Radical Democratic Inclusion: Why We Should Lower the Voting Age to 12

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Abstract
Democratic societies such as the United Kingdom have come to fail their young citizens, often sacrificing their interests in a political process that gives much greater weight to the preferences and interests of older citizens. Against this background of intergenerational injustice, this article presents the case for a shift in the political system in the direction of radical democratic inclusion of younger citizens, through reducing the voting age to 12. This change in the voting age can be justified directly, with reference to the status, interests, and capacities of younger citizens, and it can also be justified as a remedy to existing forms of intergenerational injustice. This change in the voting age would require a parallel transformation in the role of secondary schools as part of the 'critical infrastructure' of a democratic society, which would be part of a broader shift towards a more genuinely democratic political culture. The proposal is defended against less radical alternatives (such as votes at 16) and more radical alternatives (such as votes for younger children). The article concludes with some reflections on democracy and intergenerational justice in light of the Covid pandemic and the climate emergency.

1. Introduction: Radical Democratic Inclusion and Votes for Young Citizens

This essay presents an argument for a deep transformation of our democratic societies, so as to make them more inclusive of younger citizens. On the view I present here, the borders of full citizenship should be extended to include those, from the age of twelve upwards, who are in secondary level education. This is obviously a radical proposal in more ways than one, and is far from the real-world political agenda of any current political society, where debates in this area usually go only so far as considering the extension of the franchise to those aged sixteen and over. Nevertheless, among the tasks that properly fall to political philosophers is the task of considering political proposals that may in some respects still be seen as unlikely or, at least, ahead of their time. In that spirit, I aim here to make a case in favour of this shift towards the democratic inclusion of teenagers, in the hope that the merits of

doi:10.1017/S135824612200008X © The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2022

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824612200008X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the case for enacting this kind of democratic transformation will in time come to seem unanswerable.

The structure of the essay is as follows. In Section 2, I discuss the significant respects in which our current political societies fail their younger citizens. In Section 3 I present the core argument in favour of extending the vote to those aged twelve and over, respond to a number of criticisms that this view might face as regards the status, interests and capacities of teenage citizens, and I highlight the broader changes in the culture of democratic politics with which this change would be associated. Section 4 defends the proposal to lower the voting age to twelve against some (more or less radical) rival proposals. Section 5 concludes, while offering some thoughts on the particular context for this change in the light of the Covid pandemic and the climate emergency.

2. Societies That Fail Their Young Citizens

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Britain – like many other economically developed democratic societies – is now a society that does not serve its young people at all well. Indeed, to put things more strongly, this is now a country that has let down the next generation rather severely, and in a variety of different ways. It has become common to hear about particular geographical communities that have been 'left behind', but alongside this we have to realise that we live in societies where the younger generation are being 'kept behind', with their life-chances systematically restricted and their aspirations frustrated. It is a sign that something has gone badly wrong in the operation of our democratic societies when, despite aggregate levels of societal wealth continuing to rise, the next generation face a future of uncertainty, debt, and economic precarity, with their mental health suffering in the face of trying to adjust to a society that seems designed to operate against their interests. Furthermore, this is all happening at a time in which our collective democratic institutions continue to fail to address the unfolding climate crisis with anything like the required level of seriousness of purpose.

It is unsurprising that many young people turn away from political engagement, through a mixture of frustration, hopelessness and disaffection, and so it is also unsurprising that electoral turnout is lowest among the youngest cohorts.[1] This of course only exacerbates the

[1] See for example 'Age and Voting Behaviour at the 2019 General Election', British Election Study, 27 January 2021. Online at: https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/age-and-voting-behaviour-at-the-2019-general-election/. The British Election study data shows that the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824612200008X Published online by Cambridge University Press

problems of intergenerational inequality in both the economic and political domains, as older cohorts find themselves able to get the political system to respond to their social and economic interests, further tilting the playing field away from the interests of the young. Even relatively advantaged young people in the UK face some rather unappealing future prospects. In this regard, I often think of the situation faced by my own students. In many ways, they are in what should be a wonderful position at an early stage in their lives, having secured places at a good university in a prosperous society; yet their prospects are deeply uncertain, and even those who secure good jobs will (in the absence of the particular unfair advantages enjoyed by those who can expect large financial transfers from parents or grandparents) be likely to find themselves spending years when they pay forty or even fifty percent of their income as rent to landlords, alongside their repayments of large amounts of student debt, not knowing when they might be able to purchase a home, or start a family. For many even of this relatively advantaged group, their lives are beset by the phenomenon described by Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit as 'planning blight', with a sense of precarity and uncertainty making it difficult for them to move confidently forwards in their lives in the way that their parents or (even more so) their grandparents would have been able to do at a similar age.[2] It is absolutely unsurprising, therefore, that there is an epidemic of mental ill health among young people in our societies – such a response can be seen not as a disconnected pathology, but as an entirely reasonable response to objective circumstances.[3]

It is not just those in their late teens and twenties who are being so systematically ill-served by our social and economic institutions. Those in the immediately younger cohort are, if anything, being treated even worse. Real terms levels of education funding were cut significantly in the UK over the 2010s, and this came in the wake

level of turnout among the 18-24 age cohort was only around 50% in the 2015, 2017 and 2019 elections (albeit rising gradually across these three elections), whereas among those aged 75 and above, turnout in these elections was over 80%. It is also important to note that rates of electoral registration are much higher among older voters.

[2] See Wolff and de-Shalit (2007, p. 69). See also Bidadanure (2018).

[3] Mark Fisher wrote movingly and insightfully on this subject. See for example Fisher (2012) and Fisher (2014). See also the work of David Smail, which Fisher cites, e.g. Smail (2015).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824612200008X Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in 2010, which had provided some significant financial support for less-advantaged young people continuing in full-time education.[4] Although examples from countries such as Iceland have shown the enormous benefits of public funding of sporting and social activities for teenagers, no such programme of public investment in the well-being of teenagers ever makes its way onto the political agenda in most countries.[5] And, of course, teenagers know well what is ahead of them in terms of the difficulties faced by young adults in their societies, with the understandable consequence that for them too it is difficult to face the future with optimism and confidence.

In short, our younger generations find themselves in a predicament where they face intertwining and mutually reinforcing social problems. Given the reliance of their life chances on potential future capital transfers from their parents and grandparents, which in so many cases make individuals' economic prospects depend not on their own talents, ideas, energy or hard work, but simply on the economic position they inherit from predecessor generations, we have a crisis of opportunity and of social mobility.[6] These sorts of circumstances constitute a direct violation of even the most minimal requirement of social justice: whereas at one point the readers of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* might have considered the idea of 'fair equality of opportunity' to be a remarkably modest and uncontroversial principle of justice, it now seems like a distant or even mockingly unattainable ideal.[7] Alongside this, the phenomenon of 'planning blight' mentioned above, with young people left economically dependent on their parents for longer, and facing economic precarity, a mountain of debt from university, and for those who can get their own place to live, frequently facing years with insecure housing tenure as they transfer much of their income to a landlord, means that we see something close to a crisis of social reproduction, as it becomes increasingly difficult for people to form families of their

[4] See e.g. Forrest (2021); Sibieta (2021). On the Education Maintenance Allowance, see Bolton (2011); Murray (2010).

[5] For the Icelandic Youth Fund, and the Icelandic Sport Fund, see the website of Rannis (*Rannsóknamiðstöð Íslands*), the Icelandic Centre for Research, here: https://en.rannis.is/funding/youth-sport (for sport funding) and here https://en.rannis.is/funding/youth-sport/youth-fund/ (for general funding for youth activities). See also Young (2017).

[6] See Piketty (2014); O'Neill (2017, esp. pp. 357-58).

[7] Rawls (1999, §12, §14). See also Rawls (2001, §§13-14); O'Neill and Shields (2017); O'Neill and Williamson (2009); O'Neill (2012).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824612200008X Published online by Cambridge University Press

own, and to advance through their lives in the ways that previous generations would have simply taken for granted.[8]

Taken together, these crises of social mobility and social reproduction can be seen not only as bad in themselves, but also as fundamentally undermining younger people's freedom: the current younger generation simply does not have the range of live open options for how they might want to live their lives that their parents and grandparents were able to enjoy. What we would expect all of this to lead towards is a further crisis – a crisis of social inclusion and social allegiance – whereby it becomes increasingly difficult to see why younger generations should give their affiliation and support to a socioeconomic system that constricts their sense of agency, facilitates their economic exploitation, and stymies their long-run life chances.

There are many aspects of economic and social policy that would need to change in order to transform the position of the younger generation in a more favourable direction. But it is difficult to envisage such measures being implemented in the absence of a more foundational change: that is, a change in the distribution of political voice and power within our societies. Younger people have become accustomed not only to having their interests largely ignored in the political system, but also constantly to finding themselves on the losing side in democratic decision-making. In recent years in the United Kingdom, younger cohorts did not vote for Brexit in 2016, and in 2017 and 2019 backed the more egalitarian social democratic option presented by the Labour Party, only to find themselves serially, repeatedly defeated; meanwhile, the political system again and again delivers on the preferences, and protects the interests, of retired voters. Those with less of a long-run stake in the society again and again get their way over those whose lives lie mostly still ahead of them, all the while turning the younger generation into something akin to a permanent internal minority: ripped-off, unsupported, marginalized, and frequently even exploited and demonised.

It is natural to think that a flourishing society is one where the life prospects of each succeeding generation are an improvement on the preceding generation. The French political theorist, one time Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner Léon Bourgeois, whose thought has in recent years gained renewed influence on writers such as Thomas Piketty, defended a plausible 'solidaristic' conception of intergenerational justice, according to which each generation has an obligation to improve the life situation of the next

[8] On the crisis of social reproduction, see Fraser (2016); see also Bidadanure, op. cit..

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generation, as a way of solidaristically acknowledging and symbolically repaying the benefits they had received from previous generations.[9] In more recent decades, philosophers have defended a related, but more modest, conception of intergenerational justice, which requires, as Philippe Van Parijs puts it, 'each generation, each birth cohort, to make sure the situation of the next generation […] is no worse than its own'.[10] Given the background environmental crisis and the social problems outlined above, neither the solidaristic standard of continual onward improvement nor the more modest standard of making things no worse is being met under current circumstances.[11] We live in societies that are failing completely to meet even modest requirements of intergenerational justice, and so our younger generations are absolutely justified in feeling that they are being treated in a manner that is both unjust and unacceptable.

This introductory section has presented a brief sketch of the situation in which we find ourselves, in which our societies are now failing their younger citizens in various, mutually reinforcing ways. Younger people face deep intergenerational injustices, in the context of a political system that is structurally indisposed either to take their interests sufficiently seriously so as to remedy those injustices, or to give them sufficient voice or influence so as to be able to undertake a fundamental reorientation of that system in the direction of more just outcomes. Writing over twenty years ago, Philippe Van Parijs talked about the situation in advanced industrial societies that saw a confluence of (a) deep injustices being wrought on younger generations, and (b) a political system that makes any attempt to address these injustices almost impossible, given the excessive political power of older generations, so that 'the political feasibility of [any] reform that would prevent such injustices is exceedingly problematic, given how our democracies are currently organized' (Van Parijs, 1999, pp. 295-96). Van Parijs's prediction in 1999 was that, with the median age of voters only likely to rise in subsequent years, getting closer to the retirement age in advanced industrial societies, these problems were only likely to become deeper, more pronounced, and more troubling. Unfortunately, history has proven that this pessimistic prediction was completely correct, although what Van Parijs

[9] See Bourgeois (1902); see also Piketty (2020) and O'Neill (2021). On conceptions of intergenerational reciprocity see Gosseries (2009).

[10] Van Parijs (1999, p. 294). See also Rawls's discussion of the 'Just Savings Principle' in Rawls, op. cit., on which see also Meyer (2021).

[11] On the dimensions of the environmental crisis, see Lawrence and Laybourn-Langton (2021).

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could not have known at the time he was writing was the way in which some of the most burdensome consequences of the crises of the twenty-first century – most notably the Great Financial Crisis of 2007-8 and the Covid pandemic from 2020 onwards – have been further loaded onto the shoulders of the young, making the situation now even more baleful than could have been predicted in extrapolating in a linear fashion from the trends of the late twentieth century.[12] The contours of these problems of intergenerational injustice, and the difficulty of solving them within our existing institutions have, then, been known for quite some time, but they are now manifesting with a worryingly increased severity. What then is to be done?

3. A Radical Remedy: Votes for Young Citizens

In the context of these age-based injustices, I want to suggest that the vote should be extended to young citizens from the age of 12, so that the population of teenagers who are in secondary education are fully enfranchised. The franchise has expanded continually over the history of democratic societies, and this is a clear and obvious next step in this process of broadening the basis of democratic politics. To take the case of the United Kingdom, we have only really had a genuinely broad democratic franchise since the Representation of the People Act of 1918, which abolished property qualification among male voters, and extended the vote to a subset of women aged over 30, in the process roughly trebling the size of the electorate. The franchise was only extended to all women over the age of 18 in the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 (for comparison, France did not extend the vote to women until as late as 1944, a change voted through by De Gaulle's government-in-exile in London). And those aged 18-20 in the United Kingdom only became voters as late as the 1969 Representation of the People Act.[13] In short, the limits and contours of the right to vote have been far from stable, and have undergone periodic expansions in the direction of greater democratic inclusion. There is no reason to think that a limitation

[12] For the impact of the Great Financial Crisis on the young, and its knock-on effects in creating a collective sense of political consciousness among a specific generation see Milburn (2019). On the monetary policy response to the Covid pandemic increasing existing asset values (and thereby exacerbating intergenerational inequalities), see Tooze (2021).

[13] On the history of the expanding franchise, see Foot (2005); see also Vallance (2009); Johnston (2013).

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of the franchise to those 18 and over is a deep or inviolable feature of electoral politics and, indeed the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum operated with a franchise extended to 16 year olds, as have elections to the Scottish Parliament since that time. Democratic inclusion is a work-in-progress, in the UK as in other developed democratic societies and, as I hope to be able to show in what follows, it is a process that we have very strong reasons to keep pushing forward.

An extension of the vote to those 12 and over would give voice and standing to young people in our society, and ensure that their views, values and interests were given greater attention in our democratic deliberations. By dropping the voting age from 18 down to 12, we would also be making a significant move in the right direction as regards the redistribution of political power away from older and retired voters, giving ourselves the opportunity to have a society that moves beyond the current marginalisation of the young, in favour of one that treats them more fully as fundamentally our equals. In this section, my aim is to give the (rather straightforward) basic argument in favour of democratic inclusion of those of secondary school age, to rebut some possible lines of criticism, and to embed the proposal in a broader discussion of what it would be to have a more genuinely democratic society.

(a) Taking All Citizens' Interests Seriously

Why should we include the young in our democratic institutions? The positive argument is remarkably simple and straightforward: it is that young members of our society (a) are participating citizens whose lives are lived as part of our shared social and institutional environment; (b) have fundamental interests that are deeply at stake when it comes to how they are treated by the social, political and economic institutions of our society; and (c) do not in general lack any specific capacity that would allow them to exercise their democratic rights as voters, or as citizens more generally. My position is that these three claims, taken together, constitute a jointly sufficient case for the democratic inclusion of young people.

Claim (a) and claim (c) hold that there is not a relevant difference between those in the 12-17 age range and their older fellow citizens. But with claim (b) one could put things rather more strongly; indeed, one might say that younger citizens have especially weighty and long-run interests with regard to the evolution over time of our societies as, quite simply, those with more years ahead of them are going to be

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more enduringly affected by current political and economic decisions, certainly much more so than much older voters, who may be coming towards the latter years of their lives. Moreover, other things being equal, we would expect that those whose interests are going to be more fully at stake, over a longer time period, would have more reason to take a long-term time horizon in their thinking, and to be able to take long run considerations more seriously than those for whom the future of their society will not be a future through which they themselves will live.[14] Indeed, one sees some striking evidence of this in the generally much higher level of awareness of, and mobilisation around, environmental issues evinced by younger people.[15]

(b) Rebutting Some Common Objections – on Status, Interests and Capacity

The straightforward positive case for democratic inclusion of young people should, on the face of it, be hard to resist. Why, then, might people nevertheless be unmoved by it, or look to resist it? One claim might be that those under the age of 18 do not really meet the first element of the description given above – i.e. that they are not participants in our shared institutions, and hence lack a relevant stake, or the relevant standing, that would be a precondition for full democratic citizenship. One could imagine narrower accounts of what it is to be a full participant in society, emphasizing economic contribution through work or contribution to the state's budget (e.g. as a 'tax payer'), or some other level of positive contribution that younger cohorts are held not to meet. Nevertheless, one can rebut this line of argument in more than one way. At a relatively superficial level one can point out that many young people, under the age of 18, do indeed contribute in these ways, whether through part-time work, or through paying taxes of various kinds. Conversely, many people aged 18 or over are not themselves in full-time employment, and may find themselves outside the scope of the income tax system, and no more involved in paying other taxes than are other, younger people. But more fundamentally, this

[14] For discussion of this point, see Bidadanure (2016).

[15] See for example the remarkable spread of the Youth Strike for Climate / Skolstrejk för Klimatet movement founded by Greta Thunberg in 2018. See, e.g., Taylor (2021) and Carrington (2021). See also Thunberg (2019).

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economistic way of measuring social participation is both unreasonable and anachronistic – indeed, it smacks unpleasantly of the kind of thinking that stood behind nineteenth century property qualifications for the vote. People can be full participating members of society in all sorts of ways, through the contribution they make to their communities, their families, and to the intermediate institutions of which they are part; and people aged 12-18 absolutely can and do make social contributions of just these kids. Moreover, given that most people in this age group are in full-time education, they are typically daily participants in one of the most important kinds of institutions within our societies, actively involved in developing their capacities and, through that current institutional participation, building their capability to make a valuable social contribution in many other ways in the years ahead.

An unsympathetic reader might say that I'm here unduly weakening the relevant idea of participation, but in response it should be borne in mind that, over the long-run history of democratic societies, the evolution of thinking about the franchise has in essence been about shifting from unduly pinched and narrow conceptions of what it is to be a full citizen in the relevant sense, towards a more open and expansive conception. In her remarkable book on the history of the emergence of democratic constitutions, *The Gun, the Ship and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions and the Making of the Modern World*, Linda Colley emphasises the way in which the extension of the franchise was at first, in the late eighteenth century, internally associated with the extension of military conscription (Colley, 2021). To be a full citizen was to be someone available for military service and so, indeed, the demand for democratic rights often came from within the ranks of military men. Here, then, was an idea of full participation associated with one's standing as a member of a society's fighting force, and hence we see the restriction of the franchise in early democratic constitutions to men. While historically revealing, nobody would now want to defend a conception of democratic participation connected in this way to martial capacity. One can see the expansion of the franchise in the nineteenth century as a turn away from this martial idea of citizenship to a more economic conception, but with the abolition of property qualifications for women's voting rights in the UK in 1928, this too was something that a democratic society such as the UK managed to move beyond. People can be full participating members of society in all sorts of ways, and we would not now think it justifiable to exclude someone on the basis of their economic status – indeed, we should see that as being as absurd as a removal of the vote from

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those who had not served or were not available to serve in the military.[16] The conflation of 'voter' and 'tax payer' in some parts of the popular political imagination should be seen for what it is – an unjustifiable and indeed rather sinister anachronism.

So much for some of the common objections to claim (a) above. I would hazard the view that, when it comes to claim (b) nobody would be so perverse as to claim that young people do not have fundamental interests that are deeply at stake when it comes to the direction of politics and policy in their societies. To deny that would be not so much merely to deny the political status of young people as to fundamentally deny their underlying moral status; that would be a view as implausible as it is offensive. The significance of the interests at stake here becomes still more pronounced when we take a more complex, intertemporal view of citizens' interests. For it is not only true that teenagers have weighty current interests, extending into the future, as regards the political and economic decisions made within their societies. Alongside this, it is also the case that current teenagers have future interests in respect of how the political system treats them now, and in terms of the ways in which their views are addressed and accommodated, not only in terms of the ways in which their future selves would be glad that policy has been made in a way that reflects the impact on those in the future, but also because their future selves will have been glad of having grown up in a political system that embeds their status as full democratic citizens from an early age, and which gives them a clearer path to becoming active and engaged members of their political society (a point to which I will return below).

What then of claim (c), the idea that people aged 12-17 do not in general lack any specific capacity that would allow them to exercise their democratic rights as voters or as citizens more generally? Here one could imagine objections that teenagers are too feckless, unfocussed or unintelligent to follow political issues and to exercise political judgement in the way that one would expect of competent voters. Such objections, though, can be countered at more than one level. While some teenagers might make inattentive democratic citizens, we all know teenagers who take an active interest in the politics of their societies, and would be likely to exercise their votes

[16] For a very funny satire of a quasi-fascist society in which political rights are tied to military service, see Paul Verhoeven's 1997 film, *Starship Troopers*. The novel of the same name, on which Verhoeven's film was based, seems not to have been satirical at all, but rather to endorse this kind of militarism. See Heinlein (2015).

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judiciously. If one is focussed on the existence of the requisite capacities, it seems to be the most clear violation of basic fairness to exclude a whole group just because *some* of its members might not evince the virtues needed by responsible citizens. Indeed, the readiness with which some opponents of votes for teenagers are ready to exclude *all* from the entitlement to vote on the basis of a lack of capacity among only *some* of that group itself displays a kind of unmotivated bias towards the status quo, and a readiness to hold this group to different standards than those applied to their older fellow citizens. It would be question-begging to justify the unequal treatment of teenagers on the basis of the unequal application of a standard to which other citizens are not held. Needless to say, there are many older voters who may be unreflective, feckless or even plainly deluded in their political thinking and in the ways in which they deploy their vote, but this of course does not mean that we think it justified to have some public test for sorting the 'responsible' voters from the less responsible, much less that we are thereby justified in excluding broad swathes of citizens from democratic inclusion on the basis of the failings of some of their number.

It would, moreover, be entirely against the spirit of democratic societies, and it would represent a failure to treat citizens with respect and in a spirit of equality, to think that some regime of individualised testing to assess citizens' capacities could be appropriate. That is part of why, when I stated condition (c) above, I did so not in terms of *individual* capacities, but in terms of whether the group of potential new voters *in general* lacked any specific capacity needed for the exercise of democratic rights. Young citizens of secondary school age, with seven or more years of full-time education behind them, will in general have the requisite basic capacities in terms of comprehension, numeracy and general intelligence to be able to follow political issues with sufficient attention, and to be able to exercise their vote responsibility. Some may not do so, of course, but that is no different than for any other group or cohort, and that would give us no reason to exclude this younger group in particular from democratic life, any more than it would give us a reason to exclude any other group.

In his discussion of the case for votes for children, Daniel Weinstock introduces what he calls a 'Principle of Minimal Realism', 'which states that we should not exclude categories of persons from the franchise on the basis of epistemic standards that would be appropriate only for an idealized democracy that lies at a significant remove from reality of the practice of actually existing democracies' (Weinstock, 2020, p. 757). Weinstock's principle gives a judicious and appropriate standard for avoiding one kind of faulty

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reasoning in this kind of territory, where people can be minded both to apply standards inconsistently to different groups, and also suddenly to switch to a rarefied register of an imagined idealized democratic system when constructing arguments for electoral exclusion, when much of the practical urgency of the need to think about expanding democratic *inclusion* is driven precisely by the highly non-ideal operation of actually existing democratic systems, and the far-from-ideal outcomes to which they typically lead. In short, and in endorsing Weinstock's principle, we should neither hold the young to standards that we do not apply to others, nor in general make use of a standard for democratic citizenship that is unrealistically utopian and disconnected from the range of behaviours displayed by real voters in real polities.

(c) Schools, Democracy, and an Enhanced Democratic Culture

When we imagine a polity that drops its voting age to 12, and thereby enfranchises those attending secondary school, we need to imagine the broader consequences that would be entailed by this act of radical democratic inclusion. Once we look at our younger fellow citizens as in some sense political equals within a democratic society, it is clear that certain other elements of our social world, and in particular of our educational system, would need to change.[17] For a start, political education would become a more pressing matter, with a need for secondary schools to do more to equip their pupils for democratic citizenship. As things stand, citizenship education is often done very poorly within our educational system, and many citizens leave school without much sense of the potential power of the political system to change the conditions of their lives, or of how they might practically come to play a significant role within that system.[18] A world in which those aged 12–17 were *already* full democratic citizens would be a world in which the need for schools to do better in terms of citizenship education would be much more vivid, and a world in which the relevance and importance of democracy could be more easily communicated to young citizens.

[17] On what is involved in relating to one another as equals, see O'Neill (2008), and Schemmel (2021). On schools as places where people learn to relate as equals, see Laden (2013). On how things often go wrong under current conditions, see Bruch and Soss (2018).

[18] For valuable discussions of how the education system could do much better at educating *citizens*, even under the current political system, see for example Callan (1997); Brighouse (2005) and Kitcher (2022).

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Where the minimum voting age is 12, and the typical gap between elections is 5 years or less, all citizens will encounter their first general election while still in full time education, with the opportunities that this would bring for education on the facts and issues under discussion, and for collective deliberation within a supportive environment. This would obviously place a responsibility on schools to do more in terms of the political education of their students, and to do this in an open, professional and non-partisan way, but this is something that is well within the competence of an educational system, and which many teachers would relish. The suggestion, then, is that the shift in the voting age would need to go alongside an enhanced role for schools as part of what Jan-Werner Müller has called the 'critical infrastructure' of democracy: that is, the set of institutions that make a thriving and engaging democracy possible (Müller, 2021). As it stands schools tend to do too little to help to support emerging democratic citizens, which is perhaps understandable when one thinks of the way in which those aged 12-17 are separated from the realities of democracy. Abstract nostrums about democratic values and the significance of the vote could be transformed into something much more real and vital when political issues can be discussed among a group who all already possess the basic democratic rights and entitlements of full citizens, and who will be able to use their votes as they come to see as appropriate. Democratic education can be transformed for the better when democracy is seen as something in which everyone can participate, rather than something that happens only to other people.

This likely transformation of the democratic culture can also be seen from the other side of the democratic process, when one thinks of the way that it would transform the way in which politicians and political parties would relate to younger citizens. With those aged 12 and over now recast as full democratic citizens with voting rights, no local constituency election campaign would be complete without the candidates visiting local secondary schools and making their case directly to younger citizens. This would change the dynamic between politicians, parties, and those young voters, giving politicians and parties strong reasons to communicate their message clearly to this audience, and to take the ideas, values, and interests of the young seriously. The political culture would, as a whole, no longer communicate to the young that they are marginal or unimportant, but would in general be reconfigured so that young citizens found themselves treated with a great deal more respect. What would instead be communicated to the young would not be their irrelevance or marginality, but their status and standing as citizens in a genuine democratic community.

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When one thinks of these broader changes in the democratic culture, some of the lines of criticism of lowering the voting age come to seem rather misdirected, or beside the point. In their influential treatment of the case *against* lowering the voting age even to 16, Tak Wing Chan and Matthew Clayton examine empirical studies that show that the young lack political judgement, knowledge and engagement – that, as Chan and Clayton put it, the young lack 'political maturity' – and that therefore extension of the franchise would be misguided (Chan and Clayton, 2006). But what they are reporting on, with regard to their empirical findings, are the understandable consequences of a system that treats the young with disrespect, and which gives the young very little reason to engage seriously with the democratic process.[19] To take the consequences of the current pattern of democratic exclusion as evidence against the case for democratic *inclusion* is completely back-to-front. We should not expect that political groups with stable and thoughtful political positions should just exist *ex nihilo* before the members of those groups are included in the political process; rather, one of the functions of democracy is to give people the opportunity to forge those stable political identities through debate and deliberation with one another, and through the individual and collective exercise of their capacities as citizens (Müller, 2021). Democratic inclusion is a precondition for the transformation of the democratic culture, and should not be held off on the basis that the current, untransformed political culture is one that, entirely reasonably, leaves many young people disengaged and disaffected.

(d) Creating Democratic Citizens – Vote Early, Vote Often!

One intriguing phenomenon demonstrated by current empirical research, though, is the degree to which democratic participation is a *habit*. Those who start off voting at an early age generally retain that pattern of participation. As Eric Plutzer puts it, most voters display *inertia* with regard to political participation – they are either habitual voters or habitual nonvoters.[20] Under our current system, the general pattern is that younger voters are likely to start off as habitual nonvoters, with the problem of democratic activation then in

[19] As regards the 'path-dependence' of the phenomena described by Chan and Clayton, see Weinstock (2020, p. 760). See also Peto (2018).

[20] Plutzer (2002). On voting as a *habit* see also Gerbet et al. (2003). I am grateful to Harry Hathaway for helpful guidance on the empirical dimensions of voting as a *habit*.

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effect a problem of habit change over time, of shifting people from the column of habitual nonvoters to the column of habitual voters. Once the shift happens, the effect of habit makes people 'sticky' in their role as activated and engaged citizens: for example, one 2009 study estimated that voting in one election increases the probability of voting in a subsequent election by 13% (Denny and Doyle, 2009). And so the key problem in increasing turnout among younger voters is to establish a pattern of political engagement at an early opportunity.

It is not surprising that younger people in general are less likely to vote, both due to problems generated by the kind of reasonable disillusion, disengagement and demobilisation discussed above in section 1, but also due to wholly understandable practical and logistical issues related to the fact that, as things stand, people first become voters at a very tricky time in their lives. As former Labour Party leader Ed Miliband puts it, we currently expect people to start voting at a stage in their life that 'often coincides with a time of flux – moving away from home, getting a job, starting further or higher education. Given those distractions, these years can reasonably be described as 'arguably the worst possible years to have one's first vote' (Miliband, 2021, p. 167). Miliband makes that remark in the context of arguing for the voting age to be dropped down to 16, but with general elections up to 5 years apart, the relatively marginal change that Miliband supports would not fully address the problem that he identifies, as many first time voters would still find themselves in that 'time of flux' after the end of full-time school attendance.[21] With a shift to votes at 12, by contrast, we ensure that for everyone the first time they vote in a general election is when they are still in secondary education, and still able thereby to call upon the supportive infrastructure that their school can provide in helping them to navigate their new status as full, voting citizens. This change would, therefore, create a really strong opportunity for more people to get into the *habit* of voting: through bringing citizens' initial experience of exercising their democratic rights into an earlier phase of their lives, we create the conditions where it is more likely that those citizens will go on to exercise those rights over the subsequent course of their lives. To sloganize, and appropriating for less nefarious ends a phrase at times attributed to James Michael Curley of Boston or Richard J. Daley of Chicago: it is a case of *vote early, vote often*.

[21] Despite the inadequacy of dropping the voting age to 16, the seemingly beneficial consequences of even this change are striking, when one looks at the case of Austria, which shifted to votes at 16 in 2007. See Zeglovits (2013); Zeglovits and Aicholzer (2014).

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(e) A Preponderance of Reasons: the Overdetermined Case for Votes at 12

My hope is that the foregoing discussion makes the case that we have overwhelmingly strong reasons to accept the reduction of the voting age to 12. The case can be made both in *instrumental* terms, as regards the way in which this kind of extension of democratic inclusion can be seen as a precondition for overcoming the various pathologies of intergenerational injustice to which our societies are subject; but the case can also be made more *directly*, in terms of the appropriate way in which institutions should respond to its younger citizens, given their status, (current and future) interests, and capacities. More broadly, one can also see the proposal for dropping the voting age substantially as part of a wider case for how we can create a more vibrant and active democratic culture, and how to make the most of our existing educational institutions in helping to turn democratic inclusion from an abstraction to a reality. This is, then, a change to the rules of democracy that one can support on a number of different grounds, and which might in time hope to attract the support of those approaching these issues from a variety of different starting points.

4. The Policy of Votes at 12, and its (More or Less Radical) Alternatives

Let us assume, then, that there is a strong case for lowering the voting age. We might nevertheless ask why the right way forward would be to lower the voting age to 12 in particular, as against any other particular age. In this section I will look to justify my proposal against both the (less radical) claim that the voting age should be reduced to 16, and the rather more radical claim, as recently advanced by David Runciman, that the voting age should be dropped all the way to 6, with primary school children as well as those attending secondary school being brought within the scope of full democratic participation.

(a) Votes at 16: An Insufficient Step in the Right Direction?

The first thing to say about Votes at 16 is that, insofar as one is convinced by the case for lowering the voting age, this is probably the strategic position that one should endorse in political terms, if one's primary objective is to support a policy that has a chance of being enacted in the near run. As mentioned above, Austria already has a

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voting age of 16, as does one other European Union member, Malta. Sixteen is also the voting age in a number of South American democracies, including Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador. In the United Kingdom, although the voting age is 18 for most national elections, and for local elections in England, the voting age was lowered to 16 for the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, and is also in use for elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Senedd, and for Scottish and Welsh local elections. One might have the sense, then, that in advocating for Votes at 16, one would be pushing at an open door, and advocating for a distinctively realistic policy that one might well expect to see eventually adopted for United Kingdom general elections (it is notable that the Labour Party went into both the 2017 and 2019 general elections advocating a voting age of 16), and in other democratic countries.[22] Certainly, there is nothing in the argument of this essay to deny that a move from a voting age of 18 to a voting age of 16 would be a move in the right direction.

However, I think there is a strong case for why it would not be enough. In almost every instance, the arguments for shifting the voting age to 16 carry through to the more radical conclusion that the voting age should be further reduced to 12. We have already seen this above, with regard to Ed Miliband's point about trying to avoid the situation where young voters' first vote happens during the 'time of flux' immediately after leaving school, and instead can be exercised while still within the more supportive environment of their secondary school, as this is clearly an argument that takes us beyond votes at 16 and instead leads us to endorsing a considerably younger voting age. If the electoral cycle is x-years long, then the minimum voting age should be no higher than x-years before people typically leave school, suggesting that in a country with a maximum of five years between elections, and with people leaving

[22] Bills have been introduced to the UK Parliament to reduce the voting age for general elections to 16, most recently Jim McMahon's Representation of the People (Young People's Enfranchisement and Education) Bill of 2017, which had support from Labour, the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party, but which did not become law due to a lack of government support. (See https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2074) Perhaps most notably, Tony Benn's comprehensive Commonwealth of Britain Bill of 1991 also contained provision to drop the voting age to 16. Benn's plan for a new republican constitution for Britain never got so far as a second reading in the House of Commons. See Rush (2021).

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school at 18, the minimum voting age should be no higher than 12 or 13.

In a similar manner, as regards the way in which the case for Votes at 16 can so easily be tweaked in a more radical direction, if our argument is about the significance of representation of interests, given the fact that (again to cite Miliband's argument) 'if you are a voter, politicians are more likely to take your interests into account' (Miliband, 2021, p. 165) this applies just as much to those in the 12-15 age bracket as it does to those aged 16 and above. There seems, indeed, to be no pressing relevant difference, unless it is the difference that, with younger citizens further from the time of economic independence, and with more years ahead of them when they are reliant for their future prospects on the performance of their country's educational institutions, the interests of this younger group perhaps stand in even stronger need of being taken seriously into account within the democratic process. Or to take a different line of argument explored above – the point about political *habit* and the creation of active democratic citizens – again the case takes us beyond the modest conclusion of votes at 16 towards a more radical realisation that the voting age should be dropped further.

In general, there seems no general reason to think that there are relevant and significant differences between the status, interests or capacities, with regard to the requirements of political engagement and participation, of those in the 12–15 age range and those in the 16–17 age range. Given this, it is unsurprising that in most cases, an argument for extending the franchise to those in the second group very quickly can be extended so as also to apply to those in the first group. More might be said in favour of holding the line for a voting age higher than 12 and, as I've said above, I think there is good reason to treat even the milder policy of votes at 16 as an important step in the right direction, but to my mind a more powerful and interesting challenge actually comes from the opposite direction, from those who would argue that the voting age should be reduced so as to include young children. It is to those views that I shall now turn.

(b) Why Not Go Further? Runciman, Weinstock and Votes at Six

In a much-discussed 2018 lecture on 'Democracy for Young People' and more recently in a 'Long Read' essay for *The Guardian*, 'Votes for Children! Why We Should Lower the Voting Age to Six', David Runciman has made the case for an extension of the franchise, with

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a new minimum voting age of six, that might make my own putatively radical suggestion seem like a rather tepid, milquetoast halfway house (Runciman, 2018; 2021). In a similar vein, Daniel Weinstock has also recently considered a wholescale extension of voting rights to children, concluding that 'we may be duty-bound to consider what may have seemed at the outset as an outrageous suggestion – namely, that children be given the same voting rights as their elders' (Weinstock, 2020, p. 771). While I am highly sympathetic to Runciman's and Weinstock's views, and would indeed be delighted if by some miracle any democratic polity were to follow their advice and implement such a radical new extension of the vote, I think there are a number of good reasons to prefer my more moderate position. Let me take some of these in turn:

(i) *The Critical Infrastructure Argument*: according to the view developed in this article, one of the related changes to our democratic institutions that would be necessitated by a much lower voting age would be the enhanced role that schools would have to play in providing an important element of the background 'critical infrastructure' of democracy. It seems plausible that secondary schools, as part of their role in preparing young people for the lives that lie ahead of them, could be especially well-suited to this kind of infrastructural and preparative role. By contrast, such a role would sit less easily with primary schools, which one can see as addressed to the work of helping children to develop their more foundational capacities. Given that we typically already embed a significant transition from one kind of educational setting to another when children move from primary to secondary education, it seems wise to align this new line of transition to full democratic citizenship along with that educational transition, in a way that allows each kind of educational setting to play a distinct kind of background role in children's development.

(ii) *The Value of Symbolic Transitions Argument:* related to the previous point is the idea that there is much that is of value with having the transition to full democratic citizenship being something of which the recipient of that change of status is fully aware, and which they can consciously integrate into their sense of their own personal development. In this way, there is a further case in favour of alignment with the change of educational setting, but from the perspective of the new voter rather than considered in terms

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of the role and function of the educational institution itself. By contrast, if everyone aged 6 and over could vote, then younger voters would have little sense of this being a status into which they had transitioned, as opposed to it being something in the background, taken for granted.

It seems to me that there is much to be learned here from how the transition to full community membership are handled by religious communities, something that is often achieved in a way that communicates the significance and value of that transition in a far more vivid way than is done in secular contexts. The Catholic sacrament of Confirmation – often described as the 'sacrament of maturity' – is typically conferred around the age of 12–14, or sometimes slightly younger.[23] Similarly, the Jewish ceremonies of Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah, at which boys and girls come to full community membership, are performed at the age of 12. It seems plausible that both the Catholic and Jewish traditions have got at something valuable and significant here, in treating seriously the public acknowledgement of the point at which young people move into full membership of their communities, and take on the associated status and entitlements of that new status. This is not to say that secular, democratic states need to be led by religious conceptions of maturity or status – far from it, indeed – but it is to say that there is no reason not to try to learn from the practical insights of religious traditions.

(iii) *The Argument from the Burden of Voting and the Value of Childhood:* a third consideration against the further reduction of the voting age so as to include younger children turns on a different way of understanding the interests of those younger children themselves. It seems plausible to think that, for younger children, one of the valuable aspects of their status outside full membership of the political community is that it excludes them from the burden of having to engage with political issues, and gives them more of a protected space for development. And so we might well think that it would be backwards to enfranchise younger

[23] Debates about younger or older ages for Catholic confirmation have interesting affinities with debates about the voting age. See, e.g., Cornwell (2016).

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children on the basis of giving full consideration to their interests, when those interests would best be served by being freed from the responsibilities of full citizenship. By contrast with children of secondary school age, who are generally already taking a keen interest in the wider world and developing their views and outlook, it might seem like a rather cruel imposition to draw younger children away from their own concerns and to direct their attention towards the often rather dismal world of politics.

In the conclusion to his own discussion of these issues, Daniel Weinstock considers whether children might be after all 'entitled to not have to consider the tawdry realities that participation in political life inevitably places one in contact with'.[24] Weinstock's own position on this question is inconclusive, but he is certainly correct that there is good reason to think that these kinds of considerations about the burdens of voting and the value of a (non-political) childhood should be given at least some weight. Obviously, though, this is a consideration that should not be over-extended: one could imagine someone making a parallel argument about younger teenagers, but this can look grotesquely patronising if a competent, engaged and articulate young person aged 13 or 14, who may be passionate about issues of social and environmental justice, is told that, for their own good they should be protected from having to think about politics. And so we might here take the view that the position of votes at 12 presents a plausible middle way for trying to offer some protection of younger children from politics, without patronising those in the older age range. Those who might seem still to have a complaint here would be the engaged and knowledgeable 10 or 11 year old, who might plausibly complain that their exclusion from full political status is arbitrary and unfair; but at least under a democratic regime of votes at 12 they would not have too long to wait.

Taken together these three kinds of consideration point towards the greater plausibility of my more moderate proposal, rather than the full enfranchisement of everyone old enough to read a ballot paper.

[24] Weinstock, (2020, p. 771). For a related argument see also Beckman (2009).

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Alongside these considerations is also, of course, the more straightforward point that any concerns we may have about the threshold of basic capabilities and capacities required by democratic citizens, which really do not seem to generate plausible worries for young people in secondary school who have completed their primary education, would certainly get more purchase when we start to think of the case of 6 and 7 year olds, for whom the cognitive demands of citizenship might be too much. The policy of votes of 12, then, is very much in the spirit of Runciman's and Weinstock's lines of argument, while avoiding some of the less attractive features of their more radical proposals.

5. The General Case and the Special Case: Lowering the Voting Age After Covid, and in Light of the Climate Emergency

I want to end this discussion by suggesting that, implausible though it may be to imagine such a radical change in our voting system being enacted any time soon, this really ought to be an issue that is taken fully seriously, and which should be treated with a reasonable degree of urgency. The argument of this essay has been that there is a *general* case for the enfranchisement of young citizens, given their status, interests and capacities. But, writing in 2022, in light of recent events and developments, I think we can see that there is also an additional and urgent *special* case for democratic transformation. In this regard, it is worth thinking about the Covid pandemic, but most importantly about the climate emergency.

During the Covid pandemic, huge sacrifices were made by the younger generation, sacrificing time in education, leisure and sporting activities, and valuable time with friends, in order to make an enormous contribution in protecting their fellow citizens from the threat of the virus. This was typically a case of those who were at lower relative risk, and less clinically vulnerable, sacrificing their own interests and well-being to protect the older and more vulnerable. In a less pathologically unjust political society, this extraordinary collective act of social solidarity would have generated a level of gratitude and acknowledgement appropriate to the degree of sacrifice involved. A society that took the young less for granted might have marked that sacrifice with a collective decision to provide extra years of educational funding to make up for time lost, or a commitment to write-off student loans, or a new determination to solve the housing crisis faced by young people. It should have prompted more serious thinking about wealth taxes, and the intergenerational

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transfer of resources. In short, it should have occasioned an overdue decision to acknowledge this extraordinary social contribution by doing at least some of what would be necessary to redistribute opportunities to the younger generation. None of this happened. Instead, the older beneficiaries of the sacrifices made by the young responded much like Michael Corleone in *The Godfather, Part II*: 'My offer to you is: nothing'. This grotesque violation of basic reciprocity, which we have just all witnessed playing out in plain sight, could hardly have provided a more vivid demonstration of the need to redistribute political power, and hence the need to transform our democratic institutions in a way that gives more voice and influence to younger citizens.

But the most pressing 'special' case for urgent reform to the democratic system is not about acknowledging what has happened with Covid, but is instead about looking forward to what is ahead of us. It is a horrifying but transparent truth that our existing political system, with its inveterate short-termism and inability to act against the near-run interests of older and wealthier parts of society, is fundamentally failing to respond at the right scale to the climate emergency. We are in a ship heading towards the rocks, with those in charge refusing to listen to the pleas of younger passengers that we are headed for disaster. Under these conditions, the very least that we should do is to find a better way to steer the ship. The dangers ahead of us are such that finding a better way to forge a political response to crisis is far from an abstract or idle matter; the need for structural change in how we organise our politics is a matter of pressing necessity.[25]

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[25] For helpful discussion of the case for lowering the voting age, I am very grateful to the students in my Autumn 2021 MA module on 'Advanced Topics in Political Philosophy', and in particular to Harry Hathaway (whose own view is in favour of the abolition of the voting age altogether). I have also benefitted from discussing these issues with the participants in the World Economic Forum 'Great Narrative' meeting in November 2021. Further thanks for useful discussion, online or in reality, to Anita Allen, David Axelsen, Richard Bellamy, Juliana Bidadanure, Paul Bou-Habib, Eamonn Callan, Christina Easton, Suzanne Fortier, David Grinspoon, Malte Jauch, James Johnson, Mary Leng, Dominic Mahon, Thierry Malleret, Joe O'Neill, Tommy O'Neill, David Owen, Tom Parr, Michael Rosen, John Steele, Daniel Weinstock, and Miklós Zala. I am especially grateful to Julian Baggini for the invitation to contribute this essay.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824612200008X Published online by Cambridge University Press

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