

5 parameters by which to assess any policy-intervention: Widening the franchise to include children?

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So far in this series we have mainly assessed technologies (GM, nuclear) and public services (the question of how to fund the NHS) according to our five parameters: precaution, evidence, political economy, asymmetry, and framing. In this edition of TPM, we strike out in a different direction: by looking at a question concerning democracy itself. In Britain in the last few hundred years, the franchise has gradually been widened: to include more and more men (not just the wealthy), and then women. This is common-sense to us now: but most of these extensions were highly controversial at the time. We (the authors of this article) like to think that a philosophical approach would have significantly helped ease the path to the extension of the franchise...by suggesting that there is little to fear as a result of such widening (precaution; and, over time, evidence); and by suggesting that widening the franchise is likely to improve the power and the condition of the worse off and most excluded (political economy, asymmetry); and by suggesting that in any case it is the merest justice to seek to let the people govern, which is what 'democracy' means (framing). Can the same line of thought be applied to further extensions of the franchise now? Will it be common sense in a hundred years' time that some of those currently excluded from our democracy are in fact part of the *demos*, entitled to vote?

Well, who?

Well, the most obvious such class of whom there is a substantial number is: those who are currently excluded from voting because they are too young. These people -- teenagers, for instance -- are obviously, well, *people*. So why shouldn't they be allowed to vote? In the nineteenth century, 'we' enfranchised the middle class, and then workers; and in the twentieth century, 'we' enfranchised women; are children (i.e. people under 18) the next logical step?

Of course, the first point to make hereabouts is that obviously there is a potential slippery slope here. It would be absurd, unthinkable to enfranchise toddlers... But equally, of course, just because there is an absurd extreme that no-one would want to go to, and just because there is necessarily then a grey area, a tricky question of where to draw the line, doesn't in the least imply that we shouldn't lower the voting age. Otherwise, we would never have got the franchise lowered from 21 to 18, or indeed from 30 to 21 among women.

So: While it might sound radical -- some would say even crazy -- to consider enfranchising those well below the 'age of majority', we ought judiciously and without prejudice to consider the case. On its merits. What do our five parameters say about extending the franchise to the young? 16-year-olds were already enfranchised in the Scottish independence referendum; nothing calamitous occurred, and indeed the experiment was widely considered an enlivening success. How far further might one go? Why not extend the franchise to include all teenagers, those on the threshold of adulthood, at least? Or more, perhaps...The age of criminal responsibility in the UK is 10. Too young, perhaps? But put it this way: if one is old enough to go to jail, is it clear that one is not old enough to have a say in the laws which decide who goes to jail and who doesn't? Or even more, perhaps...Kids at middle-school are often idealistic, enthusiastic, not world-weary, and are full of ideas and invention. Is it obvious that the decisions that they would make in the ballot-box are worse than those that their parents or uncles and aunts or grandparents make? How about enfranchising 8 year olds?

This is a philosophical piece. We aren't going to debate here (though we think that the debate would be well worth constructing) all the finer points of whether the voting age should actually be 18, 16, 13, or 10, or 8. What we *are* going to do is consider the *principle* of a *radical* extension of the franchise: Think something closer to 10 than to 16...

Let's get underway.

1 Precaution

Is there a risk of ruin, through enfranchising the young? Possibly. Two such possible risks come to mind.

First, one might worry that a radical extension of the franchise would lead to ruinous decisions being made. Then again, there is quite good reason to believe that our existing democracy is making ruinous decisions (e.g. decisions about our environment, which is our shared life-support system) *already*. If so, then the risk merely of such decisions being made also by children-voters is not a serious consideration against a radical franchise-extension.

Second, one might worry about the risk of the kids *themselves* being seriously damaged by the franchise-extension. Would it lead to them being exploited, propagandised by unscrupulous political advertisers, for instance? This we think is a weightier consideration. For, while the power of (such) propaganda is a general worry (think for instance of the cultural and political power of the SUN, or of the MAIL, or of Sky), the worry is particularly vivid with regard to our children. Children, and the more so the younger they are, have less powers of resistance to such exploitation, and more risk of loss of innocence.

However, how serious a risk is this, for (say) 12 year olds, as compared to 4 year olds? We think it is much less serious. And surely no-one is going to propose directly enfranchising 4 year olds. By the time they enter their teens, many children are actually quite worldly-wise and protected against those who would manipulate their minds. Yes, they are still children, and so there is a legitimate worry here. But it is hardly a decisive one.

Finally, and coming back to the first point again, is there reason for hope that children empowered to vote might actually make it more likely that a genuinely precautious programme or attitude would be embraced by political actors? We think that perhaps there is: we shall explain why below, especially under the headings of 'political economy' and 'asymmetry'.

2 Evidence

There is much evidence salient to the question of whether enfranchising the young would be a positive move or not, far too much to work through in any detail here.

One should consider the views of the young themselves: it is interesting that polls often show them themselves doubting whether their own enfranchisement would be a good idea. (Of course, there is a potential paradox here: why should those *against* enfranchising children be at liberty to use the views of those children themselves as evidence against such enfranchisement?)

One should consider what's been done, what's happened, in the past when it has happened: e.g. in reductions of the voting age from 21 to 18, or more recently to 16.

One should consider the capacities of the young: is there an evidentiary reason for doubting that they have the wisdom or capability for rationality etc. of their elders? (Again, one needs to make a comparative judgement, here: such evidence will only be evidence against the enfranchisement-widening-proposal if it suggests that the enfranchised children would be *less* capable of being voting citizens than their elders are, on average...)

We have had a little look at the evidence in these areas, and this is what we think: We think that the evidence *against* radical franchise-extension is by no means non-existent; but we think it is on balance fairly weak. We also however think that the evidence *for* radical franchise-extension is on balance fairly weak. There is some reason to believe that many young voters would not choose to vote; some reason to believe that many of them would be influenced by their parents on how to vote (and there would undoubtedly be dangers of this being abused, along the lines indicated by the postal-voting scandals we have seen in recent years); some reason to believe, on balance, that their effect on elections' outcomes would be less great than some might expect. (In fact, of course, this cuts both ways: if indeed their effect wasn't that great, then naturally the evidence either for or against their enfranchisement is not that strong.)

3 Political Economy

What would be the effects of widening the franchise as considered here upon the *kind* of society we have, upon the distribution of *power* in that society, upon the *values* of society?

For the reasons already outlined above, it is hard to say, in this case, and one has some reason to believe that these effects would be less substantial and less unidirectional than (for instance) would be the negative effects of a large increase in the amount of nuclear power, or of healthcare-privatisation.

However, self-evidently the extension of the franchise to teens or some such would bring about a *prima facie* political empowerment of them. And we think it likely that this empowerment, *even if* it functioned largely only on a symbolic level, would in itself start to change the values of society in a

positive way. Adults would be forced to think about power of children; and forced thereby, we would suggest, to consider the future, which children are to us.

Enfranchisement of the below-working-age young would also increase the voting demographic that is not in work. This might have two implications: those seeking votes would have to think more about the balance between being business-friendly and protective of public services and family life. They also might well have to think significantly more about the transition from education to the workplace. In short, the tendency would likely be against concentration of political power with the economically powerful. And this gives rise to the last point we will make under this heading. While one might be inclined to think that a lack of basic economic and/or financial literacy should serve to rule out enfranchising children, one might just as well see things the other way. Such a lack of economic and financial literacy might well afford these voters a clearer view on some (perhaps moral) matters, which they see undistorted by the propensity to see everything through the prism of financial cost, and of contributions to a material economy.

4 Asymmetry

How would enfranchising children affect the voiceless, those who risk suffering as a result of decisions we make but who lack a symmetric power to alter those decisions? Here again, the idea of a radical franchise-extension has real attractions.

First off, one might consider children themselves as among those who are, at least sometimes, voiceless (though care should be taken not to diminish children's very real agency - an extraordinarily-inspiring (and equally heart-rending) case in this connection is to be found in the story of a youthful Pakistani carpet-making-worker (Iqbal Masih) who did much to liberate and to stand up for and with his fellow bonded-labour child-workers, and who, for his pains, was assassinated - at age 12...).

Perhaps more importantly still, our experience is that children -- and sometimes especially, actually, pre-teen children -- are themselves extraordinary advocates for the voiceless. Children tend to care intensely for our non-human kin, and for the future of our living planet.

We have suggested above (especially in sections 1 and 2) that it wouldn't be much of a gamble to radically extend the franchise. Perhaps that little gamble would be well-worth taking, if it gave us a shot at putting into action a set of attitudes and policies that would actually do a good bit better than we are currently doing at listening to -- and acting for -- the voiceless?

5 Framing

Are children our wards? Are they part of the people? Are they beings whose innocence badly needs protecting? Are they a source of potential wisdom? Are they a potential source of unwisdom? Are they a symbol, a precious reality, a hope?

Actually, we think that there is a good case for a positive answer to ALL of these questions. And that makes the overall question under consideration in this article a tricky one. If the frame of 'Children are part of the people' dominates, then that suggests, *ceteris paribus*, that it is wrong to exclude them from voting. But if we think of them more developmentally, as needing cherishing and protecting so that they can BECOME part of the people, then that suggests, *ceteris paribus*, the opposite.

Another point one might make here is as follows: how do we frame participation in the democratic process in the first place. Is it framed by the minimally-liberal maxim 'government by the people for the people'? If so, then those who are governed deserve a role in the governing. This would seem to frame things in a way which on balance recommends extending the franchise as much as possible. (This thought can be recast by framing our democratic institutions and procedures by foregrounding the question of political legitimacy; again, this might incline one towards extending the franchise, on the simple grounds that a wider franchise suggests *prima facie* a greater legitimacy.)

Or do we frame the democratic process according to the idea of the promotion of public reason, versions of which one finds in Kant and Mill, and more recently in deliberative democratic thought? Here the idea is not merely that individuals be represented through the democratic process, but that the process itself feeds into the development of public reason. Here we might be more inclined

to invoke developmental grounds against extending the franchise to the extent we have been discussing. (But then again, we might not: for perhaps it would be particularly poignant for those developing into being adults to be given the chance to be citizens, to be enfranchised, as part of that very developmental process. Perhaps this *would* feed into the development of public reason.)

Our overall thought, on balance, about framing, is perhaps already implicit in our remarks in sections 3 and 4, above. There is enough grounds for optimism that enfranchising the young would help to reframe our society and our politics as having as its first virtue the need to take care together of our future, of our posterity, to infer that it is a move that, while it may sound extreme, uncommonsensible, even crazy, should be seriously considered. Remember: once upon a time it sounded extreme, even crazy, to talk about freeing slaves en masse. Sometimes, our 'common-sense' needs reconstructing. That is what deep-reframing is all about.

Conclusions

In the previous 'episodes' of this series, we have come to clear judgements on each of the proposals under consideration, on the basis of our five parameters. The present case is far more finely balanced, and far less decisive. In part this is because of the wealth of data one might draw on which we can only gesture at here. In part it is because when one gets to 'framing' one sees the possible frames which could be invoked as spiralling off into the distance. We think that the impact of a radical enfranchisement of the young would probably be less significant in its effects than many would suppose; and that the matter of principle here is complex.

On balance, for the reasons given in sections 3 and 4, we think that there *is* probably a case (albeit very far from a decisive one) for a radical franchise extension. We certainly think that the idea deserves more air-time than it is currently given in our polity (i.e. more than zero: for there is at present zero consideration given to extending the franchise 'below' age 16). Such a change would need to be brought in very carefully, with serious safeguards against its actually turning out to be harmful to children. It would require a step-change in the political education, in the best sense of those words, of the young: and again, this would have to be very carefully judged, to guard against the kinds of abuses we have mentioned above, especially in section 1. The most powerful argument against enfranchising children is probably that it is unfair to them and potentially hazardous to them to do so. But we think that there should at least be serious thought given to how to guard against this, and thus to find a way of enabling the enfranchisement to go ahead (perhaps experimentally, perhaps gradually; and perhaps this process itself, and the clear recognition of the hazards attending getting it wrong, could *itself* once more function in the positive value-moulding way indexed in section 3, above...). Such a widening of the franchise would work best as part of a *package* of measures designed to yield a more genuinely deliberative democracy - measures that should in fact, we would argue, be extended to the whole populace, to deepen, to start to actually bring about, democracy: the *people* governing...

So: the case for (or against) enfranchising the young, we are suggesting, is not clear cut. 'If', reader, you are in favour of 'universal suffrage', that doesn't mean you must support the radical franchise-widening that we have been considering here. *But* we do think that the logic of universal suffrage may bear extending. If this were actually to occur, then, as with the calamities that some forecast from the enfranchisement of workers and women, we think that these alarmists would prove silly and wrong, and that actually there would probably be much less that changed at all than was forecast (again, as actually happened in the 19th and early 20th centuries: enfranchising the workers did not yield socialism). But we think that one thing that maybe *would* start to change somewhat would be our society's chronic short-termism. Its lack of care for its posterity - that we like to represent to ourselves, so often, through our children...

A final thought. We remarked earlier that it would be unthinkable to enfranchise the very young, or the unborn. Or indeed, one might add: unborn future generations. And this is literally true, and obviously so. And yet...one of us (Read) has argued in this very magazine (in TPM 57, back in 2012) that there is a powerful case for effectuating just such an enfranchisement, indirectly, or 'metaphorically'. I.e. That there is a strong case for seeking an *analogue* to enfranchising those

undoubtedly too young to vote on their own part, on grounds especially of precaution and asymmetry (the future ought to be permitted vicariously to prevent its own obliteration and to speak up for itself), and also probably of political economy and framing too. This analogue, Read sought in the idea of creating a quasi-Platonic set of '*guardians* for future generations': to provide our polity with the next best thing to the profound impossibility of literally enfranchising those future generations. The argument for something like 'philosopher-monarchs' to rule over people who are capable, at least in principle, of ruling themselves, is weak at best; but such guardians could seek to represent those people whose biggest problem (and in age of human-created global threats, this is a very big problem indeed) is that they don't exist yet.

If one is convinced by the idea of enfranchising children, then one ought to consider seriously the case for some kind of proxy-enfranchisement of future generations. But equally: if one is attracted by the latter idea, then it might be applied back to the case of children. I.e. If one is profoundly alarmed at the harm that enfranchising children might do to them, and thus unconvinced by our suggestion that it is probably on balance a risk worth taking, then that is not an end of the matter. One ought at minimum to seek to investigate the possibilities of proxy-enfranchisement of them, to seek to realise the benefits explored under headings 3 and 4, above...