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MISSING AN OPPORTUNITY? THE LIMITED CIVIC IMAGINATION OF VOTES AT 16

Abstract

The debate over reform to the voting age at Westminster elections is dominated by a concept of young people as deficient and disengaged citizens. In the contemporary context of young civic action, new approaches to the civic can support a regeneration of the vote in young people's expanded political toolbox. A conceptual approach to the debate on voting reform is presented alongside a critical appraisal of the opportunities available, to all sides of the debate, to contribute to young political regeneration.

I. Votes at 16: missing an opportunity?

Voting is a vital component of citizenship in electoral democracies. The potential reform of electoral rules to include 16 and 17-year-olds in Westminster elections, commonly known as Votes at 16, would therefore change the structure and function of citizenship for young people in the UK. For this reason, the consideration of Votes at 16 must take place alongside an assessment of the concept of citizenship as it pertains to young people, as well as the conceptual approach to citizenship that underpins the consideration and implementation of Votes at 16.

In this article, it is argued that the dominant conceptual framework, inherent in both sides of the debate on Votes at 16, is an engagement or 'at best, apprentice' model of citizenship (Henn and Foard, 2012). According to this model of young citizenship, young people are considered fundamentally deficient, disconnected and disengaged. In this way, electoral franchise reform to include sixteen-year-olds and seventeen-year-olds in Westminster elections continues to model young people as deficient and disengaged political actors in need of external influences to provoke institutional political engagement. As a result, existing debates over, and proposals for, Votes at 16 as a reform for Westminster elections continue to focus on young people as problematic and

disengaged actors and, when concrete proposals for reform are made, young suffrage is hitched onto additional civic education and political engagement components.

The framing of young people as deficient and in need of engagement that dominates policy debates concerning Votes at 16 risks creating a two-tier model of electoral citizenship in which the enfranchisement of the youngest voters is tied, unequally, to education and engagement, and in which the voices of young people continue to be marginalized. In this article, the case is made for supporters and opponents of Votes at 16 in Westminster elections to rebuild a meaningful, two-way conversation with young people about citizenship, social change, and electoral reform. Young people demonstrate political engagement, and, in particular, are found undertaking political action with an expanded toolbox of strategies, approaches and tactics. The imbalance in the concept of citizenship at the heart of the debate over Votes at 16 risks missing a vital opportunity, not only to consider extending suffrage to younger voters, but to regenerate and reaffirm the place of voting in the political toolbox of young citizens.

2. Ambiguous adulthood: uncertainty and division in the debate over Votes at 16

Votes at 16, with respect to Westminster elections, remains a contested idea. Academic debate encompasses many well-advocated arguments for and against Votes at 16. These range from the argument that 16 and 17-year-olds should vote because they are competent to do so (Hart and Atkins, 2011) or at least that they are as incompetent as older voters (Olsson, 2008), to the argument that 16 and 17-year-olds are not competent (Denver, 2013) or that we lack empirical proof of their competence (McAllister, 2014). The defining feature of this debate is, precisely, that it is a debate. Taking competency as an example, there are those who argue young people are competent, and those who argue they are not, and evidence is available for use by both sides. Indeed, the case has been made that young competence is a red herring, since if voting is about competency, then democracies ought to impose a competence test and dispense with arbitrary age limits altogether (Cook, 2013). Competency is just one example of a marker of adulthood on which

the discussion concerning Votes at 16 passes to-and-fro between advocates and their opposition. More recently, the debate is enriched by numerous real-life empirical examples as Votes at 16 has come into being, with prominent European cases in Austria and Scotland. Yet, despite the implementation of Votes at 16 in these cases, there has been little change to the contentious nature of the debate.

Since the academic debate is now well established, with ample evidence from other contexts called upon by all sides, the policy debate on Votes at 16 lacks a firm, evidential framework that can exclude one position or another. As a result, the debate has come to pivot on normative perceptions about 'markers of adulthood' (Loughran et al., 2019:33). These markers are defined exclusively in adult-oriented terms, identifying markers of adult behaviour and adult socialization that conceive of a threshold to adulthood that young people are expected to cross.

3 Defining markers of adulthood

The search for what Loughran et al. (2019:33) call 'markers of adulthood' is similar to the linkage made in the late 1960s between 'Votes at 18' and what were then considered key markers of adulthood. Marriage, parenthood, employment and home ownership constituting major markers, and these were occurring at a younger age in the 1960s than in previous generations. Contemporary debates on markers of adulthood often form around similar approaches to adulthood as a life stage at which young people can or will do things in their everyday lives that are considered in a normative way to be, in some way, adult. In March 2010, for instance, the Scottish Government published a national consultation on the possibility of an independence referendum. The consultation included reforms to institute Votes at 16, proposing that:

> Denying 16 and 17-year-olds the vote risks them becoming disengaged from the political process at the very point society expects them to take on rights and responsibilities such as getting married or serving in the armed forces. (Pickard, 2019a)

The continuing disagreement over whether 16-year-olds count as adults arises in a large part from the normative assessment of such markers – adulthood is, to a great extent, in the eye of the beholder – and reflects a frustration at the confused and confusing range of ages at which different things are allowed in the UK today (Mycock, 2014). Unlike in the case of 'Votes at 18' in the 1960s, when there was general agreement that 18 had become the age of majority, there is considerable disagreement over whether adulthood and the legal rights currently associated with such should begin at 16 (Loughran et al., 2019). Furthermore, the normative nature of markers of adulthood, in addition to the polarizing nature of the debate between advocates and opponents, means that markers of adulthood are not only contentious but can seem to be picked and chosen when they are expedient for the argument – whether for or against Votes at 16 – being made. In the above example, the Scottish Government advocates Votes at 16 based in part on the age of military recruitment in the UK. Yet, that 16-year-olds can be recruited by the military (and, indeed, can begin applications when aged 15) is extremely contentious. It has been challenged by the UK Parliament Joint Committee on Human Rights, the Defence Committee, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, major child rights organizations, Amnesty International, the National Union of Teachers, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and many UK veterans groups, among others. As a threshold for adulthood it is, at best, confusing: it remains legal for 16-year-olds in the UK to take on combat roles, but illegal for them to buy PEGI 18-rated war games like Call of Duty: Modern Warfare. Yet, in the 'often repetitive' arguments for and against Votes at 16 (Loughran et al., 2019:33), in this example from the side of its advocacy, the recruitment of children for combat roles continues to be included time and again in favour of reform, despite the contentious nature of the example.

The issue, exemplified by the above example of child recruitment to the military, is not that markers of adulthood at 16 – or, indeed, at any age – cannot be found or justified in debate. The issue is that these markers are ambiguous, shifting and contentious. They 'overlap with questions of maturity, thus highlighting the increasingly ambiguous and differentiated legal parameters of childhood,

youthhood and adulthood across the UK' (Loughran et al., 2019:33). There is no UK-wide official age of majority, nor even a UK-wide official age of electoral suffrage, now that Votes at 16 are in place for some elections in Scotland and Wales (Pickard, 2019a). It must be said that although advocates for decreasing the age of suffrage tend to point to 16, this is not the lowest threshold for markers of adulthood: the age of criminal responsibility, for instance, is 10 years old in England and Wales. It could be argued that the claim ought to be raised for voting rights at 10 in those locations.

4. Challenging transitions to adulthood

Beyond legal thresholds like the age of criminal responsibility or the voting age, adulthood itself is a complex, socially constructed and contentious concept, not least in times of economic precarity when young people are struggling to establish themselves according to the kinds of markers of adulthood that held in the 1960s, like homeownership and stable employment. The debate over Votes at 16 in the UK identifies markers for adulthood at 16, at 18 or at other ages precisely because these markers are uncertain, contentious, and asymmetrical in their meaning across the UK. Advocacy for or against voting rights at 16, when based on comparisons with other rights and responsibilities, will always rest on uncertain foundations while 'rights and responsibilities are accrued incrementally and often inconsistently across the four nations' (Pickard, 2019a).

Markers for adulthood will remain uncertain and ambiguous, in keeping with an uncertain and precarious contemporary social, economic and political context for young people. The transition to adulthood is complex and socially negotiated. For instance, while stable employment was considered in the 1960s to be a marker of adulthood for the majority of young people at the time the UK debated Votes at 18, employment is more frequently precarious in the UK as a post-industrial economy. The contemporary transition to adulthood is better understood as a navigation of competitive and uncertain employment markets, periods of employment, underemployment and temporary employment as well as joblessness (Antonucci et al., 2014).

It is understandable that, as a result, Votes at 16 is becoming manifest in policy discussions as a component part of the transition to citizenship. The most recent approach the UK has made to adopting Votes at 16 in Westminster elections is the progress of the Representation of the People (Young People's Enfranchisement and Education) Bill 2017-19. Jim McMahon MP said of the proposal:

> As much as the Bill seeks to extend the franchise, the lion's share of the Bill is about education in schools. We recognise that there is a disconnect between politicians, politics and the people we say we are here to serve. (HC Deb 3 Nov 2017, c1140)

The connection between education and enfranchisement represents a concept of young citizenship that is transitional. It conceives of 16 and 17-year-olds as a transitional population who are moving from non-citizenship to citizenship, and identifies the importance of factors 'such as civic education and parental socialization… [that] can play a positive role on the political participation of young people' (Eichhorn, 2018:389). The selective example of the Representation of the People (Young People's Enfranchisement and Education) Bill 2017-19 is presented as an illustration of a vital distinction that must be made between the debate over Votes at 16 in contrast to other historical struggles for suffrage, such as those led by classes of people excluded from power, and the women's suffrage movement. It is also different to franchise reform as an elite-led project to build policy programmes with more diffuse benefits (Lizzeri and Persico, 2004).

On the contrary, as Birch *et al* (2015) predicted, Votes at 16 as a reform for Westminster elections relies on a theoretical concept of the youngest voters as a deficient group who must be guided through a process of education and socialization. Conceptually, the assumption that young people are deficient and disengaged permits advocates for Votes at 16 to accommodate the contentious debates outlined earlier in this article, over issues like young competency or normative markers for adulthood. In the case of this Bill, 'education in schools' represents a commitment to competency and develops a new marker for adulthood. 16-year-olds will have completed a certain required

training course and, therefore, age 16 will be established as an appropriate threshold for suffrage. Leaving behind the arguments for or against this approach to suffrage, conceptually speaking, the tethering of Votes at 16 to education in this way conceptualizes the young person as deficient, and institutes the reform as a top-down and adult-oriented model, based on compulsory training, that intends to pull young people along an institutional pathway into engagement with Parliamentary elections.

5 On political engagement and political efficacy

In this way, the debate concerning Votes at 16 continues to be dominated by the perception that young people are generally disengaged and represent, for that reason, an incipient crisis for democracy. Opponents and advocates alike tend to reproduce a common assumption that most young people are apathetic, civically unaware, disassociated and excluded. The assumption that young people are deficient in their engagement, and need to be guided into participation with democratic institutions has not formed, in a coherent way, with the question of young efficacy in those institutions at a time when 'young people are denied an effective voice in the political process and are short-changed in the policy process' (Furlong and Cartmel, 2012:14). Indeed, even among young people who demonstrate high engagement in traditional, institutional democratic forms like party membership, the experience of politics remains 'perplexing': youth faction members 'appear politically empowered' but 'have not been asked by anyone to participate', do not feel they have any influence on public policy, and lack a 'clear sense of organizational efficiency' (Rainsford, 2017). Young people remain at the margins of party politics, and parties generally see youth wings as a way to recruit, train and socialize members of the future (Henn et al., 2002) rather than members in the present. Young members continue to be siloed in consultations on youth-specific issues rather than on mainstream policy (Mycock and Tonge, 2012).

The approach to youth as a transition, in other words, is manifest in institutional politics through the presumption that young people are somehow in transition to being political, and moving towards

democratic citizenship. It presents a pro-social and conformist (Banaji, 2008:543) path to institutional democratic action that is insulated from young people's lived experiences that institutional action is perplexing, frustrating and often inefficacious. Young people who do participate in institutional democracy find it confusing and frustrating, and often feel disrespected by democratic institutions that do not treat them as equals. As it has been stated elsewhere, advocates for Votes at 16 '[overlook] the need to consider political participation, democratic socialization and transitions to adulthood in a coherent and connected manner' (Loughran et al., 2019:35). It is argued here that, in particular, the debate on Votes at 16 is generally incoherent with respect to the ways that young people are socialized to institutional politics in a contemporary era marked by distrust, disaffection and experiences of political inefficacy. In particular, the debate on Votes at 16 remains insulated from the question of efficacy and the contemporary context of young people's politics in which 'young people are denied an effective voice in the political process and are short-changed in the policy process' (Furlong and Cartmel, 2012:14).

6. Contemporary political socialization: young people's complex political toolbox

In the contemporary era young people in the UK are socialized to a particular social, political and economic context. This context is, for most, economic precarity and hardship (Bessant et al., 2017) and experience of successive economic, social and political crises from the economic crash of 2007-2008 to the well-remembered protests, demonstrations and political upheaval among the young in connection to austerity policies and especially the rise in tuition fees in 2010-2011, from the uprisings and unrest in English cities in 2011 to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated control regimes. For young people, this period is also characterised by the broadening of political grammars to include more of what has been called 'Do It Ourselves' politics (Bang, 2010; Pickard, 2019b) or a regeneration of 'everyday politics' (Sloam, 2020). The political action of young people since the turn of the millennium has become characteristically diverse. Where elections are concerned, low rates of young turnout were long regarded the harbinger of young political abstention or even apathy in

the UK. On the contrary, recent experiences of increased young participation in the referendum on Scottish independence (Eichhorn, 2018), the referendum on EU membership (Sloam, 2018) and possibly the General Election of 2017 (Sloam et al., 2018) have been argued to indicate that young people abstain in some polls and vote in others. At least, based on these experiences, it appears that fluctuations in young abstention are a complex phenomenon.

In this context, the debate over Votes at 16 presents an important opportunity to revisit the concept of the vote with respect to young people, and the way that young people become socialized in the UK today. While political socialization is a vital component of democracy, and while the development of competence in civic action is part of the transition to adulthood, the debate over Votes at 16 largely fails to consider democratic socialization in a coherent way (Loughran et al. 2019. Votes at 16 in Westminster is so much debated as a case of developing competency or reaching markers of adulthood that it overlooks the broader richness of the political in democracy. For instance, the significance of personal experience of inequality, injustice, altruism and efficacy on political subjectivity is well established (Haste and Hogan, 2006:477), and exposure to deprivation or inequality has a major role in an individual's development of political agency. Civic commitments and connections also develop democratic citizenship. These processes do not come with clear, adult-defined age thresholds: one can experience altruism or injustice at an early age and become socialized to concepts of democratic governance, electoral democracy and civic action accordingly.

While debates over Votes at 16 focus on adult-imposed markers of adulthood, for young people the process of socialization to politics as well as the process of undertaking political action is far more complex. The political toolbox for young people represents an expanded 'grammar' of political subjectivities and activities, including new grammars of the political that are characteristic of contemporary young people's politics (O'Toole, 2015). Young people's political activism is frequently transgressive or subversive of traditional and institutional politics. For instance, young people can use the internet to unlock opportunities for local, national and international networks of support,

learning and cooperative political action that show differences to the political action of older people (Grasso, 2018:186). The politics of young people are not formulated in a relationship with stable, reliable and externally imposed threshold markers of adulthood but, on the contrary, against the complicated task of constructing and depicting oneself. For instance, though debates over Votes at 16 continue to reinterpret the concept of entering work and paying taxes as a marker of adulthood, truly for young people the nature of work is not one of stability, but of seeking it in times of economic precarity. The contemporary transition to adulthood is more accurately compared to the process of building and submitting a CV for consideration by adults than crossing an immutable marker in the life course. Not only are young people undertake complex and precarious transitions to adulthood, but they are frequently socialized to democracy with a sense of anxiety (Flanagan, 2008) or pessimism (Mitrea et al., 2020).

A good example of young political socialization in practice, which is directly applicable to Votes at 16, is the contemporary form of young people's environmental activism. The global movement of young people taking political action in the environmental cause has begun a new and influential wave since 2018 (Wahlström et al., 2019). In particular, young environmental activists have demonstrated in response to climate change and perceived inaction or inadequate action on the part of individuals, governments and international organizations. Although environmental activism is a broad field, the movement of school climate strikes is characteristic as a youth-led, youth-centred movement (Bowman, 2020) that, in the UK, has used school strikes. School strikes are a form of direct action in which young people withdraw their labour from schools in a similar way to a worker's strike, and school strikes have been familiar in UK politics since the late 19th century (Cunningham and Lavalette, 2004). Many of the young people participating in school strikes – and, indeed, organizing them – are under the age of 16 (Wahlström et al., 2019) and early studies with young people participating in the climate strikes find that young people develop networks, share their feelings and explore approaches to the politics of climate change at school, both in class and in informal relationships with friends, family and classmates. This process of political socialization is extremely

powerful, because it represents the development of young people as members of a democratic society, who are not only possessed of the capacity to take action, but who undertake it in a characteristically democratic fashion. Worldwide, the democratic movements of the young tend to be more horizontal in structure, more grassroots in orientation, and open to new ideas and to the sharing of opinions. Similarly, the characteristic manner of young people's environmental politics in the UK is that young people, including young people who do not consider themselves activists, wish to discuss issues with their peers (Sloam, 2020) and see democracy as a rich pluralism in which there are many approaches and opportunities to work together with others (Bowman, 2020).

School strikes over the need for action to respond to climate change have been another recent example of the richness of young people's politics around the age of 16, including those younger and older. They are also an example of the failure of the debate on Votes at 16, which continues to conceive of young people as deficient and disengaged, to 'consider political participation, democratic socialization and transitions to adulthood in a coherent and connected manner' (Loughran et al., 2019:35). The process of socialization to democracy, for young people, is part of a complex and uncertain transition to adulthood. It is, characteristically, a period in which young people want to listen to and learn from each other, and find opportunities to do things for themselves (Pickard, 2019b). While young people are not a monolith, it is broadly the case that the contemporary transition to adulthood is one in which young citizens and citizens-to-be explore multiple opportunities for political action. Most of these do not adhere to adult-imposed thresholds of competency or normative propriety, because political subjectivity is developed by personal experiences of inequality, injustice, altruism and efficacy (Haste and Hogan, 2006:477) as well as interactions with peers, friends, teachers, parents, family members and others in the community, and these experiences do not start at 16.

7 Nonparticipation, abstention and dissent

The debate over Votes at 16 is missing a vital opportunity. The political subjectivity, political explorations and democratic action of young people at all ages, including around the age of 16, is accompanied in the UK by the abstention of young people from institutional political participation. The millennial generation has been called the 'least politically engaged of all' across multiple repertoires of political activity (Grasso et al., 2019:199). The current young generation, who are now coming of age in times of ongoing crises, are developing a political toolbox for taking part in democratic society. They do not, according to the evidence we have, perceive democratic politics as a straightforward matter of getting the vote at a certain age and using it. They develop a broader toolbox, within which the vote coexists with other processes of sharing, cooperating, organizing and acting as an individual and together with others. Young people are doing all these things irrespective of markers of adulthood. Votes at 16 remains an 'elite-driven project' (Birch et al., 2015) that is out of step with an era of grassroots democracy.

Votes at 16 is also out of step with an era of young dissent. Young people, socialized as they are during periods of crises, are frequently pessimistic about the social, political and economic status quo and want things to be different (Mitrea et al., 2020). That citizens can, and should, challenge the status quo is not only good for democracy, but vital to the sustainability of democratic systems. Where Votes at 16 is concerned, however, the emphasis on mandating thresholds and processes by which young people can be guided into institutional engagement with the existing political system does not recognize that many young people would like the opportunity to dissent from that system, and to improve it. In other words, as O'Brien et al (2018:1) put it, writing on young people's environmental activism, 'the challenge for democratic theorists, activists and citizens is not just about how young people can be included in decision making. It is also a question of how they can dissent from prevailing norms, lifestyles, decisions and action that perpetuate business as usual and its far-reaching, long-lasting and in some cases irreversible global impacts'. In the case of young people concerned about climate change and in other cases too, young people do not simply wish to sustain the existing socio-political system by participating in it. They wish to improve it by changing

it, and the debate over Votes at 16 is missing the opportunity to make the case for the vote as a way to do so.

8. Regenerating the vote: a new civics approach to Votes at 16

Democratic citizenship is a concept that includes a tension 'between the goal of creating citizens who will be actively involved in sustaining the existing socio-political system, and the goal of creating citizens who are equipped to challenge the status quo' (Haste et al., 2017: 3). The debate concerning Votes at 16 is remarkable for the imbalance between these two sides of the tension in citizenship, and specifically for the purposive attitude of proponents and detractors to define the extension of suffrage as a tool for engaging young people. That is to say, the question of Votes at 16 is predominantly argued to be one of how the existing socio-political system can most appropriately sustain itself through the active involvement of young people, and only rarely as a tool that equips young people to challenge the status quo. This fundamental question remains on the margins of the debate surrounding reform to the exclusion of 16 and 17-year-olds from the electorate.

A vote is about having a voice, but it is also about having power. Whether one advocates or opposes Votes at 16, the debate over suffrage is an opportunity to bring young people into a regenerating discussion about the vote, its role in democracy, and its utility in young people's political toolbox. The limited conceptual framing of Votes at 16 as, predominantly, an elite-driven project for defining markers for adulthood and assessing young people's competence to vote according to those markers, along with compulsory education, does little to make the case for voting as an effective tool. It does not take advantage of the richness of young political socialization beyond limited, contentious and largely outdated concepts like home ownership, stable employment and military recruitment (Loughran et al., 2019). In particular, while such markers for adulthood may on occasion coincide with the right to representation in Government when paying taxes and so forth, in other cases (such as the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales) they do not. Vitally, the current debate on Votes at 16 has limited ability to conceive of new civic approaches to participation

that can develop voting, at any age, in better coherence with the rich and variegated nature of contemporary political socialization and participation.

The approaches known together as 'new civics' herald dramatic changes to how we think about civic participation, certainly in the last decade (Haste et al., 2017:3). A new civics approach requires us to 'broaden the definition of civic participation' (Carretero et al., 2015:300) beyond the bounds of electoral politics to include, for instance, modes of participation like 'Do It Ourselves' politics (Pickard, 2019b), 'voice as agency' (Carretero et al., 2015: 300) and the politics of young voicelessness (Kallio and Häkli, 2011). In the above example of young people participating in school strikes, new civics recognizes that protesters struggle to be recognized as 'agents of democracy, not pathological deviants' (Haste et al., 2017:4) and that widening the scope of what is considered civic is of benefit not only to those who undertake broadly civic actions, but also, generally speaking, to democratic systems.

Writing on the debate for and against Votes at 16 in Australia, Judith Bessant (2020) explains that while 'young people have become politically active across the globe' there remained 'confusion' over the role children and young people should play in community and political life. In her detailed analysis of the debate on both sides, Bessant explains that the exploration of Votes at 16 as a potential reform was limited by the assumption that young people 'are always by nature deficient in a variety of ways that confirms their status as denizens' rather than citizens New civics offers an opportunity for all of us, on both sides of the debate on Votes at 16, to regenerate our discussion about electoral franchise in a way that reclaims the vote as a functioning tool for democratic power. Where young people are concerned, a new civics approach to Votes at 16 demands a more complex set of questions than 'do we allow them to have their say', and a more responsive and agile concept of political socialization than the identification of certain markers of adulthood as appropriate to the accrual of voting rights alongside other rights and responsibilities (Loughran et al., 2019). The debate over Votes at 16, whether or not the reform for Westminster elections becomes law, offers a unique

opportunity to reopen the definition of the civic and the concept of the vote in a way that can reinforce the role the vote plays in the political toolbox for young people.

9. Conclusion: Some recommendations for Votes at 16

Based on the evidence that young people's political activism is characterized by grassroots organizing, by sharing voices and opinions with peers, and by 'Do It Ourselves' approaches to civic activity, practical opportunities to involve young people in reform will be many. These must start from a renewed interest in young people as citizens on whom democracy depends, and on a concept of interdependence that builds on the inherent tension in democratic citizenship 'between the goal of creating citizens who will be actively involved in sustaining the existing socio-political system, and the goal of creating citizens who are equipped to challenge the status quo' (Haste et al., 2017: 3). Whether one advocates for or against Votes at 16, it is vital to recognize that the debate over extending suffrage is an opportunity to involve young people meaningfully in that process alongside broader structural reform to a democratic system in which 'young people are denied an effective voice in the political process and are short-changed in the policy process' (Furlong and Cartmel, 2012:14). Among the many practical approaches to shift the focus of Votes at 16 away from the current 'elite-driven project' (Birch et al., 2015) and towards a process of regenerating the vote within a broadened 'definition of civic participation' (Carretero et al., 2015:300), several are envisaged here.

First, while Votes at 16 are commonly envisaged alongside a renewal of civic and political education in schools, it is vital that such education responds to the fact that political socialization is complex, multifaceted and begins at an early age. Young people are not non-political denizens who are to be brought into citizenship. As democratic citizens, they develop, maintain and craft modes of political being, belonging and, indeed, civic and political action including at ages below 16. One practical method for supporting youth-centred civic learning is Youth Participatory Action Research, aligned with teaching methods that support young people in studying, exploring and taking action on issues

in their communities (Cammarota and Fine, 2008). If Votes at 16 is to be accompanied by bolt-on proposals for civic education, a broader concept of the civic would allow the Vote to coincide with a broader welcoming of young people in civic life through education, not just in how to engage with political institutions, but also in youth-led civic action, through YPAR as one example.

Second, the reform itself as an 'elite-driven project' (Birch et al., 2015) is a glaring opportunity for meaningful consultation with young people themselves. In particular, much work has been done by the British Youth Council which, since 2003, as led the Votes at 16 Coalition alongside a wide range of political parties, young people's organizations and democratic reform groups. In their important review of Votes at 16 in the UK, Loughran et al. (2019:33) identify the British Youth Council's (BYC) 2014 Select Committee, comprising youth councillors from around the UK, as having produced the 'most substantial consideration of the implications of the reform since the Electoral Commission's (2004) *Age of electoral majority* report'. The BYC , and other youth-led organizations in the UK, and the work of young people in local youth councils, could be an important asset in the delivery of a meaningful, youth-led and youth-centred citizens assembly on Votes at 16. The debate on voting age reform is an opportunity to work with youth organizations like the BYC to put young people at the heart of the reform. For instance, if political education is to be attached to Votes at 16, what education would young people wish to have? What systemic reforms would young people wish to see in democratic institutions that would regenerate the connection between young people and the vote as a democratic tool?

A renewed interest in the concept of the civic, with respect to young people, will allow us to see Votes at 16 as an opportunity in a way that the current and restricted debate over reform cannot. In their recent and influential review of the current state of Votes at 16, Loughran et al. (2019:34) warn advocates who see voting age reform 'as a mechanism for encouraging greater youth political participation' that they must 'address the danger that it may merely empower the already engaged while doing little to address the underlying causes of youth political disengagement'. They also argue

that Votes at 16 looks likely 'as political and public support is growing', including among a small but growing group of Conservative MPs (Loughran et al., 2019:34). If Votes at 16 looks likely, then it is important that the debate takes place, now, in a form that produces proposals for the reform of the voting age that best accommodates opportunities to address the underlying causes of youth political engagement. Votes at 16 has substantial support among 16 to 17-year-olds (Loughran et al., 2019) and the interest of young people in the reform represents an unparalleled chance to involve young people directly in the reform in a holistic approach to reform.

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