

This article was downloaded by: [Rutgers University], [John Wall]

On: 30 October 2014, At: 14:02

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



The International Journal of Human Rights

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fjhr20>

Democratising democracy: the road from women's to children's suffrage

John Wall^a

^a Philosophy and Religion, Rutgers University, USA

Published online: 28 Oct 2014.

To cite this article: John Wall (2014) Democratising democracy: the road from women's to children's suffrage, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 18:6, 646-659, DOI: [10.1080/13642987.2014.944807](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2014.944807)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2014.944807>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Democratising democracy: the road from women's to children's suffrage

John Wall*

Philosophy and Religion, Rutgers University, USA

Political philosophers have begun to debate whether the right to vote should be extended towards some or all of the third of humanity who are under 18 years old. In addition, child and youth suffrage movements are arising globally. Much uncertainty remains, however, about whether democracy can legitimately be extended beyond adulthood. This article advances this discussion by comparing children's suffrage debates today to those surrounding the global women's suffrage movements of the past century and a half. It argues that minor enfranchisement requires postmodern rather than modern conceptions of democratic inclusion and revised understandings of voting rights as such.

Keywords: children; children's rights; democracy; suffrage; vote; women's rights

Introduction

The right to vote has been won historically through long and difficult struggle. All groups who are now enfranchised – the wealthy, the poor, non-landowning men, ethnic and racial minorities, women, and younger adults – did so through processes of painful social debate and upheaval. Suffragists such as Oliver Cromwell, Frederick Douglass, Marion Wallace Dunlop, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Emmeline Pankhurst, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela expanded voting rights only against the grain of the status quo through civil war, marches and demonstrations, legal action and civil disobedience. Although voting is not the only, or even necessarily the most effective, way for people to influence governance, it has become over time the global benchmark for measuring basic political participation.

Despite their active involvement in all of the above democratic movements, children and youth under the age of 18 have, until very recently, neither agitated for the vote for themselves nor been considered its rightful recipients. This is despite the fact that this age group constitutes fully one-third of all humanity (even more so in previous centuries). The question of the enfranchisement of minors is now, however, starting to make itself heard. Since the 1980s, groups of children and youth have begun to organise for the right to vote; separate children's parliaments have been established in about 30 countries; governments have started consulting with children directly rather than only via adults; and a small number of political philosophers and children's advocates are now arguing that minors' suffrage should be a right.

*Email: johnwall@camden.rutgers.edu

In the following, I extend the discussion of children's right to vote that is currently taking place in political philosophy by comparing it to historical debates around the right to vote for women. Women's suffrage presents a close analogy to children's suffrage, first because women are likewise fully one-third of democratic populations, and second because women have generally been excluded from suffrage the longest. I will argue that minors' right to vote cannot be understood simply as an extension of the historical progress of the right to vote for adults. In fact, this historical progression itself has involved different kinds of arguments and actions for different kinds of adults. In particular, the debate over children's suffrage needs to move beyond modernistic conceptions of democracy based on rational individualism to postmodernistic conceptions based on the inclusion of difference.

Voting rights in historical context

While the question of who deserves the right to vote is often considered a settled matter, history shows that enfranchisement has been won for a wide range of different reasons for different groups. A brief sketch of this history will provide us with a more complex context for the consideration of voting rights for children.

Beyond highly constricted examples in ancient Greece, India and Rome, something like modern democratic voting first appears in Norman England soon after 1066 when the nobility and clergy were granted the right to elect a Great Council to approve the laws of the Crown. This Great Council eventually drafted the 1215 Magna Carta that forced King John to accept wide-ranging nobility oversight; evolved shortly thereafter into the first so-called 'Parliament' (from the Latin for discussion or speech); and as a result of an armed rebellion in 1265 extended the vote to all free inhabitant householders, a vote which, however, was subsequently curtailed in 1430 to only 'Forty Shilling Freeholders' or those owning land worth at least 40 shillings of annual rent.¹ Subsequently, the United Kingdom's Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867 extended suffrage to the one in seven adult males who were renters. And its Representation of the People Acts of 1884 and 1918 further extended voting rights to, respectively, approximately 40% of adult men and then all men 21 and over regardless of property qualifications. Women did not gain the right to vote until the Representation of the People Act of 1928. Most recently of all, the voting age in the United Kingdom (UK) was only lowered from 21 to 18 in the Representation of the People Act of 1969.²

A similar but abbreviated pattern can be found in the United States (US). Voting remained limited to male property owners in the British colonies prior to independence, as well as under the 1777 Articles of Confederation and the 1789 Constitution. Four Amendments to the Constitution gradually extended suffrage thereafter: the 1870 Fifteenth Amendment to adult males regardless of race, colour or previous servitude; the 1920 Nineteenth Amendment to adult females; the 1964 Twenty-fifth Amendment to any adult regardless of failure to pay poll or other taxes; and the 1971 Twenty-Sixth Amendment that lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. Since voting rights in the US are also state-wide (not just national), some individual states extended votes to women earlier: New Jersey in 1776 (but rescinded in 1807), Wyoming in 1869, Utah in 1870, Colorado in 1893, and so on.

Elsewhere in the democratic world, voting expansion has generally followed similar patterns, though at different paces, from property owning men, to non-property owning men, to women, and then to young adults. The first national rights of women to vote were granted in New Zealand in 1893, then Australia in 1902, Finland in 1906, Canada in 1917 and Poland in 1918. Women's voting rights were later established in, for

example, Turkey in 1930, South Africa in 1930 (for white women only), Japan in 1947, Niger in 1948, India in 1950, Iran in 1963, Jordan in 1974, Nigeria in 1978, Qatar in 1999 and the United Arab Emirates in 2006, with women's suffrage anticipated in Saudi Arabia in 2015. Likewise, ethnic and racial barriers to voting have gradually been removed over time, for example in the enfranchisement of the Maori in New Zealand in 1865 after the Maori War, Jews in Romania in 1923 and blacks in South Africa upon the end of Apartheid in 1994.

Finally, it should be noted that the founding charter of the United Nations, the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, calls in Article 21 for 'universal and equal suffrage'. It states that 'everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives'. Of course, this 'universal' suffrage was likely intended at the time to apply only to adults aged 21 and older. Globally, both within and outside democratic societies, even many adults remained for many years afterward excluded. The struggle for adult suffrage is therefore a long and ongoing one, involving a wide array of challenges across different historical and cultural contexts.

Arguments for and against women's suffrage

If we focus on the particular case of women's suffrage, we find that there is also a diversity of arguments around which suffrage has been debated. Taking the US and UK as relatively early examples, we see that women and women's advocates developed three basic ideas over time, having to do with women's equality, difference and empowerment.

The earliest movements in the US and UK for women's suffrage, starting with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, generally argued that women should be able to act, not just within their traditional private sphere, but also with equal rights in the public sphere of politics. Seneca Falls' 'Declaration of Sentiments', drafted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, declared that women's exclusion from the elective franchise violated the country's founding principle that 'all men and women are created equal'.³ When the 1870 Fifteenth Amendment granted the vote only to African-American men, Susan B. Anthony objected that 'citizenship' should mean that 'there is, and can be, but one safe principle of government – equal rights for all'.⁴ Meanwhile, in the UK, John Stuart Mill, philosopher and politician (unsuccessfully) proposed amending the 1867 Reform Bill to enfranchise women by replacing the word 'man' with 'person', on the grounds that 'a hard and fast line between women's occupations and men's ... belongs to a gone-by state of society'.⁵ Because women too have active roles in the public sphere, there can no longer be 'any adequate justification for continuing to exclude [from voting] an entire half of the community'.⁶

What now seems like a common-sense equal rights argument faced at the time significant and successful opposition. The principal objection appears to have been that women by nature have 'capacities appropriate to private life and the domestic sphere rather than the public world of politics', making them lack the necessary political 'independence' and 'rationality'.⁷ In opposition to Mill, UK representatives in the House of Commons argued that 'between the sexes it was abundantly evident that Nature had drawn clear lines of distinction', men excelling in 'practical force, stability of character, and intellect', women in 'mildness, softness of character, and amiability'.⁸ Joined to this is the notion that women are already sufficiently represented by the vote of their husbands and that what women primarily need from political life is adequate male protection.⁹

After the failures of this early suffrage movement, a second kind of argument gained prominence, alongside that for equal rights, based on the notion that women should be enfranchised precisely because of their gender difference. Women voting, it was claimed,

would elevate the moral tone of politics by introducing maternal and compassionate virtues. As put in Ohio's 1873 Constitutional Convention, 'when our mothers, wives, and sisters vote with us, we will have purer legislation, and better execution of the laws, fewer tipping shops, gambling halls, and brothels'.¹⁰ The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), founded in 1890, 'stressed . . . the more palatable essentialist theme that feminine qualities would be a welcome addition to the polity', as well as that 'women had distinct economic and social interests that could only be protected by possession of the right to vote'.¹¹ In the UK, Millicent Garrett Fawcett asserted that 'this difference between men and women, instead of being a reason against their enfranchisement, seems to me the strongest possible reason in favour of it; we want the home and the domestic side of things to count for more in politics'.¹² Women's experiences as mothers and wives would not be an impediment but an asset in progressive legislation.

The principal objection to this difference argument was that enfranchisement would, on the contrary, degrade the very virtues that women uniquely possess. As one California legislator observed in 1879, 'I believe that women occupy in many respects a higher position than men, and I, for one, do not wish to drag them down from that exalted sphere.'¹³ It was also claimed that women's suffrage would infuse political life with an unwanted female seductive power over men and household-like quarreling, while simultaneously destroying the foundations of families.¹⁴ Both men and women at the time furthermore argued that women did not wish to leave the private sphere anyway, some in the UK, for example, claiming that enfranchisement would threaten women's 'physical powers', sanity and domestic capacities.¹⁵ It was even suggested in 1873 that women's suffrage would threaten the British Empire, since 'sentiment and not reason might guide the deliberations of the world'.¹⁶ Precisely *because* women are different from men, women's voting would undermine the natural division of private and public responsibilities.

Neither the equality nor the difference argument finally won the day. Women did not gain suffrage until a third kind of argument was added on top of these first two, the argument that enfranchisement is the only means for women's political empowerment. In both the US and the UK, this desire for one's own political power arose in part through women's increasingly public roles in World War I, as well as greater numbers of especially working-class women entering the workforce and forming labour unions. In the US, NAWSA and similar organisations became increasingly militant: organising locally, canvassing, picketing the White House, getting arrested, going on hunger strikes and committing acts of civil disobedience. As Florence Kelley declared, 'no one needs all the powers of fullest citizenship more urgently than the wage-earning woman'.¹⁷ In the UK, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) turned from 1909 onwards towards increasingly politicised acts such as civil disobedience, marches, court battles and imprisonment by the hundreds, under the new banner of 'Deeds, not words!'¹⁸ Challenging the very distinction of public and private spheres, these movements proclaimed that suffrage was necessary to halt women's economic, social and domestic exploitation. Whether like men or different, women ultimately needed to exercise political power on their own behalf.¹⁹

These victories were also, of course, not without significant opposition. In the US, many objected on the grounds of religious and cultural tradition. It was argued, for example, that the Bible required that 'the head of every woman is the man' and that enfranchisement would 'blot out three of the most sacred words known in the world's vocabulary of six thousand years, namely, mother, home, and heaven'.²⁰ Others viewed voting as unwomanly and an undue burden on the female intellect. Women's acts of civil disobedience 'contravened not only the law but, perhaps more importantly, their idealized role as wives and mothers'.²¹

Indeed, the simple act of exercising political action challenged traditional assumptions about women's apolitical natures and millennia of male power.

Movements toward children's suffrage

With these gendered and broader historical struggles in mind, let us examine what has been happening in the past 20 years or so in the nascent suffrage movement for children. While this movement is little known outside advocacy and research circles, it has in fact made significant advances in a relatively short span of time. What we find is that this progress has not followed quite the same lines of action and argument as previously for women.

The concept of children's suffrage arguably dates, in practical terms, to the United Nations' 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most widely ratified treaty in all of world history. While the CRC does not call for voting in particular, it does, unlike all previous international children's rights agreements, advocate not only 'protection' and 'provision' rights for children but also what have been called 'participation' rights, including rights to freedoms of expression, thought, association, and the like. Most relevantly, Article 12 affirms each child's 'right to express [his or her] views freely in all matters affecting the child'.²² Without directly addressing voting, the CRC lays a participatory groundwork for its possibility.²³

One step that many countries have taken towards including minors directly in democracy is the establishment of new kinds of political institutions for listening to children's voices. For example, in 2001 New Zealand developed the Agenda for Children, a forum for children and youth to be actively consulted on national issues.²⁴ In 2003, South Africa launched the Children in Action (*Dikwankwetla*) project in which children address parliamentary hearings on children's issues.²⁵ In 2004, the UK appointed four Children's Commissioners (one each for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) to listen to children's views on legislation and policy.²⁶ These and other government initiatives at least consult children directly, on the assumption that their interests are not necessarily represented adequately by adults. At the same time, of course, they do not provide children with the kind of direct political power that adults enjoy.

A step closer to suffrage can be found in the 30 or so countries that since the 1990s have established children's parliaments. These countries include India (where the first were created), 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.²⁷ Generally speaking, children's parliaments operate from the village or school level up to district and then national levels, with children electing representatives at each level for themselves. Often there are two separate parliaments for younger children around six to 12 and for adolescents. Sometimes children's parliaments are dominated by privileged groups of children or function only educationally.²⁸ But frequently they manage to influence regular adult parliaments, particularly around local services and utilities, education policy and even allocations of budgets.²⁹ For example, the children's parliament of the city of Barra Mansa in Brazil partially controls government budgets having to do with schools and recreation.³⁰ Of course, separate children's parliaments do not empower children equally to adults, which is why women, for example, did not press for separate women's parliaments. Nevertheless, children's parliaments do demonstrate that even quite young children are interested in and able to vote on serious public issues.

Finally, the closest step that has been taken towards minors' suffrage is the granting in several communities and countries of the vote to youth as young as 16. The voting age has

been lowered to 16 for national elections in, for example, Brazil, Austria, Cuba, Nicaragua, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the British Channel Islands and parts of Norway; and to 17 in, for example, East Timor, Indonesia, Seychelles and Sudan.³¹ Some countries such as Germany and Israel permit voting at 16 in local elections. In the US, a lowering of the voting age to 16 is part of the agenda of the child-run National Youth Rights Association. Some US states already permit voting in primary elections at 17 if the voter will turn 18 by the time of the general election; and several states have proposed voting ages of anything from 12 to 17, most famously California, which had a bill ultimately defeated to permit a quarter vote at 14 and a half vote at 16.³² A Votes at Sixteen Campaign was defeated before the UK Electoral Commission in 2004³³ and is now being championed by the Labour leader Ed Miliband as part of his new party platform.³⁴ Most radically – in a step we will return to later – the German parliament proposed but shelved in 2008 a bill that would grant the vote to each citizen at birth, to be used by a parent until the child claims it for her- or himself.³⁵

Overall, the children's suffrage movement, if it may be called that, looks a little like the very earliest stages of the women's suffrage movement. It is led by just a few children's groups and advocates. It does not occupy a central place in public democratic debate and is little known about even among children themselves. One striking difference in the case of children is that the leading countries are primarily less developed ones. This may be because the less wealthy a country, the more likely children and youth are to have active roles already in the public sphere such as through work and labor organisations. Another difference from the women's suffrage movement is that child leaders, such as parliamentary representatives, remain children only for finite periods of time, leading to continual turnover in leadership. Nevertheless, similar to the beginnings of women's suffrage, those children and child advocates who are engaged in children's suffrage are active, determined and passionate and have managed to put the issue on the public map.

Arguments for and against children's suffrage

Underlying these historical changes lie a surprisingly wide variety of arguments both for and against children's suffrage that are being made by child advocates, childhood studies scholars and political philosophers. When one examines these arguments, one finds a different kind of moral logic than undergirded women's suffrage. While part of this difference can be attributed to today's changed and more globalised world, and part lies in the fact that the children's suffrage movement is still quite young, part of the difference is also conceptual, having to do with the nature of childhood. It is this last part that I wish to focus on here. It turns out that the logic has followed a somewhat different order: generally not from equality to difference to empowerment but from empowerment to equality to difference.

Starting in the 1970s, scholars and child advocates began to claim that children should be provided the right to vote in order to empower them to influence political decisions affecting them. Holt, for example, argues that all children 'should have the same right as everyone else to vote' since 'to be in any way subject to the laws of a society without having any right or way to say what those laws should be is the most serious injustice'.³⁶ As the political philosopher Young later put it, just as for women so also for children, 'no persons, actions, or aspects of a person's life should be forced into privacy'.³⁷ Franklin claims furthermore that children cannot be represented accurately through voting only by adults: 'That adults have an understanding of the interests of children which is superior to that possessed by the children themselves is not sufficient to justify intervention in their affairs.'³⁸ Children remain the poorest and most exploited social group because they lack the political franchise to assert their own interests and demand political

accountability. For example, if children could vote, legislators would be more likely to properly fund schools, improve playgrounds and recreation spaces, respect children's voices and agency, and strengthen laws against children's discrimination and abuse.

Those opposed argue that children should not exercise the power to vote because they lack sufficient competence. Chan and Clayton claim that minors have not yet acquired sufficient 'knowledge of the political system, and understanding of the nature and significance of issues that are the subject of public and political debate'.³⁹ Similarly, the UK Electoral Commission determined in response to a petition to lower the voting age to 16 that only by 18 could citizens be sure to possess 'the development of sufficient social awareness and responsibility'.⁴⁰ Children might vote for representatives who promise frivolous or harmful laws such as banning bedtimes or removing media controls. As Scarre puts it, 'most adults, because they have lived a long time, have this ability [to plan systematic policies of action], but children, because their mental powers and experience are inadequate, do not'.⁴¹ Such arguments have their roots in the Enlightenment architects of modern democracy itself. According to Locke, for example, 'the necessities of [a child's] life, the health of his body, and the information of his mind would require him to be directed by the will of others and not his own'.⁴²

In the 1980s and 1990s, child advocates introduced a somewhat different kind of argument based on equal rights. The 1989 CRC in particular drew attention globally to children's rights to public participation. While children may not be owed equal rights to adults in all areas of life, it can be argued that in politics they deserve equal representation. Franklin, for example, points out that childhood and incompetence are not synonymous: 'The presence or absence of rationality does not justify the exclusion of children from political rights but the exclusion, if anyone, of the irrational'.⁴³ Adults do not lose voting rights if they become senile, mentally ill or just plain thoughtless. Others oppose a voting 'competence test' since, as the history of such tests has shown, they 'might be used to limit *adult* suffrage or to grant some adults more votes than others'.⁴⁴ In addition, it is likely that children possess significantly greater political knowledge and capacity than they are given credit for, since, just as was the case for women and minorities in the past, not having the possibility to vote removes the chief incentive for developing voting capacities in the first place. As seen for example in children's parliaments and labour movements, when given the opportunity children can prove equally capable of democratic participation.

The counter-argument is that children are unequal in ways that other voting populations are not. Archard claims that '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)'.⁴⁵ The political theorist Habermas suggests that children do not possess the full 'communicative competence' required to engage in equal political procedures of 'reciprocal perspective taking'.⁴⁶ Cowley and Denver note that children 'have little experience of life beyond family and school, and no memory of governments or public affairs going back further than two or three years at most'.⁴⁷ And Barber argues that children simply lack the requisite 'civility' to deliberate with others constructively.⁴⁸ These arguments are again rooted in the Enlightenment, as for example in Kant's claim that children should not have public rights because their sense of reason has not yet taken control of their egocentric passions.⁴⁹

Most recently, advocates have also turned to arguments about children's difference, that is, that children need to be able to vote precisely because their experiences and situations are *not* always the same as those of adults. Cockburn asserts, for instance, that children's greater dependency on parents and special needs for education and health care should not exclude

them from citizenship but rather force us to develop more ‘child-friendly’ conceptions of citizenship itself.⁵⁰ Schrag points out that a lowered voting age would respond to the fact that ‘children do have interests not shared by adults, the most salient being the interest in receiving an adequate education . . . [f]ailure to receive [which] simply cannot be made upon reaching the age of maturity’.⁵¹ In a broader sense, third-wave feminist political theorists have argued that democracy is about the representation of difference as such, so that children should be included precisely as children. Lister, for example, includes children in her claim that ‘our goal [in democracies] should be a universalism which stands in creative tension to diversity and difference and which challenges the divisions and exclusionary inequalities which stem from diversity’.⁵² Moosa-Mitha similarly opposes ‘adultist’ conceptions of democratic citizenship with ‘difference-centered’ conceptions that include children’s ‘right to participate differently in the social institutions and culture of the society’ based on their ‘own lived reality’.⁵³

While I am not aware of any literature directly opposing this difference argument, there are several ways it is opposed indirectly. In a wide-ranging book arguing against children’s rights broadly, Guggenheim claims that ‘the greatest goal for advancing children’s rights should be a return to a time when we treated children like children’, that is, when ‘a caring society would insist on considering [children’s] needs and interests’.⁵⁴ According to Guggenheim, the very concept of children’s rights treats children as if they were adults. Along with this problem, he argues, children’s rights undermine necessary roles of parents: ‘However inadvertently, our current emphasis on children’s rights reduces the pressure on adults to do right by children.’⁵⁵ Others suggest that granting children political rights would undermine differences rooted in culture. ‘Granting children the amount of participation in decision making granted in the Convention [on the Rights of the Child] may be more problematic in cultures where freedom of expression and self-assertion are less valued than obedience and duty fulfillment and where adult–child interactions are traditionally quite hierarchical.’⁵⁶ Indeed, some argue that international non-government organisation work on children’s rights ‘draws children out of their own contexts of family and community, and re-locates them within the rather different context of the developmental organization’.⁵⁷ While not addressed to voting in particular, such claims imply that voting would diminish rather than increase government responsiveness to children’s experiential differences.

Beyond the women’s suffrage paradigm

As this debate over children’s suffrage shows, many of the same arguments are used for and against children voting as were used in the past for and against the vote for women. At the same time, elements of the debate are distinct. My own view, developed elsewhere, is that even arguments based wholly on women’s suffrage are sufficient to support suffrage for minors.⁵⁸ However, what I wish to suggest here is something else: that the logic of the debate around children’s suffrage ultimately needs to be liberated from these kinds of historical antecedent. As already suggested, each historical group to gain the franchise has in fact done so by revising what is meant by the franchise itself: non-landowners, for example, by disentangling suffrage from property rights; or women by appealing to the need to include experiential differences. A similar kind of revision of the very purpose of voting is required if we are to have a constructive debate today concerning children. Elsewhere I have referred to this kind of shift as a practice of ‘childism’, by which I mean, in analogy to terms like feminism and womanism, that children call for not only equality to adults but also, more radically, the systematic restructuring of historical assumptions in response to children’s suppressed differences of experience.⁵⁹

The difference between feminism and childism when it comes to voting can already be detected in the difference between the women's and children's suffrage movements. Women's voting was ultimately won by capping equal rights and difference arguments with the larger idea that it is a matter of women's empowerment. The logic here, viewed in retrospect, suggests that women's equality to and difference from men are ultimately elements of a larger right to exercise power on one's own behalf. But the logic for children's voting has so far been different. Initial efforts started where women's suffrage left off: in children's right to political empowerment. But this starting point had to confront the fact that fighting for children's political empowerment would never likely be achieved by children themselves, especially considering very young children's lack of experience and educational tools to wield political power effectively. No two-year-old will ever hold a university chair or organise a constitutional convention on children's voting, because age affects such abilities differently than gender.

Arguments for children's suffrage have had to discover wider grounds in children's experiential difference, incorporating children's empowerment and equality under the banner of children's difference, instead of the other way around. This focus on difference suggests the need to move the centre of gravity of the debate even more decisively from modernity to postmodernity, insofar as modernity tends to ground political action in individual rationality, while postmodernity tends to do so on the basis of lived experiences of difference.

The most useful forms of postmodern political theory for our purposes are those that reject a purely antagonistic struggle among differences (such as in Laclau and Mouffe⁶⁰) – since here children are likely to lose – and embrace instead an ethic of interdependent responsiveness to difference. Ricoeur, for example, bases social and political relations on an 'intersecting dialectic of oneself and another' in which 'the other constitutes me as responsible, that is, as capable of responding'.⁶¹ Here, differences of experience are the basis for ever more expansive political relations. As Kearney similarly puts it, social responsiveness means that one 'wagers that it is still possible for us to struggle for a greater . . . understanding of Others and, so doing, do them more justice'.⁶² In terms of human rights, the political theorist and activist Appadurai calls for an 'ethics of possibility' that promotes 'those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of the imagination, . . . and that widen the field of informed, creative, and critical citizenship'.⁶³ These forms of postmodernity call for not only a struggle among differences but also a further mutual responsiveness between them.

In this case, it might finally be possible to imagine a political theory that could seriously consider voting rights for children. For even if children are not able to prove themselves equally competent political actors as most adults, and even if children are unlikely to have their voices equally heard in a struggle for political empowerment, they can nevertheless legitimately demand that political representatives respond to their own particular and diverse differences of experience. The children's vote would then be grounded in the necessity for political representation to respond to children's uniqueness rather than their competence or power. The reason the current adult-only vote would not suffice is that children's differences of experience are most reliably understood and asserted by children themselves.

In the modernist model, you only receive suffrage if you can justify your rational independence. Even in many postmodern models, you deserve representation only if you can fight for it for yourself. In a more responsive postmodern model, however, you are owed representation because your experiences deserve a concrete response from those who make laws and policy. In this case, children's suffrage would not only be justifiable, but it would serve as the very model of what voting is ultimately for, namely to make politics

as representative of the widest diversity of the people as possible. A democracy would prove itself truly democratic to the extent that it responds to the people's diversity of differences.

Towards suffrage for minors

Whether or not children's voting can be justified in theory, could it be carried out in practice? Women's suffrage required eliminating centuries-old barriers of gender. What would voting look like if it were also to remove barriers of age? If, for example, it were extended to teenagers, children, toddlers and even babies?

There have been three kinds of solution contemplated so far to this practical question. The first is simply to make suffrage universal, on the view that anyone who desires the vote should not be barred from access to it. This solution is proposed by Holt, who responds to fears of the youngest children not knowing what they are doing by arguing that these children would also therefore not be likely to vote anyway.⁶⁴ Furthermore, as Franklin points out, 'the potential danger of a few children voting who perhaps should not is far outweighed by the actual injustice involved when large numbers of children who are interested and informed about politics and wish to vote are excluded from so doing'.⁶⁵ Indeed, there are many arguably incompetent adults possessing the right to vote, regardless, for example, of senility, intellectual disability or severe mental illness. Here, competence is revealed to be less important a democratic value than inclusiveness.

Universal suffrage for citizens in effect extends to children the logic of suffrage for other groups like women. Regardless of whether members of any group appear interested in or capable of political choices, democracy should aim for maximum inclusivity. Only in this way can political representatives be held fully accountable to the interests of all affected by their decisions. The difficulty with this solution, however, is that a larger proportion of children than women are likely not to vote in actuality. Babies, toddlers and younger children will generally have little sense of what voting means and reduced opportunities to take it upon themselves to exercise it. Younger children would then find themselves the only major social group lacking direct political influence. In fact, by having the vote in theory, this group may become even more marginalised in actuality since it might be felt that they are no longer owed special consideration.

A second option would be to establish what Schrag has called a 'fitness test' for voting, similar to a driving test, in which anyone below the age of 18 would have the opportunity to demonstrate their basic ability to vote whenever they so desired.⁶⁶ Such a test might, for example, ensure that every voter has a minimum capacity to differentiate between major political parties. It would enfranchise any child with sufficient competence and interest, while automatically barring any child without them. At age 18, it could then be presumed that minimal political knowledge exists without having to pass a test.

This model also operates somewhat on the model of women's suffrage, in that it assumes the need for a minimal level of competence. The advantage is that it responds to the most significant criticism of children's suffrage as failing to account for political incompetence. The disadvantage, though, is that it defines voting as a matter of equal rights alone and not also one of power. It does not force politicians to take non-enfranchised children's concerns seriously. In addition, a competence test could even more profoundly marginalise children who are already disadvantaged through, for example, poverty, disability or poor education. Indeed, it may not be possible to invent a fitness test that is not politically distorted.

A third solution is to grant universal suffrage, but empower parents or guardians to exercise it on a proxy basis until such a time as they believe that their child is prepared to exercise it for him- or herself. As noted above, such an option was proposed in the parliament of Germany, though it has never actually been voted upon. In 2008, a broad coalition of children, children's advocates and both liberal and conservative politicians drafted a bill that would grant suffrage to all German citizens at birth, with the proviso that a parent or guardian adopt it on each child's behalf until such a time as they believe the child is ready to use it.⁶⁷ One variation on this model might be to transfer the vote to each child upon passing a competence test.

The advantage of this proposal is that it would overcome the problem, found in both of the other proposals above, of the youngest children finding themselves even more profoundly disempowered. Even the youngest and poorest of children would finally have a relatively direct and proportional influence in political affairs. Every citizen would have an equal say in elections, even if in some cases through the proxy voice of others. If there is a disadvantage, it is that parents and guardians cannot necessarily be trusted to use their extra vote in children's own interests. In general, while a proxy vote is an improvement on no proportional representation at all, it still places that person one step removed from direct inclusion.

My own proposal would be for an amended version of the German model in which suffrage is granted to all citizens at birth and exercised by a parent or guardian until such a time as each child or youth claims it for him- or herself. The difference here is that the right to vote on one's own behalf is not granted by an adult but claimed by the child. A child claiming the right to vote can be taken as basic proof that the child possesses sufficient understanding and desire to exercise it competently. Such a model would realise in practice the post-modern theory developed above that democracy is really about responding to the fullest possible diversity of the people's experiential differences. Most children and youth can interpret their own basic political interests better than adults can on their behalf. For those not yet ready to do so, a proxy vote is the best way to respect this particular kind of difference: the difference of still remaining politically dependent on caregivers.

Such a model suggests a revised way of thinking about voting. Voting would not be the expression of individual rationality or group struggle, but rather the expansion of social interdependency. It would be a mechanism for enforcing the idea that laws and policies should be maximally responsive to people's lives. While some children would still depend on adults for proxy inclusion, and children and youth in general may have less political experience than most adults, the point is that political representatives would be held as accountable as possible to the full diversity of different constituent experiences. Democracy would be that much more representative of the demos or people.

Conclusion

Whatever its theoretical and practical outcomes, the emerging discussion about children's suffrage needs to move beyond simply applying past historical suffrage movements to the young. It can struggle with the more profound challenges by entertaining revised conceptions of voting itself. Every group that has gained enfranchisement over democracy's complex history has demanded that the democratic ideal respond to previously marginalised kinds of experience. Proponents on both sides of the children's suffrage debate will continue to talk past each other insofar as the argument is about whether or not to extend the logics of suffrage inherited from the past. The fact is that, again like all other disempowered groups, children and youth present democratic life with a profound opportunity for

creative new self-critique. What minors really call for is democracy's more profound democratisation.

Notes on contributor

John Wall is Professor of Religion, with a joint appointment in Childhood Studies, at Rutgers University, Camden, USA. He is the author of *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Georgetown, 2010) and *Moral Creativity* (Oxford, 2005), and co-editor of *Children and Armed Conflict* (Palgrave, 2011), *Marriage, Health, and the Professions* (Eerdmans, 2002), and *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought* (Routledge, 2002).

Notes

1. John Maddicott, *The Origins of the English Parliament, 924–1327* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
2. Charles Seymour, *Electoral Reform in England and Wales* (London: David & Charles Reprints, 1970).
3. Mary Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle, eds, *Concise History of Woman Suffrage: Selections from the Classic Work of Stanton, Anthony, Gage, and Harper* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 96.
4. Elizabeth Cady Stanton et al., *The History of Women's Suffrage* (1881; reprint, Salem, NH: Ayer Publishers, 1985), vol. 3, 275.
5. Representation of the People Bill of 1867, House of Commons Debates, 20 May 1867, 821.
6. *Ibid.*, 817.
7. Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, revised ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 141.
8. Representation of the People Bill of 1867, 839.
9. Sophia A. Wingerden, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866–1928* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 14.
10. Stanton et al., *The History of Women's Suffrage*, vol. 3, 697.
11. Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 159–60.
12. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 'Home and Politics: An Address Delivered at Toynbee Hall and Elsewhere', c.1888, 3.
13. Stanton et al., *The History of Women's Suffrage*, vol. 3, 202.
14. Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 155.
15. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *Women's Suffrage Journal*, 1 April 1870, 13.
16. Women's Disabilities Bill, House of Commons Debates, 30 April 1873, 1238.
17. Stanton et al., *The History of Women's Suffrage*, 71.
18. Wingerden, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866–1928*, 73–85.
19. Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 176.
20. E.S. Nichols, ed., *Proceedings and Debates of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Ohio, 1913*, vol. 2 (Columbus, OH: F.J. Heer Printing Co., 1913), 600–39, 604–7.
21. Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 2.
22. UNICEF, Convention on the Rights of the Child. <http://www.unicef.org/crc/> (accessed 10 September 2013).
23. John Wall and Anandini Dar, 'Children's Political Representation: The Right to Make a Difference', *International Journal of Children's Rights* 19, no. 4 (2011): 595–612, 598.
24. Maree Brown and Jaleh McCormack, 'Placing Children on the Political Agenda: New Zealand's Agenda for Children', in *The Politics of Childhood: International Perspectives, Contemporary Developments*, ed. Jim Goddard, Sally McNamee, Adrian James and Allison James (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 185–207.
25. Lucy Jamieson and Wanjiru Mukoma, 'Dikwankwetla – Children in Action: Children's Participation in the Law Reform Process in South Africa', in *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation*, ed. Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2010), 73–82.

26. Jen Williams and Rhian Croke, 'Institutional Support for the UNCRC's "Citizen Child"', in *Children and Citizenship*, ed. Antonella Invernizzi and Jane Williams (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 184–7.
27. Stefanie Conrad, 'Children as Active Citizens: Addressing Discrimination against Children's Engagement in Political and Civil Society Processes' (Plan International, 2009). <http://www.plan-international.org.uk>; Sara L. Austin, 'Children's Participation in Citizenship and Governance', in *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation*, ed. Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2010), 245–53; Children's United Parliament of the World (2013). <http://www.childrenstate.net>; Stephanie McCrummen, "'Children's Parliament' Sets High Bar in Congo: Youthful Body in a Beacon of Justice', *The Washington Post*, 11 August 2007; Neighborhood Community Network (2013). <http://www.neighborhoodparliament.org>; Jayashri Sarkar and Blanka Mendoza, 'Bolivia's Children's Parliament: Bringing Participation to the National Stage', *Children, Youth and Environments* 15, no. 2 (2005): 227–44; Lalitha Sridhar, 'Bal Sansads: Members of Parliament at 11', *Infochange: News and Analysis of Social Justice and Development Issues in India* (May 2004). <http://infochange-india.org/20040508228/Children/Features/Bal-Sansads-Members-of-Parliament-at-11.html>; Emma Williams, *Children's Participation and Policy Change in South Asia* (London, UK: Save the Children, Childhood Poverty Research and Policy Center (CHIP), 2004). <http://www.childhoodpoverty.org/index.php/action=documentfeed/doctype=pdf/id=86>.
28. Alan Turkie, 'More than Crumbs from the Table: A Critique of Youth Parliaments as Models of Representation for Marginalised Young People', in *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation*, ed. Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2010), 262–9; Michael Wyness, 'Regulating Participation: The Possibilities and Limits of Children and Young People's Councils', *Journal of Social Sciences* 9 (2005): 7–18.
29. Mary John, *Children's Rights and Power: Charging Up for a New Century* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 235–9; Ahsa Bajpai, *Child Rights in India: Law, Policy, and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 469.
30. Yves Cabannes, 'Children and Young People Build a Participatory Democracy in Latin American Cities', *Children, Youth and Environments* 15, no. 2 (2005): 185–210.
31. Greg Hurst, 'Ministers Contemplate Lowering the Voting Age to 16', *The Times*, 14 February 2003.
32. Bobby Caina Calvan, 'Californians Consider Granting 14-Year-Olds the Right to Vote', *Boston Globe*, 25 April 2004.
33. Philip Cowley and David Denver, 'Votes at 16? The Case Against', *Representation* 41, no. 1 (2004): 57–62; Alex Folkes, 'The Case for Votes at 16', *Representation* 41, no. 1 (2004): 52–56.
34. BBC News, 14 September 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-24229366> (accessed 15 September 2013).
35. Harry De Quetteville, 'Germany Plans to Give Vote to Babies', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 July 2008; KRÄTZÄ (*die Kinderrächtszänker*) (2013). <http://www.kraetzae.de>.
36. John Holt, *Escape from Childhood* (New York: Penguin, 1975), 155–6.
37. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 120.
38. Bob Franklin, 'Children's Political Rights', in *The Rights of Children*, ed. Bob Franklin (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 24–53, 30–1.
39. Tak Wing Chan and Matthew Clayton, 'Should the Voting Age be Lowered to Sixteen? Normative and Empirical Considerations', *Political Studies* 54 (2006): 533–58, 542.
40. Cowley and Denver, 'Votes at 16? The Case Against', 60.
41. Geoffrey Scarre, 'Children and Paternalism', *Philosophy* 55, 211 (1980): 117–24, 123.
42. John Locke, 'Two Treatises of Government', in *The Works of John Locke*, Vol. V (London: W Sharpe and Son, 1823), 130.
43. Franklin, 'Children's Political Rights', 34.
44. Francis Schrag, 'Children and Democracy: Theory and Policy', *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 3, no. 3 (2004): 365–79, 371.
45. David Archard, *Children, Family and the State* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 53.
46. Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. C.P. Cronin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 64.
47. Cowley and Denver, 'Votes at 16? The Case Against', 61.

48. Benjamin R. Barber, 'The Discourse of Civility', in *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions*, ed. Stephen L. Ekin and Karol E. Soltan (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1999), 39–47, 42–3.
49. Immanuel Kant, *The Science of Right*, trans. W. Hastie (Clifton, NJ: A. M. Kelley, 1974), paras 28–9.
50. Tom Cockburn, 'Children as Participative Citizens: A Radical Pluralist Case for "Child-Friendly" Public Communication,' *Journal of Social Sciences*, no. 9 (2005): 19–29, 27.
51. Schrag, 'Children and Democracy', 374–5.
52. Ruth Lister, 'Citizenship: Towards a Feminist Synthesis', *Feminist Review* 57 (1997): 28–48, 39. See also Ruth Lister, 'Why Citizenship: Where, When and How Children?', *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 8, no. 2 (2007): 693–718.
53. Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, 'A Difference-Centred Alternative to Theorization of Children's Citizenship Rights', *Citizenship Studies* 9, no. 4 (2005): 369–88, 375.
54. Martin Guggenheim, *What's Wrong with Children's Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 266.
55. *Ibid.*, 266.
56. Virginia Murphy-Berman, Helen L. Levesque and John J. Berman, 'U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child: A Cross-Cultural View', *American Psychologist* 51, no. 12 (1996): 1257–61, 1259.
57. Sarah White, 'Children's Rights and the Imagination of Community in Bangladesh', *Childhood: A Journal of Global Child Research* 14, no. 4 (2007): 505–20, 510.
58. John Wall, 'Can Democracy Represent Children? Toward a Politics of Difference', *Childhood: A Journal of Global Child Research* 19, no. 1 (2012): 86–100.
59. John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).
60. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2001).
61. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 341 and 336.
62. Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 81 and 232.
63. Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2013), 295.
64. Holt, *Escape from Childhood*, 155–71.
65. Franklin, 'Children's Political Rights', 45.
66. Francis Schrag, 'The Child's Status in the Democratic State', *Political Theory* 3, no. 4 (1975): 441–57, 452.
67. CRIN (Children's Rights Information Network), 'Germany: Children Should Have the Right to Vote, Say Parliamentarians' (2008). <http://www.crin.org/resources/infoDetail.asp?ID=17831&flag=news>; De Quetteville, 'Germany Plans to Give Vote to Babies'; Goethe Institute, 'The Right to Vote from Birth On?' (2010). <http://www.goethe.de/ges/pok/sup/en5570225.htm>.