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Extra votes for parents?

Recently I was asked to share some thoughts on the virtues of democracy with a fifth-grade class in my son's primary school. Having taught something about democracy in a graduate school of government, I thought the assignment a cinch. Further reflection led me to change my mind.

How was I to explain the virtues of universal suffrage and majority rule to society's disenfranchised? Resorting to a teacher's stratagem, I avoided the issue by asking the students why they thought children should not be able to vote. They saved the day by saying they were still incapable of it because they lacked experience and knowledge. One little girl softly grumbled, though, that she read the newspaper and her parents did not.

Returning to teaching adults, I quickly dismissed the youngster's remark and went back to the intricacies of public finance. Still, the question kept nagging at me, and lately I have seen why. I often discuss in my graduate school lectures the problem of raising money for schools in suburbs heavily populated by elderly, or "middle-aged" suburbs from which the children have grown up and left. The majority no longer has much interest in maintaining the school budget, and the schools suffer.

Second, the pattern of President Reagan's tax cuts—preserving Social Security at all costs, while hacking away at children's programs—drove home the repeated plaint of the "children's lobby": Children cannot vote. Looking ahead to the "graying of America" I am left with an uncomfortable sense of imbalance in our political system. In a society all too ready to live for the present, how do we create a political force for our children's pensions? Or more immediately, how do we give political weight to their current health and well-being? The recent debate over the Voting Rights Act suggested a solution.

I do not propose giving children the vote. But it seems to me that there has to be a better way to represent their legitimate needs in legislative corridors than relying on the mixture of altruism and self-interest that characterizes the pleas of teachers, social workers, pediatricians and others serving children.

My proposal is quite simple. Give parents a vote weighted by their number of minor children. Two parents, with two children, get four votes. One parent with one child gets two votes. Once you get over the initial shock, consider the potential virtues of this approach:

—Children's interests are given electoral weight in the political calculus, e.g., the debate over the school budget is truly determined by one person, one vote.

—Parents become formal trustees of the



future consequences of public actions, e.g., avoiding building up current public liabilities for future payment by the children.

—Older children might get caught up in public questions earlier, e.g., "How are you going to use 'my' vote, mom?"

A dream, no doubt, but wouldn't it be better than the current system?

Of course there would be problems. Profound ones, like how seriously parents will see their role as "trustees" and try to represent the children's best interest. Mechanical ones, like how to deal with two parents who disagree and have one child—who votes for the child? (Is there any reason we can't have a half vote for each?) Political ones, like mobilizing to amend 50 state election laws.

In the end, however, the driving logic of the idea is one person, one vote. Surely children are persons. The problem is how to give them a voice in an adult world. Our traditional solution is to rely on the same parents who handle their money, education and nurturing. Why not let the parents also handle their vote? That little girl who reads the newspaper will tell her parents how to use it.

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