5 *Manifesto 3*

Suffrage and Political Equality – Where Do Children Fit?

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5.1 Introduction

This manifesto is about who gets included in democracy – that is, who gets to vote and participate in the democratic process – and who doesn't. It proposes a new democratic settlement – one in which ageist assumptions (about children) no longer operate, and children are afforded this same political right as their fellow citizens. This is not a straightforward claim to make. For many, the idea of children voting is conceptually incoherent, and, at present, there is limited political support or momentum for children's suffrage. Consequently, much of this manifesto is concerned with the range of arguments used to police the distinction between democratic inclusion and exclusion, and whether they're sound. Only by reckoning with and rebutting these arguments can the ground be cleared to make a coherent case for children's suffrage. The second half of this manifesto illustrates why the ordinary arguments for franchise rights also – and maybe especially – apply to children.

There was a time when the answer to the question who gets included in democracy was depressingly limited. Before the advent of so-called universal suffrage in the early twentieth century, very few people in democracies were allowed to vote. Various religious groups were excluded, as were men without property, and it's only in the last 100 years or fewer that women have been enfranchised and the voting rights

This manifesto is based on a lecture I gave at Eton College on 14 June 2023. For a more thoroughgoing account of some of the same arguments, see Pearse (2023a).

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of ethnic minorities properly respected and protected. By contrast, in modern democracies, the question might seem like a non-starter. The franchise is now far more inclusive, and voting populations are considerable. It's true that, in most democracies, prisoners aren't allowed to vote – presumably as punishment for violating the social contract in some way. People who live in a country but aren't citizens can't vote either – being not sufficiently invested in that place's politics and social structures. And yet, relatively speaking, these are fractions of any given population, so hardly significant (or hugely worrying) carve-outs from the franchise.

This is not the case, however, with the only other excluded constituency, children – or those under the age of eighteen. Questions of inclusion are still worth asking because this group is actually pretty massive; even in ageing populations – such as those in England and Wales – children make up 20 per cent of the population (UK Government, 2020). That's one in five people – one in five people who aren't allowed to vote.

In this manifesto, I want to talk about whether or not this is right or justified. What are the arguments for excluding children from the franchise, and are they fair and legitimate? And conversely, what are the arguments of including children, and do they stand up to scrutiny? In 2022–2023, I ran a research project in the University of Cambridge Primary School (UCPS), where I put these and similar questions to six-, eight- and ten-year-olds (Pearse, 2023b). It turns out that young children have a lot to say about democracy, as well as various political issues, and in some cases showed an interest in alternative democratic arrangements. The findings of this research aren't the basis for my view that children should be enfranchised. As I hope to demonstrate, there are independent, and in some cases a priori, reasons why we should think about children as political agents who, like adults, are entitled to vote in elections. Nevertheless, speaking to students at UCPS added colour to these arguments, and left me more optimistic about the scope and prospect of democratic innovation.

In what follows, I'm going to make the argument in favour of children's suffrage in two parts. In the first part, I'll discuss the arguments against children voting, and hopefully show how they're arbitrary or misguided. Then, in the second part, I'll set out the more positive case, and try to show why it's important and right that children participate in democratic politics. And note, by children, I mean

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anyone under eighteen. Not just sixteen-year-olds, not just six-year-olds; but every single person. (If the prospect of a two-year-old voting sounds faintly ridiculous, don't worry, I agree, and I'll address that reservation at the end; so hold on to that scepticism. For now, however, I just want to stress that when I say children, I don't just mean teenagers; I mean young children as well.)

5.2 The Case against Children Voting, and Why It's Flawed

But I'll start with the arguments against. I think when you ask people 'why aren't children allowed to vote?' they normally answer with one or all the following. The first thing they say is that children are too incompetent to vote responsibly. The second thing is that enfranchising children would distort electoral outcomes and make democratic politics incoherent. And the third is that it'd be nonsensical to grant people voting rights before they acquire other age-related rights – like the rights to buy alcohol and cigarettes, get married, join the army or drive a car.

The issue of competence is, I think, the central question. It's widely assumed – and, on average, it's certainly plausible – that children aren't as competent as adults. They're less knowledgeable, less experienced, and they lack something – reasonableness, wisdom, acuity – that apparently only comes with adulthood. Thus, while adults are equipped for democratic participation, children are not – they lack the ingredients necessary to vote responsibly (Cowley and Denver, 2004).

However, if you want to hold this position, you've got to have an answer to the following question: which capacities, knowledge or skills are *actually* and *specifically* necessary for someone to vote responsibly? Is it the ability to make logical inferences, or reason from abstract principles? Is it knowledge of the different branches of government or the legislative process? How important is it to understand a party's policy platform, and how it differs from others? And should one vote for the common good or in one's self-interest? The problem is that we just don't know – there's no agreement on what someone needs to vote responsibly. And until we collectively decide what's necessary, it's impossible to say adults have it – whatever *it* is – and that children don't.

Still, for argument's sake, let's assume that some sort of competence is required to vote – what might this imply for children? Well, if we

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assume a minimal competence requirement – say, the ability to loosely compare parties or leaders – many children would presumably qualify. In which case, the grounds for exclusion disappear, and children should be given the vote. By contrast, if we assume a high competence threshold – for example detailed understanding of entire legislative agendas, and the ability to reason from first principles, with an eye on common interests – most children would presumably fall short. However, so too would many adults. According to YouGov (2020), 35 per cent of UK adult voters can't identify their local MP. While, at different times, 59 per cent of Americans haven't been sure which party their state governor belongs to, and only 44 per cent have been able to name a branch of government (Achen and Bartels, 2017).

You can test a version of this proposition yourself. If you're a child, ask your parents or teachers, and if you're an adult, ask anyone, to explain and evaluate the NHS, and Brexit, and macroeconomics, and housing reform, and environment policy, and traffic regulation, or any number of other policy issues. Very few will have mastery of all, or even any, of these issues, let alone piercingly original insights. (Full disclosure: I have absolutely none.)

And yet, in all modern democracies, ignorant and irrational adults – like me – are allowed to vote. We form sketchy judgements – about immigration or labour markets or whatever – and vote accordingly. And rightly so. If we excluded adults for having silly or ill-informed views, the electorate would be a very lonely place indeed. And yet, at the same time, we disqualify children by accusing them of the very same shortcomings. That is, we hold children to a competence standard that we don't apply to adults. This is arbitrary, unfair and something we should reconsider.

That's the first argument against giving children the vote; the idea that children are *uniquely* incompetent – a claim that's either unknowable or not true. The second, related argument is that enfranchising children would lead to policy chaos. Here, the basic idea is that ignorant or disengaged electorates will produce an ignorant or disengaged politics. If we allow inexperienced and irrational children to vote, the outcome of elections and the policy decisions they give rise to, will reflect, and be distorted by, children's ill-conceived and incoherent preferences.

This concern is rooted in a particular view of democracy and the role of elections. It assumes that voting is a mechanism for distilling public

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opinion, and that the views of the electorate have a powerful influence on the content of law and public policy (Dahl, 1991, p. 126). If this were true – if this was what elections were for – concerns about voter incoherence would be entirely justified. We'd want voters to be reasonable and knowledgeable so that when they vote in elections, their influence on politics was sensible and good.

The problem with this argument, however, and the reason we don't need to be overly concerned about voters' cognitive abilities, is that this is not what elections are all about. Voting in an election is not the same as deciding what happens; voters don't necessarily get their way, and they certainly don't make the law. That's the job – and has always been the job – of politicians and bureaucrats.

It's plausible that, over time, a country's politics will move with the ideological temperament of its citizens – although here we're talking years or decades, not months or news cycles (Caughey and Warshaw, 2018). Democracies aren't unresponsive to their voters' interests and concerns – in fact, the empirical evidence shows they're disproportionately responsive to the concerns of the rich, the white, the educated, and the male (Elsässer, Hense and Schäfer, 2021). Most politicians have it both ways; they pander to voters *and* renege on manifesto commitments. However, the whole point of representative democracy is to put some distance between citizens, who vote in elections, and politicians, who take decisions. It doesn't matter if voters are Einsteins or Zoolanders, because they're not the ones who decide things; politicians are. And this is why democracies have survived – and in some cases, flourished – with ignorant, unreasonable or indifferent electorates (Hannon, 2022).

The point, then, is that allowing children to vote is unlikely to radically distort public policymaking. Democracies might gradually become more responsive to children's needs, which would be no bad thing. But the frivolities of children's lives wouldn't suddenly become policy preoccupations because politicians wouldn't let them.

Nor – I don't think – would we see a major disruption to party politics. If children could vote, their voting options would be limited, just as, in first-past-the-post electoral systems or highly polarised democratic environments, adults' voting options are limited. We'd still have the same political parties, served by the same bureaucracy, and headed by the same (often underwhelming) politicians.

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Moreover, even if we assume that children are stupid and irrational – and to a significantly greater degree than adults – what effect would this actually have on the electoral map? There's no reason to assume ignorant children would all vote for one and the same party. On the contrary, their ignorance and irrationality would be distributed across the political spectrum – much as ignorant adult votes are allocated to different people, parties and programmes (Olsson, 2008, p. 67).

The final worry about political disruption is that granting the vote to children would gift an additional de facto vote to parents, who exert considerable influence on their children's preferences. As children are highly impressionable, they're likely to follow their parents' instructions, and parents will thus end up with more political power than other childless adults. But again, I think this concern is misplaced. For one thing, we simply don't know how politically biddable children are. Ballots are private, which gives anyone the freedom to vote as they wish. And as any parent will tell you, children are famed for their disobedience as much as – if not more than – their quiescence.

And yet, to some degree, this also misses the point. Political influence is inevitable. Who reading this has ever had a truly original thought, uninfluenced by environment or other people? Adults are influenced by the newspapers they read, the TV they watch, their work, their friends, their religious groups, their trade unions – and in some cases, still their parents. Children and adults are alike in this regard. Both exist in spheres of influence. And seeing as we don't hold it against adults, we shouldn't really hold it against children.

I've now covered the claims that children are incompetent, and that their votes would mess up public policymaking. The third and final objection to children voting is about the order in which rights and responsibilities – including voting rights – are acquired. In the UK, at present, you can vote at eighteen, which is the same age you can get married and buy cigarettes and alcohol. The age of consent, and the age you can join the army, is sixteen. And incredibly, children in England become criminally responsible at ten years old.

This sequencing works, according to some, because voting is a serious business, and the right to vote should therefore be acquired around the same time – and certainly not before – one acquires the right to do other things of similar weight and consequence, like getting married or joining the army. If you're too young to drink or smoke, surely you're too young to vote? And if you're not deemed fully

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accountable to a country's laws, presumably you shouldn't have a say over that country's governance?

On the surface, these parallels seem fair and plausible. However, to properly adjudicate their validity, we need to understand why certain rights – be it to drive or marry or drink – are withheld from children in the first place. As freedom is generally thought to be an important quality, and an indispensable feature of any democracy, why is it that adults are free to do some things that children aren't?

Although this sounds like a straightforward question, getting a precise answer isn't easy. For example do adults possess certain qualities – lacking in children – that make them fit for liberty (Uprichard, 2008)? Intuitively, several things come to mind – adults are more reasonable, more experienced, wiser and more knowledgeable than children. And therefore, they're likely to exercise their freedom with greater care. Well, maybe. But like the competency question, the boundary between childhood and adulthood is often blurrier than we think. I've met plenty of children who are reasonable, wise and knowledgeable enough to exercise liberty sensibly. And we've all met adults who are manifestly unsuited to freedom: adults who are frivolous, reckless, thoughtless – and ultimately dangerous.

Nevertheless, in a crude and approximate way, democracies stagger the acquisition of rights to ensure children – whose whole lives are ahead of them – are not unduly or prematurely injured by the misuse of potentially harmful liberties. Adults have the freedom to become alcoholics, or get in car crashes, to get married and divorced, or kill people in battle. But we withhold these rights from children until such a time as they're deemed sensible enough to exercise them, if not with care, then with a greater appreciation of their consequences. We rely on some idea of 'childhood', even though it's a woolly and imperfect category. And we deny children harmful liberties so as not to risk their future freedoms.

This is relatively uncontroversial. There aren't many people who think children – however defined – should be allowed to drive or get married; the risk for harm is simply too great. But while this rationale works well vis-à-vis the right to drink or smoke, or the age of consent, it doesn't apply to voting rights, which aren't obviously dangerous, and which pose no direct threat to children's future well-being (Umbers, 2020, pp. 741–742).

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As we've talked about already, the franchise doesn't give someone the power to make a law or decide a course of action. So voting isn't a way for one person to hurt another. Nor is it dangerous for voters themselves – at least not in the same way that smoking endangers smokers, or war endangers soldiers. When someone acquires the right to smoke or get married, they open themselves up to physical or psychological danger. Voting rights, on the other hand, have the inverse effect. Voting is a way to protect yourself – both from the state and your fellow citizens. And it's only when you're enfranchised that your rights and liberties are truly secure – as testified by the twentieth-century experiences of women in the UK and African Americans in the US.

Finally, there's the question of criminal responsibility. It's true that enfranchising children under ten would mean children in the UK could loosely affect the lawmaking process but not themselves be responsible to the law. Perhaps this seems jarring. But remember that the connection between voting rights and criminal responsibility is hardly decisive. People visiting a foreign country are expected to obey the law and are punished if they don't, despite having no say in the law's construction. Allowing children to vote before they can be charged with an adult crime is simply the inverse arrangement. It's hardly beyond the realm of existing practice.

5.3 The Positive Case for Child Enfranchisement

Having been though the flaws in the arguments against children voting, I've hopefully shown that the reasons for excluding children from democracy don't really stack up. In my view, this establishes good theoretical ground to revise, or better yet abandon, our current voting age thresholds. However, in practice, simply noting the unfairness or inconsistency of the status quo is unlikely to bring about reform. For that, we'd also need a standalone case for children's suffrage, and even then, political change is unlikely without a loud and active social movement; which is maybe where you – younger readers – will pick up the baton.

However, with that first condition in mind, in what remains of this manifesto, I'm going to set out the positive case for children voting. There are two, interrelated reasons why children should be given the vote; both gestured at already, but worth drawing out and making

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explicit. The first is a matter of principle, and the second is a question of political pragmatism.

The principle is that of political equality – the essential democratic attribute. While monarchies and aristocracies allocate political power unequally, democracies share it among members of the political community. Of course, historically, the number of participating members in a democracy was often relatively small – usually confined to male citizens, and only men who had either completed military training or owned a certain amount of property. However, in modern democracies, the demos has become a broader entity, in which virtually every adult citizen has the right to vote. Thus, according to Article 21 of the United Nations' (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 'The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government . . . expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage.'

These universal voting rights are built on, and derive their power from, two interlocking claims about human equality. The first is that everyone is equal in human dignity – that is, we all possess the same moral weight and value, and no person is intrinsically worth more than anyone else. And the second is that we all have unique (though not perfect) access to our own perspectives – in other words, our experiences bear on us in ways that only we appreciate, and shape who we are as people.

Two things then follow from this, politically. First, if we all have equal moral value, no one should be given more authority, or offered greater security, simply because of who they are. We all deserve the same degree of formal respect and protection. And second, if we all have a degree of self-knowledge, we all deserve to formulate our own preferences, and express them publicly if we wish. This, in a nutshell, is what voting is all about. Voting rights are a statement of political equality. They signal that – whoever we are – our opinions have as much weight and influence as anyone else's. And – if we want – they're a means to channel our views and submit them to public scrutiny.

So, the question is, Do children have as much moral value, and are they as privy to their own experiences, as adults? I think the answer is yes. And this means they too are entitled to respect and protection, and an outlet for their views and ideas. In short, they should have the vote. As long as we fail to provide this, 'universal suffrage' is not really universal at all; it's partial suffrage, checked by age, acting as a (not very good) proxy for competence.

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A fuller and more faithful understanding of universal suffrage finds support in Article 12 of the United Nations' (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says that any child 'capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views in all matters affecting the child'. Which – to me – sounds like the right to vote. Article 13 goes on to say that children's 'right to freedom of expression' should 'only' be restricted if necessary to protect the rights of others, national security and public order and health. As voting rights pose no threat to others nor to the social fabric, allowing children to vote would hardly violate these conditions.

Nevertheless, some people still maintain that voting age thresholds *are* compatible with political equality (Weale, 2007, p. 214; Daniels, 1983). After all, we set the voting age at eighteen, and we assume – all things being well – that every child will eventually pass the age threshold and join the franchise. That is, we all start out as children and end up as adults, and so, over the course of a lifetime, everyone gets to vote, and everyone acquires the right at the same point in their lives. This is what makes the disenfranchisement of children different from the historical disenfranchisement of women or ethnic minorities – the latter constituencies were debarred for life, whereas children are excluded only until they're eighteen.

It's therefore true that the current exclusion of children is less egregious than, say, the historic exclusion of women. However, simply saying that children eventually graduate to adulthood, and thus the franchise, is not a hugely compelling argument. Not least because the same principle could be used to extend the voting age to forty, or justify withdrawing voting rights from everyone over eighty. In both cases, everyone over the course of their lifetimes would be treated the same way and have the same entitlements. And yet, most people recoil from the idea of deferring or withdrawing people's voting rights because establishing unequal franchise rights would create relational inequalities in which some cohorts – in the present moment – have more status and influence, and are shown greater consideration, than others (Bidadanure, 2016). Respect and protection, and the ability to express one's views and perspectives, are things we want now and forever, and therefore political equality isn't something anyone wants to postpone or give up.

A further challenge might be that children don't actually need to vote because their parents or caregivers – people who can vote – understand

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them, look out for them, and will act on their behalf. This argument has some surface appeal, and it's definitely true that parents are obligated, and well placed, to exercise control over some aspects of their children's lives. At the same time, however, the idea that parents will necessarily act on their children's behalf is simply mistaken. For one thing, it overlooks the fact that some parents are neglectful or indifferent to their children's well-being. But it also wrongly assumes that parents, or adults in general, can comprehensively understand or communicate children's perspectives. It ignores the reality that childhood and adulthood are entirely different experiences. And while adults may remember their own childhoods, times change, and people change too, and it's not obvious that today's adults are capable of speaking to or for the views of today's children. Children have their *own* perspectives, and these perspectives deserve formal representation. And for this, children need the vote.

So, that's the principled argument: children are citizens, and, in the ways that matter, equal to adults, and therefore they should be part of the franchise. However, for many people the equality argument is probably too abstract – a bit divorced from political realities. And that's why the second, pragmatic argument for children's votes is so important. Because this is an argument about the real, concrete costs and benefits of suffrage.

In short, children ought to be enfranchised because, without the vote, their needs and concerns are likely to be overlooked. Remember, it's the politicians, not the voters, who make the law. Citizens may be morally equal, but this doesn't mean they're equally capable of wielding power, or making decisions, or even prosecuting their interests. Consequently, the right to vote doesn't allow citizens to legislate or decide on policy. Instead, voting provides a (loose) guarantee that one's concerns and perspectives will not be systematically overlooked by those other people who *do* decide things – that is, by politicians (Wall, 2021). Representatives aren't beholden to voters, but they're incentivised to look out for them, or respect their interests, because in five years or so, voters will have a say over whether those politicians have a job nor not.

Children are the only citizens who don't have this insurance. They're not allowed to vote, and therefore their views count for less in political discourse, and they're liable to be overlooked in political decision-making. A structural inequality that can lead to exploitation, and even – in the worst cases – persecution (Harris, 1982, p. 50).

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This was one of the conclusions reached in a recent report by the UK Children's Commissioners (2020), who warned that 'children's right to be heard and involved in decision-making processes . . . is being denied' and therefore 'the UK government does not prioritise children's rights or voices in policy or legislative processes'. As a result, the report argues, England's initial COVID-19 responses 'overlooked children's needs' and instead prioritised the reopening of hospitality and retail. Likewise, the United Nations (2019) recently reported that, in 2018, 30 per cent of UK children were living in poverty, while, across similar timelines, pensioner poverty – a key electoral concern for politicians – had declined by half.

Without the vote, a community's interests are likely to be deprioritised. What's more, there's some evidence that acquiring or expanding voting rights gives rise to socio-political advantages. For example, between 1880 and 1938, franchise expansions in Western Europe had a positive impact on redistribution and the provision of public goods (Abou-Chadi and Orlowski, 2015). Fast-forward to 2011, when various Norwegian municipalities reduced the voting age to sixteen and youth engagement and representation increased, as did the initiatives designed to include young people in local politics (Godli, 2015).

These effects aren't always obvious or immediate, and they can also be hard to anticipate. As an illustration of this, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women in the UK were divided on the franchise question. The Suffragettes, obviously, were in favour, but many other women felt detached from politics or believed men were better suited to it (Runciman, 2022). However, the benefits of voting do eventually become apparent. And the fact that no enfranchised group has ever returned or given up the vote says everything about its significance.

5.4 Conclusion

This manifesto makes two interrelated claims. The first is that giving children the vote a requirement of justice, and a way to establish real political equality. The second is that suffrage is a form of political protection – protecting people from neglect or even abuse, and ensuring goods and opportunities are more evenly distributed – that children require. While the upsides of children voting are obvious, the downsides are much overblown. There's no reason to assume politics or

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policymaking would go berserk or incoherent if children could vote. Nor – if anyone is worried – would enfranchised children be allowed to take up seats in Parliament. There's a difference between electing representatives and having the right to stand as one.

Despite these claims, it's still worth considering the possibility that some – or even most – children aren't really interested in these sorts of questions or arguments. Although, we still know relatively little about what young children think about politics, it's probably safe to assume that many of them don't want the vote, or are happy to wait for it. Of the primary school children I spoke to, roughly half were in favour, half not. Some said they found politics boring, while others said they were put off by its aggression and grubbiness – complaints often made by adults as well.

Importantly, though, none of this changes the basic injustice of children's exclusion. Not caring about politics or not wanting the vote doesn't make not having it any less dangerous – it just makes it less likely that children will campaign for suffrage. On the other hand, many of the children I worked with had lots to say about politics. They were engaged and thoughtful and had distinct political perspectives. And their interests ranged broadly, from climate change, to refugees, to corporate social responsibility. Children are a mixed bag – just as adults are. And while these qualities aren't prerequisites for voting, they make the need for child representation clear and urgent.

Of course, if there were no voting age restrictions, and anyone could do it, one might wonder about the role that two-year-olds would play? Surely, they wouldn't or shouldn't vote, as they probably can't even hold a pen. That's a fair challenge. If you can't hold a pen, it's unlikely you're going to vote. However, all age thresholds are arbitrary. So, if the threshold was two, we'd inevitably find some two-year-olds who could hold a pen, and cared something about politics, but were denied the right to exercise these abilities. The benefit of *not* having a threshold is that anyone who wants to vote – at any age – is able to and isn't excluded. I'm sure most young children wouldn't want to – in much the same way that many adults don't want to either. But having the desire to vote – which implies that one understands what voting means and how elections work, as well as suggesting a basic grasp of the electoral options on offer – should be justification enough for doing so. If a very precocious two-year-old feels up to it, great. If they don't, that's fine too. And the same applies if you're twenty-two or ninety-two.

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This manifesto holds that voting is a right of citizenship, not a privilege of competence, and on that basis, we should all be allowed to do it.

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