

A Case for Thinking of the Children

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“Won’t somebody please think of the children!?”

Helen Lovejoy, *The Simpsons*

Introduction

Children are a group of persons whose political interests are systematically underrepresented. Here we will lay out the basic argument for proportionally representing children in political arenas, including some options for how children can best be politically represented. We will support our assumptions: 1) that people’s interests should be proportionally politically represented and that 2) children are people. Then we will discuss the possibly large impact that the enfranchisement of children promises, especially in its relation to the interests of the long-term future.

The Scenario

Imagine three people stuck on a desert island, a father, a mother, a son, and a stranger. For the sake of argument, we can refer to them as Adam, Eve, Seth, and Narcissus. Each of the inhabitants of the island has a personal political interest. Adam and Eve have personal interests, but they also have an interest in their son, Seth. Seth has personal interests, but he is too young to competently articulate this interest all the time. Narcissus, true to his name, only has personal interests.

The inhabitants gather to determine a proper voting system. They have two options:

System A: In voting System A, all adult inhabitants (Adam, Eve, and Narcissus) get equal votes.

System B: In voting System B, all inhabitants (Adam, Even, Seth, and Narcissus) get equal votes. However, because Seth is sometimes incompetent to vote, sometimes his vote is delegated to the person most competent to represent his interests, in this case Eve.

Which voting system is more proportional?

In System A, there are 3 votes distributed amongst 4 interested parties (3 votes: 4 interests). Adam (1 vote: 1 interest), Eve (1 vote: 1 interest), Seth (0 vote: 1 interest), and Narcissus (1 vote: 1 interest). So, the representation is not in one-to-one relation to the interests. The consequence of this is that the child’s interests are systematically disenfranchised, and if any adult votes on behalf of the interests of the child then that will come as a direct tradeoff with voting for their own interests (e.g., if Eve votes half of the time for Seth’s interests, then she only can vote half of the time for her own interests). If every adult votes 1/3 of the time for the interests of the child, then the ratio of interests to representation will be equal for all parties (0.75

votes: 1 interests). But, if Adam and Eve agree to compromise their interests and Narcissus refuses to ever compromise his interests, then Adam and Eve's interests will always be systematically disenfranchised: Adam (0.75 vote: 1 interest), Eve (0.75 vote: 1 interest), Seth (0.5 vote: 1 interest), Narcissus (1 vote: 1 interest). So, in System A, enfranchisement is always a marginal tradeoff between parties, and perfect proportional enfranchisement is only achievable with perfect coordination amongst all interested voters.

In System B, there are 4 votes distributed amongst 4 interested parties (4 votes: 4 interests). If Seth is given his own vote: Adam (1 vote: 1 interest), Eve (1 vote: 1 interest), Seth (1 vote: 1 interest), and Narcissus (1 vote: 1 interest). If Eve is delegated representation of Seth's vote: Adam (1 vote: 1 interest), Eve (2 vote: 1 interest), Seth (0 vote: 1 interest), and Narcissus (1 vote: 1 interest). Either way, the representation is in one-to-one relation to the interests. The consequence of this is that there is always a vote on behalf of the interests of the child that does not come as a direct tradeoff with voting for one's own interests (e.g., if Eve gets 2 votes and gives half of her consideration to the child's interests and half of her consideration to her own interests, and votes accordingly, then both parties will receive exactly 1 vote). If Eve gets 2 votes and votes in this manner every time, then the ratio of interests to representation will be equal for all parties, even though Seth does not get to vote for himself (1 votes: 1 interests). Even if Eve get 2 votes and then systematically overrepresents her own interests relative to Seth's, the amount of resulting disenfranchisement to Seth cannot be any worse than the worst case disenfranchisement of Seth in System A: Adam (1 vote: 1 interest), Eve (2 vote: 1 interest), Seth (0 vote: 1 interest), Narcissus (1 vote: 1 interest). So, in System B, enfranchisement is always possible without any marginal tradeoff between parties, and perfect proportional enfranchisement is achievable without perfect coordination amongst interested voters.

The Argument

The basic argument for giving children representation follows:

- P1. Children are persons with political interests.
- P2. Political representation should be distributed proportionally amongst persons with political interests.
- C1. Therefore, political representation should be distributed proportionally amongst persons with political interests, including children.

This argument can then be provided a corollary that disjunctively outlines the ways in which children might be included into political representation:

- C2. So, in order to include the political interests of children,
 - a. Either *on average* children represent their own political interests, and so the children should represent themselves;
 - b. Or, *on average*, guardians represent their children's political interests better than children represent their own political interests, and so the guardians should represent their children;
 - c. Or, delegates can be specially selected and trained for fidelity in representing children's political interests, better than guardians or children represent their interests, and so the delegates should represent the children.

Justifications for these propositions follow.

Premise (P1)

To say that “children are persons with political interests” seems uncontroversial. Indeed, human adults are accepted to be persons with political interests, and human children are on a continuum with adults, with no distinct line between them. As long as political interests are preserved with personhood and personhood is preserved with humanity, then children should qualify in the same sense that adults do (Singer, 2011).

Objection P1.A

One could object that children are not moral patients in the relevant sense that is necessary to be “persons with political interests”. Perhaps children cannot experience life in the same way that adults do, and so cannot be said to have interests in the sense of patienthood.

Response P1.A.1

However, because children can experience human emotions, it seems that children must be said to have sufficient sentience to have interests in some minimal political sense. As long as political decisions have any influence whatsoever on the wellbeing and illbeing of children, then the moral patienthood of children will be preserved (Singer, 2011).

Objection P1.B

One could object that children are not moral agents in the relevant sense that is necessary to be “persons with political interests”. Perhaps children are not educated, cannot reason, or are not developed enough in some other way, and so cannot have interests in the sense of agency.

Response P1.B.1

However, some children, particularly older children, do seem to have a sufficient sense of agency to recognize and represent their own interests competently. Though, some children, the younger children, do not have a sufficient sense of agency and cannot competently represent their own interests.

Response P1.B.2

However, this sense of agency does not seem to be relevant to the question of political representation anyways, since a person who cannot represent themselves politically still can be represented politically (Rowlands, 2012). A child who is incompetent to cast a vote in their interest still has interest in the way that vote could be cast by another on their behalf.

Premise 2 (P2)

To say that “political representation should be distributed proportionally amongst persons with political interests” seems uncontroversial. This is a basic principle of impartiality in social choice theory: in cases with groups greater than one, some schema for distributing representation and making decisions amongst the interests of the constituents must be devised (List, 2022).

Objection P2.A

One could object that political representation should not be distributed proportionately, but disproportionately, according to some variable by which the disproportion is calculated (List, 2022). For example, one could distribute representation disproportionately according to need, giving higher weight to those without necessities and giving lesser weight to those with luxuries. In the case of children and adults, the disproportion could be distributed according to age, with more weight given to old age and less weight given to young age. Or, the disproportion could be distributed according to intelligence, with more weight given to high IQ and less weight given to low IQ (which up to a point would be a considered a rough proxy for mental age). Indeed, the current system in the USA and elsewhere disproportionately represents adults and entirely excludes children based on an age-cutoff, making a weighted step-function assigning representation disproportionately to those above the step and below the step.

Response P2.A.1

However, given that everyone, regardless of age or IQ, has approximately similar interest to be defended or offended, to distribute political representation disproportionately according to some variable other than interest would only seem to introduce departures from fairness, where fairness is conceived of as the proportional representation of interested parties (List, 2022).

Objection P2.B

One could object that all persons with interests should not get proportional political representation. For example, non-citizen immigrants do not necessarily get proportional political representation. In this spirit, we seemingly can specify categories of persons that do not get representation.

Response P2.B.1

However, different cases may have different reasons for disenfranchisement on the grounds of proportionality.

For example, one reason to disenfranchise non-citizen immigrants is that they already have enfranchisement in another country. To give them double enfranchisement (in both countries) would actually seem disproportional, so some process of citizenship before representation seems appropriate. This may be less true in different cases. For example, in the case of political refugees who no longer have a country to return to, the case against enfranchising them may be very (or vanishingly) weak because they will not be doubly enfranchised.

Objection P2.C

One could object that all persons are already proportionally politically represented without the representation of children. This is because, although persons aren't equally represented at different periods in their lives (childhood less, adulthood more), persons are indeed equally represented when considering lifetimes. Everyone gets to vote—once they are voting age—and therefore everyone gets proportional political representation.

Response P2.C.1

However, this measure of proportionality across lifetimes does not seem completely valid.

First, because some persons may never reach voting age, measuring proportionality using the unit of a lifetime is very disproportional. Every child who dies before the age of enfranchisement does not get representation in their entire lifetime. So, if our measure of proportionality is comparing lifetimes, then some persons (who die young) never get represented at all, a disproportional fact.

Second, because people get to vote until their deaths, which may come at different times, measuring proportionality using the unit of a lifetime already is very disproportional. Those who die young end up having a less representation than those who die old, because the former get fewer chances to vote than the latter. The only way to make sense of this unfairness is to compare moments-of-life-lived, not lifetimes, as the unit of comparison. This is because, in terms of moments of life-lived, those who live shorter lives are entitled (and receive) less representation, and those who live longer lives are entitled (and receive) more representation, by virtue of having more moments-of-life-lived to have interest in.

Third, because on average children have different interests than adults, measuring proportionality using the unit of a lifetime is very disproportional. If we compare the lifetimes of persons, then we are acting as though every moment-to-moment experience of persons can be treated as equivalent in its political interests. However, because political interests can change between periods of life, representing adulthood only cannot be fairly considered representing childhood too. This system would be inexact in proportional treatment of the different political interests corresponding to different periods of life.

Conclusion 1 (C1)

The conclusion can be said to follow deductively from the premises without trouble. Furthermore, even if one of the above objections to premises 1 or 2 succeeds, modified versions of premises 1 or 2 can still allow the argument to go through.

For example, if proportional representation was dispensed with, and weighted representation was embraced, thus modifying premise 2, the conclusion of the argument (C1) could still succeed, but it would just succeed for a weighted system instead: “political representation should be distributed [in a weighted manner] amongst persons with political interests, including children.” This conclusion would still require that children be politically represented, just represented according to some weighting system, so the corollaries determining how to best represent the children could still be assessed.

Corollaries 2a-c (C2a-c)

Assuming that the core argument holds, and that one wants to include children (as persons with political interests) proportionately into the system of political representation, then arises the natural question: how does one best represent the political interests of children? The most

obvious way would be to have children represent themselves (C2a). Another obvious way would be to have guardians represent their dependent children (C2b). And another way would be for delegates, trained to represent children, represent children (C2c). Intuitively, any one of these three options may be sufficient to improve the proportional representation of the interests of children.

Nonetheless, one might object to one or more of the three means by which children might be represented.

Objection C2a.A

First, one might object to the notion that children should represent themselves. Children are incompetent and therefore cannot reliably represent their own interests (Piaget, 1936). Children are often cited as paradigmatically incompetent epistemic agents (Stoutenburg, 2017).

Response C2a.A.1

However, even if true, this incompetence is insufficient to automatically justify disenfranchising children from self-representation; the incompetence of children would have to be proven so severe that their self-representation would work against their own political interests on average, and it is not obvious that this is the case.

Even if children were this incompetent, guardians or delegates could represent the children instead.

Objection C2b.A

Second, one might object to the notion that guardians should politically represent their dependent children. Some guardians' interests may be indifferent to or orthogonal to the interests of their dependent children. Some guardians may abuse their vote for their own interests, in cases in which their own interests conflicted with their dependent children's interests. And some guardians may even act against the interests of their dependent children, misusing or abusing them (Brockington, 1996).

Response C2b.A.1

However, we can grant that some guardians are poor stewards of their dependents, but nonetheless, if, on average, guardians are aligned with children's interests more than the average voter is aligned with children's interests, then guardian representatives will be better at representing children's interests than the alternative of nobody representing children's interests. And it seems that guardians do, on average, have the children's interests at heart ("AHRQ Data Tools", 2024). Guardians would have to be proven to be actively acting against children's interests on average to be disqualified from representing children on these grounds. And, in this case, they may well be neglecting (or even flouting) other duties as a guardian, in which case their guardianship might be reasonably revoked anyways.

Furthermore, because of the direct relationship between guardian and dependent, guardians could engage their dependent children in the process of voting in a more active way. Guardians could teach their dependent children about their representation, inquire about their interests, and attempt to vote accordingly. At a certain point, if the guardian

determines their dependent competent, then the dependent could even be permitted to represent themselves.

Even if guardians were disqualified, delegates could represent the children.

Objection C2c.A

Third, one might object to the notion that delegates could be assigned to politically represent children. Perhaps adult delegates could not be trained to represent the interests of children perfectly, even in principle (Cameron, 1999).

Response C2c.A.1

However, it seems implausible that a delegate could not be trained to represent someone else's interests *at least a little*. It just seems like a matter of the appropriate sequence of vetting and prepping. Even if it were true that all delegates were seriously imperfect in their representation of the interests of children (i.e., never absolutely perfect representatives), and even if these delegates were only marginally better than neutral with respect to representing children's interests (i.e., barely even positive representatives), this would still be better representation for children than the alternative of no representation at all.

Further Consequences C ∞

The impact of representing the interests of children could be quite substantial.

If we assume that 1) the average person lives until 72 ("Life Expectancy", 2020), 2) that persons are children until around 18 years of age (Oregon v. Mitchell, 1970), 3) a demographic distribution that is equal across ages, and 4) a system of proportional political representation, then we can conclude that around 25% of all human interests are children's interests. Given that death rates increase as age increases, this number is the lower bound on the percentage of children's interests as a fraction of total human interests.

It is also probably the case that children's interests have a greater alignment with the interests of the long-term future, because children's personal interests will naturally have a longer time horizon than adults' personal interests. So, this 25% or greater enfranchisement of human interests could end up exerting up to a 25% or greater pressure towards preferences that tend to benefit the long-term future. Furthermore, if the long-term future contains the majority of possible human interests, then such pressure can be said to be better for human interests in general (MacAskill, 2022).

Therefore, if we replace a policy that systematically disenfranchises childhood interests with a policy that marginally enfranchises childhood interests, then we have the chance of having an impact with an upper bound of greater than 25% of all democratic political power exerted towards preferences that are at least on-margin oriented towards the long-term future and therefore the benefit of human interests in general.

Objection C ∞ .A

One might object that the cumulative negative impacts of children's political interests could outweigh the positive impacts.

If the interests of children were systematically opposed to the interests of the entire community, then an enfranchisement policy might be negative. For instance, it might be in the interest of children to throw perpetual ice cream parties, bankrupting the community.

Response C_∞.A.1

However, since eventually the ice cream would run dry, such childish indulgence would have diminishing returns to the children whose interests are being served. Furthermore, because children naturally age out of being children, their interests are on a continuum with and never entirely divorced from the interests of the adults that they will someday become, making it impossible for the interests of children to entirely oppose the interests of the community.

Objection C_∞.B

One might object that the system of proportional representation chosen could be vulnerable to extreme corruption, which could outweigh the benefits of implementation.

If the interests of guardians or delegates were systematically perverted by their duties of representation, then the system's outcomes might be negative. For instance, such policies might perversely incentivize parents to have more children, so as to have more votes and accumulate more political power, for themselves or their posterity. Or, the delegates, without oversight to veto their representational choices, might be corrupted by their power and only pass policies favoring themselves.

Response C_∞.B.1

However, regarding the former problem, because the added costs of parenting one extra child are so high, and because the added benefits of casting one extra vote are so low, it is fairly implausible that such incentives would prevail. The added benefits of the one vote would have to equal to or exceed the added cost of an electoral period of childcare (a tidy sum).

Regarding the latter problem, although the delegates of children may indeed be corruptible (and probably are), this is also true of any representative office in any political system. So, although a potential problem, it is not obvious why this should be disqualifying in the case of childhood representation we are discussing, and should rather be disqualifying to all cases of corruptible representation in all democratic systems—a much larger question about the legitimacy of political representation per se.

Conclusion

Given that children are people with interests and that people's interests should be proportionally politically represented, children's interests should be proportionally politically represented—either by themselves, their guardians, or appropriately selected delegates—the impact of which could be far-reaching.

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