



Feature

Kid Governors and youth civic engagement in the USA

The USA faces a sharp generational divide, with ageing elected officials increasingly out of step with the concerns and priorities of young people. Disillusionment with the gerontocracy in Washington, DC, is fuelling widespread disaffection among American youth, many of whom feel that their voices are ignored on critical issues ranging from health care, mental health, and housing insecurity to gun and police violence, climate change, and foreign policy. Over the past decade, thousands of young people have mobilised to march and protest around these issues and, more recently, to call for a ceasefire and an end of US Government support for Israel's military operations in Gaza. It is not a given that their disillusionment will discourage young people from casting ballots in the 2024 presidential elections, but less than half of Americans aged 18–29 years currently plan to vote, according to one recent poll.

Civic education in the USA is a patchwork of evolving state-specific and school district-specific curricula and standards, mostly delivered in dry, uninspiring textbook passages. Many school systems do not teach civics at all. But the Kid Governor programme, a nonpartisan civic education initiative, aims to change that, by familiarising children with elections and voting around issues that are important to them and facilitating their civic engagement and informed action. Launched in 2015 by The Connecticut Democracy Center (Hartford, CT, USA), the programme provides free, state-specific lesson plans to teach fifth graders (typically age 10 years) about state government, political campaigns, and voting. Students nominate candidates at individual schools' primary elections, and statewide elections determine which candidate will serve a 1-year term as Kid Governor, advancing their chosen policy goals and

lobbying adult lawmakers. The other candidates serve as the Kid Governor's cabinet members. The programme is active in Connecticut, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, and Oregon.

"In Connecticut, there's a requirement that kids get a half-year course in civics in high school—and that's about it", said Brian Cofrancesco, Co-founder and Director of the Kid Governor programme. "That's very late in their careers to be learning about government and civics in depth for the first time. So, we decided to start a little younger...We wanted to take learning beyond just a textbook—to make it an authentic experience. The Kid Governor programme is a real election; students really run for office."

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Kid Governor candidates have increasingly emphasised youth mental health, anxiety, depression, and food security, and public health issues like tobacco smoking and vaping prevention, Cofrancesco noted. Zoya Shah, the 2024 Oregon Kid Governor, ran on a platform of mental health awareness. "I have anxiety", she explained. "I was lucky to get the needed help and support from my parents. However, I realised that a lot of kids who are suffering from a mental health issue may not get the support I got...Every year after my birthday, I have a physical

check-up with my paediatrician. I feel along with that there should also be a check for a kid's mental wellbeing."

Two Connecticut Kid Governor Cabinet Members, Olivia Campbell, in 2022, and Aaron Enyong, in 2023, ran on platforms of addressing child food insecurity and ensuring access to healthy food, respectively. "Many of my friends have had to worry about where and when their next meal will come from, and that just isn't right", Campbell said. Enyong promoted healthy school lunches with fresh produce and suggested that kids should be included in taste-testing school menus.

Focusing on fifth graders makes the Kid Governor programme unique, according to youth civic engagement experts contacted by *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*. "These grades are often neglected when it comes to civic education, but we can and should start early", said Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], Tufts University, Boston, MA, USA). "Young people are and have always been leaders of social change", she said. "They lead innovations in our civic engagement practices, especially in social movements and voter engagement, because young people know their friends the best."

For the recent poll see <https://ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2023/12/05/young-americans-harvard-poll-trump-biden>

For the Kid Governor programme see <http://kidgovernor.org/>



Connecticut's 2022 Kid Governor Makhi Ettienne-Modeste (center) poses with his Cabinet Members in his office at Connecticut's Old State House.

For more on **Educating for American Democracy** see www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org

For the **Children's Voting Colloquium** see <https://www.childrenvoting.org>

For more on **childism** see *Child Geogr* 2019; 20: 257–70

For more on **child suffrage** see [Comment](#) *Lancet Child Adolesc Health* 2024; 8: 251–52

“Giving kids a seat at the table and a voice in decisions about their health and wellbeing is important”, said Charlotte Anderson, Oklahoma’s 2021 Kid Governor. “First, adults can learn a lot from kids by listening to our perspectives. We have experienced things that adults haven’t or don’t remember. We are more affected by gun violence because of intruder drills and [by] climate change than adults. Second, being heard and feeling like you matter and have a voice at the table affects your mental health. We will be more likely to grow up and vote, and have better mental health, if we learn at an early age that our voices matter and that we can make a difference.”

Civic education in the USA is widely underfunded, limiting cross-organisation collaborations, Kawashima-Ginsberg noted. Lessons are often disconnected from real-life community concerns that could inspire students to become civically involved. Educating for American Democracy is a national and collaborative education initiative intended to strengthen the teaching of civics and history education in US schools. “The youth civic engagement ecosystem is often siloed from other fields, which can lead to it not incorporating key elements like the developmental progression of youth civic competencies and young people’s agency to be involved in civic life”, Kawashima-Ginsberg explained. As a result, too few young people have sufficient opportunities to learn and apply civic knowledge before adulthood.

Programmes like Kid Governor and Educating for American Democracy can help to close that gap. But efforts to foster youth civic engagement must go beyond the classroom, said John Wall (Childism Institute, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ, USA), Co-director of the Children’s Voting Colloquium. “Children should be listened to seriously”, Wall said. “They have important contributions to make to political life. Framing [engagement] as merely educational contributes to the assumption that the

quarter of the population who is under age 18 don’t actually have to be taken seriously.” Adults tend to feel more comfortable with children learning about civics and elections, he said. But when they see children attempting to change things—whether it’s climate change, gun violence, the Black Lives Matter movement, poverty, gender, or disability rights—many adults become upset.

The Kid Governor programme is nonpartisan, but it hasn’t entirely escaped the country’s culture wars. In 2019, the first openly homosexual Kid Governor running on a platform of LGBTQ youth safety prompted opposition from some. Teachers in Oklahoma, where the state government is dominated by conservative Republicans, voiced concern that participating in the programme could leave them open to accusations of “indoctrinating” children.

Wall believes children are often as or better informed than adults on the issues that matter to them. As an example, he pointed to Kid Governor Charlotte Anderson, who reached out to him with insightful questions about child suffrage after reading his book *Give Children the Vote: On Democratizing Democracy*. Wall is a proponent of childism, a conceptual framework for understanding and confronting discrimination against children and empowering them through transformation of social norms. “Childism is essentially modelled on feminism”, he explained. “The idea is to uncover or overcome a deep history of patriarchy or adultism. In patriarchy, the *pater* is the adult male. Childism is an attempt to resist the way in which adultism pervades everything in society, just like sexism does...It’s about undoing the way in which children are marginalised.”

One way to do that is to bring youth into policymaking at earlier ages, through child suffrage, Wall believes. Cities in California, Maryland, New Jersey, and Vermont permit

adolescents to vote in school board or municipal elections starting at age 16 years, he noted. “Policymaking around all of children’s lives, in particular their health and wellbeing, is currently made without the benefit of children’s perspectives. A voting system in which adults can vote and children can’t vote...is not conducive to forcing politicians to make good health-care decisions for children. On the contrary, it incentivises them to focus primarily on adults’ needs.”

There is surprisingly little research validating the common notion that younger adolescents are distinctly less ready than 18-year-olds to consider complex information and make deliberate voting decisions, added Kawashima-Ginsberg. Clinicians serving children and young people can also help them express their views and thereby facilitate youth civic engagement. “The doctor’s office is one of the most important places for kids to feel like their voices are heard”, explained Elena Tipton, Connecticut’s 2016 Kid Governor, who ran on a platform of promoting a youth culture of kindness. “Creating an environment that does not dismiss their feelings can certainly help create stronger voices within our youth.”

Cristiano Almeida, Connecticut’s 2024 Kid Governor, would like to see children’s clinicians encourage physical activity among kids, emphasising connections between activity and cognitive and emotional wellbeing. “It would be great if paediatricians reinforced the message that kids’ voices and concerns matter and that adults are willing to listen”, said 2021 Oklahoma Kid Governor Charlotte Anderson. “Paediatricians should encourage their patients...to speak out about what matters to them. Kids aren’t trusted with enough information about their bodies to make healthy choices. But I’ve been lucky to have great doctors and nurses that treat me with respect and talk to me directly.”

Bryant Furlow