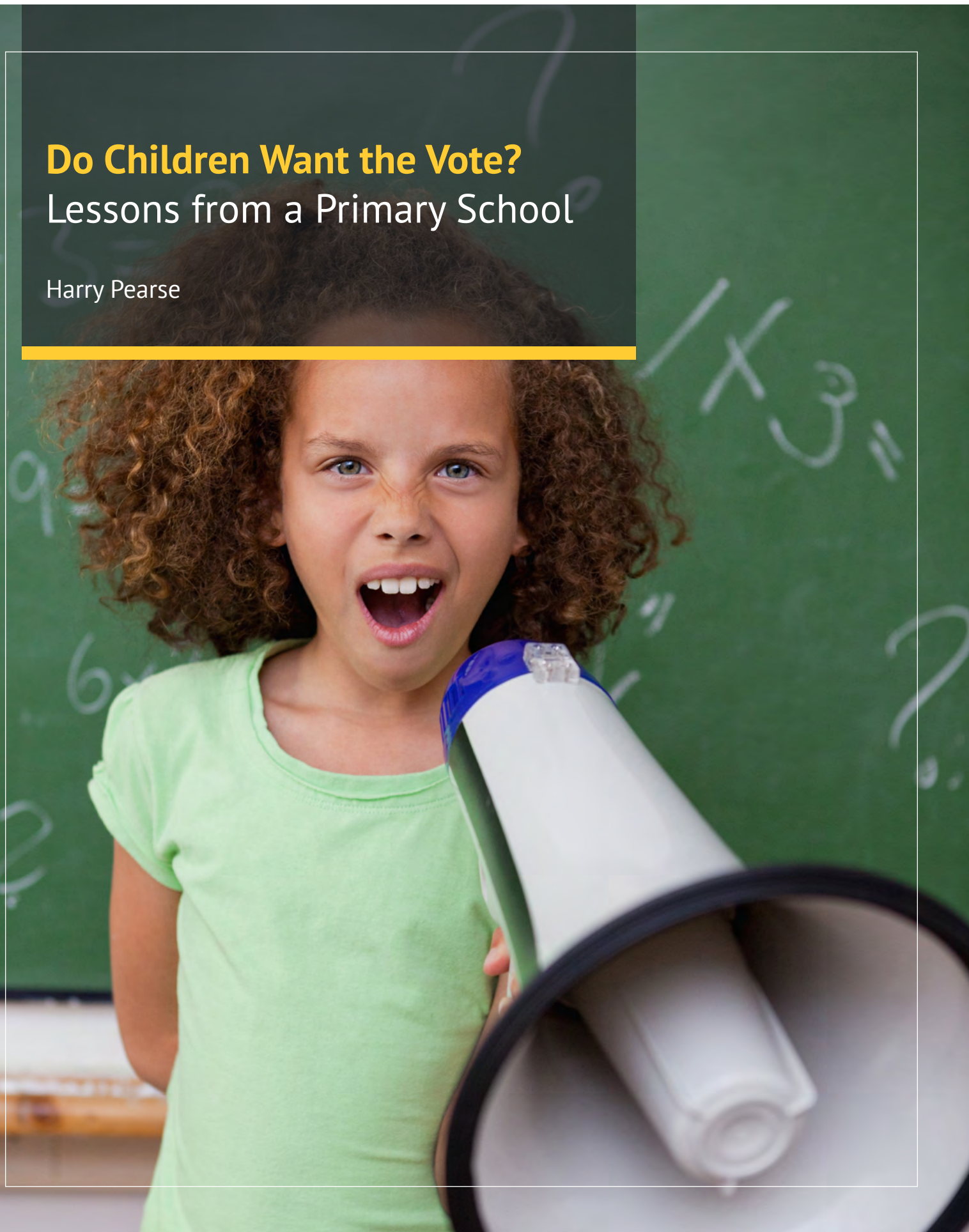


Do Children Want the Vote? Lessons from a Primary School

Harry Pearce



Preface

For a number of years, I have been making the case – in print and in public forums – for the enfranchisement of school-age children. Though there is growing academic interest in this subject, it remains very much a minority – even a quixotic – cause in contemporary politics. Whenever and wherever I have suggested lowering the voting age to six-years-old, I have been struck by the consistent response I get. Most people are instinctively against it, many of them excessively so. However, when there is a chance to discuss children’s enfranchisement in more detail, most of those objections fall away. The case is generally accepted when it can be fully put and genuinely heard. Yet that doesn’t make much difference to whether people care about it. Once they stop thinking it’s a terrible idea, they tend to think it’s a trivial one.

This reflects two features of the argument concerning the enfranchisement of children. The case for it is primarily negative – *no*, it *wouldn’t* be dangerous; competence is *not* a criterion for citizenship; voting is *not* the same as policymaking; children are *no more* susceptible to influence than adults; and so on. And second, children are largely absent from the conversation. That gives it an airless quality. It is a principled argument, founded on reassurance, and lacking the urgency of a political movement. It is a high-concept but low-energy endeavour.

Working for a term with primary-age schoolchildren was an opportunity to remedy this. The project described in this report was not intended to test children’s competence or their aptitude for democratic politics, nor was it meant to be an exercise in teaching citizenship. It was designed to be a way of exploring the question of children’s

enfranchisement as it is experienced by children themselves. Do they care about it? Do they understand the pros and cons in the same way as adults? Do they think it would make any difference? If so, how?

The results are described in this report. They are, I believe, varied, interesting and not always predictable. For me, three things stand out in what we discovered. First, votes for children as experienced by children is not a low-energy idea. It is full of life, not because all children are in favour of it, but precisely because children respond to it in fresh and unexpected ways. Second, whatever else giving children the vote might do, it would introduce a sense of experimentalism into our democratic politics, something that is for the most part sorely lacking. Third, where it is possible to hear the voices of adults in the attitudes of children to politics, it tends to come out as cynicism (some of the children were notably cynical). It is true, therefore, that children sometimes mimic adults. But that is not an argument against allowing them to vote. It is an argument for it because it does not reflect well on the adults. When children speak for themselves, the conversation becomes much more interesting.

I am very grateful to the University of Cambridge Primary School for hosting this project and to the Newton Trust for their support and I would like to thank to my co-investigators Harry Pearse and Ella Bradshaw for their invaluable contribution to this research. I am particularly grateful to Harry Pearse for the report that follows.

**David Runciman, Professor of Politics,
University of Cambridge**

Executive summary

Although the theoretical arguments for children's suffrage are credible, they're neither familiar nor widely accepted. Presumably, in part, because children's suffrage lacks political traction. There's no *movement* for children's enfranchisement.

This project cannot hope (and does not intend) to initiate such a movement. However, it aims to explore what it means to treat children like full citizens, capable of inclusion in democratic life. Although adults rarely speak to children about politics or ask how they feel about their democratic exclusion, this project does precisely that. We ask children if they're interested in the franchise, or if they feel adequately represented by adults. And we attempt to unpack children's political concerns (if indeed they have any), and their preferred policy options and political fixes.

We work from the assumption that voting is, or ought to be, a right of citizenship, not a privilege of intelligence or rationality. Therefore, we make no inquiries into whether children possess the capacity to participate in democracy. Nevertheless, we also assume that mining children's views and perspectives will likely enrich the case for children's suffrage. It's unlikely that every child desires or is even interested in voting rights. But if only some children have misgivings about their exclusion, or express distinct perspectives on political questions, the arguments for disenfranchisement become harder to sustain.

To explore these issues, researchers from the University of Cambridge partnered with the University of Cambridge Primary School (UCPS) to run a series of workshops with children in Years 2, 4, and 6 (aged 6-7-years-old, 8-9-years-old, and 10-11-years-old, respectively). We ran the same workshops with each class, allowing comparisons across age groups, and all but one of the workshops were conducted with full classes – only the final sessions was designed for smaller groups.

The outcomes of the workshops are summarised as follows:

- Most students grasped the basic principles of democracy; that people authorise governments by voting for politicians at elections, and that governments take political decisions on behalf of the people.
- While some children favoured the idea of child enfranchisement; others were sceptical – paralleling the outlook of women in the early twentieth century, who were also divided on the question of suffrage.
- In each class, the arguments on both sides mirrored the arguments adduced by adults and discussed in academic literature. Much hinged on whether children are cognitively, or morally, or practically equipped to vote responsibly – the so-called competence criterion. Some children said competence is necessary for voting, and that children are rightly disqualified. On the other hand, some observed that the competency criterion is only applied to children and that adults aren't screened for voting capacity. Several children argued that competence isn't relevant to voting, and that all people are (or should be) entitled to vote. Some also noted that children's disenfranchisement leaves politicians with little incentive to cater to children's needs or interests; and that irrational or erratic voters don't necessarily lead to irrational or erratic government – that voting isn't the same as law-making.
- On education and environment policy, children of all ages said the people best placed to understand their concerns and interests are other children – people of similar age, with similar experiences, who regularly interact with other young people.

- They said parents are usually receptive to children's perspectives, but that politicians have more authority to prosecute children's interests. Implicitly, the schoolchildren understood the difference between familial relationships or advocacy – parents listening to and seeking to protect their children – and political representation.
- Most of the children were aware of, and concerned by, contemporary political issues and challenges, like the cost-of-living crisis, homelessness, and refugees. They recognised policy trade-offs and acknowledged when their judgements were uncertain. Their views were sensitive and creative, but also variable – some were frivolous and reactive, others more serious and grounded in longstanding belief.
- In some cases, the children expressed heterodox views – e.g., about the war in Ukraine – or explicitly challenged ideas they'd heard at home. In doing so, they undercut the common assumption that children simply adopt the views of their parents, and that enfranchising children would effectively give parents an extra vote.
- Although, predictably, the most talked about issue was climate change, the children expressed novel perspectives on this familiar topic. They didn't argue that young people are more worried about climate collapse than older generations because they – children – are due to suffer more of its consequences. Each class was as worried about current environmental degradation as future climate breakdown. Moreover, most thought it preferable to incentivise, rather than mandate, environmentally friendly behaviours, distinguishing them from older peers (teenagers and young voters) known to support more rigorous government action on climate change. Absent the vote, these distinctive child perspectives are likely to lack representation.
- In the penultimate session, we asked each class to select four representatives to participate in a focus group scheduled for the following session. We discussed a range of selection processes – voting, asking for volunteers, running a lottery, getting the teacher to pick etc. However, each class found individual methods unsatisfactory, and instead opted for composite processes, like submitting volunteers to a lottery, or voting on volunteers. In doing so, the children showed an experimental approach to the process of representation, beyond that evident in contemporary democracy, which is based almost entirely on voting. They said they wanted their procedures to prioritise fairness and equality.
- The focus groups were run by professional moderator, Gemma Stokes (Podengo Research).¹ Again, children across year groups demonstrated an awareness of political issues, like climate change, homelessness, and the cost-of-living-crisis. Most of them also showed a basic understanding of democratic mechanics; that people vote for governments, and politicians take decisions.
- The Year 2 students demurred on the question of children voting, saying that children are too young and irresponsible. By contrast, the children in Years 4 and 6 were broadly in favour. The older students discussed a variety of (lower) age thresholds, as well as voting conditions, like weighted votes, selective issue voting, and indicative votes.
- Compared to the eight-year-olds and ten-year-olds (Years 4 and 6) the six-year-olds (Year 2) struggled to concentrate and sustain conversation throughout the 50-minute focus group. However, the Year 6 students were notably more cynical about politics than the younger cohorts, characterising politicians as corrupt, disproportionately wealthy, and indifferent to the concerns of other people. Still, each group

1. See: <https://gopodengo.com/>

expressed reservations about the utility of voting, not mentioned in previous sessions – complaining that democracies were ruined by disagreement and untruthfulness. Depressingly, democratic disenchantment appears to set in much earlier than is commonly supposed.

- Overall, the workshops revealed that – in large part – children are politically engaged and have distinct and imaginative political judgments; that children implicitly understand the limits of non-political, parental representation; and that, although some children oppose enfranchisement, many are in favour – citing children’s competence, or their rights, or their need to protect their own interests. At the very least, these findings suggest children are interested in the vote and democratic politics more broadly.²
- That said, several children questioned whether voting was effective in the face of political corruption and unrepresentative legislatures. They’re disenfranchised, but also disillusioned. At the same time, they expressed support for less conventional mechanisms of representation, such as volunteering and using lotteries. Not all their ideas were novel or feasible. But at least children appear to possess an experimentalism (possibly born of dissatisfaction) that democracies will need to replicate if they hope to negotiate the pressures of the twenty-first century.

2. It should be noted that the participating students at the UCPS constitute a limited and possibly unrepresentative sample. It would be helpful to conduct similar research at other schools in different places.

Introduction

There's never been a campaign for children's votes on the scale of the Suffragettes' movement in the UK or the civil rights movement in America.³ Neither children nor adults are protesting or campaigning for children's enfranchisement – at least not in large numbers. And while Children's Studies and children's rights theory are burgeoning fields of inquiry (Archard, 2015), the literature on children and voting remains scarce – usually limited to academic scholarship, where it's still marginal and largely unfamiliar (Wall, 2021; Munn, 2012; Lau, 2012). As such, when pressed, most people intuitively side with the standard arguments against children's suffrage (Runciman, 2021). It's common to hear that children don't know enough, or are too irrational, to vote responsibly; or that children's interests will distort public policy. Many adults also scoff at the prospect of allowing people to vote who can't yet smoke or get married or join the army (Pearse, 2022b).

Although each of these arguments is refutable, debunking them only removes the theoretical objections to children voting; it has little *political* impact. It hasn't changed – and doesn't seem likely to change – children's concrete political situation.⁴

These refutations can be summarised as follows:

- It's arbitrary to disenfranchise children for their (alleged) ignorance but place no cognitive threshold on adult participation. We let ignorant adults vote – and rightly so (Achen and Bartels, 2017; Caplan, 2007). But don't grant children the same privilege (Archard, 2015; Lau, 2012).
- It's hard to say whether children are less equipped for democratic participation than adults. Human beings have variable intellectual, moral, and practical capacities, and what qualifies someone for democratic life is unclear and possibly unknowable. (For various suggestions, see: Cohen, 1975; Lau, 2012; Dahl, 1991; Schrag, 1975).

- However, even if children are less competent than adults, their incompetence – expressed through the ballot box – is unlikely to radically distort public policymaking (Olsson, 2008). In representative democracy, electoral processes and governance structures create buffers between (potentially misguided) electorates and political decision-makers (Hannon, 2022; Somin, 1998). Voters can influence politicians, but electorates don't make decisions or write law. That remains the job of politicians and bureaucrats.
- Consequently, voting isn't a danger to others, or to voters themselves. On the contrary, it might even contribute to individuals' self-development (Merry and Schinkel, 2016). This distinguishes voting rights from the rights to have sex or drink alcohol. The latter rights pose a threat to right holders and the public, and should therefore be withheld until individuals come of age and are (more) likely to exercise them with care. Voting doesn't demand the same paternalistic oversight (Umbers, 2020; Munn, 2012).
- It's even arguable that voting rights should be conferred as *early* as possible to protect individuals from the dangers of *not* being enfranchised (Wall, 2021) – a condition that renders people powerless to shape or withstand the decisions of political actors (Harris, 1982).

This points to the positive case for enfranchisement; that voting is a statement of equality – designating people as worthy of dignity and respect – and that, in practical terms, voting is a loose guarantee that one's interests or concerns will not be systematically overlooked by political decision-makers – i.e., politicians (Wall, 2021). Voting may not confer direct power on voters. But its importance is shown by the fact that no enfranchised group has ever given up the right to cast a vote.

3. The United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of a Child* defines a child as a person under the age of eighteen. Although our research and evidence are entirely UK-based, the implications of this report refer to children in general.

4. Although, countries like Scotland have lowered the voting age to sixteen, in the UK, even this relatively modest proposal remains controversial, and in many quarters, actively opposed (Cowley and Denver, 2004).

And yet, despite the flaws in the arguments against children voting, and the weight of the arguments in favour, most people are solidly against the idea of children's suffrage. This almost certainly has something to do with the lack of political traction or even public attention surrounding the question of children's democratic participation. For the most part, arguments for children's suffrage haven't taken root outside universities; they're absent from political speeches, the pulpit, and the popular media. Nor have they given rise to social and political activism – there are no marches or sits-ins, no pamphlet wars or political disruption. The cause of children's suffrage is missing something characteristic of every other franchise movement; that is, an actual movement.⁵

Quietism doesn't invalidate the case for enfranchisement – children's voices are important, but the arguments for their enfranchisement are rights-based; they hold in principle, with or without the endorsement of children. Nor, therefore, does the non-existence of a campaign make children's disenfranchisement any less unjust (although it might mean the injustice is less internalised and therefore easier for children to bear (Schrag, 1975)). However, the absence of children's voices from the suffrage conversation does make the "project" of children's enfranchisement a little cold. And this coldness, with its implied lack of political impetus, is partly why the idea of children voting remains so marginal. That children have fewer opportunities for public communication than adults mean it's possible they're more agitated by their exclusion than we realise. This project seeks out these missing voices and attempts to redress this imbalance.

The project described in this report was jointly undertaken by the University of Cambridge (Dr Harry Pearce, Prof David Runciman, and Ms Ella Bradshaw) and the University of Cambridge Primary School (UCPS). Our aim is to bring children's voices and perspectives into the democratic arena and

understand their views on voting and democracy – not to stoke political agitation or initiate a political movement. We already have some idea of what 18-year-olds, and in some cases 16-year-olds, think politically – they cast votes and their views are canvassed in polling. By contrast, we never – or very rarely – ask young children what they think about politics (Holt, 1975). We don't know how children feel about democracy or their disenfranchisement – would they like to vote now or are they happy to wait until the current legal age? What is their preferred means of participating? Furthermore, we don't know if, or to what degree, they feel represented by different adult cohorts. And we don't know, or understand the basis for, their political concerns, if indeed they have any. These are the questions this project tries to answer.

Our purpose, in other words, is to test what happens when you think about children as individuals entitled to democratic consideration. When you treat them as full citizens and not simply (or exclusively) as children. These considerations have a sharper focus in relation to primary-school-aged children, because at secondary school children are already (conventionally speaking) on the brink of adulthood. But young children are political agents too, and we want to understand how *they* think about their political circumstances.

What the project *doesn't* do is answer the question: should children be allowed to vote? Since the advent of universal suffrage in the early twentieth century, democracies have gradually become more inclusive – raising the threshold for franchise exclusions (Pearse, forthcoming). We think these rights-based arguments are compelling, don't require additional empirical support, and can be straightforwardly extended to children. As such, we're also not concerned with the question of whether children have the capacity to participate. Many of the children in this study are competent and politically engaged. However, the

5. It's also notable that advocates of children's suffrage tend to be adults. While other suffrage movements were pioneered by the excluded constituency itself, children have so far played a minimal role in the franchise conversation – although they've been prominent in other forms of political activism, such as the School Strike for Climate and Extinction Rebellion.

question is misguided; assuming that voting is a privilege of competence, when in fact it is (or should be) a right of citizenship.

In some ways, our inquiries are less weighty than these sidestepped questions. But the larger questions have been answered, without any obvious impact on political reality. The issue of children's suffrage remains stuck on (solid) rational ground without popular attention or political traction (Runciman, 2021). These cannot be achieved overnight. But this project – and the inquiries it makes – has the potential to breathe new life into the question of children's enfranchisement. For if children are shown to be cognisant of their exclusion and mistreatment, as well as possessed of their own political perspectives, the case "in favour" will likely improve.

The project has no broader political aspirations than this. We're not concerned if children are "left" or "right", which politicians they prefer, or which parties they'd vote for. We simply want to treat children

as serious political actors and find out if they too understand themselves as such. To do this, we ran a series of six workshops at UCPS with children in Years 2, 4, and 6 – that is, children aged, six, eight, and ten-years-old. The first five sessions were conducted with full classes – around 25–30 students in each. Only the sixth was designed for smaller groups. The workshops explored ideas and arguments about voting, representation, policy, deliberation, and leadership, and were structured in the same way for each year group, allowing for age-related comparisons. Harry Pearse, David Runciman, and Ella Bradshaw took handwritten notes throughout the sessions, and the sixth session – the focus group – was audio recorded.

The sessions and their outcomes are detailed in the following section.

Workshops

Between 14 October 2022 and 2 December 2022, Harry Pearse, David Runciman, and Ella Bradshaw jointly ran six workshops in the UCPS. Each week, we ran the same session in three classes – Year 2, Year 4, and Year 6. The same classes participated each week, and each session lasted approximately 40 minutes.

Session one: Should children be allowed to vote?

Structure

The classes discussed the question: Who rules Britain? As a prompt, we showed them a slide (see Appendix) depicting the monarch, the army, the government, the people, and the police. We then asked each class if children should be considered part of “the people” and thereby entitled to vote? We asked those who thought “yes” and “no” to stand at opposite ends of the classroom, with the “maybes” in between. Members of each group had the opportunity to persuade the others, and at the end the children could revise their choices if they wished.

Summary of outcomes

There was no consensus within or between year groups on the question, ‘Who rules Britain?’ However, the range and types of answers were relatively consistent across ages. For example, it was frequently observed that while the army and police have significant powers of coercion and sanction, they don’t rule or make decisions, but rather follow orders. By contrast, many children thought the King ruled – either by deciding the rules that society had to follow or signing them off. (Almost everyone noticed that the slide we used was out of date – referring to the “the Queen” instead of the King). A child in Year 6 thought the King ruled London, but not Britain.

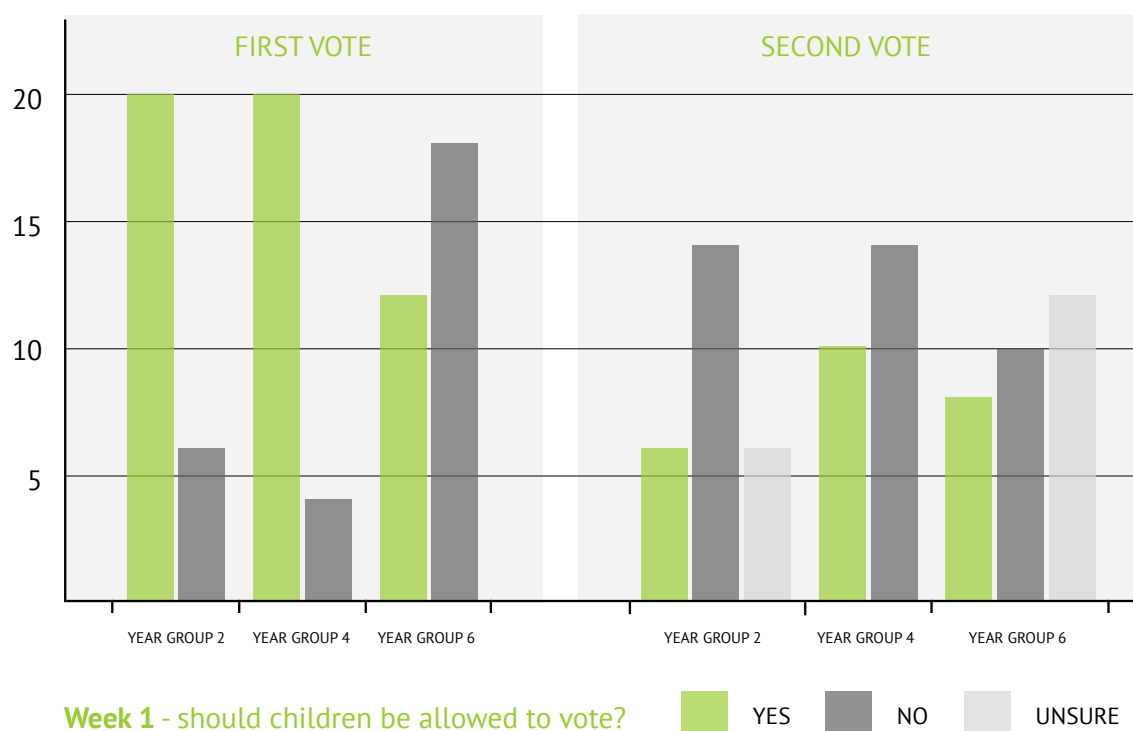
Nevertheless, in general, each year group revealed a democratic bias. It was repeatedly observed that governments take decisions, make rules, and give orders, and that governments are authorised by ordinary people who vote in elections. Although some children over- or underestimated the role and influence of ordinary people, most children

understood that “the people” have power – to empower and change governments – but that they don’t strictly rule, which is the role of politicians and governments. Several students in each year group noted that no constituency rules entirely alone – instead, power is shared between the different groups.

On the question of whether children should be allowed to vote, various arguments were made on both sides, largely mirroring the arguments raised by adults when asked the same question. The Year 2 students opposed to child enfranchisement said children would simply copy the preferences of family members. Children are too ignorant to vote – they have ‘no ideas’ and ‘don’t know the names of things’ – and they’d struggle to get to the polls by themselves. Those in favour of children voting observed that parents or other family members could escort them to voting booths. They also argued that children ‘are people’ – just as much as adults are – and that as long as kids can’t vote, their interests and priorities will be ignored by politicians.

Similarly, several Year 4 students said adults are capable of understanding politics – as possibly are teenagers (because they’ve been to school) – but that children are not and would only vote for ‘silly’ things. However, others offered the rejoinder that governments don’t enact silly things just because certain voters subscribe to them. It was also argued that having the right to vote would encourage children to become better informed, and that voting could be ‘fun’. Some wondered if children should only be allowed to vote on particular issues, and others recommended a voting age of nine-years-old.

Sceptical Year 6 students also said voting was too much responsibility for children: noting that children are ill informed, immature, are easily manipulated or



corrupted, and rely too heavily on stereotypes when making decisions. In contrast, it was also argued that children are ‘mini-people’ and ‘not aliens,’ and should therefore be entitled to vote. One student said ten-year-olds were sufficiently responsible (though admitted that 5-year-olds probably were not). Others agreed that not all children were silly, much as not all adults are sensible. It was even suggested that, while adults are usually motivated by economic self-interest, children might vote on ‘more important’ things like climate change. The upshot being that voting is more about one’s points of view than one’s maturity.

Voting results

Year 2: In the first poll, 77% voted ‘yes, children should be allowed to vote’ and 23% voted ‘no’. In the second poll, following the class debate, 23% voted ‘yes’, 54% voted ‘no’, and 23% were ‘undecided’.

Year 4: In the first poll, 83% voted ‘yes’ and 17% voted ‘no’. In the second poll, 42% voted ‘yes’ and 58% voted ‘no’.

Year 6: In the first poll, 40% voted ‘yes’ and 60% voted ‘no’. In the second poll, 27% voted ‘yes’, 33% voted ‘no’, and 40% were ‘undecided’.

Reflections

The arguments children made about voting were similar (though expressed in very different language) to those adduced in adult discussions of the same issue, as well as the academic literature on child enfranchisement (see, e.g., Runciman, 2021; Lau, 2012). Across year groups, the case “against” was often based on a version of the competency argument – that voting requires (or ought to require) voters to be informed or engaged or conscientious, and that children are too ignorant or disengaged to do it properly. If children were allowed to vote – the argument goes – electoral outcomes would reflect their incompetence and distort policymaking or politics more generally. The basic counter argument was also made – that children (of a certain age) *do* possess whatever attributes are required to vote responsibly. Although the disagreements about the exact age threshold indicate how difficult it is, or would be, to establish a clear and consensual position or campaign.

Nevertheless, several of the arguments in favour of enfranchisement moved away from these discussions, and in some cases challenged the basis of the competency argument itself. For example, several students observed that adults are sometimes less

sensible and more selfish than children, highlighting how inconsistently voting thresholds are applied – i.e., that we hold children to cognitive or ethical standards that we don't apply to adults; standards that many adults would fall short of. (Relatedly, a number of students were sympathetic to the idea of withholding votes from old people or – a largely nineteenth century idea – introducing competency tests). However, it was also argued that children should be enfranchised because they're part of "the people" – a position at odds with the idea that voting is a reward for knowledge or experience, but conducive to the view that suffrage is a right of citizenship; a right granted to the people or citizens in a particular democratic community (Weale, 2007). Some students noted that, without the vote, children lack democratic representation and are liable to be overlooked in political decision-making. Others contended that even if children (voters) are irrational or erratic, government do not necessarily follow suit – pointing to the fact that voting isn't the same as getting one's way or deciding what happens. Whether or not an electorate is informed and rational, politicians are responsible for making law.

It's not unusual for disenfranchised constituencies to be divided on the question of enfranchisement. Although the Suffragettes formed a visible and eventually successful mass movement, not all women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were in favour of suffrage – a sizeable percentage held that politics was a grubby or masculine pursuit or thought that voting would make little difference to their lives (Runciman, forthcoming). The fact that some children oppose the idea of young people voting is not therefore a blow to the case for enfranchisement – although it was notable that, in each year group, the number of students in favour of voting declined *after* the debates. In the UK, the right to vote confers no obligation. So, if children were enfranchised, they could elect not to exercise their right until they deemed it appropriate. However, no enfranchised community – anywhere – has ever relinquished the right to vote.

Session two: Representation

Structure

Each class was shown a slide (see Appendix) depicting seven categories of people: parents, celebrities, teachers, the King, campaigners, businesspeople, and politicians. The classes discussed which of these adults have the most influence over education and environmental policy. And also, which of them – if any – speak for the interests, concerns, or priorities of children.

Summary of outcomes

The Year 2 students said teachers and parents have the most influence over education policy, whereas the King and celebrities aren't important (barring the latter's capacity as parents). Parents and teachers, alongside campaigners, were thought to be the most receptive to children's views. It was argued that children – as students – know more about education than most other people, except maybe teachers. Parents and politicians were said to have the most influence over environmental policy, though the King was also considered influential. By a large majority, they agreed that parents were the most engaged with children's perspectives.

Overwhelmingly, the Year 4 students argued that teachers have the most control over education policy. They also said teachers are likely to understand children's needs, as they interact with children every day. Nevertheless, parents pay the most attention to children's views on school and education. It was widely held that celebrities don't take decisions and the King doesn't know what children want or believe. On the environment, the Year 4 children said politicians have little power and are often disinterested. They said Greta Thunberg was too busy to understand what the public wanted, but they still thought campaigners had by far the most influence. Like the Year 2 students, they said children understand what other kids think about the environment.

The Year 6 participants said that, although parents and teachers have an impact on education, government is the ultimate authority – in charge of setting curriculums and writing laws. On the other hand, they argued, politicians only listen to majorities, whereas parents pay most attention to their own children. On environmental policy, the class said politicians ignore children because they don't need them to stay in their jobs. Almost unanimously, campaigners were said to have the greatest influence. Although, again, children were thought to be the group best able to understand the concerns and interests of other children.

Reflections

Students from each class intuited that children were the constituency most likely to understand their concerns and priorities – either due to similarities in age and experience, or the fact that children interact with other children. This assumption shows an implicit understanding of the importance of descriptive representation. The idea that people with biographical similarities have (some) common interests, and that it's advantageous if political representatives embody those same characteristics (Elsässer et al., 2021). In democratic societies, the most scrutinised characteristics are probably ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background. But age is also significant (Runciman, 2021). Even if they had the vote, children would not be descriptively represented (qua children) – unless they were also allowed to stand for parliament. They would, nevertheless, be electorally represented. And several children understood that to be given the vote is to be given a voice – a voice that politicians must listen to if they want to stay in their jobs. Without such representation, it's far easier for politicians to ignore children's perspectives and interests (Wall, 2021; Umbers, 2020).

However, if parents or guardians look out for their children's interests, does that not reduce the need for formal political representation? Although, unfortunately, not all parents are this considerate, the supposition is nevertheless plausible, and in all three year-groups, children reported that parents are the

adult constituency most likely to listen to their views on education and the environment. At the same time, however, most children said politicians, not parents, are the group with the most influence over policy. Parents may understand their children, but they lack the political authority necessary to prosecute their interests. On the other hand, politicians possess the authority, but lack electoral incentives to cater to children's concerns. An obvious way to square this circle would be to give children the vote.

Session three: Political interests and concerns

Structure

We asked each class to talk about policy areas they wished politicians and other adults would take more seriously. We then divided each class into three subgroups, and asked each subgroup to come up with a basic policy recommendation for one of the issues discussed.

Summary of outcomes

The children in Year 2 focused on the war in Ukraine, poverty, and the environment. One student said they were concerned about oil prices, as well as inflation caused by the war in Ukraine. The class largely agreed that the war was bad for the combatants, but also the rest of the world (increased prices), as well as the environment. They recommended supplies be sent to Ukraine to alleviate the consequences of war, and said that efforts should be made to bring the conflict to an end. One student argued that, because Ukraine was originally part of Russia, it was wrong to resist the Russian invasion.

The class worried about poverty levels in the UK, and suggested people should be paid more for the work they do. In response to concerns about the environment, the subgroup recommended driving less, cycling and walking more, and building fewer factories.

The Year 4 students were concerned about the environment, refugees, and homelessness. On the environment, they discussed ways to transition from petrol to electric vehicles, largely agreeing that incentives were better than enforcement – e.g., finding ways to bring down the cost of batteries so electric cars are price competitive with petrol vehicles. The subgroup recommended introducing rules that prohibit the destruction of trees and woodland.

The group agreed that there should be more and nicer refugee camps, and that refugees should be allowed to attend school in their host country. Refugees, they argued, are human, like everyone else. When asked for a single policy, the subgroup recommended that more refugees be allowed to enter the UK, and that new arrivals should be provided with greater resources. They were uncertain how this might be funded.

While several students said the rich should be taxed to raise money to tackle homelessness, others counselled against excessive taxation – claiming this would simply reverse the fortunes of the rich and the poor, but also that the rich had worked hard for their money, and it'd be unfair to take too much of it. Still, the subgroup agreed that homeless people should be given enough money to survive.

The Year 6 students also focused on the environment, agreeing that citizens should try to shop locally. The environment subgroup recommended that government subsidise sustainable farming.

Poverty and the cost-of-living crisis was another major worry. The class acknowledged that the crisis had been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. They nevertheless held that the government should tax the rich (and mansions, in particular), and spend more on the NHS and schools and less on politicians' wages. In other areas, they were more ambivalent. They were unsure, for example, if increases in petrol prices were harmful or in fact good for the energy transition. Similarly, they couldn't decide if giving out free food was sensible and humane or likely to cause

food shortages. The subgroup recommended lower taxes for those on low incomes.

Finally, the Year 6 students talked about online bullying, which they said was not given enough attention relative to offline bullying. The subgroup recommended that tech CEOs be mandated to monitor their platforms and controlling online bullying, or face fines.

Reflections

That students in Year 2 were concerned about oil prices and inflation shows that – for better or worse – children are politically engaged and familiar with global events. In fact, children in each year group demonstrated a keen understanding of current affairs, both domestic and international, and were able to think sensitively and creatively about potential policy solutions. That many of them were forthright about their uncertainties, acknowledging the intractability and trade-offs of political decision-making, highlights perceptiveness and self-awareness. These were the most vocal students – others, however, were less confident and more diffident.

Of course, it's possible that children are exposed to political opinions at home (through parents or grandparents or siblings) and then adopt them as their own. This assumption is the basis for the claim that enfranchising children would, in effect, multiply the votes of parents, whose influence weighs heavily on children's opinions. Nevertheless, the fact that one child expressed solidarity with Russia against Ukraine casts doubt on this critique. Perhaps they came across this factoid at home. But it's a rare point of view, certainly – we suspect – uncommon in Cambridge, and it's equally plausible they encountered it somewhere else, outside the family – at school, the internet, social media etc. Children – like adults – live in multiple and overlapping spheres of influence. That adults overhear and adopt the concerns of their families, friends, preferred news outlets, colleagues, faith groups, trade unions etc., is rarely treated as a major cause for concern. So why is it with children?

When asked for policy recommendations, some children thought on their feet, while others adduced longstanding beliefs. The striking aspect was their variety and imagination, not their (apparently obvious) sources of influence. It's worth remembering, however, that voting isn't about fixing problems or deciding policy, which is the responsibility of politicians, but rather the expression of preferences and choice of representatives. It was telling, therefore, that students of all ages conveyed a range of views – from the perceptive to the frivolous – on a variety of political issues.

Session four: Policy – climate change and the environment

Structure

In the previous session, each year group expressed concern about the climate and environment. Consequently, in this session, we asked all three classes – as classes and in subgroups – to discuss a range of policy options for addressing climate change.

Summary of outcomes

The three classes all thought citizens shouldn't be forced to abandon petrol cars or use electric vehicles, but that policy should be flexible, incentivising people to adopt environmentally friendly behaviours – by, for example, government subsidising the production of electric vehicles. The Year 6 students said it was better to emotionally manipulate and 'guilt trip' electorates – using evocative images etc. – than mandate specific actions. Likewise, while rich countries should be encouraged, rather than forced, to pollute less.

Technology was a theme, and source of hope, for many children. Desired technological advancements ranged from developing new negative emission technologies to reengineering planes to glide instead of motor. Investment in science and experts was

therefore deemed crucial. Other suggestions included rewilding and exploiting existing and natural negative emission technologies (e.g., planting more trees).

The Year 2 students were divided about how to pay for climate policy – some argued that everyone should pay, others said entrepreneur, Elon Musk, should foot the bill, and some said government subsidies should contribute most.

Reflections

It's well documented, and not at all surprising, that children are concerned about climate change (Strife, 2012). It's a cliché that children are more invested in the future (and more worried about climate change) than adults because they'll have to live through more of it than their older peers. In fact, we found little evidence of this sort of inter-generational grievance. The children we spoke to had distinctive concerns, but they appeared as worried about the current state of the environment as they were about possible future scenarios, and they gave no indication they deserved prior or preferential sway over the course of climate action. Surprisingly, in this and the second workshop (on representation), many students were critical of Greta Thunberg, arguing that she didn't speak for all children.

It was also interesting that most children preferred incentives and inducement to enforcement – marking them out from adolescents and young people, who are known to favour more stringent government action on climate change (World Health Organisation, 2021: 7). Irrespective of which approach is fairer or more effective, it's notable that on a significant political issue, children have different perspectives from their older peers. Unfortunately, without the vote, these perspectives are liable to be overlooked.

Session five: Selecting political representatives

Structure

The classes discussed various ways to select four members of their class to participate in a focus group scheduled for the following session. Options included: voting, asking for volunteers, a lottery, or asking a teacher to decide. Each class voted for which selection procedure they wanted, and then used that procedure to select four students to attend the focus group.

Summary of outcomes

Each year group insisted the selection process should be fair and not arbitrary, and they all had misgivings about systems in which representatives could be selected against their wishes – for example, as a result of the teacher choosing or through a standalone lottery.

Having discussed a variety of often composite selection processes, the Year 2 students voted on three options. First, asking for volunteers, and if more than four people volunteered, choosing four at random (out of a hat). Second, asking for volunteers, and if more than four people volunteered, putting them to a vote. And third, voting on everyone in the class. In the end, they opted for the first option. Several Year 2 students expressed a desire not to participate in the focus group.

On balance, the Year 4 students were more averse to the randomness of a lottery, but less hostile to the prospect of the teacher choosing – arguing the teacher would know which students were deserving. At first, the class favoured selection by volunteering, with a vote held on whoever put themselves forward. However, in the end, they decided to put all the volunteers' names in a hat and choose four at random. This shift meant volunteers no longer had to make a pitch to their electorate, but instead were chosen at random – this caused many more students to volunteer.

Several Year 6 students worried that a ballot would result in representatives being chosen for their popularity rather than the strength of their ideas – i.e., for 'the wrong reasons'. Others feared potential candidates would lie to garner votes. They also discussed placing everyone's name in a lottery, placing only volunteers' names in a lottery, and letting the teacher decide. In the end, a majority voted to hold a ballot. Two candidates won outright – garnering more votes than anyone else. The tied candidates (in third place) were then placed in a hat and two selected at random.

Reflections

In each class, we presented the selection options as distinct and mutually exclusive: vote, or hold a lottery, or ask for volunteers, or let the teacher decide. However, no class was satisfied with these options, and each opted for a composite system instead.

When making choices themselves – and not just talking about democracy in the abstract – the children revealed a degree of experimentalism not currently evident in democratic politics, where representative infrastructure is built more-or-less entirely around voting and elections. The students in Year 2 and Year 4 both decided not to hold ballots (preferring to submit volunteers to a lottery), and those in Year 6 combined voting with the drawing of lots – each citing fairness and equality as the reasons for their choices. Whether these are preferable means of choosing representatives is an open question. However, by testing alternatives, the children demonstrated a willingness to challenge existing democratic conventions. If representative democracy hopes to evolve and survive into the twenty-first century, at some point, it will have to broaden its horizons beyond current electoral formats and experiment with different decision-making processes (direct and deliberative), as well as, potentially, different mechanisms of representation (Pearse, 2022a). Though some adults have the appetite for reform, enthusiasm is limited. On the other hand, children – at least on this showing – seem instinctively more experimental.

Session six: Focus group

Structure

Each group of four representatives (chosen in the previous sessions) participated in a formal 40–50-minute focus group, planned and overseen by Gemma Stokes (Podengo Research and Marketing). The three focus groups were more rigorous and detailed than the previous sessions and more exacting on students. The same questions and material were covered with each year group, and the sessions were designed to be as similar to an adult focus group as possible.

Summary of outcomes

The groups were invited to talk about various political topics, like climate change, homelessness, and the cost-of-living crisis, and as per our previous sessions, each cohort demonstrated awareness and concern. They were also shown pictures of prominent politicians – Boris Johnson, Rishi Sunak, Liz Truss, Donald Trump, Kier Starmer, Barack Obama – and other famous faces, like David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg. The groups could mostly identify the people depicted, except for Kier Starmer, whom no one recognised.

The most interesting discussions concerned the students' understanding of power and conceptualisations of democracy. The Year 2 students found it hard to concentrate on these discussions for long periods, and frequently digressed to unrelated issues to do with their home or school life. Still, two of them held that democratic power comes from electoral mandates (i.e., voting), while the others said politicians derive their authority from banks or from God. The group agreed that, although politicians ought to play an important role in the world, at present, they argue too much, which prevents them making decisions. The participants characterised democracy as a constant process of climbing and falling – continuously presenting ideas and trying (but not always succeeding) to persuade others.

They demurred on the question of children voting, claiming that children are too reckless, and don't understand politics well enough, to vote responsibly.

Although the Year 4 children claimed the news is boring, they nevertheless understood that the prime minister and king are together responsible for making and approving law. They knew the prime minister derives his or her authority from the people; that democracy is a system of voting; and that voting enables ordinary people to (at some level) decide what happens in the world. They grasped, therefore, that becoming an adult and acquiring the right to vote is a form of power.

The group agreed it was unfair to withhold the vote from citizens under 18-years-old who know who or what they want to vote for. They said 16- and 17-year-olds have adequate political knowledge and should be allowed to vote, and that younger children should also be granted a vote on certain issues (ranging from the frivolous (ice cream policy) to the salient (climate change)). The group described democracy as a process of helping people and warning them of danger. They said democracy ought to be about community and working together, but that it was difficult to know what other people were thinking, and therefore disagreement was commonplace.

The Year 6 students were conspicuously more cynical about politics than their younger peers. They claimed politicians are largely incompetent – singling out erstwhile Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, as egregiously hypocritical. They also noted the gulf between the lives of the rich and powerful, and those of everyone else, arguing the former don't understand or look out for the latter. The group understood that democracy works when candidates stand for election – making pledges and inducements – and that the winner is the candidate who garners the most votes. However, they complained that politicians regularly overpromise, and even lie, and that the power holders in the House of Commons are wealthy and unrepresentative of the broader electorate. Power, they concluded, was a by-product of wealth.

One participant characterised disagreement as inimical to democracy because it stymied decision-making and action. Another said disagreement simply meant certain people's expectations wouldn't be met. One student was optimistic that debate would result in agreement, while another said politicians usually repudiate whatever they disagree with.

The Year 6 participants thought it reasonable that children their age (10-11-years-old) be allowed to vote. However, they said that four-year-olds are too frivolous and superficial. One participant said secondary-school-aged children should be able to vote, but that their votes should count for less (until they're 16-years-of-age) lest young people constitute too powerful a voting bloc. Another thought children could participate in indicative votes – informal, non-binding consultations held before formal adult elections.

On democracy itself, it was claimed that disputation and rudeness discouraged participation, but also that it was fun to express one's ideas or be persuaded of something. Democracy could be improved, they argued, by enshrining measures or mechanisms to guarantee or at least facilitate truthfulness. The group agreed it would be advantageous if politicians had more real-world experience.

Reflections

There was a noticeable difference between the Year 2 students and the older groups in terms of concentration and the capacity to sustain conversation or argument. Although the Year 2 students articulated coherent ideas about democracy and different policy areas, their views had to be pieced together from fragments taken over the course of their 40–50-minute session. The children in Years 4 and 6 were far better at sustaining trains of thought for the entire session. However, the Year 6 participants were considerably more cynical about politics, power, and the political classes, than the younger cohorts, frequently characterising politicians as rich, disconnected from ordinary concerns, and self-serving. This variety in perspective is priced

into democratic practice. By giving voice to different outlooks – naivete and cynicism, for example – democracies bring a wider range of ideas to bear on political problems (Umbers, 2020). Nevertheless, it's troubling that children as young as ten-years-old are already deeply pessimistic about politics – suggesting that dissatisfaction with democracy sets in even earlier than is commonly supposed (Foa et al., 2020). It also raises the question of where the cynicism is coming from? If it was being picked up at home, we'd expect to see higher levels of cynicism in younger cohorts too. That the Year 6 students are disproportionately pessimistic suggests they're being exposed to new and different information and perspectives – for example, through social media or older children or adults.

There was a mix of views on the question of child enfranchisement – although the proportion in favour was higher than in our first workshop. There was also more willingness to countenance compromise scenarios, like weighted votes, restricted issue voting, and indicative voting. Again, each year group rehearsed versions of the competency argument. However, the utility of voting was called into question more vocally than in previous workshops – and not just by the Year 6 students. Participants complained that disagreement stymies democratic decision making; that politics is shot through with untruthfulness; and that politicians are liars whose wealth makes them unrepresentative, and even sometimes uncaring. Thus, although support for children's suffrage was higher than in our previous polling, enthusiasm for conventional representation appeared to be more strained.

This depth and elaboration were partly a function of setting. The focus groups were more detailed and probing than the previous sessions. They also involved fewer students, allowing participants more time to develop their thoughts. Like the other workshops, however, they revealed that children are politically engaged with distinct perspectives on political questions.

Conclusion

The aim of this project was to seek out children's perspectives and introduce children to conversations that traditionally exclude them; conversations about democracy, voting, representation, and public policy. We were interested in what children think about the franchise, and whether they care about their exclusion; if they feel represented by adults; and if they have political concerns and policy priorities. The project sidestepped the question of children's capacity for democratic participation – an inquiry that mistakenly associates competence and voting rights. (However, as an aside, if one chose to measure voter competence according to awareness of how democracy functions, or how laws come into being, or which politicians are empowered, many of the children involved in this project would qualify). Nor was the project designed to resolve the broader puzzle of whether children should be allowed to vote. Our findings certainly lend credence to the affirmative, but it's a question that's answerable without recourse to empirical evidence, and rests on whether children are deemed to be rights-holders and citizens – part or members of “the people” – invested with the same rights, dignity, and respect as their adult peers. We proceeded on the basis that children *are* citizens, and that they are, or should be considered, part of the people. As such, the project refrained from interrogating the principled, rights-based arguments for children's suffrage, but rather treated them as given.

Clearly, however, the *political* impetus of children's enfranchisement is not determined by the persuasiveness of these arguments. In fact, if children's suffrage is to become more than an academic curiosity, it cannot rely (solely) on rational argument; it must also draw on the opinions, feelings, and perspectives of children themselves. There must be a movement for children's suffrage; a movement committed to various philosophical arguments, but also motivated – if it ever comes to pass – by a belief among children that they've been excluded from or mistreated by democratic politics, and that a different democratic settlement is desirable and in reach.

This project attempted to shine a light on the relationship between children and democracy. While contemporary politics shows little interest in children – children can't vote, and their opinions are rarely canvassed – this project aimed to treat children seriously; to listen to them, respect their views, and understand their perspectives. It wasn't a starter pistol for a campaign for children suffrage. But we were interested in whether the raw materials for a franchise movement existed: if there was disquiet among children or desire for an alternative democratic settlement. Put simply: we wanted to know if children are political?

We undertook this project knowing what it would mean for the cause of children's suffrage if the raw materials were absent. If children had no interest in voting, or if they already felt adequately represented by adults, or if they had no political ideas or concerns or priorities – or if their ideas or concerns or priorities were identical to other cohorts' – the arguments for child enfranchisement would still stand, but the case would be harder to prosecute. There'd be no urgency, no potency; the prospect would have limited political import.

But, this turned out not to be the case. Many of the children we spoke to were aware of the mechanics of democracy. They were politically engaged, revealing distinct policy perspectives, creative judgements, and an appreciation of political trade-offs. They implicitly understood the limits of non-political, parental representation. And in some cases, supported the prospect of children voting – arguing that children have the capacity to participate, or that competence is irrelevant to voting, or that absent the vote children's interests are passed over. At the same time, several children raised doubts about the efficacy of voting – when balanced against political corruption and unrepresentative legislatures.

The older children were already conspicuously dissatisfied with democracy, which, if allowed to build up, could lead to serious legitimacy problems for democratic governance. Citizens don't have to agree

with everything their governments do – in fact, many, most of the time, will not. It's important, however, that citizens believe in the functionality and relative fairness of democratic processes. If they don't, the entire system can fall apart. It was therefore interesting and encouraging that many of the children were sympathetic to other, less conventional mechanisms of representation, such as volunteering and using lotteries. These ideas may be impractical, or only suitable for small groups. But in rejecting or building upon conventional methods (voting), they revealed an experimentalism that democracies must learn to harness if they want to evolve and survive in the twenty-first century.

Of course, not all of the children were politically engaged or in favour of enfranchisement – many evidently were not. (Just as not all disenfranchised women were politically active or in favour of women's suffrage). However, a sizeable proportion of the children involved in this project wanted to be included in the franchise (if not always in the same way or to the same degree as adults). And many conveyed policy perspectives – on climate change or homelessness or online bullying – distinguishable from prevailing adult views. These perspectives need representation, and democracies work better – are more legitimate and better at solving problems – when they encompass a broader range of view, interests, and perspectives.

Future Research

The results of this research are clear and suggestive: children are a constituency interested in, and in need of, a form of political integration. But before jumping to definite conclusions, it's important to note the number of workshops conducted (six including the focus groups) and the smallness of our sample sizes – we ran the same workshops in the UCPS with classes in Year 2, Year 4, and Year 6; each comprising about 25-30 students. To generate broader and comparative data, we'd need to conduct other workshops at different schools, in different places, with children of different demographics and ages. Doing so would establish a clearer picture of children's preferences and variations between age groups. It would also enable us to track whether children in different socio-eco-cultural circles have different or similar views on the franchise, or representation, or political priorities. Beyond their research value, these clarifications would help us produce teaching aids and lesson plans for teachers to run similar workshops, exploring similar themes, in other schools.

Additional workshops could also experiment with bringing children and adults into conversation together, either informally or in formal citizens' juries or assemblies. This would deepen our commitment to treat children as full citizens – as right-holders like their adult peers. It would also open questions about forms of democratic participation beyond voting – deliberative or plebiscitary.

Bibliography

- Achen, C.H., and Bartels, L.M. (2017). *Democracy for Realists: why elections do not produce responsive government: with new afterword by the authors*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Archard, D. (2015). *Children: Rights and Childhood*. London: Routledge.
- Caplan, B. (2007). *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cohen, C. (1975). On the Child's Status in the Democratic State: A Response to Mr Schrag. *Political Theory* 3(4): 458-463.
- Cowley, P., and Denver, D. (2004). Votes at 16? The case against. *Representation* 41(1): 57-62.
- Dahl, R.A. (1991). *Democracy and its Critics*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Elsässer, L., Hense, S., and Schäfer, A. (2021). Not just money: unequal responsiveness in egalitarian democracies. *Journal of European Public Policy* 28(12): 1890-1908.
- Foa, R.S. et al. (2020). Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect? *Centre for the Future of Democracy*.
- Hannon, M. (2022). Are knowledgeable voters better voters? *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 21(1): 29-54.
- Harris, J. (1982). The Political Status of Children. In Graham K (ed.), *Contemporary Political Philosophy: Radical Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 35-55.
- Holt, J. (1975). *Escape from Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Lau, J.C. (2012). Two Arguments for Child Enfranchisement. *Political Studies* 60: 860-876.
- Merry, M.S., and Schinkel, A. (2016). Voting Rights for Older Children and Civic Education. *Public Affairs Quarterly* 30(3): 197-213.
- Munn, N.J. (2012). Reconciling the Criminal and Participatory Responsibilities of the Youth. *Social Theory and Practice* 38(1): 139-159.
- Olsson, S. (2008). Children's Suffrage: A Critique of the Importance of Voters' Knowledge for the Well-Being of Democracy. *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 16: 55-76.
- Pearse, H. (2023). Children, voting, and the meaning of universal suffrage. *Forthcoming*.
- Pearse, H. (2022a). Refurbishing Democracy: More Direct, More Deliberative, and Younger. *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance* 5 (1): 11-15.
- Pearse, H. (2022b). Why aren't children allowed to vote? An expert debunks the arguments against. *The Conversation*, 28 December.
- Runciman, D. (forthcoming). The Enfranchisement of Women vs the Enfranchisement of Children. In: Wall J (ed.), *Exploring Children's Suffrage*.
- Runciman, D. (2021). Votes for children! Why we should lower the voting age to six. *The Guardian*, 16 November.
- Schrag, F. (1975). The Child's Status in the Democratic State. *Political Theory* 3(4): 441-457.
- Somin, I. (1998). Voter ignorance and the democratic ideal. *Critical Review* 12(4): 413-458.
- Strife, S.J. (2012). Children's Environmental Concerns: Expressing Ecophobia. *The Journal of Environmental Education* 43(1): 37-54.
- Umbers, L.M. (2020). Enfranchising the Youth. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 23(6): 732-755.
- United Nations (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> (accessed 16 February 2023).
- Wall, J. (2021). *Give Children the Vote: On Democratizing Democracy*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Weale, A. (2007). *Democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- World Health Organisation (2021). *Young People's Fight Against Climate Change: actions we can take for health and well-being*. Available at: <file:///Users/harrypearse/Downloads/KS38---Climate-change-action-14.09.2021-web.pdf> (accessed 1 March 2023)

Appendix

Who rules Britain?



The Queen?



The Government?



The Police?



The Army?



The People?

Who has most influence?



PARENTS



CELEBRITIES



TEACHERS



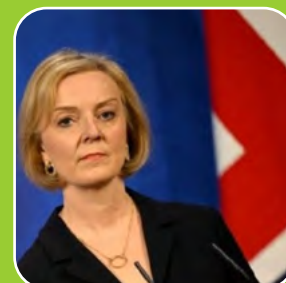
THE KING



CAMPAIGNERS



BUSINESS PEOPLE



POLITICIANS

