

## Children's Political Representation: The Right to Make a Difference

John Wall<sup>a</sup> and Anandini Dar<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Departments of Philosophy and Religion and Childhood Studies, Rutgers University

<sup>b</sup>Department of Childhood Studies, Rutgers University

### Abstract

While children's rights have made significant gains in recent decades, children and youth continue to wield relatively little power in determining the nature of their societies' rights as such. This article sets out to explore what it might mean for children to enjoy genuine political representation. While it is often acknowledged that children should possess political rights to participation, voice, and citizenship, we argue that there is a need also for their more specific right to representation in democratic government. Furthermore, this right can be realized only if the very notion of representation is rethought along post-modern lines in light of children's particular experiences: as a right not so much to exercise autonomy as to make a political difference. The article examines recent movements toward children's involvement in policy-making, children's parliaments, and children's voting, and then makes practical proposals for enabling children's fuller representational empowerment.

### Keywords

children; democracy; difference; parliaments; politics; power; representation; rights; voting

Children's rights, both as a concept and as a movement, has made tremendous gains in recent decades. One could argue that "rights" has become the de facto common language for discussing and advancing children's social concerns around the world today, especially since the ratification of the United Nations' 1989 Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in all but two countries. Less often considered, however, is the extent to which children are able to influence the construction of rights themselves. In a sense, the very most fundamental right is the right to help determine the nature and extent of rights as such. Despite advances in their rights to political participation, citizenship, and voice, it remains the case that the third of humanity around the world who are under eighteen exercise relatively little political power, whether in electing representatives, influencing laws, or shaping policies. The movement for children's rights has yet to imagine comprehensively what it might mean for children not only to receive rights but also to shape their society's rights regime.

We argue here that children's rights must include children's direct political representation. Such rights invite childhood studies scholars and child rights



activists to realize the potential in moving beyond Article 12 of the UNCRC. Children's political rights should be exercised not only indirectly through voice, organization, protest, and participation, but also directly through using power, influencing policies, and voting. While an argument can be made that political change arises from grass-roots movements in civil society, labour organizations, and the like (Mansbridge, 2003), it is also the case that direct political representation is something adults value for themselves and would be unwilling to give up. Ways need to be found for it also to be extended toward children.

To make this argument, the article first documents some of the ways in which children around the globe are negotiating representational rights today. It then shows why these practices of negotiation can be understood as not just for participation or citizenship – the usual languages by which they are described – but also, more specifically, for direct representational power. And finally, it argues that traditional frameworks of political representation, found within political theory, do not sufficiently account for such efforts by children, and proposes a new and broadly post-modern model based on the rights of all in a society, including children, to make a political difference.

### **Negotiating for Power**

With the exception of a small number of aristocratic children who have been kings, queens, and nobility, children have historically exercised next to no direct political power. They have, of course, influenced political life in various ways, such as through worker movements, protests, campaigning, and organizing, but they have almost never enjoyed the right to their own democratic representation in government. The rise of democratic governance in the past two- to three-hundred years has been an almost exclusively adult phenomenon. Nevertheless, the past few decades have seen children make a number of incursions in this area. These movements toward political representation can be understood as falling along a continuum of increasingly direct forms.

Toward the relatively less direct end of the spectrum are various efforts by local and national government agencies to establish systematic ways of representing children's political voices in policy-making. These are in part inspired by Article 12 of the UNCRC, which affirms children's right to "express [one's] views freely" and "be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child." Government agencies have of course long "represented" children in some sense, such as by funding their education, protecting their free speech rights, or prosecuting instances of abuse. And governments have also often been impacted by children, children's advocates, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) taking stands for children's issues. But recently, many governments have begun to create specific institutional structures for responding more directly to children's own voices.



For example, in 2001 New Zealand developed an Agenda for Children based upon an ambitious national consultative process in which some children were asked to voice their society-wide problems and desires (Brown and McCormack, 2005). In 2003, South Africa launched the Children in Action (Dikwankwetla) project to include children's participation in parliamentary hearings and public debates (Jamieson and Mukoma, 2010). Since 2004, the United Kingdom has appointed four Children's Commissioners (one each for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) whose purpose is to safeguard and promote children's rights in legislation and policy (Williams and Croke, 2008, 184-87). The Israeli Knesset now regularly invites children to participate in its child-related committees (Ben-Arieh and Boyer, 2005, 50). The government of Rwanda holds a National Summit for Children and Youth every year around a particular child-related theme (Pells, 2010). In 2009, the Kazakhstan government worked with UNICEF to organize a political consultative process with youth aged ten to twenty-four called a National Adolescents and Youth Forum (Karkara and Khudaibergenov, 2009). These are but a few of the many examples of children at least being given some form of representative voice in governance, however much it may ultimately remain adults who conduct the process and draw the conclusions.

A somewhat more direct form of children's political representation can be found in the growth of children's and youth parliaments. At present, at least thirty countries have some kind of non-adult parliament structure, whether nationally or in cities, villages, or schools. These include India, Sri Lanka, Norway, Finland, Germany, Slovenia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Congo, Burkina Faso, Liberia, New Zealand, the UK, Scotland, and a Children's United Parliament of the World (Williams, 2004, 21-22; Sridhar, 2004; Cabannes, 2005; Sarkar & Mendoxa, 2005; McCrummen, 2007; Children's Parliament Association of Finland, 2008; Children's United Parliament of the World, 2009; Conrad, 2009; Mutseyekwa, 2009; Austin, 2010; Neighborhood Community Network, 2010;).

Many children's parliaments, especially in wealthier nations, are oriented more toward children's education in politics than toward the actual exercise of power in adult political systems. Some tend to favour select groups of children: such as older children, those with a particular interest in politics, the middle classes, or those who happen to attend a participating organization or school (Wyness, 2005; Turkie, 2010). On the other hand, some children's parliaments do exercise a degree of political power. One of the first children's parliaments, set up in the 1990s in village schools in Rajasthan, India, involves children aged six to fourteen electing child representatives who have been able to make genuine differences for their communities. They have shaped educational policy in their schools, dismissed inefficient teachers, and brought in resources for improved local services and utilities (Bajpai, 2003, 469; John, 2003, 235-39). On a national level, the government of Bolivia created a children's parliament in 2004 whose representatives make regular formal recommendations about laws and policies to the adult assembly (Sarkar and Mendoza, 2005). Some local children's parliaments, such as

in the city of Barra Mansa in Brazil, have extensive powers over children's issues and control parts of the government budget (Cabannes, 2005). It is often in poorer communities, where children tend to be more directly involved in labour and public life, that children have also found greater opportunities for influencing politics. While these examples do not represent children as fully as adults, since children still function within parliaments that are separate from those for adults, they at least open up pathways to situate children at the center of political decision-making on their own behalf.

Perhaps at the most direct end of the spectrum are movements for children and youth to be given the right to vote. Although the UN may or may not have been thinking of children, its founding 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls in Article 21 for "universal and equal suffrage," proclaiming that "everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives." Over half a century later, suffrage for non-adults remains extremely rare. Even the UNCRC does not mention children's right to vote, only going so far as promoting, in Article 12, children's right to being heard, and that too only "in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

Nevertheless, some scholars and activists have argued for children's either full or partial suffrage. As long ago as 1975, John Holt claimed that instead of just lowering the voting age, there should be "the right to vote for people of any age," to be exercised, whether child or adult, solely on the basis of whether one wishes to take part in public affairs (Holt, 1975). More recently, Bob Franklin argues that, while not all rights should be enjoyed equally by children (such as to freedom from parental control), the right to vote should include children because it is the cornerstone of "the right to be a citizen" (Franklin, 1986, 24). He claims that children are just as politically rational or irrational as adults, that even incompetent adults are allowed to vote, and that allowing for children's voting would "give higher priority and emphasis to policies relating to youth affairs than at present" (*ibid.*, 46).

The right to vote has also gained some traction in praxis. There is cross-party support in the German government for a bill to provide the vote to each citizen at birth, to be used by a parent until the child claims it for her- or himself (de Quetteville, 2008). This in part follows the efforts of a German youth organization that has for several years lobbied for full children's suffrage (KRÄTZÄ, 2009). A number of countries including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, Yugoslavia, and the British Channel Islands recently lowered the voting age to sixteen (as well as Germany and Israel for local elections), and East Timor, Indonesia, Seychelles, and Sudan to seventeen (Hurst, 2003). A UK organization has convinced its national government to study lowering the voting age to sixteen across the board (CRAE, 2010). This follows similar efforts by the Votes at Sixteen Campaign that was ultimately defeated before the UK Electoral Commission in 2004 (Cowley and Denver, 2004; Folkes, 2004). In the United

States, a lowering of the voting age is part of the agenda of the child-run National Youth Rights Association (2010). Many individual states in the US have proposed voting ages of anything from twelve to seventeen, most famously in California where a bill was ultimately defeated to permit a quarter vote at fourteen and a half vote at sixteen (Calvan, 2004). In some states, children can already vote at seventeen in primary elections if they will turn eighteen by the time of the general election.

These are but a few examples of contemporary movements for children's more or less direct political representation. Not included here are the many efforts, such as Free the Children (Stasiulis, 2002, 528), in which children have fought to influence policy through non-representational but just as important means. What we find is that political representation can take many forms: ranging from children's voices being heard through government agencies, to children's parliaments in which children at least partly represent themselves, to children's direct right to influence representatives through the vote. These often little known steps are akin to those of the very earliest political reforms for other groups such as racial minorities and women. The powerful rarely give up power easily. In the case of children, they have ample historical arguments to back them up. Nevertheless, it is also clear that many children are interested in being politically represented and that steps can be taken in such a direction. Indeed, in the broader history of political life, the changes starting to take place are significant and unprecedented.

### **Representation as Participation?**

How can these nascent movements for children's representation be understood more broadly and systematically? The primary language for doing so, particularly in the area of childhood studies, is that of children's participation. The notion of children's political participation is complex and open to different interpretations. It has partly been shaped by similar movements within feminism. In the case of children, new ideas are beginning to emerge, as we propose here, that do not just extend adults' political rights to children, but also prompt a rethinking of the political terminology itself. Such an effort does not discount work in feminist and childhood studies scholarship, which among other things recognizes the value and power within everyday activities of individuals, but instead builds on these advances in order to imagine larger structures of political representation in which children may be fully rather than only partially included.

How useful is it to understand children's political representation as a form of political participation? In the early socio-ethnographic childhood studies movement, children's "participation" is equated with children exercising their own social voice and agency. It emphasizes how children are "actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the

societies in which they live" (James and Prout, 1997, 4). This language is also used in what UNICEF calls the six "participation rights" of the UNCRC, which include Article 12. These are, briefly: to be heard, freedom of expression, thought, and assembly, privacy, and access to information. As a mode of broader social participation, political representation is part of the right to exercise one's voice and agency in political affairs. It points to children "being active citizens, articulating their own values, perspectives, experiences and visions for the future, using these to inform and take action in their own right and, where necessary, contesting with those who have power over their lives" (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010, 3).

One complication in this notion of political participation is the question of whether children's perspectives and experiences find their most authentic medium of participation in articulations of their "voices." This problem emerges with the growing focus on ethnographic research methods in the study of and work with children (James and Prout, 1997, Christensen and James, 2000, James and James, 2004). While various scholars have discussed the need for listening to children's "metaphoric voices" or non-verbalized perspectives, policy practitioners and aid workers still primarily draw on children's words as an authentic form of participation, where this focus excludes alternative forms of children's expressions of experiences, and younger children often entirely (Meacham, 2004, James, 2007). This reliance on "voice" as a tool for participation can be attributed again to the varied interpretations of Article 12 of the UNCRC. Also, Allison James warns researchers and policy practitioners that, "as we listen to children we need to be careful that we know how to hear what they are saying, through acknowledging that their words and ideas may be filtered, obscured, or muted by the constructs of childhood that shape our conceptualization of the life course" (2004, 33). The danger in assuming that every word the child speaks is unfiltered and unmediated by those around her and is the only way of getting at a child's perspective, complicates the understanding of what participation of children can really include. James also suggests that there "remain[s] a very present and pressing concern given the rhetorical power that 'the voice of the child' wields" (2007, 268).

What is more, it is not altogether clear that children's full participatory agency and voice is the same thing as their full participatory power. Unlike for most historically marginalized adults, younger and to some extent older children do not necessarily have the political resources, experience, or capital to impose their own perspectives on political life. As Tracey Skelton has argued, "what is required now is an understanding from children's perspectives as to what they envisage as effective and meaningful participation" (2009, 178). Children's participation will translate into political power only insofar as it can find expression within the power struggles of concrete political structures.

This problem of participatory power can be described using Roger Hart's "ladder of participation." Hart suggests that children have participatory rights in societies in varying degrees, ranging from lower rungs of the ladder of manipulation,

decoration, and tokenism, to higher rungs of being informed, being consulted, taking initiative, and, at the highest level of all, sharing with adults in actual decision-making (Hart, 1997). Harry Shier's alternative ladder of participation describes the problem in similar terms: in this case, how to move from the lowest rung in which children are only passively listened to, to the highest rung in which children actively share in power (Shier, 2001). The problem for children's political representation is not, therefore, just whether they are able to participate. It is, instead, whether they can do so actively and effectively rather than partially and tokenistically. Such distinctions suggest that "participation" is not a fine-grained enough term in itself to capture what is needed to comprehend children's genuine exercise of political power.

There are at least two ways in which political participation can be more carefully defined, beyond simply agency and voice. One is to reconceptualize participation as an expression not of independence but rather of interdependence. Fitzgerald *et al.* claim, for example, based on their analysis of New Zealand's Agenda for Children mentioned above, that "children's participation is not tied to the efforts of an individual child asserting a claim, but rather emerges within a mutual interdependence, recognition and respect for children and their views and experiences" (2010, 300). Barbara Bennett Woodhouse has similarly argued that ideally, for children's rights, "illusions of autonomy, so dear to adult-centric schemes of rights, would dissolve, making room for the reality of dependency and interdependency" (2008, 309). The idea of political participation as the expression of independent agency or freedoms involves a level of adultism. It assumes a politically independent individual. The reality, however, is that both children and adults are better understood politically as operating within larger networks of social interdependency, in which they both act but also depend on support and inclusiveness.

A second and more radical way to conceptualize children's representational participation is to emphasize the need to respond to political difference. Nigel Thomas uses the social theories of Iris Marion Young and Pierre Bourdieu to argue that "representation is most inclusive when it encourages marginalized groups to express their perspectives" (Thomas, 2007, 210). When applied to children, he claims, political participation must not only acknowledge children's interdependency but also actively recognize their specific difference or otherness as children. Otherwise, adults will continue to assert their own unchecked power without disruption of their historically engrained assumptions. As Ragnhild Lund similarly puts it, "a new focus on the 'participating child' implies that the various structural, contextual and geopolitical factors at play will have to be deconstructed to understand the full significance of participation in creating a significant society and cultural change for children" (2009, 146). Political representation will truly include children only insofar as it involves the ability to transform entrenched structures of power through children's particular lived experiences of difference.



In contrast with the language of the UNCRC and much of the discussion within childhood studies, then, children's direct political representation is something more than their right to political participation. The right to participate is a significant historical step, but it needs further development to include interdependence and difference if it is to reach a level of children's actual political inclusion and power.

### **Representation as Citizenship?**

A further and more recent way to understand children's political representation is through the notion of children's citizenship. The term "citizenship" is implicitly more political than that of participation. However, citizenship too is open to more and less child-inclusive interpretations. The standard and longstanding view among political philosophers is that citizenship is based on humanity's capacities for autonomy and rationality, capacities assumed to be more evident in adulthood. For example, the influential political philosopher John Rawls defines "equal citizens" as "adult persons in the society" (Rawls, 1993, 245). In his view, only adults can be sufficiently "impartial," "autonomous," and "reasonable" to be "able to explain ... the principles and policies they advocate and vote for" (ibid, 48 and 217). Childhood studies scholars have increasingly challenged such a view of citizenship by turning to alternative political models. It turns out that these models parallel the above movements toward greater appreciation for political life's interdependence or differences.

The first approach, similar to Fitzgerald's and Woodhouse's above, is to argue that children's and adults' citizenship should be understood, not as an expression of individual freedoms alone, but more broadly as one of dialogical interdependence. That is, citizens are both free agents with their own political voices and, at the very same time, dependent on each other and on social systems for contexts of political support. Marc Jans, for example, has argued for a "children-sized citizenship," which is "based on a continuous learning process in which children and adults are interdependent" through "a dynamic and continuous learning process" in which all persons together "give meaning to their environment" (Jans, 2004, 40). As Tom Cockburn puts it, "both adults and children are socially interdependent" through the possession of citizenship's both "responsibilities and duties" (Cockburn, 1998, 113). Children's relative political dependency should not mean that they do not deserve to be represented as full citizens. Rather, it should inspire greater appreciation for the complex interplay of the freedoms and supports needed for citizenship overall.

This model of representation as citizenship takes advantage of recent advances in political theory that understand public life, not as a competition among individuals, but as an intersubjective dialogue or discourse. Discourse theory,





as influentially developed by Jürgen Habermas, suggests that political representation should be “communicative” in the sense of striving as far as possible to create social agreement among all affected members of a society (1990, 66). Discourse or dialogue does not simply protect rational autonomy, but rather strives to include the perspectives of all who have a claim or interest in particular political decisions. Seyla Benhabib has similarly argued that true citizenship involves a “dynamic process” in which no single voice is allowed to dominate but rather “claims and principles are contested and contextualized, invoked and revoked” through a continually evolving conversation (2004, 211 and 179). Iris Marion Young refers along such lines to an “inclusive communicative democracy,” which “encourage[s] the particular perspectives of relatively marginalized social groups to receive specific representation” (2000, 8).

A second model of children’s citizenship emphasizes instead the inclusion of disempowered groups precisely in their differences. Ruth Lister, for example, has used feminist scholarship to argue (against the influential mid-twentieth century view of T.H. Marshall (1950) that children are mere “citizens in the making”) that citizenship is really about “a struggle for recognition” (Lister, 2007, 709 and 715). More specifically, “our goal should be a universalism which stands in creative tension to diversity and difference and which challenges the divisions and exclusionary inequalities which can stem from diversity” (Lister, 1997, 39). Children and other groups need their historically underrepresented differences as fellow citizens to make an equal impact on the political whole. Similarly, Cockburn has more recently argued, in a slight shift relative to his earlier thinking above, for a “radically pluralistic public arena” in which “political spaces ... change themselves to accommodate the everyday worlds of children” (Cockburn, 2005, 27). That is, children can overcome their historically second-class citizenship only insofar as public life responds to what makes children not only similar to adults but also experientially and socially different.

This model can be taken even further to argue that the very purpose of citizenship is to represent difference as such. Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha has developed a feminist, anti-racist, non-classist, and transgendered theorization of children’s citizenship as what she calls “difference-centered.” Citizenship should be based on “the right to participate differently in the social institutions and culture of the society” (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, 375). Such an approach would enable a radical critique of historically “adultist” oppression by transforming political life in response to children’s “own lived reality” and “subjective experiences” (ibid, 375 and 377). Citizenship means, in this case, being included in one’s greatest possible difference.

This second model is based to a large extent on post-modern political theories that seek to challenge historical differences of power. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have more broadly argued that political representation needs to be understood as based on conflict rather than consensus, on an “agonistic” or even

“antagonistic” struggle among irreducibly diverse perspectives. The full citizenship of marginalized groups requires “deconstructing” or “negating” established power structures through “the multiplication of antagonisms and the construction of a plurality of spaces” (2001, 192). As Mouffe puts it elsewhere, in a direct critique of Habermas, “the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant ‘agonistic’ public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted” (2005, 3). True citizenship, in this view, would not seek interdependent dialogue so much as diverse decentering.

The advantage of both of these interdependent and difference models of children’s citizenship is that they move beyond the Enlightenment assumption that citizenship rests on individual autonomy. On such a model, children are unlikely to emerge from their historically second-class political status. It is easier to imagine children as full citizens if citizenship means engaging in interdependent discourse or being included as different. In each case, children gain a higher level of right to political representation: on the one hand, through a more supportive political context; on the other, through the deconstruction of established powers.

The question remains, however, whether children’s citizenship in these senses rises to the level of being able to support children’s direct political representation. The reality around the globe is that children are by far the largest group who are called citizens without in fact exercising a great deal of political power. As children show, citizenship and representation are not necessarily the same thing. Children may be just as interdependent and diverse as adults, but does this mean they are truly represented in political decision-making?

### **Representation as the Right to Make a Difference**

Our argument is sympathetic with these developing perspectives on children’s participation and citizenship, but it presses them one step further to conceptualize children’s full political representation. We turn to the language of “representation” because it takes us to the root of the question of children’s political power. A fully child-inclusive model of political representation will combine the above concepts of interdependence and difference in what we call the right to make a political difference. Such a right is based on the recognition of historical differences of power, but aims not merely to deconstruct power but also to reconstruct it more interdependently. The concept of children’s representation that we have been examining so far in this article turns out to provide a way to re-imagine representation for all. From this lens, the job of political representatives is to enable social differences to make a difference to the whole.

The interdependency approach above has both strengths and weaknesses when it comes to children’s political representation. The primary strength, as we have

seen, is that it overcomes deeply entrenched assumptions from modernity that what deserves representation are only claims that can be made with a supposedly autonomous rationality. The weakness, however, is that such a model does not account for children's historically unequal access to power. This drawback can be seen in the rare instance in which a discourse theoretician, Benhabib, attempts to include children. She admits that children and other groups "seem to be excluded from the moral conversation" (2004, 14). But her solution is that "the moral interests of beings who are not full participants in moral discourses ought to be and can be effectively represented in discursive contexts through systems of moral advocacy" (ibid.). Such a view of representation through advocacy directly contradicts the fundamental discursive ideal of including everyone in the actual political conversation. Even more importantly, as our discussions above suggest, adult advocacy for children's interests is not necessarily reliable and affords children only a highly indirect political influence. Finally, as Smith and Bjerke have argued, "expecting children to behave and communicate like adults is not appropriate, and some change is required on the part of adults to accommodate children's differences" (2009, 18). If citizens are represented only through interdependent dialogue, then children are still marginalized insofar as that dialogue is constructed and performed on adult terms.

The difference approach is likewise both helpful and limited. Its strength obviously lies in recognizing that children have been subject throughout history to systematic exclusion from power. It includes children, not on the basis of their ability to enter into discourse like adults, but on the basis of their particular lived experiences as children. But the weakness of this model, when it comes to children's representation, is that it does not account for what the interdependency model makes all too clear: children's relatively high dependence on supportive political contexts. The particular difference of children, in fact, involves on the whole exercising fewer resources for struggling among differences for power. The difference approach is better at negatively deconstructing imbalances of power than at positively constructing uses of power in which children could fully take part. More generally speaking, some groups will have more power to assert their differences than will others. For example, the elderly are more likely than children to be able to make sure that their government provides them health insurance. While conflict is necessary, it should not altogether displace interdependent consensus.

Childhood thus exposes a fundamental dilemma in how to extend representation rights to all. On the one hand, if persons and groups are represented by taking part in an interdependent dialogue, they will exercise different levels of power in shaping the direction that dialogue takes. On the other hand, if persons and groups are represented by being empowered to assert their own differences, they will have to speak up for themselves without relying on support from the whole. In short, childhood exposes the importance of political power representing both diversity and community at once.



This dilemma can be resolved by rethinking political representation as the right of all to have their differences of experience make an actual difference to the political whole. Movements for children's parliaments, agencies, and other political mechanisms demonstrate that excluded groups like children will find genuine political representation only insofar as their particular experiences are able to transform the use of political power by societies. This approach to political representation remains post-modern in its desire to ground political life upon difference. But it complicates the picture by insisting that differences should not just deconstruct power but also reconstruct it more inclusively (Wall, 2008, 2010). The struggle among different groups is not only antagonistic but interdependently creative. Its aim is not the expression of difference as such but the inclusion of difference in an ever more expansive use of power in common.

Political representation is then concerned, if it is truly to include children, with empowering differences of experience to make a genuine difference to the exercise of power by all. The right to political representation is not just a right to be different but also, in a more dialogical way, to make a difference to the whole. It is this kind of representation that, as we have seen, children themselves call for when they argue that their voices do not seem likely to make a difference.

### **The Future of Children's Representation**

What difference could something like this right to make a difference actually make to children's representation in practice? Let us take our three sets of examples from above – government agencies, parliaments, and voting – and see how they might be imagined to function in ways that would be truly representative of children in the exercise of political power.

Government agencies such as task forces, committees, and commissions have long been means for those in power to respond more fully to those they represent, whether children or adults. Merely being voted into office does not always suffice for understanding and acting upon the diverse experiences of constituents. The particular issue raised here by children, however, is the extent to which historically underrepresented groups are able to make a real political difference. As Hart's ladder of participation shows, governments can use these kinds of commissions to make an appearance of representation without responding to marginalized lived experiences in actuality.

The goal of such agencies is better understood as finding new ways to represent a particular group's differences of experience. Such agencies should function as phenomenologies of the citizenry, attempts to expand the common political imagination in the direction of greater lived diversity. In the case of children, agencies have to go beyond only giving children a voice. They should not only



enter into dialogue with children but also respond by working out how to make a difference to existing laws and policy. The test of an effective government agency would then not consist merely in whether all parties have been heard, but rather, in a more interdependent way, in whether there results a more expansively imagined use of power. It may end up being adults who continue to wield power the most, but do they do so in ways that are challenged by children's distinctive experiences? Do the Children's Commissioners in the UK, for example, only perpetuate the hidden privileges of adults or do they transform political assumptions and practices?

Children's parliaments need to be rethought along similar lines. They are truly representative of children's diverse experiences only to the degree that they reconstruct government policies. Some parliaments show that it is possible to hold children's elections without making any actual difference in children's lives. Others show that, given the chance, children are able to contribute to the transformation of whole political structures. The distinction lies in the extent to which children's differences actually make a difference to the use of power.

The question may be asked whether children are best represented through their own separate parliamentary system. On the one hand, separate children's parliaments can be compared to separate juvenile justice systems, which do in fact generally make it more likely that responses will be given to children's unique experiences. From this perspective, special parliaments for children might better ensure that children's perspectives are not drowned out adults' perspectives. On the other hand, separate parliaments are not typical of how marginalized groups have historically gained power. There are no separate women's parliaments, minorities' parliaments, poor parliaments, or the like. This is because operating apart from a general parliament is on some level inherently tokenistic, placing a distance – however wide or narrow – between the electoral process and the actual exercise of power.

The right to make a political difference would seem to argue, on balance, for children's inclusion in the same parliamentary structures as adults. For ultimately it is general parliaments that wield actual power. Insofar as any group's distinctive concerns are not included, the parliamentary process itself has failed in its representative function. Those who represent children, whether they are children or adults, must have the ability to influence policy and make new laws. It may be the case that distinct children's parliaments could help children themselves organize their political interests. But it is likely more effective for children to organize in the same way as do adults, that is, through interest groups, lobbying, and mass media. The danger of children's parliaments is their sequestering children into a disempowered political realm, and thus perpetuating their historical exclusion from power. We would go so far as to say that, so long as it does not interfere with a child's focus on education, children ought to be permitted to hold parliamentary seats. This would help the policy-making process to respond more fully to

children's experiences. In any case, children need to be understood as full citizens with equal rights to general parliamentary representation.

This brings us to the most contentious example of children's voting. We cannot enter here into the scholarly debate about children's voting that is now starting to emerge (Franklin, 1986; Archard, 2003; Cowley and Denver, 2004; Folkes, 2004; Shrag, 2004; Chan and Clayton, 2006; Clayton, 2006). We can point out, though, that arguments against children's suffrage are usually based on the traditional notion that voting is an act of independent reason that relies on a maturely developed knowledge of and ability to think about political affairs. As the political theorist Matthew Clayton has argued, children 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). Or as David Archard more strongly puts it, "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). Even the two newer forms of political philosophy discussed above would tend to exclude children from voting. Habermas and Benhabib's dialogical model suggests that voting is an expression of argument and discourse, which especially younger children might easily be said not to be ready for. Laclau and Mouffe's agonistic model might be somewhat more child-friendly, but voting as part of a struggle for power could also arguably presume a relatively mature capacity for engaging in political battle.

We would suggest, in contrast, that if democracies are supposed to be representative of all the people, the problem around children's voting is not a lack in children's competence but rather a lack in existing conceptions of democracy. While voting does not solve all political problems, it does serve in most societies today as the central means for adults to make a difference in politics, a right that few adults would be willing to give up. The most compelling reason why children should gain the right to vote is that it would hold political representatives more fully accountable than they would otherwise be to children's experiential differences. Elected representatives use their own judgment when they exercise power and are not beholden to their constituents' every desire. But their job is to represent the lives and concerns of citizens as diversely as possible. Voting is the key mechanism for making sure that representatives use their power for the general good, as opposed to for narrow or special interests. Without children having the vote, representatives are still responsible toward children – just as prior to women's voting, they were still responsible toward women. But they will generally exercise this responsibility more fully if they are beholden to a wider range of citizens. Children should have some kind of right to vote in order that elected representatives may better perform their democratic duties.

It is also true that voting depends on some level of political understanding. This level is not, however, independent rationality – for the simple reason that such a thing does not exist, neither for children nor for adults. What voting truly requires is the capability for connecting one's own experiences to choices among political differences. This capability should be affirmed at the earliest rather than latest possible age, keeping in mind developmental age criticisms within childhood studies (James, 2004; Clark-Kazak, 2009). For this reason, we support the German proposal for children to be granted the vote upon birth, with the ability to exercise it upon the choice of each child. A similar proposal has also been defended by Francis Shrag, who argues that the concept of “the parents' vote” for very young children is “more than 100 years old, and ... was actually implemented for a brief time between the world wars in the French protectorates of Tunisia and Morocco” (2004, 376). When exactly a child might be able to claim his or her own vote would doubtless vary according to each child's own lived experience and socio-cultural context. Up to that point, a child's vote may perhaps be exercised by their parents or guardians, since parents are the next most likely persons to stand up for their differences for them in most settings. Alternatively, if a proxy vote can still be considered second-class citizenship, perhaps parents and guardians should be left out as intermediaries and the vote simply granted to all – a position that may increase responsiveness from the political system even if young children rarely in fact vote. In either case, some form of children's suffrage would seem necessary if democracies are to create interdependent political spaces that strive to respond as expansively as possible to citizens' experiential differences. A genuine democracy is not a competition among autonomous individuals but a sharing of power across diversity, a true *e pluribus unum*.

## Conclusion

However it is worked out in practice, it is clear that new thinking is required around children's political representation. Children will remain second-class citizens so long as the use of democratic power is reduced to modernistic or even more recent political models. Children's representation has generally gone further in practice than it has in theory. Nonetheless, theory also needs to be interrogated and transformed if children are to influence political life for themselves. This transformation, we have argued, involves conceptualizing children as not just political participants or citizens, but also, and more specifically, as owed political representation. And this requires in turn reimagining political representation itself as the right to have one's lived experiences of difference make a difference to the political whole.

Children's political representation does not mean that children should necessarily gain the same rights as adults in all spheres of life. Merely having all the same rights would no longer account for children's social and political differences. The right to political representation is so fundamental to a society that it should be enjoyed as extensively as possible by all. Other rights such as to marriage, driving, drinking, and full time labour can be argued to violate rather than respond to what is distinctive in childhood. The same could be said for rights that children should uniquely enjoy, such as a free education, universal health care, and not being sentenced to life in prison. Different groups can legitimately enjoy different rights, so long as those rights respond to their different experiences. The right to political representation, however, deserves to be exercised by all, since it is the right to make a difference in shaping the political realm as such, to which all necessarily belong.

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