



## Children's Suffrage: A Critique of the Importance of Voters' Knowledge for the Well-Being of Democracy

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### Abstract

That children should not have the right to vote is something that most people think of as self-evident. It is so obvious that almost none of the prominent democratic theorists have given it any serious consideration. It is a non-issue.

In this paper, I question this “self-evident” view. The main reason why children are excluded from the suffrage is that they lack political competence. By reviewing the research on political knowledge among voters, however, I show that the fear of the ignorant voter has been vastly exaggerated. If democracy works well with a large number of adult voters with little or no knowledge of politics, it should also work with children voting.

The article also discusses the role of parents. The idea that children should have the right to vote very much depends on whether we accept that parents can act as their children's trustees or not. My argument is that this should not be a problem. Acting through representatives is already an accepted practice in the democratic system. Parents are already considered the children's legal representatives. There is no reason why they could not be thought of as their political representatives as well.

### Keywords

Democracy; voting rights; suffrage; children's suffrage; political knowledge

### Introduction

That children should not have the right to vote is something that most people think of as self-evident. It is so obvious that almost none of the prominent democratic theorists have given it any serious consideration. It is a non-issue.

In this article, I question this “self-evident” view. The main reason why children are excluded from the suffrage is that they lack political competence. A great deal of evidence, however, suggests that lack of political competence among a large number of the citizens does not present a problem for the well-being of democracy. This seriously questions the notion that children should not have the right to vote.

In this article I will propose that children should have the right to vote. Saying this I know that I automatically will attract suspicion. Is this a serious proposition? Do I really mean that children, even infants, should vote?

It is true that most people never have heard of such an idea and find it intuitively absurd, but it has actually received some attention before, both by scholars and politicians. A very good overview of earlier suggestions is presented by van Parijs in his article “The Disenfranchisement of the Elderly, and Other Attempts to Secure Intergenerational Justice” (van Parijs, 1998). Other examples of scholars with an interest in the topic, although with different views, are Schrag (1975, 2004), Farson (1974), R. Bennett (2000), Gustafsson (2001, 2004), Beckman (2003) and Archard (2004). The Electoral Commission of the U.K. (2004) has also published a study about the possibilities of lowering the voting age to 16.

The idea of giving children the right to vote has also its proponents within the public sphere. Here one can find parliamentarians from the left and the right<sup>1</sup>, children’s rights activists<sup>2</sup>, paediatricians<sup>3</sup>, and single individuals<sup>4</sup>. The question thus is not entirely new. It has been brought up from time to time, and as such it deserves our attention.

I also think it is important to point out that what I am offering is not a ready made solution to a specific problem, but an argument. I do not expect that everyone that reads this article should immediately become strong supporters of children’s right to vote, only that the question itself is not as self evident as we previously have thought. At least I hope to show that our normal way of justifying the exclusion of children from the suffrage—stressing their lack of knowledge—is not very strong.

I will begin my line of arguing by asserting that children, in principle, deserve the right to vote on the same grounds as adults do. There is nothing within democratic theory that requires children to be excluded from the suffrage by default. Rather, the exclusion is an exception. The question whether children should have the right to vote or not depends on how well this exception can be justified.

Then, I give a presentation of the main argument for excluding children from the suffrage—the competence argument. It originates from the critique of the idea of democracy at the time of the first democratic breakthrough in the late

<sup>1</sup> For example: Pia Gjellerup, social democrat, member of the Danish *Folketing*, (TV2 Nyhederne, 24/10 2003); Klaus Haupt, liberal, former member of the German *Bundestag*, (Haupt, 2004); and in France the party *Front National*, has included the issue in its platform, (Programme du Front National, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> For example: *Association for Children's Suffrage* (ACS) in the United States; *Familienbund der Katholiken* in Germany.

<sup>3</sup> For example: *Matt Gaughwin*, Australia, (Australianpolitics.com, 18/4 2001); *Anders Smith*, Norway, (Aftenposten.no, 10/5 2005); *Hugo Lagercrantz*, Sweden, (Lagercrantz, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> For example Mike Weiman (2002) in Germany, see also <http://www.kinderwahlrecht.de>.

19th and early 20th centuries. By revisiting these thoughts, we will be able to see more clearly on what premises it rests.

The plausibility of these premises will then be tested through a discussion of the effects of the electorate's competence on the well-being of the democratic system, the relevance of the current voting age, and the role of parents. I will show that our concerns for the low levels of political competence within the electorate have been exaggerated. Giving children the right to vote will not cause any harm. On the contrary, we could even expect an *increased* level of competence among the voters because of the parents' involvement. In this respect, excluding children from the suffrage is not only unnecessary, but also contradictory to its own purpose!

In a final part, I discuss the role of parents. If children are going to vote, they will unavoidably do so under the influence of their parents. And if also the youngest children should be allowed to participate, the actual vote will be cast by the parents directly. The idea that children ought to vote thus very much depends on whether we accept that parents can act as their children's trustees or not. My argument is that this should not be a problem. Acting through representatives is already an accepted practice in the democratic system. Parents are already considered the children's legal representatives. There is no reason why they could not be thought of as their political representatives as well.

### Universal Suffrage

In the earliest days of popular rule, the commonly accepted view was that the suffrage should be restricted. The "self-evident" view was that some people were not supposed to vote: women, labourers, and people of colour. This was the root of any discussion on extending the suffrage. It was the suggestions for extending the suffrage that needed to be justified, not the other way around. The restrictions were regarded as "natural."

Today, the burden of proof has shifted. Today we believe that democracy should embrace each and everyone, and treat each person, regardless of social status, gender, or race, as equal. This is our new default position that hardly anyone questions. No one any longer finds restrictions on the right to vote to be "natural." Restrictions, such as the deprivation of the right to vote for convicted criminals, still exist in some countries, though they are constantly being questioned. "Universal suffrage" today means that it should be truly universal. It does not, in its most pure and basic form, entail any exceptions. It is a principle and the principle is simple and clear: everybody shall have the right to vote, and everybody means *everybody*.

I want to make this clear to show that the current order, present in all of the world's democracies, that some citizens under a certain age do not have the right

to vote, is not a plain and simple starting point from a theoretical point of view. It is the commonly accepted idea of what the best way to organize our democracies is; but it is based on an exception from a general rule. And as such, it requires a justification. We do not always seek to implement all our most cherished principles as categorically as possible. We recognize the need for exceptions. However, when we do so we normally also ask for a justification if the exception is to be accepted.

It is my opinion that we should address the question of whether to give children the right to vote in the same way. The exclusion of children is an exception. Can this exception be justified? Are the reasons by which we exclude children from the suffrage acceptable? Are they based on sound judgements on what we know about how the democracy works and how we want it to work?

By focusing on the justification of the exception, I am not going to exert much effort in defending the rule itself. Unlike trees, stones or animals, children are human beings; therefore I assume that the general rule is applicable to children in the same way it is to adults.

Some might argue that politics does not concern children in the same way as many, albeit decades ago, argued that politics did not concern women. I am not going to address this and similar objections since they challenge the general rule itself. To claim that politics does not involve children is to say that children are not included in the group of people who are subjects to the power of the government. That is to assume that children are a people of their own, and just as Australians should not vote in U.S. elections, children should not take part in the elections of grown-ups.

In contrast to this I presuppose that children are affected by politics just as much as everyone else. Minors and adults do not live apart from one another. We are subjected to the same laws and have equal stakes in how the government spends the taxpayers' money. Consequently, children's rights to protect their interest is no less important than anyone else's.

In saying this, I am also arguing that voting is a way to protect one's interests. Not everyone would agree with me. Some maintain that, when voting, people are primarily motivated by ideas of the common good and that this attitude also should be encouraged. By proposing that children should have the right to vote in order to protect their interests, one instead encourages people to consider their narrow self-interests.

Others honestly argue that voting has no meaning at all. They either claim that the democratic system is a façade because of the influence of special interests or the dark force of capitalism,<sup>5</sup> or they refer to the voting paradox formulated by

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<sup>5</sup> The classic reference in this respect is Schumpeter (1941). For a modern version on the same theme, see Zolo (1992).

Downs, which states that the expected return of voting for an individual never can compensate the effort of voting. One vote in several millions will have almost no impact on the electoral outcome.<sup>6</sup>

None of these popular theories on the merits of voting can, however, compete with the experience of history. Experience clearly shows that those excluded from the suffrage will not be able to protect their own interests. The most evident case is the improved status of women during the 20th century. Is there anyone who believes this would have happened if only men had been allowed to vote? And would women today be willing to give up their right to vote because some political theorists argue that voting is meaningless? I doubt that, and I doubt that previously disenfranchised African Americans in the United States would give up their rights either. The fact that people are willing to die for the right to vote says something of its importance.

Thus, that I assume in this article that voting is a way for people to protect their interests can hardly be argued to be incorrect, nor morally offensive. The suggestion that the inclusion of children within the suffrage would suddenly raise the selfishness of the electorate to an unacceptable level is extremely unlikely. It did not happen when full male suffrage was introduced, neither when women received their right to vote.

My basic assumption in this article is that children, in theory, deserve the right to vote. As such, this right can only be restricted if it is truly necessary. One such necessity would be to make the democracy work. Even he who argues that the suffrage ought to be as inclusive as possible can hardly deny that the democracy must also retain a basic sense of rationality (Cohen, 1975:4). If children, even infants, are given the right to vote, one unavoidably gives the same amount of influence over the business of the government to people who are scarcely aware of their own existence as one does to the most experienced of adults. Maybe then we need to exclude from the suffrage the part of the demos that unquestionably has almost no understanding of politics whatsoever in order to make the democracy work? This is what the competence argument maintains.

### **The Need for a Competent Electorate**

Historically, there have been four main reasons to exclude people from the suffrage: citizenship, desert, competence, and type of person (sex, race). When the first modern ideas of democracy were introduced during the 18th and 19th

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<sup>6</sup> A recent example of theorists who strongly emphasize the voting paradox can be found in Estlund (2002). However, a far better starting point for learning about the rationality of voting and the voting paradox is Aldrich (1993).

centuries, *desert* was a main issue. The right to vote was something that one had to earn. The Swedish debate, for example, almost entirely focused on this problem. The conservatives who opposed universal suffrage argued that no right could be unconditional. Every right must be balanced by a duty. In the Swedish context, this meant that the right to vote was linked to the duty to pay taxes. He who had a larger income paid larger taxes. Consequently, he fulfilled larger duties and was given more votes. Most important, however, was that one fulfilled one's duties. Unpaid taxes justified immediate exclusion from the suffrage (Olsson 2000, ch. 4). Another equally important issue was sex. In Sweden, just as in other countries, women were excluded solely on the basis of being women. A woman's duty was to take care of her family. This had nothing to do with politics, so it was believed (Möller 2004:79–84). Similar arguments have also been used in countries with racial divisions. The exclusion of African Americans in some American states is the most well known example.

Today, it seems as if only competence can be accepted as a legitimate reason.<sup>7</sup> Restricting the suffrage by restricting the right to become a citizen is of course a current issue of debate in many countries, but does not concern us here since children are already citizens. Why, then, should less competent voters not be allowed to vote?

Modern democratic thinkers do not seem to wish to discuss this problem. They merely state that children are less competent than adults, and that is all we need to know. As Robert Dahl puts it:

So far as I am aware, no one seriously contends that children should be full members of the demos that governs the state. An eight-year-old child can hardly be enlightened enough to participate equally with adults in deciding on laws to be enforced by the government of the state (Dahl 1989:126).

Yet, what he does not explain is why a voter needs to be “enlightened” to be allowed to participate. To understand why, we need to return to the anti-democratic ideas that dominated the intellectual debate during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, at the time when universal suffrage was introduced in Europe.

Ever since Plato, anti-democratic thinkers of different kinds have been complaining about the people's general lack of knowledge. Meritocracy—the idea that there is an identifiable group of persons that are suitable to govern—has undeniably been one of democracy's main competitors. At the turn of the century, two books within this tradition were published that soon became very influential,

<sup>7</sup> Disenfranchisement based on *desert* still exists, though, in countries where convicted criminals are not allowed to vote (e.g., the U.K.). Excluding women is also not completely abandoned in some countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia).

*The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* by Gustave Le Bon (1960/1895) and *The Cult of Incompetence* by Émile Faguet (1916).

In *The Crowd*, Le Bon explains how large crowds of people behave. The mass has a tendency to bring down people's senses. The mass is a mob that lacks common sense and is governed by passions and acts of impulse. It can easily be manipulated by agitators who can lead it towards all kinds of madness.

*The Cult of Incompetence* concurs with this general picture of how people behave, but also adds that the masses, if they are left to their own devices, will elect incompetent leaders. The masses lack the ability to judge who has the proper qualifications. Instead, they are inclined to choose leaders that are similar to themselves. They cannot identify with the truly competent candidates since these individuals, by their very competence, are different from the rest of the group. As a result, the masses unavoidably choose incompetent leaders.

Ideas such as these were very influential,<sup>8</sup> and most people of education believed that democracy was a high-risk project (Tingsten 1933:14–19). Maybe it was a nice idea that all citizens should be allowed to vote, but it was dangerous. In general, people were not mature enough to govern themselves. They would not be able to organize themselves in a civilized manner. There was a substantial risk that everything would end in a barbarian rule by the mob.

This was how the problem of competence was viewed by the people who controlled the governments of Europe and other democratizing countries at the turn of the century. At the same time, they also had to adjust to the strong demands for voting rights by the lower classes. The solution to the problem was to ensure that universal suffrage was extended in a controlled manner. This was done by either extending the suffrage gradually, or by introducing “guarantees” or safeguards to make certain that competence was not ignored. Examples of such guarantees included having two chamber systems or proportional representation.<sup>9</sup> Among these guarantees, an age limit was also included.<sup>10</sup>

Although the problem of how to introduce universal suffrage without causing too much damage was primarily a concern for the European conservatives, they were not the only group who tried to solve this problem. One famous example is the United States' Constitution. It was created years before the advent of conservatism. One of its chief characteristics is the many checks and balances. These were

<sup>8</sup> For an example of Le Bon's importance, see Schumpeter (1942:256–268).

<sup>9</sup> In Europe, the proportional system of representation was introduced by the conservatives. In fear of being washed away at the polls by the labour parties due to the first-past-the-post system, they introduced the proportional systems in order to make sure they would be represented in parliament (Przeworski, 1988:64–70).

<sup>10</sup> For example, in Sweden the voting age was raised from 21 to 23 (Olsson, 2000:148).

not only included to ensure that the different branches of government should be able to control one another; they were also seen as a protection against the whims of the people. James Madison spoke about protecting the people from “the tyranny of their own passions” (Pole 1987:268).

Another well-known case is of course that of the liberal thinker John Stuart Mill. As a genuine democrat, he wanted as broad a suffrage as possible; but at the same time, he conceded that the problem of competence could not be ignored. The people were simply not educated enough. The majority of the voters would be manual workers and their “political intelligence” was not developed. There was a great risk that they would enact a “class legislation,” that is, a legislation that only favoured the interests of their own class, without understanding that there were other interests in society. Mill argued that there was no way one could evade the issue of competence. His suggestion thus became that every individual should have the right to vote, although the right should not be equal to all. People that could be argued to be more intelligent than others should get extra votes, like employers or those with a university degree (Mill 1865:50–51, 68–72).

When the foundation for the modern democracy was laid, it was done so with great scepticism. The idea that all people should vote, even the uneducated lower classes, was not a proposal that generated enthusiasm by all. There was a widespread fear that democracy would turn into a rule by the mob. The need for an age limit was apparent.

With these thoughts in mind, we can summarize the prerequisites for the argument of competence:

1. The competence of the voters is of a major importance for the survival of democracy, or at least for its proper functioning. A low level of competence within the electorate seriously harms the outcome of the policy process.
2. Children lack political knowledge.
3. If children are allowed to vote, this will cause serious harm to the democratic system.

### **The Importance of Knowledge for the Well-Being of Democracy**

Of these three propositions, I will not debate No. 2. It is possible to argue that children are not completely without knowledge, and sometimes can act just as wise and mature as adults (Schrag 1975, 2004; Beckman 2003), but to suggest that children in general should be on the same level would be an exaggeration. My critique instead focuses on the supposed need of competent voters. The argument is simple: A large number of voters with a low level of competence is not a problem for democracy. The system works just as well (or at least will not deteriorate). Including a new group of people with apparently low competence will not cause any harm.



What the European conservatives and other sceptics feared was that the experiment of democracy would turn into a rule by the mob due to the incompetent segments of the electorate. This fear never came true. Today, we know more about the sustainability of democracy than people did in the early 1900s. We know that installing democracy in a previous non-democratic country is a delicate matter. It can easily go wrong. But when the consolidation process is complete, democracy has proven to be one of the most stable, and at the same time, free and efficient political systems history has known. We know that democracy works. And it works despite the fact that a large number of the electorate is very low in competence. For it is not only children who lack knowledge of politics; the same can be said for many adults.

The problem with the idea that voters need to be competent in order to vote is not that competence does not matter, but rather that the electorate must not be treated as a whole. Certainly I believe that if all, or a large majority of the voters had the same level of competence as children, democracy would be in trouble. But that is not a correct picture of the electorate. It is far more diverse.

The general level of competence of the electorate has been an issue of discussion since the first American studies of voters' knowledge were presented (Berelson et al., 1954: 227–233, 308; Campbell, 1960: 542; Converse, 1964). These studies showed that there was a significant gap between what the voters knew about politics and what they ought to have known if they were to be on the same level as their representatives. The discussion has since centred on whether this is a problem or not.

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) have carried out the most extensive and recent study of the American electorate. They assessed the overall knowledge of the American voters by summarizing the results of a large sample of surveys between 1940 and 1994. In total, 448 factual questions about institutions and processes, people and players, and domestic and foreign affairs were included. The level of correct answers per question varied from 99 percent (e.g., naming the President of the U.S.) to 1 percent (e.g., naming the Prime Minister of Norway). The overall result showed that of the 448 questions, the American electorate as whole managed to answer 43 percent of the questions correctly.<sup>11</sup>

Is this a high or low level? It is difficult to say. The general perception seems to be that American voters are less informed than electorates in other countries (ibid. 89–91). However, there are no reliable cross-country comparisons. A similar study of the Swedish electorate showed that it is able to give the correct answer to 71 percent of the questions (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004:198–208). Yet, the simple explanation to this difference is that the American surveys included questions that were far more difficult.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>) The figure is my estimate based on Tables 2.2 to 2.5 in Delli Carpini & Keeter (1996:62–104).

<sup>12</sup>) In the American study, the electorate's lowest score is 1 percent of correct answers. The Swedes' lowest score is 26 percent. The difference can only be explained by the difficulty of the questions.

Another way to assess the competence of the electorate is to focus directly on the supposedly problematic group: the voters with a very low level of competence. This is the group that hypothetically would be most likely to turn into a dangerous mob. How large is this group?

Again, it seems as if different ways of measuring yield different answers. Based on a survey with 50 questions, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996:93–95) found that, on average, 31 percent of the voters answered, “Don’t Know” and another 21 percent gave a wrong answer. This gives us a total of 52 percent, suggesting that on average, about half of the electorate does not know the correct answer to a question about politics.<sup>13</sup>

The average sum of incorrect answers, however, is not a very good measurement since it also includes wrong answers by highly competent people. Bennett instead focused on the group of voters that are undoubtedly ignorant. In two similar surveys (Bennett, 1988; 1996), he tried to assess the size of the group that he called the “Know Nothings.” This group hardly managed to answer any question correctly. In his first study, he concluded that if his survey had been a test, he as the professor, although grading very generously would have to fail 29 percent. Repeating the test with five questions about foreign policy, he found that 32.9 percent do not manage to answer one single question.<sup>14</sup>

A different way to measure the size of this group is presented by Lau and Redlawsk (1997). Rather than focusing on the factual knowledge of the voters, they tried to determine how many voters vote “incorrectly” in the way that they vote for a candidate whose opinions they do not share. They found that 25 percent of the American electorate vote directly against their own opinions.

Together, these studies provide an idea of how much, or how little, the electorate knows about politics. It seems as if we can say that, at the least, 25 percent of the voters are extremely ill suited to make an informed political choice. This might seem like a substantial share, and a sufficient reason against including even more uninformed voters.

I believe that we should judge the situation quite differently. What these studies show is that democracy works *despite* a large number of ignorant voters. I do not disagree on the fact that 25 percent is a large number; but it is also a fact that these people have not caused any serious harm to the democratic system. The belief that was shared by many pre-democratic thinkers that this group would destabilize the political system, or at least make it work dangerously poorly, just has not come true.

<sup>13</sup>) The median values are 26 percent for the “Don’t Know” group and 15 percent for the wrong answer group, which yields a total of 41 percent. A similar study of the Swedish electorate gives an average of 49 percent incorrect answers. See Petersson et al. (1998:111).

<sup>14</sup>) Bennett argues that the choice of foreign politics does not affect the results significantly. People who totally lack information in one policy area most likely also lack information in other areas. See also Berelson et al. (1954:227).

Why is this so? There are several explanations. One is that lack of factual knowledge cannot entirely be interpreted as a lack of political judgment. There is a strong link between factual knowledge and other types of measurements of political competence. People who score high on tests about facts also score high on other forms of tests. That is why measurements of factual knowledge are an accurate measure of political competence in general (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1993). Nonetheless, there are rational ways to make informed choices without being fully informed.

There are “shortcuts” to knowledge. For example, a person can buy a technologically complicated product, such as a computer, without knowing anything about how it works. She puts her trust in choosing a product from a reliable company. In the same way, voters make use of political parties or ideologies as “trademarks.” Being uninformed is thus not entirely the same as making an irrational choice (Niemi & Weisberg, 2001:105–106).

A second explanation comes from the randomness of “voting errors.” When uninformed voters vote, they make mistakes. Many of these errors, however, are not distributed towards any particular alternative, but spread out randomly. Due to this spread, they cancel each other out. If a left-wing supporter votes for a right-wing candidate by mistake, it will not affect the final outcome since a right-wing supporter probably will have voted for a left-wing candidate by mistake. Random “voting errors” do not tilt the result of the election in any particular direction.

The theoretical basis for how this works can be found in the Condorcet Jury Theorem. Condorcet discovered that the likelihood for a group of people to give the correct answer to a question is far greater than the average likelihood of the single individuals.<sup>15</sup> The probability of the group also increases rapidly as the size of the group increases. Thus, groups are better guessers than individuals, and large groups are better than small groups. This means that it is possible to determine the correct answer to a question by letting the majority decide.

The mechanism behind this is called “information pooling.” Each individual possesses bits and pieces of information, some of which is correct and some false. When voting, the correct information guides the voters in one direction, whereas the false information guides them in many directions. Correct information points to one answer; false information points to many answers. By this, the correct information is “pooled” (aggregated) and the false information is cancelled out (Page & Shapiro, 1992:15-26; Miller, 1996; List & Goodin, 2001; Grofman & Feld, 2002).

Many people find the Condorcet Jury Theorem contra-intuitive, arguing that it only works when the individuals are able to make *educated* guesses. The individual

<sup>15</sup> A presentation of the Condorcet Jury Theorem can be found in List & Goodin (2001).

probability of guessing must be more than 0.5; otherwise, one will have a reverse aggregated effect. It is also argued that it only works when there are two alternatives (Estlund 1993, 2002:25). Both these objections have, however, convincingly been rejected by List and Goodin (2001). The Condorcet effect operates both with individual levels of probability below 0.5 and with multiple alternatives. It is in fact the many alternatives that make it work with low individual levels of probability. The aggregated effect even *increases*.<sup>16</sup>

A third critique of the Condorcet effect is that in order to work, it presupposes a “true” answer, but the nature of political questions is that the “truth” always is contested. This critique, however, misses the point. The information pooling mechanism is not a method to find the truth, but rather a method to eliminate bad information. Unsound political propositions and unreliable candidates are sorted out. The idea is not that the majority is likely to know the truth per se, but that it is a better judge of quality of information.

The aggregating effect that Condorcet discovered comes a long way in explaining why ignorant voters do not harm the democratic system. Random “voting errors” are not a problem. But what about systematic errors? The pre-democratic belief was that ignorant voters were not only uninformed, but they could also easily be manipulated. Due to their ignorance, they could be deceived to vote unwisely, that is, to make systematic “voting errors.” An important question then becomes, can ignorant voters be manipulated to vote in any direction?

The answer seems to be yes, although not by much. The third explanation for why ignorant voters do not threaten the democratic system is that their behaviour is not very different from the rest of the electorate. There are differences, but they are not large enough to cause any harm.

Bartels (1996) has shown that in American presidential elections, democratic candidates gain on average 2 percentage points, and incumbents gain 5 percentage points due to ignorant voters. This shows that the ignorant group does not vote entirely randomly, suggesting that some ignorant voters are probably being pushed to vote for a candidate without knowing why. However, it also shows that this group is not exceedingly large, around 4–10 percent,<sup>17</sup> far less than the 25–30 percent that constitutes the entire ignorant group.

Moreover, we cannot assume that this group is easily manipulated. Although we have reason to believe that 10 percent of the electorate systematically votes “incorrectly,” this does not mean that they have been deceived to do so because of

<sup>16</sup> Why is this so? List & Goodin explain, “Under plurality rules the winner does not have to beat *all* the other options taken together. It has only to beat *each* of its rivals taken separately...” (285). The reverse Condorcet effect only sets in when there are two alternatives and the average individual probability of the group is below 0.5.

<sup>17</sup> A 2-point gain for one candidate becomes a 2-point loss for the other candidate, making the difference between them 4 percent.

campaign propaganda. Some of them might very well be stable voters that always vote for the same “wrong” candidate or party. In fact, Kuklinski et al. (2000) argues that the more misinformed (systematically incorrect) a person is, the less likely she is to change her mind. The people who are the most wrong are also the most stubborn.

However, is it not true that ignorant voters are more likely to be the ones that decide who to vote for at the very end of the campaign (Niemi & Weisberg, 2001:104–105; Ellis, 2003:177; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004:217–226)? Does this not prove that ignorant voters are more easily manipulated? No, because being a “late decider” is not equivalent to being sensitive to political campaigns. On the contrary, late deciders are *less* inclined to become manipulated because they are less interested in politics to begin with. Furthermore, most late deciders do not belong to this group more than once. Only a fraction constantly makes its mind up late (Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Ellis, 2003:174–175).

To conclude, it is impossible to argue that ignorant voters have had a severely harmful effect on the well-being of democracy. The pre-democratic belief was that the large ignorant group would both be easy to manipulate *and* act unanimously as a mob. There is simply nothing that supports this view. The ignorant voters are not a homogenous group in which every member acts the same. Some of them probably cast their votes completely randomly; others are pushed in one way rather than the other. Some vote for the same party as they always have, and some change their minds in every election. Together, this shows that political ignorance among a large segment of the voters is not a threat to democracy.

### The Misguided Age Limit

An important objection to my line of arguing is that if children were to be included, this would mean that the group of ignorant voters would increase dramatically. It might not be possible to prove that the ignorant voters are a problem today, but what would happen if the electorate increased by several millions? Children represent slightly more than 20 percent of the population in modern western democracies. If we add this group to the existing 30 percent of the electorate that has very little knowledge, we come frighteningly close to the point where the ignorant voters outnumber the rest.<sup>18</sup> Would that not be a true cause for concern?

<sup>18</sup>) Obviously, we cannot simply add these two figures since they are shares of different totals. A rough calculation based on U.S. census figures, though, would yield a share of ignorant adults plus children as 53 percent of the population. [Total population: 294 million; ignorant adults: 88 million (i.e. 30 percent); children: 67 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).] This calculation is, however, very crude since it is based on population figures and not citizens or registered voters.

Although I still believe that nothing bad will happen as long as ignorant voters do not start to act as an entity, like a regular party, this question deserves an answer. Let us assume that an age limit is an effective way to increase the level of competence within the electorate. Where, then, do we draw the line? At 18 years?

I would say no. If we think it is justified to exclude some people from the suffrage due to their lack of knowledge, this should apply equally to *all* citizens. Accordingly, adults without adequate knowledge should not be allowed to vote either. The proper way to do this would be to introduce a test that everybody, regardless of age, would be allowed or required to take. If a 12-year-old scores well enough, he should have the right to vote, whereas a 39-year-old who fails should not.

The historic experiences of using tests of competence, however, do not speak in their favour. No test will be without arbitrariness and they have been used to discriminate against certain groups in the past (Schrag, 1975). An age limit could perhaps be seen as a fair substitute. After all, we do know for certain that children are less knowledgeable than adults.

Nonetheless, from this we cannot conclude that 18 years would be the proper age limit. There are several studies showing that there are large differences in knowledge between young voters and the rest of the electorate (Bennett, 1988; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991, 1993, 1996; Peterson et al., 1998:116; Milner, 2002:48–49; Ellis, 2003:169; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004:210–216). Figure 1 shows the pattern for the Swedish electorate. This pattern is not unique for Sweden. Young voters are less knowledgeable in most countries.<sup>19</sup>

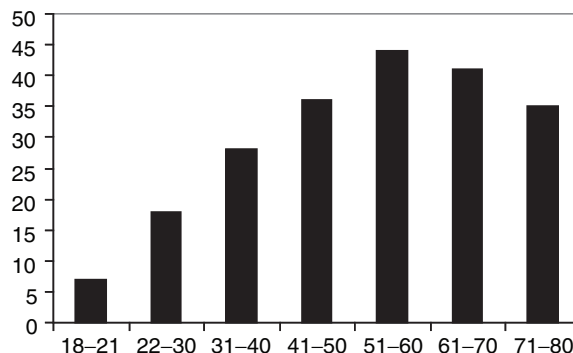
These figures give very meagre support for the idea that 18 years would be a suitable age limit. It is evident that voters gain knowledge as they get older and that there is a significant gap between the youngest group and the rest.<sup>20</sup> Holmberg and Oscarsson's study covers twenty years and six elections. During this period, the share of first-time voters that managed to get 4 or 5 points on a 5-point scale was only 7 percent. The share of the oldest voters was 35 percent.

If we truly believe that an age limit is an effective way to ensure that the competence level of the electorate does not deteriorate, then we ought to *raise* the age limit. A modest raise would be to 22 years in order to eliminate the worst group,

<sup>19</sup> Is this a result of a shift in knowledge between generations or within the life cycle? Probably both; but the fact that young voters are less knowledgeable in considerably different countries like Romania, Mexico, and Norway, can hardly be explained solely by generational shifts (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004:215). See also Jennings (1996).

<sup>20</sup> Jennings presents somewhat different results arguing that voters gain knowledge until they are about 30 years of age and then stay on the same level (Jennings, 1996).

**Figure 1.** Swedish voters with good political knowledge by age. Average percentages. 1985–2002.



Source Adapted from Holmberg & Oscarsson (2004:212). Good political knowledge includes the group of the electorate that has reached the top two levels on a five-step index.

but an even more effective raise would be to set the voting age at 30 years. Then, we would definitely see an increased level of competence within the electorate.

Those who find the idea of giving children voting rights sympathetic, but are still hesitant, have suggested that the voting age perhaps could be lowered to 16 years.<sup>21</sup> I find this even more misguided. The idea of having an age limit is to *increase* the level of competence within the electorate. That is why there is an age limit to begin with. By lowering it to 16 years, one will include more ignorant voters and consequently decrease the level of competence, making it all the more pointless. If we honestly believe an age limit is a justified restriction of certain people's democratic rights, we should be able to show that it does what it is supposed to do. We would then most likely have to raise the voting age. If we are not willing to do this, the logical action would be to remove the age restriction altogether.

### Parents Provide the Competence that Children Need

Yet another objection to my line of reasoning would be that, although first-time voters are not very knowledgeable, they are still better than children. An 18-year-old and a 3-year-old are, after all, very different. An 18-year-old might not be able to compete with a 50-year-old in terms of political knowledge or life experience,

<sup>21</sup>) For example: The Electoral Commission (of the U.K.) (2004).

but she has reached a certain level of independence. She does not have to be under guidance. In this respect, one could say that she is at least competent enough to protect her interests. A 3-year-old cannot even perform the voting act.

I agree that a 3-year-old will not be able to vote without the help of his parents. They will, in practice, decide how he should vote. Similarly, older children that are able to perform the voting act themselves will also be under the heavy influence of their parents. Thus, children will not vote with the same independent mind as adults.

Is this a problem? From the perspective of competence, I contend that it is not. Quite the opposite, this is something that shows the age limit even goes against its own purpose. The problem with children is that they lack knowledge. However, if they were going to vote either directly through their parents or under supervision from their parents, their lack of knowledge would not cause any trouble. With the help of their parents, children will have access to the knowledge and life experience they need in order to be as competent as mature adult voters.

This means, paradoxically, that a 3-year-old will be a more knowledgeable and mature voter than an 18-year-old. The effect on the electorate as a whole will then be that the general level of competence will actually *increase*. Most parents with young children belong to the age group that has the highest level of political competence, above 30 years (in western-type democracies). Thus, anyone who is troubled about the current level of knowledge within the electorate should welcome the idea of letting children vote since this (strangely enough) will increase the amount of competent voters.

### Parents as the Children's Representatives

The involvement of the parents is thus something that seems to speak in favour of extending the suffrage, if we are concerned with the level of competence within the electorate. There are, however, other arguments against giving children the right to vote that concern the role of the parents. Although not directly related to the problem that this article tries to solve, the role of the parents is so crucial to the idea of letting children vote that the entire discussion becomes pointless if we cannot also accept that the parents should be allowed to influence their children's votes. Thus, I will briefly discuss some questions regarding the role of parents. The intention is not to provide definite answers, but to show that the involvement of parents cannot be used as an argument to reject the idea of children's suffrage as a whole.

The essential issue is whether we can accept the idea of parents acting as their children's representatives. If children are going to vote, it will be a practical necessity that the parents act on their children's behalf, at least in some manner. This could be arranged in more than one way. One alternative is that parents help their children vote, that is, explain how they should vote and help them



perform the voting act. Later, when parents think their children are old enough, they let them vote on their own. Another alternative is to give parents the right to vote directly on their children's behalf.

One question that this raises is whether it is the parents who are voting and not the children. Is this not a violation of the one person, one vote rule? During the 19th century, some people were given extra votes if they owned property. Is this not the same? Why should some people be entitled to extra votes simply because they have children?

A second issue is whether the parents really are the most suitable representatives for the children. When parents are given total control over their children's votes, there will be no guarantee that they will use it in the best interest of their children. They might very well "steal" their children's votes and use them for their own narrow self-interests instead. Or parents might spoil their children's votes by voting against their opinions. A 15-year-old might have a strong political conviction that goes against her parents' views. Her views will then not only be neglected, but even misrepresented. Would that not also be a violation of her rights?

A third problem involves the question of *who* is the parent. Most children have two parents, but we cannot assume that all couples share the same political views. The parents might also be divorced and have joint custody. Does this mean that they should divide the children's votes between them? Some children are also orphans and some live with foster parents. Who would have the right to vote on their behalf?

I do not deny that these and other problems will occur if we were to allow children to vote. What we need to ask ourselves is what kinds of problems these are, and how large they may potentially be. Would these problems be entirely new to us, or do they belong to a group of problems that we already know very much about? Are these problems of a kind that make the entire idea of giving children the right to vote impossible, or can they be solved?

I would argue that the difficulties that will come from letting parents act on their children's behalf are not fundamentally different from any other relationship of representation. From this point of view, the first question, whether parents would be given extra votes or not, is wrongly stated. Historically, community members were given extra votes if they owned land, but in this case, we are dealing with people, not property. Parents do not own their children. Instead, parents will have their children's votes at their disposal. Having something at one's disposal is different from owning it.

The delegation of the children's right to vote to their parents is not any stranger than when adults delegate political authority to one another. When adults vote, they hand over their rights to political authority to their elected representatives. After the election, the representatives have the right to make use of this authority. However, we usually do not say that the ownership of this authority also shifts hands.

The second issue, that parents might abuse their right to act on their children's behalf, is also nothing new. It is merely another version of one of the oldest and most central political problems—some representatives do not do what they are supposed to. This is hardly an unfamiliar problem. The accusations directed against our elected officials are plenty: they give out promises they cannot keep because they want to be reelected; when they are reelected, they stop listening to their constituencies; they lie to cover up their mistakes; they only think of themselves; they waste other people's money; and so on. The list is endless. Despite these facts, we still think that this system of delegating political authority is endurable. Would parents be worse representatives of their children than the ones we as adults already have?

One important difference is that children cannot choose their parents or remove them from their duties. The delegation of authority that we are concerned with is not entirely democratic. Is this a problem? Undeniably, there are children who live under poor circumstances because of their parents. Nevertheless, it is a fundamental principle of society that parents make decisions for their children. They decide where their children should live, what they should eat, where they should go to school, and so on. If a child has to appear in court, his parents will represent him; and if a child owns property, this is cared for by his parents. In all matters of importance to the child, it is the parents who make the decisions, and many of these matters are far more important than deciding which candidate to vote for. Arguing that parents cannot act as their children's representatives because they might abuse their position becomes absurd in comparison to all the other powers parents already have over their children.

The last issue concerns the problem of deciding who should have the right to vote on the child's behalf. This is also not a new issue. Determining which of a child's two parents should have the final say is a problem that already exists in other areas. All children have a legal guardian, and if there is a dispute as to who this is, the matter will have to be decided by the court. We already know how to handle this question within our legal framework. The right to vote on the child's behalf will then be given to the person the court has decided is the legal guardian.

Just as letting children, even infants, vote is an intellectually daring suggestion, so is the accompanying idea that children's voting should be supervised by their parents. The important question is, then, if the parents' involvement is of such a kind that it would be utterly unacceptable. I cannot see any reason for why this should be the case. As I have demonstrated, although briefly, the role of parents as their children's political representatives is not any more troublesome than any other form of political representation that our political system is built upon. Moreover, parents are already being viewed as their children's representatives in other areas, such as in legal or economic affairs. Why would it be unacceptable to also view them as their children's political representatives?

## Conclusion

Children are citizens without the right to vote. Although one of democracy's fundamental principles is that all citizens should have the same right to influence the government of the state, this currently does not apply to children and voting. The main reason for this is that children do not have the intellectual capacities needed to make informed and mature judgments regarding governmental affairs. Hence, an exception to the rule that all citizens should have the same political rights is necessary.

In this article, I have questioned the foundations of this belief. I have argued that it is based on ideas that, at the time of the extension of the suffrage to the working class and women at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, seemed reasonable, but has since lost relevance. The pre-democratic belief that was held even by democrats such as J. S. Mill was that if a large segment of the electorate were poorly informed about politics, democracy would not work. This notion was based on a fear of the masses. Due to their lack of "political intelligence," as Mill put it, the ignorant voters could turn the democracy into a rule by the mob.

From a sceptical point of view such as Mill's, an age limit can hardly be questioned. Today, however, a century later, we know more about how democracy operates and we know that it is a far more stable political system than Mill and others had imagined. One of the main faults of the pre-democratic beliefs was that it had exaggerated the effects of ignorant voters. However, as I hope to have shown, the effects of ignorant voters are not nearly as large as has previously been thought. The main reason for this is that the ignorant group, although substantial in size, does not act as a unanimous, volatile, and easily manipulated body. Rather, they behave surprisingly similar to the rest of the electorate. They vote for the same candidates, or parties, in roughly the same way. This strongly suggests that ignorant voters are as socialized (predetermined) to vote for certain parties as any other group of voters. Thus, the ignorant group is not more unreliable than the electorate in general.

Although these empirical findings should be enough to discard the notion that children need to be excluded from the suffrage because of their lack of competence, I realize that my proposition will not likely find immediate support. To most people, the idea of allowing children to vote is not even on the cognitive map. The main reason for this is probably that we, as adults, still do not view children as full members of society in the same way as women were also excluded from equal membership for thousands of years.

Yet there is also a reason directly related to democratic theory, and that is its exaggerated emphasis on the individual capabilities of the voters. There seems to be a significant gap between what the normative theories of democracy ask of the individual citizen and what the empirical research shows that citizens actually

manage to accomplish. Berelson et al. noted this discrepancy already in their very first study of the competence of the American electorate in 1954:

*Individual voters* today seem unable to satisfy the requirements for a democratic system of government outlined by political theorists. But the *system of democracy* does meet certain requirements for a going political organization. The individual members may not meet all the standards, but the whole nevertheless survives and grows. This suggests that where the classic theory is defective is in its concentration on the *individual citizen*. What are undervalued are certain collective properties that reside in the electorate as a whole and in the political and social system in which it functions (Berelson et al., 1954:312).

In explaining why children cannot vote, I believe that Robert Dahl and other theorists make this exact mistake. Dahl points to the fact that a person who is “deciding on the laws” needs to be enlightened. This is, of course, hard to question as long as we automatically think that voting and deciding on laws are one in the same. But are they? No. The laws are not decided on by the electorate. They are prepared by the cadre of specially trained civil servants and decided upon by elected officials. Surely if the majority of bureaucrats and elected officials that make up the body of the government were replaced with children, we would get into trouble. However, that is not going to happen. The system for law making will look exactly the same as it does today. The legislature will decide on the laws, not the voters.

Voting is not a way to feed information into the democratic decision-making process. It is not with the help of the ballot that one expresses ideas, propositions, arguments, and so forth. Rather, voting is a method to distribute power. It is a way to guarantee that the people who really are deciding on the laws, the elected officials, do not forget to consider all interests equally. If we stop viewing voting as the same as writing legislative bills, the idea of allowing children to vote becomes easier to grasp. Children cannot prepare legislative texts, but they can be counted as members of the demos whose interests are no less important than those of their adult counterparts.

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