

Why aren't children allowed to vote? An expert debunks the arguments against

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Most people think democracy is something that adults do and regard the prospect of children voting as too silly to even contemplate. In the early

20th century, many democracies began (ostensibly) operating with universal suffrage, ensuring voting rights were no longer withheld from adults on the basis of wealth or sex or race. But age thresholds have endured, and children continue to be excluded from democracy—an exclusion based on what they are (young), and adults' assumptions about what it means to be young.

However, in a [2020 report to the UN](#), the UK's children's commissioner concluded that the UK government "does not prioritize children's rights or voices in policy or legislative processes." Consequently, the report argued, children's economic status is often worse than [older people's](#), and during crises such as the COVID pandemic, their insights and needs are ignored. They didn't have a say in Brexit and their concerns about the [environment](#) are routinely marginalized, despite children being set to bear the brunt of both.

A number of countries allow teenagers [aged 16 and 17](#) to [vote](#), but I think we should be thinking harder about our reasons for disenfranchising even very young children. If we're excluding them unfairly, the credibility of democracy is at risk. Here are three common arguments against children voting. In each case, I believe the grounds for exclusion are a lot less secure than we might think.

1. Children are too ill-informed to vote

The most common response to the question "why can't children vote?" is that children are too ill-informed or irrational to do it properly. While adults are capable of understanding what they are voting on, it's too much to expect of children, whose cognitive abilities are much less developed. Children are unlikely to think for themselves, but rather copy the views of authority figures like parents and teachers.

This may be true. But at what point does knowledge or rationality

become relevant to voting, and what it is that voters need in order to vote "well" or "responsibly"? Is it the capacity to identify candidates or political parties? Or the ability to analyze politicians' past performances and future promises? Must voters understand the legislative process and the roles of the various branches of government?

Though these insights are probably useful, there's no agreement on what's essential. And because we're not sure what's required, it's impossible to say adults have it—whatever *it* is—and children don't.

In fact, the differences between children and adults are likely narrower than we commonly suppose: 35% of UK adult voters [can't identify their local MP](#) while, at different times, 59% of Americans haven't been sure which party their state governor belongs to, and only 44% have been able to [name a branch of government](#). We let these adults vote, and rightly so, yet disqualify *all* children for apparently exhibiting the same characteristics.

The fact that adults don't need to show franchise credentials or an independence of mind shows that voting is not a privilege of competency, but rather a right of citizenship. The franchise should therefore be enjoyed by all citizens, including children and even babies.

If this seems frivolous, consider that very young children who can't walk or hold a pen are extremely unlikely, in practice, to exercise their right to vote—much as many adults, for any number of reasons, decline to exercise theirs. What's important is that whenever citizens acquire an inclination to vote—a motivation that presupposes an understanding of what elections do and how they work—the option should be available. Whether they're four or 94.

2. Children voting would lead to policy chaos

Another argument against children voting is that it would lead to policy chaos. If children are irrational and incoherent but nevertheless allowed to vote, the outcome of elections, and the policy decisions they give rise to, would surely reflect or be distorted by their ill-conceived and incoherent votes.

However, this misunderstands the role of elections. Voting is not the same as making law. To vote isn't to decide what happens or get one's way, or even necessarily to set the political agenda. Distilling [public opinion](#) is a messy and complicated process. And because the link between what the public wants and what it gets isn't always direct or obvious, wacky voter beliefs aren't necessarily echoed in policy.

This is why representative democracies can function with vast numbers of uninformed and irrational citizens. In fact, overcoming voter ignorance is precisely what representative politics—in which the people elect representatives to take decisions on their behalf—is all about.

Voting, therefore, is a statement of equality, a recognition of equal moral standing. More concretely, it's a (loose) guarantee that one's concerns and perspectives will not be systematically overlooked by politicians. The fact that children can't vote means they're denied this respect and protection. As the historic experiences of excluded women and ethnic minorities show us, this is not a good position to be in.

3. Voting rights shouldn't come before other rights

The third objection to giving children the vote relates to the order in which particular rights and responsibilities are acquired. Voting is a serious business, the argument goes, and thus the right to vote should coincide with, or follow, the right to perform other activities of similar weight and consequence, such as smoking and drinking, getting married or joining the army.

However, it's worth asking why any of these rights are postponed in the first place. The basic answer is that exercising these rights is potentially harmful, so they're only conferred on individuals who understand, and are likely to be mindful of, the risks.

We withhold such rights from children because (we assume) they often fail to think through the consequences of their actions. However, we don't stop heedless [adults](#) exercising their liberty in a self-destructive way. So why aren't children granted the same latitude?

The answer has something to do with protecting children's potential. We deny children harmful freedoms so as not to jeopardize their future freedoms, to ensure they reach adulthood with as many life opportunities as possible.

This rationale holds vis-à-vis the right to drink or the age of consent. But it works less well with [voting rights](#), which aren't obviously dangerous and pose no direct threat to children's future well-being.

It seems, therefore, that children are suffering an injustice: they're being denied the vote without adequate justification. At the same time, young people are acutely [dissatisfied with democracy](#), in part because they're overlooked in democratic decision-making.

Enfranchisement is not a silver bullet. But unless the place of [children](#) in democracy is improved and deepened, political division and democratic distrust will surely worsen.

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