

John Wall: Give Children the Vote

Review by Manfred Liebel and Philip Meade, 11 April 2022

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Topic

The question of whether children should be able to participate in elections has been debated in Germany, Austria and Switzerland for about three decades, and in some countries such as the USA since the 1970s. In Germany, the group *KinderRÄchTsZÄnker*, consisting of young people, first campaigned for a children's right to vote in the early 1990s. Prior to that, similar demands had been made in the 1980s by adults who called themselves 'anti-pedagogues'.

In most countries, the right to vote has so far been linked to the age of 18. Accordingly, in Germany, for example, people can only participate in national and European elections from this age on. In some German federal states, children are allowed to participate in regional and local elections from the age of 16. In Germany, the national government, which has been in office since December 2021, has agreed and stated in the coalition agreement to generally lower the voting age to 16 in the current legislative period. Whether this will happen is questionable, as it would require an amendment to the Constitution and thus the consent of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag, which had previously rejected this. In Austria, the right to vote at all political levels was already lowered to 16 years in 2007. In Switzerland, the National Council (national parliament) voted on March 16, 2022, in favour of a legislative initiative to lower universal suffrage from 18 to 16. However, this regulation would only take effect if a corresponding law amending the constitution were passed by the National Council and the Council of States (parliament of the cantons) as well as in a referendum. In all the countries mentioned, with the exception of the European elections, only persons who have the nationality of the country may participate in elections.

Universal suffrage is a basic element of any society or state system that considers itself democratic. For years, children's rights organisations in particular have advocated for enabling young people to participate in elections from an earlier age. They have proposed numerous variants for this. These range from reducing the voting age to, for example, 16 or 14 years ('lowering the voting age') to the proposal that children can participate in elections from the time they express the will to do so ('child suffrage'). Sometimes it is also proposed that parents or guardians exercise the right to vote on behalf of their children until they reach a certain age, e.g. 18 years ('parental suffrage' or 'family suffrage') or until their children express the will to vote themselves ('right to vote from birth'). All these proposals are worth discussing, as they could help to increase the political weight of the younger generations or counterbalance the dominance of the older population, which is growing with increasing life expectancy and low birth rates in many societies, especially in the economically privileged ones.

Since children under the age of 18 or 16 do not yet have universal suffrage, they are sometimes offered special voting procedures in which they can express their political preferences parallel to the 'real' elections. In Germany, these are the so-called *U18* elections, which are held about a week before national, local and European elections. The first U18 election took place in 1996 in the Berlin district of Mitte. In 2005, a nation-wide U18 election was held for the first time. In the 2021 national election, 261,210 children and young people cast their vote. The U18 election is coordinated by *Deutsche Kinderhilfswerk* (German Children's Fund). It is co-organised by the Federal Youth Council,

regional youth councils, some youth associations and the *Berlin U18 network*. This is a kind of 'pre-citizenship', which is primarily intended to serve the political education of the new generations and to awaken their interest in political issues.

Internationally, some youth-led organisations such as *We Want to Vote* and the *National Youth Rights Association* in the US have been actively campaigning for full voting rights regardless of age for decades. In addition, there are adult-led organisations such as *Amnesty International* in the UK, *Children's Voice Association* and the *Freechild Institute in the US*, or the *Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations* and the *Generation Foundation* in Germany. Some of these organisations now work together in a global network called *Children's Voting Colloquium* (<https://www.childrenvoting.org>), which includes almost a hundred activists and academics and aims to abolish the minimum age for voting worldwide.

Author and background

John Wall, the author of the book reviewed here, is one of the founders of the aforementioned network. With his book, he wants to revive the debate about children's right to vote and underpin it with scientific arguments. *Wall* is also an inspirer and representative of a scientific concept he calls *childism*. In analogy to concepts such as feminism or postcolonialism, he understands it as a critical term similar to the term *Adultismus* (adultism), which is more commonly used in Germany (see: *Liebel & Meade, Adultismus. Die Macht der Erwachsenen über die Kinder. Eine kritische Einführung.* Bertz & Fischer, Berlin; to be published in autumn 2022). Childism aims to deconstruct the dominance of adults from the perspective of children and expose their subjectivity. In doing so, *Wall* hopes to increase the imagination in social practice and academic research for the significance of the age category in social life. He is concerned not only with equal communication between adults and children, but also with a fundamental redefinition of the position of children in social power relations and a reconceptualisation of thinking about the relationship of age groups in society. To this end, *Wall* founded the Childism Institute at Rutgers University in the US state of New Jersey, where he is professor of philosophy, religion and childhood studies. Since the beginning of the new millennium, he has published numerous writings on the subject, which, such as this book, have so far only been available in English.

Content and structure

With his new book, *Wall* wants to demonstrate how the concept of childism can be used in the debate on children's right to vote. It is divided into seven chapters and concludes with a plea for what the author calls the "*proxy-claim right to vote*" (which we explain and discuss in more detail below).

In **chapter 1**, *Wall* reconstructs the **history of universal suffrage** as a basic element of democratic forms of government since the introduction of the polis in ancient Athens. He shows how the right to vote was extended from a right of privileged minorities to all inhabitants of an initially urban, then national territory who were considered 'adults'. More and more barriers were removed, except for the barrier of the supposedly too young age. He sees the main reason for denying children the right to vote to this day in the fact that they were understood as 'others' property' and limited to the 'private sphere'. This limitation, which is closely linked to the emergence of the bourgeois pattern of a childhood cut off from society, goes hand in hand with the idea that public or political affairs 'are not for children'.

In the following three chapters, *Wall* addresses the most common objections to children's right to vote. In **chapter 2**, he refutes the claim that **children do not have the necessary capacities** to make rational choices. He does admit, with reference to neuroscience, that the brains of young children

are still developing and not ready for 'complex political choices' (p. 42), but also refers to research that children have 'cognitive capacities for morality and empathy' (p. 59) at an early age. In addition, children have many other abilities such as 'a great ability to learn, mathematical dexterity, the complex use of language, self-expression through music and art, compassion for suffering, even great wisdom' (p. 41), all of which are significant for active participation in society. When it comes to the right to vote, however, only children are assumed to lack abilities, while these are taken for granted in adults. Participating in elections is also not the same as driving a car or getting married, and in no way entails risks, neither for children nor for adults. As a democratic right, the right to participate in elections requires no more and no less than wanting to do so.

In **chapter 3**, *Wall* dismantles the objection that **children do not yet have the necessary knowledge** to be able to judge complex issues that are up for decision. This is not specified anywhere and is not assumed for adults. The only knowledge that should be meaningfully considered for participation in elections is to perceive oneself as a political being and in relation to other political beings and finally to understand that 'different people's lives are not only different but also differently interpreted' (p. 77). In democracies, it is not about elitist or exclusive political knowledge, but about the knowledge that emerges from everyday experience. 'A true democracy does not define the knowledge that counts ahead of time but generates it through a multisided dialogue' (p. 83).

In **chapter 4**, *Wall* addresses concerns that the **power that accrues to children through participation in elections** has incalculable dangerous consequences because children, unlike adults, are particularly easy to manipulate. He counters that children's participation in elections does not give them power over adults, but limits the power of adults over children, and that children's views and opinions are more likely to be taken into account in political decisions. Moreover, the danger of being manipulated is not a special characteristic of children, but a general problem that can be countered by political education in all age groups. Participation in elections would even reduce the risk of manipulation, as it would bring new experiences and make young people more self-confident and critical.

In the following **chapters 5 and 6**, *Wall* shows the **positive effects** that child suffrage has on the one hand for young people themselves, and on the other hand for society as a whole. Governments would be prompted to pay more attention to the interests and experiences of children and would have to make an effort to make their actions understandable to young people. In this way, young people would not only gain more political influence, but it would also benefit their 'political growth' (p. 119) and they would gain dignity themselves. The objection that the right to participate in elections would harm children inadmissibly equates this right with the right to work, marry or have sexual relations. Adults would also benefit from children's participation in elections, as they would gain 'more complex and realistic understandings of their society' (p. 148). It would make children as well as other underprivileged groups more visible and thus make it easier for them to see themselves as part of society.

However, *Wall* also sees the need not only to aim for children's participation in elections, but also to reflect on the **different forms and theories of democracy**. He argues for a theory he calls 'reconstructive' (p. 162). In contrast to the liberal tradition of democracy, which assumes people as isolated individuals and limits these to occasional voting, it would be about taking people's daily experiences of being dependent on each other more seriously and enabling them to be present in political life. Elections would then not be understood as a simple expression of particular interests, but as 'a mechanism for holding governments accountable to the people' (p. 166). This would also make it easier to imagine children's participation in elections, as they would not only be seen as dependent on adults, but in an interdependent relationship with them.

In the concluding **chapter 7** and in a manifesto, *Wall* justifies why he advocates the '**proxy-claim vote**'. By this he means 'that every person in a democracy is provided a *proxy* vote from birth to death that they can also *claim* to exercise for themselves at any point they desire' (p. 171; italics in original). This type of children's right to vote, usually referred to in German as the 'right to vote from birth', provides a proxy (parents or other guardians) to exercise the vote until the young person wishes to claim it for her- or himself. Since no specific minimum age is set, it is not a lowering of the voting age. *Wall* justifies this form of suffrage by arguing that it implies the 'maximum possible accountability of representatives to the people' (p. 171) and the 'maximum possible empowerment of the people on their own terms' (p. 172). This idea 'learns from children that the people or demos in a democracy are not merely independent but deeply interdependent' (p. 173). As an 'interdependent right' it takes into account this 'more complex human reality' (p. 173). Instead of treating children as mini-adults, it unites 'children and adults along the same interdependent voting spectrum' (p. 181) and instead of 'a competition among the interests of individuals' it enables 'a process of shared social responsiveness' (p. 182).

However, *Wall* also admits that he is hesitant about his proposal. He lists seven frequently raised objections to consider. Genuine equality of voters could be undermined; adults who do not have children might feel unfairly treated; it would be difficult to decide which adults vote for 'their' children; parents might prevent or delay their children from exercising their right to vote themselves; children's voting behaviour could be manipulated at school; and finally, inequality between children could be increased. However, in *Wall's* view, all these counter-arguments do not weigh so heavily as to devalue his proposal. Above all, the maxim of enabling even the youngest children to have political representation would prevail. And finally, the risks and difficulties of his proposal could be countered with practical rules and persuasion.

Discussion

In the German-speaking world, proposals and demands have also been formulated for decades on how children's right to vote could be shaped. These include proposals similar to those of *John Wall*. Nevertheless, we think his book is also worth reading for readers in the German-speaking world, as it contains many new ideas and arguments. In particular, the idea of linking the right of children to vote with the idea of interdependence or mutual responsibility. Moreover, the book is structured and written in a style that allows the reader to look over the author's shoulder as he develops his thoughts and to reflect with him on the various arguments and counter-arguments.

The 'right to vote from birth' or 'proxy voting' proposed and justified in detail by *Wall* has the charm of not leaving out any child because of an age not yet reached. Another argument in favour of his proposal is that, at least in wealthier societies of the North, the demographic structure is shifting more and more towards the elderly due to higher life expectancy and low birth rates, which means that children are becoming less and less important in quantitative terms. But it seems problematic to us to have this right - as *Wall* suggests - exercised in trust by parents or other guardians.

Although it can be assumed that in most cases they want to act in the best interest of their children, the family depicts a complex structure of interests in which there is often a (political) dissent between adults and children. Since the perspectives of the younger ones often (have to) lose out, we think that from an adultism-critical point of view, children's right to vote should not be exercised vicariously by close adults, but by the children themselves. We find it astonishing that *Wall*, who explicitly addresses issues of unequal generational power in his concept of childism, does not take this into account in his proposal for proxy voting.

We see another shortcoming of *Wall's* justification of children's right to vote in the fact that he understands democracy only as a form of state government and thus exaggerates the right to vote in terms of its importance for human life. He does give some thought to different forms of democracy and what he calls 'reconstructive democracy' comes close to an understanding of democracy – usually called republican – that does not separate the political form from social life, as is the case with the liberal concept of democracy. But in his considerations, the economic and social framework conditions of any form of state are, in our opinion, not sufficiently taken into account. We need only recall that the former German Chancellor *Angela Merkel* once praised German democracy as 'conforming to the market'.

It should also be remembered that political participation is not limited to the right to vote, neither for adults nor for children. In many countries, children's and youth parliaments, children's councils or similar forms of youth participation have been established since the 1990s, inspired by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. When children's councils or similar institutions of children's participation serve as a symbolic substitute for the right to vote, they channel children's interests and energies in ways that are predetermined by adults and thus do not really contribute to countering adultism in society. However, when children's councils are part of a political process aimed at bringing about change in society, or even arise out of protest movements of young people, they can help to give these processes and movements a more stable structure and thus increase their effectiveness. In general, it can be assumed that even if children were given the right to vote, greater effects could only be expected if it was accompanied by self-organised political movements. Children's right to vote should therefore always be thought of together with other forms of political participation.

Only in this way would it also be possible to overcome an immanent limitation of electoral law, which consists in limiting political issues only to parliamentary institutions. If democracy is to be taken seriously, it cannot be content with producing new norms and laws, but would also have to change lived reality. In other words, society would have to democratise in all areas, in the economy as well as in social and educational institutions. For young people, this would mean, for example, gaining meaningful influence on teaching content and forms of learning at school, and being given legally binding opportunities to take action against the violation of their own rights. With such an extension of democracy into everyday life, the framework of a democratic form of state that sees itself as representative and based on the liberal model would be exceeded. The right of children to vote could contribute to making such a perspective more visible.

If children were granted the right to vote directly, it could be assumed that their interest in informing themselves would increase, as would their ability to make independent political judgements. Political parties and candidates who want to be elected would be encouraged to make themselves understood to young people, and the political information and options offered would be expected to be more responsive to young people's interests and expectations. Recent protest movements in different parts of the world have made visible that young people today are among the population groups that are particularly politically engaged.

An open question, which is addressed in *Wall's* book but not dealt with in more detail, relates to the possibilities for children themselves to assume co-responsibility in democratic institutions and to participate directly in decision-making. This would require new considerations and regulations of the 'passive suffrage', e.g. to what extent and in what way children not only vote, but are also elected and can adopt certain functions in the political system. Such regulations would have to be combined with a restructuring of political institutions in such a way that young people are not forced to pursue politics as a profession, and forms of practice would have to be created that are attractive to children

and can be exercised within the time available to them. In this respect, a lot of creative imagination is still needed, not least drawing on the ideas of young people.

It should also be considered that the right of children to vote would have a power-balancing function, counteracting the structural inconsideration of children in contemporary societies by strengthening their social status and bargaining position. In this context, it is not enough to change only the right to vote. Real conditions must also be created in young people's lives so that this right can be perceived as meaningful in their own lives. In this sense, it is also necessary to expand the principle of *evolving capacities*, which is decisive in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in the sense that it not only concerns the subjective capacities of children, but at the same time includes the creation of the material conditions to be able to use these capacities. These, like the experiences of action themselves, have an influence on the extent to which and the way in which the children's subjective abilities develop in the first place. The ability to recognise one's own interests and to exercise one's right to vote in accordance with them can only develop to the extent that young people have experiences of action and become aware of their own responsibility and their joint responsibility for others.

One shortcoming of the debate on children's voting rights, which *Wall* rightly points out, is that it has so far largely revolved around the question of up to what age voting rights should be lowered. But the question should not only be whether we as adults *grant* children the right to vote, or even at what age we want to grant it to them, but what we can do to *attract* young people to participate in democratic politics and political decision-making. This boils down to the question of what a child- and generation-friendly democracy would have to be like. It also includes thinking about and finding forms of representation that make it more likely that the interests of future generations are also taken into account in political decisions and that we thus come a little closer to *intergenerational justice*.

Conclusion

In John Wall's book, there are strong arguments why children must be granted universal suffrage without setting a minimum age. His proposal for young children to vote in trust through their parents does not sufficiently take into account the unequal power and different interests of adults and children. But the book is written in a way that makes it easy for readers to weigh up the different proposals for children's voting rights and come to their own conclusions. It is also a creative contribution to counteracting the still prevalent adultism in today's societies.

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