. Their chapter, "Generational Economics," shows how an extra parent proxy vote for every child would help governments and societies develop stronger economic policies to combat poverty, support families, and promote long-term instead of short-term economic prosperity. This is followed by a chapter by the legal scholar and lawyer Cheryl Milne, an expert in Canadian constitutional law and international children's rights. Her chapter, "Legality of Age Restrictions on Voting: A Canadian Perspective," examines efforts in her country to lower and eliminate voting ages and explores what avenues might be used for navigating the complex legal questions involved. The final chapter is by the UK scholar of neonatal medicine Neena Modi, a leading researcher of child health and well-being. Her chapter, "A View from Paediatric Medicine: Competence, Best Interests, and Operational Pragmatism," argues that just as pediatricians have learned to progressively engage children in medical treatment, so also could parents progressively involve children in exercising their own right to vote.

Collectively, these chapters lay a foundation for an interdisciplinary field of children's suffrage studies. They prove that a productive and stimulating conversation can be had among philosophers, political scientists,

childhood studies scholars, historians, sociologists, economists, legal scholars, and medical researchers. And if among these fields, then also more broadly among psychologists, neuroscientists, literature scholars, critical race theorists, and many others. The more democratic the discussion the better. What is more, the essays in this volume show that scholars have much to contribute to, and to learn from, growing public activism. Children's suffrage studies is well positioned to engage with child and adult organizers and policy makers, as well as to provide public debates with theoretical, historical, economic, and other critical resources.

Few scholarly pursuits could be as rewarding and creative as helping to reimagine democracy from the standpoint of children. It would be easy in our time to take a cynical view of the entire democratic project. Perhaps it is a European Enlightenment fabrication that is bound to run its course. Perhaps it cannot withstand the forces of neoliberal capitalism, corruption, authoritarianism, and globalization besetting it in our time. Perhaps its ineffectiveness has been unmasked by the existential threat of the climate emergency. However, as the issue of children's suffrage shows, democracies to date have far from lived up to their full potential. They have never been more than adult-ocracies or partial adult autocracies. It is at least worth exploring what genuinely universal suffrage could mean by removing its last great barrier of age.

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