

A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Votes of People with Short Life Expectancy From Being a Long-Term Burden to Their Country

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Abstract

In response to the growing social discontent at what is perceived as generational injustice, due to younger generations of voters facing long-term negative consequences from issues disproportionately decided by the votes of older generations of voters, there have been suggestions to introduce an upper age voting threshold. These have been all but universally dismissed as offensive and contrary to basic democratic values. In the present article, I show that the idea is in fact entirely consonant with present-day democratic practices and far from without a precedent. Hence, I describe how the aforementioned generational injustice can be rectified using a simple vote weighting scheme which is easy to implement and interpret. Lastly, I discuss the societal effects that this alteration of the voting system would have on the distribution of the origins of political power.

Keywords: Brexit, democracy, voting, ballot, elections, age, referendum, ageism.

1 Introduction

Modern democracies rely, in one form or another, on collective decision-making by means of consensus (Kriesi and Trechsel, 2008)¹. As Collingwood (2004) put it:

“the idea of a community as governing itself by fostering the free expression of all political opinions that take shape within it, and finding some means of reducing this multiplicity of opinions to a unity”.

An interesting challenge to the implementation of this principle in the real world arises when there exists a stark polarization of opinion between two or more social groups (Svolik, 2019; McCoy et al., 2018), most strongly felt in majoritarian democracies such as the United Kingdom (Cairney, 2018). This challenge is particularly practically significant when it regards an issue which is likely to have profound and long-lasting effects (Ford and Goodwin, 2017). The recent referendum vote by the British public regarding the membership of the United Kingdom in the European Union (colloquially often referred to as the “Brexit” vote) illustrates this point most poignantly indeed: exit polls conducted by numerous established polling organizations show a steep and consistent gradient across different age groups (Eichengreen et al., 2021).

¹The reader should not be misled by the word ‘consensus’ and think that by stating this I am assuming consensualism, sometimes referred to as ‘consensus democracy’, alone; even in other forms of democracy, consensus comes as part and parcel of the democratic system, e.g., even the consensual agreement about the orderly transition of power is a reflection of a type of consensus

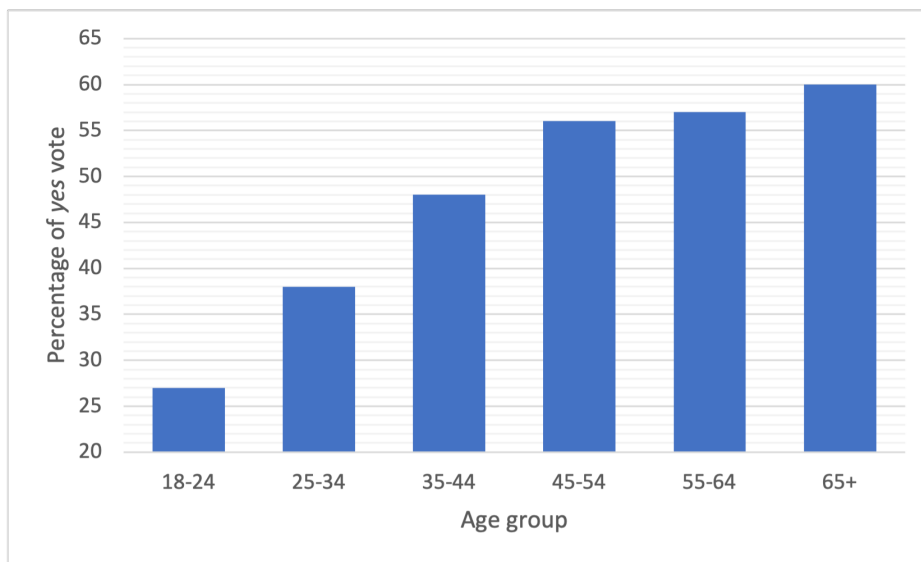


Figure 1: Brexit vote age based preferences (Finlay et al., 2019).

20 This differentiation is illustrated in Figure 1 where a close to linear relation-
21 ship can be observed, with voters aged 65+ more than twice as likely to vote
22 ‘leave’ than their 18–24 year old compatriots.

23 In the present article I would like to examine an interesting proposal which
24 was put forward by some commentators, as well as academics, in response
25 to this polarizing phenomenon. The proposal is based on the premise that
26 on average, younger voters will experience (or contend with, as their voting
27 tendency would suggest) the effects of the vote for a longer period of time
28 than their older compatriots. Hence, it was argued that the preferences of
29 younger votes should take precedence in some form (Volacu, 2021; Parijs,
30 1998). An extreme implementation of the aforementioned idea mentioned
31 by some was to exclude a part of the electorate above a certain age (Stein,

2016). The reader may think this proposal both objectionable on principle and unworkable in practice. Yet, herein I would like to argue otherwise. Firstly, I demonstrate that the idea is not at all at odds with the well-established practices of Western democracies. Next, I show how a similar proposal can be effortlessly implemented in a principled manner and without awkward *ad hoc* cut-offs, and even how the power of evidence and data can be harnessed for greater personalization and fairness. Lastly, I analyse the effects that the suggested implementation would have in the real world, which without being such by design, end up consonant with the liberal and meritocratic values celebrated by the democratic world.

2 Analysis and re-imagination of the democratic vote

2.1 On the principle

I would like to begin by pointing out that as regards the principle underlying the aforementioned proposal, fundamentally the same idea is already adopted by every democracy in existence. Consider the trivial observation that, say, a Polish citizen is not given a vote in the UK General Election. The reason behind this law is simple enough: while two British citizens by the very virtue of their shared citizenship also share the goal of wanting to make the British society function better, the same assumption cannot be as

52 readily made for a foreign citizen. Two British citizens may of course differ
53 in their understanding of the abstract concept of “better”, or indeed how this
54 betterment may be achieved, which is where the consensual decision-making
55 mentioned in the introduction is expected to play its role.

56 In this example, the lack of shared interest emerges from spacial (geo-
57 graphic) differentiation (Arandjelović, 2021). Fundamentally, the same phe-
58 nomenon is at the crux of the present argument too, with the lack of shared
59 interest emerging from *temporal* differentiation: *ex hypothesi*, the immediate
60 stake in the outcomes of a democracy decision of an elderly person approach-
61 ing the end of their life is more limited in duration than that of a younger
62 person with a longer remaining life expectancy (their mediate interests, e.g.
63 via the interests of their descendent, can be considered to be equal) (Volacu,
64 2021).

65 Though the example I have just given should serve to dispel such ob-
66 jections, I understand that it is still tempting to see any differentiation of
67 those who are presently eligible to vote as a form of injustice. Indeed, an
68 appealing aspect of democracy lies in the perceived equality between people
69 ‘at the ballot box’. Thus, any deviation from this state inherently creates
70 inequality amongst those previously seen as equal, and this is all certain to
71 provoke a vitriolic response in many, seeing it as elitism (the kind of elitism
72 will depend on the criteria used to effect differentiation between individu-
73 als), disenfranchisement, etc. I expect that many (or most) would see this
74 as some individuals being seen as ‘better’ or more valued than others. In

75 rebutting this, let us start by observing what ought to be a simple fact: the
76 perceived equality does not exist even now, *even at the ballot box*. For exam-
77 ple, all elections require the voters to be at least of a certain age (say, in the
78 United Kingdom general elections, at least 18 years old). This certainly does
79 not mean that children are less valued as individuals (Arandjelović, 2022).
80 Equally, in some jurisdictions, people with some mental impairments are pro-
81 hibited from voting, and yet nobody would suggest that they are any less
82 entitled to happiness, the freedom from suffering, etc. The geographic dis-
83 crimination I described earlier speaks of this too: two individuals on different
84 sides of an international border do not have the right to vote in the other's
85 country's general elections. Here too, it should be clear that the bases for
86 this differentiation are not based on a lesser appreciation of one individual
87 than another, but practical considerata. In short, differential roles in the
88 political process do not imply differential appreciation of individuals, their
89 rights as sentient beings, etc.

90 **2.2 A fairer system**

91 Having shown that the principle behind the proposal to differentiate between
92 voters on the grounds of what is in effect their life expectancy is nothing that
93 conflicts with the widely accepted practices of democracies as they are today,
94 I would like to address arguments against the proposal based on possible
95 practical difficulties with its implementation. In particular, a convincing
96 case can be made that the choice of the cutoff age would be *ad hoc* and thus

97 disagreeable to the public. I partially concede to this objection, that is, I
98 concede the point made but not the implication that the associated challenges
99 are particularly difficult to overcome. Hence, I propose a concretization of
100 the original idea, and show that it solves the aforementioned problems in a
101 manner which is principled, as well as simple to implement and to understand
102 as fair.

103 **2.2.1 A simple baseline**

In order to avoid having to decide on a hard cutoff point at which individuals' votes would cease to have any contribution to election outcomes, a simple weighting scheme could be implemented. In particular, given L , the life expectancy at birth, an individual's vote would have a contribution proportional to:

$$w_b(A) = L - A \tag{1}$$

104 where A is a person's age at the time of voting (the minimum value of A
105 being the minimum voting age). This technically simple and easily understandable
106 rule has a normalizing effect on the differential remaining life expectancy based
107 stakes in the consequences of a vote. This kind of normalization is not only
108 inherently principled, if not particularly nuanced (which I will address shortly),
109 but also far from being without precedent, one which is already widely used,
110 for example in the determination of insurance life

111 premiums (Beenstock et al., 1986).

112 **2.2.2 A more nuanced solution**

While what is effectively a modified vote counting strategy proposed in the previous section and captured by Equation (1) undoubtedly improves on the current state of affairs which unfairly disadvantages younger generations, it is not difficult to see that it is far from perfect. In particular, life expectancy at birth is a rather crude estimate of a *specific* person’s life expectancy, as witnessed by the high deviation of age at the time of death within a society (Hiam et al., 2021; Tuljapurkar, 2010). Adopting and pursuing the revered doctrine of evidence driven policy-making (Pawson, 2002; Marmot, 2004), it is not difficult to see that a further refinement and improvement of the process can be achieved by exploiting the pervasive availability of data and artificial intelligence, allowing us in effect to modify Equation (1) to be individual-specific. In particular, a more nuanced version of the vote weighting system can be formulated as follows:

$$w_p(I) = L(f_s(I)) - A \tag{2}$$

113 where A is as before a person’s age at the time of election (the minimum value
114 of A being the minimum voting age), I an individual to whose vote the weight
115 $w_p(I)$ is applied, $f_s(I)$ a certain set of features (e.g. socio-demographic) as-
116 sociated with the person, and $L(f_s(I))$ the predicted life expectancy of the

117 person. The aim of this altered vote weighting proposition is the same as
118 the previous one, to wit, that achieved using Equation (1), but with the life
119 expectancy prediction being more precise, person specific, rather than pop-
120 ulation based. The more comprehensive the set of features $f_s(I)$ used are
121 — which would in practice be determined both by practical considerations
122 (what data can be collected) as well as legislative considerations which take
123 into account the various issues of individual citizens' privacy — the more
124 precise the estimate would be and the fairer the overall voting system would
125 become.

126 **2.3 Relationship to alternative proposals**

127 In order to contextualize the arguments and the proposal introduced in the
128 present article, I would now like to examine how these relate to the previously
129 proposed means, be they direct or indirect in nature, of potential voting
130 power equalization.

131 One of the best known ideas in the former group, one which has al-
132 ready produced a considerable amount of fruitful debate in the scholastic
133 and legislative circles, as well as been implemented in practice, is that of
134 compulsory or mandatory voting (Lijphart, 1998). As the name would have
135 it, jurisdictions with mandatory voting compel eligible citizens (possibly al-
136 lowing some exceptions) to participate in the electoral process, often but
137 not always levying penalties against non-compliant individuals. As of Jan-
138 uary 2023, 21 countries implemented some form of mandatory voting (The

139 World Factbook, 2023), those with accompanying enforcement of the laws
140 unsurprisingly yielding higher voter turnouts (Donovan, 2017). Examples of
141 Western democracies with mandatory voting include Australia, Belgium, and
142 Liechtenstein.

143 In jurisdictions with mandatory voting, eligible individuals are expected
144 to register at the polling place (Gardašević and Toplak, 2023) or to provide
145 an acceptable reason for not doing so, such as disability, infirmity, absence, or
146 a religious objection (Dionne Jr and Rapoport, 2022). Where an enforcement
147 of the law is in place, non-adherence results in the imposition of a penalty
148 which can range in severity from being a largely symbolic one (e.g. a 20 AUD
149 fine in Australia’s 2013 federal election), over disenfranchisement in Belgium
150 and Singapore, to the three month salary withdrawal in Bolivia. In some
151 jurisdictions, mandatory voting is not applied universally, e.g. in Argentina
152 and Peru individuals over the age of 70 are exempt, and in Luxembourg those
153 over the age of 75. In addition to providing a tangible mandative impetus,
154 some have argued that compulsory voting also has semiotic value, consonant
155 (the proponents claim) with the spirit of the modern democracy; in the words
156 of Engelen (2007), it:

157 “...sends the message that every vote matters...”.

158 Despite the seemingly coercive spirit of mandatory voting, the practice ap-
159 pears to be generally welcome by the voting public of the corresponding
160 jurisdictions (Bennett, 2005).

161 While the effectiveness of mandatory voting in terms of increasing voter
162 turnout is indisputable (Engelen, 2007), the practice continues to be hotly
163 debated within the academic community, raising questions both in the realm
164 of its ethical permissibility (Lever, 2010) and the ability to increase voter
165 participation *in a meaningful way* (Jakee and Sun, 2006). For example Jakee
166 and Sun (2006) write:

167 “...compelling those who are not particularly interested in, or
168 informed about, the political process to vote increases the pro-
169 portion of random votes and we show that under simple majority
170 rule, compulsory voting may violate the Pareto principle; the less
171 popular candidate is more likely to be elected. Our results cast
172 doubt on the ‘miracle of aggregation’ argument, which optimisti-
173 cally concludes that as long as uninformed votes are not system-
174 atically biased, they will have no effect on voting outcomes.”

175 It is fair to say that at present, a sufficient amount of high quality evidence
176 which would allow for the deconfounding of a myriad of potential correlates,
177 is still lacking, this making a strong intellectual commitment one way or
178 another imprudent.

179 Other notable means of possible voting participation increase include
180 proportional representation (Blais and Carty, 1990), concurrent (Nikolenyi,
181 2010) and less frequent elections (Stein and Vonnahme, 2008), and campaign
182 finance reforms (Strauss, 1994; Ortiz, 1998; Smith, 1995), though it remains
183 unclear that the said increase would necessarily be such so as to address the

184 specific concern that the present article focuses on, namely that of genera-
185 tional injustice.

186 Regardless of what evidence ends up showing as regards the effectiveness
187 of the proposals just discussed, it is important to observe that the idea I
188 propose should not be seen as their alternative, but rather as a reformative
189 change which would coexist and serve to strengthen any one of them which
190 proves itself successful. In particular, note that even if the participation
191 of younger voters is increased, thus serving to increase the electoral power
192 of the corresponding demographic, that itself does nothing to address the
193 highlighted difference in the duration of time that individuals of various ages
194 have to bear the consequences of political decisions. It is this particular
195 aspect of injustice that the proposed change seeks to ameliorate, one which
196 no previous work has tackled explicitly, and which is conceptually orthogonal
197 and compatible with the existing proposals.

198 **2.4 Practical consequents**

199 Though the primary motivating factor for the proposal herein is rooted in
200 the notion of *justice*, one of the foundational ethical virtues (Huang, 2007;
201 Schopenhauer, 2009), it is insightful to examine what unintended conse-
202 quences its employment in practice would have. In particular and with ref-
203 erence to Equation 2, one of the individual features which most strongly
204 predicts longer life expectancy is the individual’s *income/wealth* (Brønnum-
205 Hansen et al., 2021; De Vogli et al., 2005). The reason why this observation

206 is important in the present context is that income and wealth are features
207 over which one can exercise control. For example, attaining higher educa-
208 tional level is means of increasing one's income and wealth (De Vogli et al.,
209 2005; Muller, 2002; Wolla and Sullivan, 2017). At the same time, the temp-
210 tation of achieving the same, that is income and wealth increase, by means
211 which have a negative health effect is moderated by the negative effect that
212 one's health status, which could be included using various proxy measures
213 in the prediction captured by $L(f_s(I))$, has on life expectancy. The overall
214 effect, though not intended by design, is remarkably well aligned with the
215 contemporary zeitgeist of Western democratic societies: hard work, com-
216 petition, and healthy lifestyle. Standing back, what we can see emerging
217 from the simple proposals outlined in the previous section is a dynamic and
218 constantly evolving voting ecosystem which rewards and thus incentivizes
219 democratically favoured virtues.

220 Moving away from the *in abstracto*, to wit, the proximal, immediate con-
221 sequences of the proposal in the form of behavioural motives, to the *in con-*
222 *creto*, that is the distal, mediate effects of the aforementioned behavioural
223 incentives, what we can expect to emerge is a class of affluent voters who wield
224 most of the voting power, power which is further strengthened and amplified
225 by indirect means that wealth facilitates (Rueschemeyer, 2004). Moreover,
226 the size of this power holding elite can be expected to progressively shrink
227 by virtue of a positive feedback loop, that is by means of their voting choices
228 primarily benefiting the said elite itself, the only curb emerging in the even-

229 tual dissent of the disempowered majority, leading either to the restraint of
230 the elite or the breakdown of the entire democratic system (Arandjelović,
231 2021). Thus, ironically, we come back full circle, finding ourselves in a situ-
232 ation of widespread dissatisfaction and polarization which we are observing
233 today. Hence, one must ask if the current politics, dominated by the rich
234 backed figures in the forms of Alexander de Pfeffel Boris Johnsons, Donald
235 John Trumps, Joseph Robinette Bidens, Emmanuel Macrons, Volodymyr Ze-
236 lenskyys, et al. may be the best one there is after all...or that a means of
237 redress with a greater degree of nuance than that offered by patchwork fixes
238 of the current systems may be required.

239 **3 Summary and conclusions**

240 The recent phenomenon of growing polarization (Graham and Svulik, 2020;
241 Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2021; Cho et al., 2020) and discontent (Berman and
242 Snegovaya, 2019; Galston, 2020; Schmitter, 2019) of the public in Western
243 and Western-style democracies is now widely acknowledged both in the main-
244 stream media (Graham, 2022; Hasen, 2022) and the academic literature.
245 For those who are proponents of democratic governance, for not everybody
246 is (Arandjelović, 2021), this trend is creating fears of potential collapse of the
247 democratic systems as we know them. However, for these, there is a silver
248 lining to be found in this, to wit, the exposition of some of the fundamental
249 weaknesses in how we think of and conceptualize, and implement in practice

250 democratic decision-making can be used to improve and indeed save democ-
251 racy. One of the foremost challenges is that of generational justice. In this
252 article I addressed the concern which emerges from the unequal impact of the
253 consequences of democratic decisions that is borne by voters of different ages.
254 Specifically, my focus was on the calls to restrict older voters' participation
255 in the process, for example by including an upper voting age cutoff thresh-
256 old. Firstly, I showed that despite vehement reflexive opposition to this very
257 thought that many have expressed, with claims that it opposes some of the
258 fundamental democratic values, the nature of the aforementioned proposal
259 is entirely consonant with the already long-established practices of the ex-
260 isting democratic systems, far from setting a value based precedent. Having
261 showed the *permissibility* of the principle, I next turned my attention to its
262 practical implementation (and thus the objections to the idea on practical
263 grounds) and proposed two simple and viable means by which generational
264 injustice can be reduced, one cruder in nature and the other — which draws
265 its power from evidence and data, and leverages the advances of modern
266 machine learning — more nuanced.

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278 **Compliance with ethical standards**

279 **Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest:** No conflict of interest to
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281 **Research involving human participants and/or animals:** N/A

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