“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.

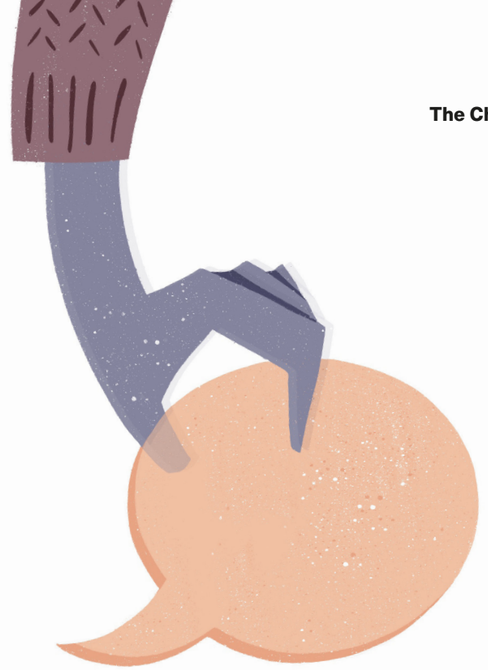
CRIN: Could you tell us how old you were when you began advocating for children’s right to vote, and why? What would you say have been the key highlights of your advocacy work?

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.