

The health and wellbeing case for children's suffrage



Published Online
February 6, 2024
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(24\)00020-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(24)00020-8)

Over the past century and a half, the right to vote has been expanded worldwide to those with low incomes, minoritised ethnic groups, women, the colonised, and young adults, but not yet to all of those younger than 18 years, who make up a third of humanity. Despite young people's obvious capacities for climate activism, anti-racism protest, gun rights opposition, labour union organisation, gender fluidity action, and much else in political life, suffrage continues to be defined by a hard line of age that leaves children's perspectives excluded. Securing children's enfranchisement faces opposition fuelled by the misconception that adults' representation of children is sufficient to secure children's wellbeing. This view is counter to the acknowledgment codified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child that children are individuals with rights to freedom of expression. The issue of children's suffrage is important not only for children but also for the wider population, including paediatricians and others working with and advocating for infants, children, and young people.

As researchers and activists engaged with children across diverse fields, and along with individuals of all ages in a global organisation called the Children's Voting Colloquium, we contend that voting age distinctions are unjust and counterproductive. Indeed, children's disenfranchisement is an urgent harm being done to children, adults, societies, and democracies.

Democracies cannot function well if they are fundamentally unjust. Democracy is supposed to enact rule by the *demos*, or people. Policies ought to be decided upon not by an elite segment of the population but by all impacted citizens.¹ This ideal has never been achieved. For instance, at the founding of the USA, only the 6% of the population who were landowning white men could vote. Women started gaining national suffrage only in 1893 and those aged 18–21 years only in the 1960s. Over time, the franchise has gradually become more inclusive globally, yet it still excludes the young.

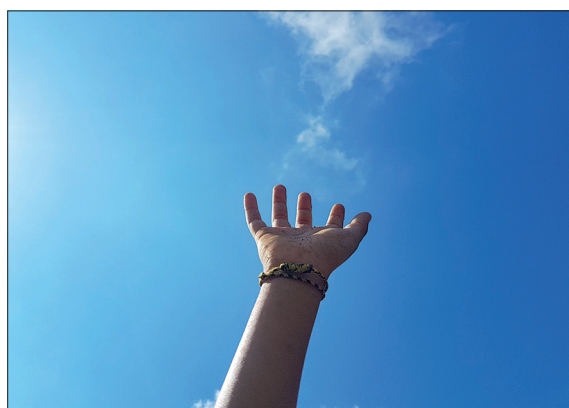
Denying a group such as children the right to vote is classic discrimination.^{2–4} The most commonly stated justification for this denial is that children lack political competency. This view, however, is unscientific, inaccurate, and irrelevant. Many adults could also be said to lack political competency, yet this fact does not bar them from voting rights. These individuals include adults

with cognitive impairments, severe mental illnesses, or dementia, in addition to those who are disinterested or uninformed. Denying the franchise on the basis of age is discriminatory because it applies a double standard, demanding a level of skill from children that is not required of anyone else.

Perhaps more importantly, democracies need children's enfranchisement in order to function effectively. Most obviously, children having the right to vote would help democracies to improve the lives of children themselves.^{1,5,6} At a bare minimum, governments would have to treat young people with equal dignity instead of as second-class citizens. Children would gain social cohesion and civic purpose. In addition, were children able to vote them out of office, representatives would be forced to centre young people's needs in policy considerations and be accountable to their concerns.^{7,8} Governments would need to pay more attention to key issues such as children's disproportionate poverty, underfunded schools, the paucity of long-term health investment, violence at home and in war, absent parenthood, and children's pressing hopes for climate regulation.

Voting rights tend to make life better for those who gain them because democratic politics is built on incentivising those in power to act in the interests of those who vote them into and out of office. The American Medical Association has documented a clear link between voting rights and health.⁹ Moreover, democratic representatives are regularly challenged by the fresh input and new ideas arising from different voices. Democracy is always an unfinished project, but as other groups, such as women, have found, enfranchisement increases

For more on the **Children's Voting Colloquium** see <https://www.childrenvoting.org>



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government responsiveness and injects previously unheard perspectives into policy making.

Part of the power of democracy is that the inclusion of more voices improves life for others as well. Adults and children do not live in separate bubbles; their lives are intertwined. Parents would benefit from children's suffrage by gaining more support for their children's health and wellbeing. Teachers would probably find themselves in better-funded and more educationally meaningful schools. Paediatricians and other health-care professionals would find greater resources for children's hospitals, health-care research, and supportive child health policies¹⁰ and so on, across the professional and public sectors.

More broadly, social policy would be strengthened by looking at all perspectives instead of just two-thirds of them. Democracies would function more effectively with a better idea of who the people are that they are supposed to serve.^{1,6,7} For example, health policy would be forced to account for children's interests directly instead of, as happens now, out of adult beneficence. Politicians would not be disadvantaged by responding to children's needs but would respond to all interests, instead of systematically prioritising those of adults.

Finally, children's suffrage would help rescue democracy from its current imperilled state. If one wanted to create a disengaged and cynical population, one could hardly do worse than to tell them for the first quarter of their lives that their voices do not count. In the 20 or so countries that have a voting age of 16 years, those aged 16–18 years turn out in higher numbers to vote than those older than 18 years.³ Denying young people the vote prepares them for the kind of authoritarian appeals that are on the rise worldwide today. Children's suffrage, by contrast, would empower democratic engagement from a young age and create a citizenry who demand accountability throughout their lives.^{7,8}

Operationalising children's votes is often cited as a major obstacle. The practical obstacles can be overcome once the principle of affording children the vote is accepted, as discussed in *Exploring Children's Suffrage*.¹⁰ Giving all children the vote can be accomplished in many different ways, for example, by providing children with voting rights akin to those of adults, by having a proxy

vote for parents that a child can then claim whenever ready, or by using custodial votes up to, perhaps, age 14 years, followed by full voting rights or veto power over custodial votes. But the key is that all children need the vote, and democracies need all children to have it.

Children's suffrage would not solve all problems, but it would make democracies more accountable to children, societies, and democratic ideals. Paediatricians were among the first groups to acknowledge and promote the rights of children to self-determination and autonomy, incorporating these rights in concepts such as assent for medical procedures and research participation.¹¹ They, along with others engaged with infants, children, and young people, are particularly well placed to advocate for child suffrage and partner with groups promoting stronger democracies around the world.

We declare no competing interests.

*Neena Modi, Lucia Rabello de Castro, Robin Chen, Anandini Dar, *John Wall*
johnwall@camden.rutgers.edu

School of Public Health, Imperial College London, Chelsea and Westminster Campus, London, UK (NM); Institute of Psychology, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (LRdC); Children's Voting Colloquium, Cambridge, MA, USA (RC); BML Munjal University, Haryana, India (AD); Childism Institute, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ 08102, USA (JW)

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