



Should children have the right to vote?

SPEAKERS

David Runciman (University of Cambridge), Karine Van der Straeten (IAST)

HOST

Rory Cellan-Jones

Rory Cellan-Jones 0:00

Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels, I'm Rory Cellan-Jones. Should we give children the right to vote? That's the subject of the latest in our podcast collaboration between Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. And as ever, we get to use the interdisciplinary strength of both institutions to explore a complex challenge. We're looking at the main objections against lowering the legal voting age, the merits of extending democratic rights to children, and how children's voices might be better represented in electoral processes. To explore these issues today, we have Karine Van der Straeten from the IAST. Karine, start us off, what is your research focus on?

Karine Van der Straeten 0:51

So my research is at the intersection between economics and political science. Broadly speaking, I'm interested in trying to better understand the practical functioning of democracy. I've worked on

topics such as corruption, immigration policies, lobbying, measurement of public opinion, how to really know what people want.

Rory Cellan-Jones 1:15

Excellent. And from the University of Cambridge, we have David Runciman. David, what are your main research interests?

David Runciman 1:21

So I'm really a historian. I'm interested in history of ideas, but also political theory. But I'm very interested in how democracy works, historically, practically, and in the future, whether it's got a future.

Rory Cellan-Jones 1:34

And David, it's your fault we're doing this particular episode because you raised this whole question in a widely shared and provocative article last year. But I'm going to start with Karine all the same. Karine, most countries have a legal voting age of 18, a few, Austria, Scotland, Ecuador, have lowered the voting age to 16. But let's start by unpacking why children aren't allowed to vote. What are the main objections against lowering the voting age to school-aged children?

Karine Van der Straeten 2:03

Well, I think the main argument is simply that we don't trust them to do it correctly. There is this idea that when people vote, they're going to impact the whole community. And in a sense, you've got to protect the community. And you have some kind of minimal level of competence or skills to vote, including or being reasonably well informed, being able to form a judgement. The main argument, I guess, now is that we feel that children younger people just lack the skills.

Rory Cellan-Jones 2:35

So David Runciman, let's come to you because you proposed this quite radical move of lowering the voting age all the way down to six. Why use six as a new benchmark, not twelve, or fourteen? What led you to zero in on six?

David Runciman 2:54

So the pragmatic answer to that is that six is shorter than sixteen. I actually said it as an off-the-cuff remark in a talk, someone said to me, do you believe in lowering the voting age to sixteen? And I said, well, you ask me, why not just go down to six? And then, as I thought about it, I thought, basically, it's an argument for school-aged children to vote. So it doesn't, you know, it could be five, it could be seven, but six is a nice round number, roughly, when children reach, not the age of competence, but the ability to go to school, which seems to me just the minimal threshold we want them to pass. There are, you know, radical theories that say it should be zero,

that it's a human right or a birth right. But I'm against that because it then gets incredibly complicated and messy because six-month-old babies can't vote. I mean, they lacked, they don't just lack the competence, they lack the manual ability to do it. So their parents would have to do it for them, you get proxy systems and all that. Six-year-olds can do it. I think the competence criteria is can you put a cross on a piece of paper, and part of my argument, I'm sure we'll come on to this, is that in all other respects, we don't apply a competence criterion to voting. So we don't actually check whether adults are competent. We've moved to an understanding of democracy where it's a citizenship right. And all sorts of adults probably on the measures that people tend to roll out aren't competent, including many, many older voters. That's fine. It's not about competence. It's about an ability to have your voice heard. That's the minimal and sufficient criterion.

Rory Cellan-Jones 4:27

You're a historian, what is the story about how we, in this country and in lots of countries, came to settle on 18 as the age?

David Runciman 4:36

Well it was twenty-one, as we know, in the not too distant past in the UK, and there was quite an argument about moving it to eighteen and it is still moving down. As we've heard, you know, Scotland has moved to sixteen. But I think it isn't just a competence question. There is an assumption that voting is part of a package both of rights and responsibilities. So it tends to be associated with things like the criminal age of responsibility, which is obviously lower than eighteen, but also people often associate it with things like the likelihood of being a taxpayer, the ability to hold certain kinds of public offices, to sit on a jury or to take part in some other kind of public forum, and children on the whole, are excluded from all of that. And so there is another argument here, and I think we should probably discuss this that the case for children voting is different from say the case that was made historically for the enfranchisement of women or ethnic minorities or the poor in the 19th century in Britain, which is the assumption that if people got the vote, they could also stand for office. Once women could vote, you'd also see women in parliament. You can't make that case, I think, with children. I am not advocating for six-year-olds in the House of Commons, I think that would be an insane idea. It would be funny, but it would be completely nightmarish.

Rory Cellan-Jones 5:55

Some might argue it might not lower the standard of behaviour an awful lot.

David Runciman 5:58

Well, and it might improve it because the grownups might want to try and put on a better show for the children. But nonetheless, the case of the enfranchisement of children is fundamentally

different because it is not a case for children to represent children. I think it'll still be adult representatives. But I do think there isn't a reason to exclude children from the basic function of expressing a view or a voice.

Rory Cellan-Jones 6:21

Karine, I can see you're very eager to give an opinion here.

Karine Van der Straeten 6:25

I think I might disagree a little bit. The argument in the past against a vote for a woman or against a vote for poor people, if it were something about them being also allowed to run for office. But it seems there was also a general argument that people just wouldn't trust what they were to do. So it was clear, for example, in the case of the extension of the right for women in many countries, that people were afraid that they wouldn't be able to form an autonomous judgement, including among the left parties, that they would just vote like the priest told them to do. I think it was definitely also the case with the poor people, we had to wait decades and decades because we dropped wealth or property qualification to get the right to vote. And part of the idea that there was this mistrust from the elites, from the political elite, that those people who couldn't be trusted and I could see some similarities in the debate we're having now with directions of the past, where we're trying to define what makes you a good citizen or reasonable citizen or capable of autonomous judgement.

Rory Cellan-Jones 8:00

And is it your feeling, Karine, that in the move that we've seen over the decades from twenty-one to eighteen, and now possibly to sixteen, we've kind of reached a general accord that lower than, say sixteen, is just too far to go?

Karine Van der Straeten 8:19

I wouldn't say so. I think that we've seen an extension of the suffrage pretty much everywhere in all three stories. I think that we're also changing collectively our views about what it means to be good enough to be an active citizen. I don't know whether we would go as early as six, as David mentions, but we could go further down. And so there are even some arguments and people pushing for a lower age. The main argument made by Mark Franklin is that what's also important is the very first election. He claimed that what you do for this first time will tend to impact how you behave as a citizen for the rest of your life. And if you're more likely to turn up the first time, then you will keep on doing so. Whereas if you don't, even if it's just by accident, you will tend to participate less or be only a sporadic voter. And so if this argument is true, then one idea is that it's also important at which age people will get the right to vote. And his argument was eighteen may be not a very good age because at eighteen young people are in a transitional phase, leaving home, they don't have as strong maybe links with our community as they would have either older

or younger. So his argument was that although he claims that part of the decline in voting we observe today in Western democracy might be due to the switch from 21 to 18, it seems that we might not observe the same thing, if anything is a reverse, if we were to lower the voting age further. Because maybe young people, teenagers at fifteen or sixteen are in a better position to get involved into politics because they have maybe a stable position in family, they also have their school and everything.

Rory Cellan-Jones 10:26

David, Karine not really impressed with six, suggesting some other ages, would you like to come back?

David Runciman 10:32

Well, if the argument is that the first time that someone votes matters, school is a good place to start. So I've just spent the last few months working in a primary school in Cambridge with children, discussing with them not citizenship or anything like that, but just their attitude to the fact that they're not allowed to vote. And the thing I mainly came away with is that schools are actually a great place to engage even six-year-olds with democratic politics. They are a safe place, it's quite a sort of lively and friendly experience for the kids. So if the argument is that eighteen is a bad time, because people are stressed and worrying about getting on in life for the first time and we're not going to go older, I think older would be a mistake. I think school is the setting for this. Teachers, education is a good framework for democratic politics. The only other thing I'd say, Karine makes an excellent point about the history of this and the history of the enfranchisement of other majorities and minorities and the case of women, a majority. And two things seemed to me true always of historic enfranchisement. The first is that before it happens, there's always a lot of panic, that it's going to kind of destabilise the entire system that these people can't be trusted. And that panic dies away almost instantly following the first election because nothing changes, the same people get elected. And it is not even the case that women get the vote and then suddenly, Parliament is full of women, it takes about 50 to 100 years. Voting doesn't actually change much. I think people overestimate the extent to which broadening the franchise produces a different kind of politics. The old anarchist slogan, if voting changed anything, they'd make it illegal, holds. But once a group has been enfranchised, even if it doesn't make a massive difference to their experience, they never ever want to give it back. There is no example in the history of enfranchisement of a group saying it wasn't worth it. So two things happen. First of all, it doesn't destabilise the system. And secondly, it's hugely valuable to the people who get enfranchised. And I see no reason for that not to be true for children too. If we didn't enfranchise children, the next election, I think, would produce a result not radically different from other elections, but children would value it enormously. And in that sense, I think it is the same as the enfranchisement of all other groups who have been excluded. It is a citizenship right. And unless someone wants to make the case that children aren't citizens, they should vote.

Rory Cellan-Jones 13:14

Karine?

Karine Van der Straeten 13:15

I do agree with that, I think it could be good not only for children because of their own right. But I think it could also be good in terms of democratic representation. Because we started with democratic principles, the first being that you have to protect the community, and that was going against, maybe giving children the right to vote. But the second fundamental principle is that everybody who is impacted by the collective decision should have a say and should be able to have their voice heard in the process.

Rory Cellan-Jones 13:47

That would take you down to babies, wouldn't it?

Karine Van der Straeten 13:50

Yes and maybe children should even have more of a say, than other people. Because if we think that many of the decisions we're taking today are not always irreversible, but at least will have some long-term impact, you can think of Brexit or policies to mitigate climate change or absence of such policies. Those are policies that are going to impact younger people, much more than older people in a sense because they've got a longer horizon, they're going to live with these policies. I think that in that respect, there are also very strong arguments, also for the fairness of political representation, to push forward. And I agree with what you said Rory, maybe we could definitely go younger than that. And one last point to what David said about schools. I do agree with that. I think that democracy is not just okay, you've got a right, the most important thing is how people actually use this right. Whether they get involved in talking about politics, in doing politics. And we see now a huge problem with young people. For example, in France, they tend to turn out maybe twice as little compared to people who are in their 50s, which is the highest, 50s or 60s. So getting young people politically active is very important and schools are probably the best place to do that.

David Runciman 15:23

And if I could just come in on that. There is, I think there is another argument here, there is a widespread recognition that one of the problems with democratic politics is misinformation or disinformation. Yeah, we're all in an information environment where if we have this elevated view that democracy requires voters to be well informed all of us, I include myself in this as much as anyone else and it's my job to be informed about politics, don't actually really know what's going on because it's very, very hard to filter out the reliable from the unreliable sources. The great thing about schools is they really take protecting children from misinformation seriously, it's actually the

one setting in our lives where there is a well-established set of rules and expectations about the sanctity of knowledge and information. Outside of schools, children are exposed to all the same crap that we're exposed to. But my experience in school, say, in primary schools, it's actually a pretty safe information environment. So I'm sometimes told, you know, childhood is an age of innocence and if children were voting, you'd sort of drag them into that world of all the nonsense that we're exposed to at election time. And as it were, it would make childhood worse. My view is it would make politics better. So you just have to imagine a politician, Boris Johnson, going into a primary school with the teachers standing there looking at him and asking the children to give them his vote. I think he would behave better than he would doing the same thing on the BBC. There's nothing more frightening than having a primary school teacher look at you and give you the impression that you've gone a bit too far. I think it would improve the standard of our politics, it wouldn't debase it, because we take the protection of children seriously, we should all have the same protection that children have when it comes to being exposed to nonsense.

Rory Cellan-Jones 17:07

Let's move on to what the research says so far, about the impact of lowering the voting age. You suggested, David, that it made very little difference. Karine, do you agree?

Karine Van der Straeten 17:23

So from what I've seen in terms of research, so first, we don't have that many data, although some countries, especially in South America, Brazil, or Nicaragua, or Cuba, lowered their voting age in the 1980s, or 1990s. There doesn't seem to be any evidence that anybody was hurt by doing that. If anything, young people at 16, when they get the right to vote, tend to turn out more than those who were given the same right at 18. So it doesn't seem that they are not interested or they don't get involved. And besides, there is some suggestive evidence that it improved their civic attitudes and their feelings of being part of the community or having a say in what's happening. I think that so far, the evidence is mostly encouraging.

Rory Cellan-Jones 18:27

And, David, back to your point of it doesn't change much. Is that what the research says?

David Runciman 18:34

I mean, this is part of the reason why I moved from 16 to 6 in a sense. There is, I think, a widespread expectation based on the evidence that 16-year-olds vote quite like 18 to 24-year-olds. So for instance, 16 to 18-year-olds like 18 to 24-year-olds would be much more likely to vote Labour, and that includes under the Corbin years, they were much more likely to vote for Scottish independence, they would have been much more likely to vote remain. In the Scottish independence referendum that wasn't nearly enough to tip the balance, as it were, you know, there was still a 10-point swing. In the Brexit referendum, we don't know, it's one of the hypothetical.

Say the voting age has been 16, I still think it's overwhelmingly unlikely it would have been enough to make a difference to the outcome. And this reflects one of the facts we haven't touched on here, which is demography. So we're talking about lowering the voting age in societies where the voting profile has massively expanded at the other end. So the number of voters over 65, over 75, over 85, over 95 is much, much higher than it was 20 years ago, 40 years ago. And our elections are overwhelmingly decided by age profile. So in 2019, if under 35s had been the electorate, 18 to 35. Jeremy Corbyn would have won the biggest majority in Labour's history. In 2019, in Britain, if the electorate had been only the over 65s, the Tories would want every single seat in the country by three. So in those circumstances, going from 18 to 16 isn't unlikely to make much difference. Going to six introduces a vast new number of voters into the cohort. The viewer is then oh, well, this is trying to tip the balance the other way, you know, if you get all the kids in, then they would have voted to stay in the European Union. I don't think anyone knows because, as Karine said, we don't actually have much research or evidence. People don't tend to ask eight-year-olds how they would vote. There is a tiny amount, but very, very little polling. So one of the things we did in this primary school was run focus groups with six-year-olds, eight-year-olds, ten-year-olds. So I now have quite a clear sense of how these cohorts engage with politics. And it's much more unpredictable and surprising than you might think. There's absolutely no evidence that all primary-age school children are Corbynites. They have all sorts of interesting and surprising views, many of them quite conservative. But the most striking thing that came out of our research is that if you run these focus groups, the ten-year-olds are really cynical. So the six-year-olds and the eight-year-old are fresh, interesting, engaged, they have all sorts of ideas. The ten-year-olds, the person who ran the focus group with us said, the ten-year-olds reminded her of adults, because they said all politicians are in it for themselves, they just do it to get rich, they lie, you can't believe them. Now, they haven't discovered that at school, they've discovered that outside of school, either online, the world of social media or from their parents. So I think six-year-olds and eight-year-olds would inject if nothing else, a fresh set of perspectives.

Rory Cellan-Jones 21:47

Karine, David has an interesting point there, which is that actually, children may absorb the views of their parents may be much more governed than other voters by what an adult says particularly up to say 13 or 14, when kids want really the opposite of their parents. Is that a desirable outcome?

Karine Van der Straeten 22:10

I think it goes back to the questions we mentioned earlier about the ability to form your own independent judgement and what it means in practice. Of course, when concerned with children, maybe we don't trust them enough with that but their views will reflect mostly what they hear at home. I think this is why what David said about schools is very important, because we should also, if we go in this direction, give them an opportunity to talk more about politics and to form their

own independent views. And for that, it would require dramatic changes, because in many countries, including France, you're not allowed to talk about politics at schools. But if you do that, it's not clear that you're helping the children, because they also need a way to form their own views. And they also need some forum to discuss. I agree with David, that could be a good idea, but will definitely require some changes in all the teaching system.

David Runciman 23:15

But Rory, on that point, I mean, the thing that I was most struck by was that the children who were better able to think for themselves were the six-year-olds and the eight-year-olds, not the ten-year-olds. I mean, that suggests if nothing else, that this has a lot to do with online identity and existence. I think the six-year-olds and the eight-year-olds are relatively immune to that. The ten-year-olds were talking like people who'd seen the kinds of YouTube videos that adults might see about what's wrong with the world that we live in.

Rory Cellan Jones 23:49

They disappeared down a rabbit hole.

David Runciman 23:51

They disappeared down a rabbit hole that their parents have gone down many times before. But the surprising thing about children if you extend it all the way down to when they start going to school, is actually we don't know what they're going to be influenced by. So for instance, many 6, 7, eight-year-olds spend as much time with their grandparents as with their parents, their parents' work, it's the grandparents or doing the childcare picking them up. Maybe they'll reflect the views of their grandparents. Now we just don't know. And if the thought is well, actually they'll just reflect the views of their favourite YouTube stars. Well, so do we. There's more social science evidence than anyone can know what to do with that voters are tribal, prejudiced, easily influenced much, much more swayed by what people like them think, than by quote, unquote, the evidence. Children are human, so they should vote.

Rory Cellan-Jones 25:16

David, the reaction when he floated this idea was kind of a visceral loathing of it from certain quarters.

David Runciman 25:22

Either a bit or of me, one or the other.

Rory Cellan-Jones 25:23

What does that say about the likelihood of it ever happening?

David Runciman 25:30

So it says two things. One, it's very unlikely. The second, I think it's just very interesting that in a political climate where most people will accept that it's not working particularly well, and there's huge frustration with our politics and people complain about our politics a lot, people are still horrified by the idea of changing it in a radical way. There's a real small-c conservatism and people I think, are conflicted on this. And when I talk about it at length, and in detail, people are much more open to the idea. There's a visceral, immediate response, partly because they just think it would produce chaos. And once you can explain that it wouldn't produce chaos, then people are much more open to it. I mean, the danger in a way is once they go from being horrified, they become relatively indifferent. First of all, they think, if six-year-olds would vote, we'd end up with sort of children in Parliament and the whole country would fall apart. And then when you say that won't happen, they think well, then it's not going to make much difference anyway. But I think the real challenge is the point that Karine made that for these changes to happen, it has to get beyond partisanship. So the Conservative Party in Britain are very against lowering the voting age to 16 because they think sixteen-year-olds wouldn't vote for them. I think in the latest poll 2% of 18-24-year-olds said they'd vote conservative the next election - two percent, not twelve, two. So there's a strong incentive for some party's not to do it. A much more radical enfranchisement, like the enfranchisement of women, like the enfranchisement of working men in the 19th century is harder to paint as a kind of gerrymandering of the system because we just don't know. I think bigger enfranchisement are better than smaller ones because they look less partisan. But the big challenge is that children are not campaigning for this in the way that the suffragettes there is no suffragette movement equivalent. It's also true in the research they've been doing recently, that quite a few children are against it. So if you ask six-year-olds, do you think you should vote? Most of them say yes, but quite a lot of them say no. We're not competent to do it, we're idiots, we don't know anything about anything, you wouldn't trust us to do anything, so why would you trust us to vote, we don't want to vote, our lives are fine as they are. All of the arguments that many, many women made against the enfranchisement of women at the end of the 19th century. There was a huge counter movement among women against the enfranchisement of women making exactly those arguments. The men are right, we're not up to it. As soon as women were enfranchised within months, all of that fell away. And I think the same would happen with children. I think it has to be top-down if it's going to happen. I think it has to be nonpartisan, which is why six is actually, I think, a better proposal and 16 because we just don't know, the first election where all school-aged children could vote would be fun because it would be really unpredictable. And politicians would have to listen to voices they hadn't heard ever in their lives. Much better that, than I think 18 to 16, where, basically, we know how the argument would go. But is it going to happen in my lifetime? No, I mean, 16 might happen. 14 conceivably might happen, but it's going to be stymied by that partisanship. Six? I'm aware this is entirely quixotic. Nonetheless, I think the argument is worth making because it throws into relief. Many of our prejudices, misapprehensions about democracy, including the thing that it really highlights is the fact that people have, you know, in a

sort of boiling frog way, have failed to notice, which is, for almost all of its modern history democracy was, it was assumed that the young were in the majority in most societies, there were many, many more people in their 20s and 30s. And then in their 60s and 70s. There are now many, many more pensioners than students, many, many more old people and young people. Our democracies are now majoritarian old, that's happened in the last 30 years. And that has changed our politics completely. Almost all the results of elections can be explained through this. And in those circumstances, excluding children looks more and more, like itself is a gerrymandering of the system. Why would you exclude children unless you wanted 65-year-olds and above to decide every election that ever happens? I think that's a terrible idea. So it does highlight things that need addressing. I don't think children voting is going to be probably decided to be the answer. But I've enjoyed making the argument because you get to some very interesting other arguments through this route.

Rory Cellan-Jones 29:53

Well, let's end by asking whether it's actually a distraction from what we seem to agree is, you know, faultlines at the moment in the democratic process. Aren't there other, more important ways or interesting avenues to explore in improving the electoral system? You know, whether we should have mandatory voting, whether we should change the voting system towards proportional representation. Karine, is this a distraction?

Karine Van der Straeten 30:20

I don't know whether it's a distraction. I think it's a, it's the same kind of questions that also are there in those other debates is how to find a fair representation. When you survey people, I am happy to learn more about the surveys about children which I know less, but usually when you survey people, they all tend to say that they would like to have more of a say, that they would like to get involved. But actually, when you look at whether they actually done that, or whether they participate, where municipalities organise debates, it's also very difficult in practice to get people actually involved. And I think there's a real difficulty, the real democratic tension is here: people say that they want to do things they want to decide, but it's almost a matter of design is how do you in practice, do you actually give them opportunities that they can use? That is a big challenge for democratic representation, not just their elections, but also getting people involved more, especially at the local level.

Rory Cellan-Jones 31:55

So David, isn't your quixotic mission to give six-year-olds the vote, just a distraction from what we should be focusing on, which is making it easier and more attractive for adults to get involved in the democratic process and not putting barriers in the way of them voting?

David Runciman 32:11

I mean, there are always more important things to be doing, you can have any position, there's always something more important to be doing. And one of the things that you listed compulsory voting no, that's a bad idea. They have it in Australia, it doesn't make any difference, and not really. Changing the voting system, maybe. But I think history has a clear pointer here. So periodically, democracy does get stuck, it has done over its 200 year history. It gets kind of entrenched, positions get entrenched, it's hard to change things. So the things that we all want to happen, we can say that we think it would be better, more participation, more this more that, but nothing actually changes. The evidence is that the thing that unstopped the bottle and produces a wide range of change is enfranchisement. Widening the franchise doesn't actually make a huge difference to electoral outcomes. But what it does is it reminds people that it is possible to change the way we do it. And we spend a lot of time a lot of people spend a lot of time talking about what we need to do, but they don't say much about how. There is historical evidence that enfranchisement is the best way to unblock the system, because it introduces an experimental element to it, a sense that the future is open again. It's a way of revitalising democracy. I think if children voted, we would find there were a lot of unexpected knock-on effects not because suddenly, you know, free sweets would be mandated in Parliament. But because actually, we would start to look at the range of things we do. I don't think it's a distraction. I think it's a way of highlighting that we're blocked. And it's not nearly as radical as it sounds. So if we're frightened of that, we're kind of everything. It's not going to happen, but I don't think that's a reason not to argue for it.

Rory Cellan-Jones 31:29

A good point on which to end, that's all we've got time for on this episode. Thanks to Karine Van der Straeten from the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse, and to David Runciman from the University of Cambridge. Let us know what you think of this latest episode of season two of Crossing Channels. You can contact us via Twitter - the Bennett Institute is @bennettinst - the Institute for Advanced Study is @IASToulouse and I am @ruskin147. If you enjoy this episode, then do listen to our other Crossing Channels editions, notably our recent one on the drivers of human behaviour and how technology is changing that. And please join us next month for the next edition, where we'll be diving into the metaverse.