



Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations



Voting Rights for Adolescents and Older Children

Policy Paper

Abstract

Children and adolescents, as part of the succeeding generations, are deeply affected by policies related to education, environmental sustainability, employment opportunities, and social equity. Yet, they do not possess the inherent right to vote and as such to express their opinions on matters that concern them the most, especially where government decisions impact their lives significantly. This is unfair for several reasons as laid out in this policy paper. On top of that adolescents demonstrate time and again how eager they are to be included in the discussion by actively participating in democratic processes through protests or interactions with decision-makers.

The Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations (FRFG) advocates for universal suffrage, which would grant all citizens the right to vote, not just young adults that are 16 years and above, but also teenagers and older children (if they want to vote). This should be achieved through a system of 'voting by registration', in which any citizen regardless of age can register to vote when they feel ready to do so. This is to not exclude children and teenagers under 18 years and violate their right to participate in the electoral process rather based on when they desire to and not an age requirement.

The democratic principles of respect for human dignity, equality before the law, and universal suffrage are all upheld by granting voting rights to young people. Democracy's cornerstone is the popular sovereignty idea, which holds that all state power originates with the populace. Universal suffrage supports this idea by ensuring that every person has an equal right to participate in the exercise of governmental authority. By restricting voting rights based on age, societies run the risk of undermining these democratic foundations since it creates a divide between those who have voting rights and those who do not.

In the context of intergenerational justice and demographic ageing, the younger generation's input in decision-making processes becomes even more important, to ensure that their interests and concerns are appropriately represented in legislative and policy decisions. The FRFG strongly believes in the significant perspectives and insights that adolescents and older children can bring to more comprehensive and efficient policymaking. Enfranchising this group gives them the opportunity to participate actively in determining their own future by recognising their developing cognitive capacities and ability for civic involvement. Furthermore, societies can create the groundwork for a lifelong civic habit. Voting at a young age instils in people a feeling of civic duty and a conviction that their opinions matter, creating a lifelong commitment to taking part in democratic processes.

Funding civic education should be a by-product of granting young people voting rights. This education promotes a more active and responsible citizenry as a whole in the long run.

This is why we demand:

1. For governments around the world to take on their legal responsibility to ensure that not only children's protection rights but also young people's participation rights are further acknowledged.
2. To ensure intergenerational justice to the younger generation and future generations and to balance out the differences in generational representation on a political scale to ensure that their interests and wishes will not be neglected.
3. To aim for a comprehensive, fair and effective implementation of youth enfranchisement.

To accomplish this, we demand:

*In terms of **Legislative Action**:*

4. **For governments:** to encourage the introduction of legislation allowing all citizens to vote if they desire to do so by implementing 'a voting by registration' policy.

*In terms of **Civic Education**:*

5. **For Education Ministries:** to push for the inclusion of thorough civic education programmes in school curricula so that students can develop the information and abilities required for responsible citizenship and informed voting.

*In terms of **Voter Registration and Engagement**:*

6. **For Election Commissions:** to demand the creation of easily accessible and youth-friendly voter registration processes from election commissions. This can involve partnering with educational institutions to streamline the registration process, mobile registration devices, and online registration.
7. **For Political Parties and Civil Society Organisations:** to encourage campaigns and projects that encourage young participation, emphasise the value of their involvement, and dispel myths about their capacity to make meaningful contributions.

*In terms of **Legal Safeguards**:*

8. **For Legal Authorities:** to encourage the addition of legislative protections for adolescents and older children who wish to vote. This should include rules against voter exploitation, harassment, or discrimination.

*In terms of **Adapting Voting Procedures**:*

9. **For Election Management Bodies:** to encourage the creation of voter education materials that are especially geared towards educating younger voters about the election process, candidates, and concerns.
10. **For Polling Stations:** to encourage the establishment of polling places that are welcoming to younger voters and have knowledgeable staff on hand to assist and guide them through the voting process.

In terms of Youth Representation:

- 11. For Political Parties:** to promote the inclusion of young people as candidates, supporting varied representation and giving young voters politicians who are aware of and sympathetic to their issues.
- 12. For Governments and Parliaments:** to facilitate the formation of youth advisory councils or forums to provide young people a place to express their views on regulations that have a direct impact on them.

In terms of Researching and Monitoring:

- 13. For Academic Institutions and Research Organisations:** to demand ongoing research on the consequences of youth voting, particularly how it affects political priorities, voter turnout, and overall participation in the democratic process.

In terms of International Collaboration:

- 14. For International Organisations:** to invite nations who have effectively introduced youth voting to share their best practices and experiences with one another, boosting international cooperation and learning.

In terms of Media and Awareness:

- 15. For Media Outlets:** to urge the media to take on a responsible role in informing the public about the value of youth involvement, busting myths, and fostering productive debates.

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1. Universal suffrage: an essential right

As stated in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), individuals possess the inherent right to participate in government processes through direct voting or by selecting representatives. Furthermore, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) recognises the freedom of children (here defined as people up to 27 years) to express their opinions on matters that affect them, especially in cases where government decisions significantly impact their lives. Even though young people make up a considerable portion of the global population, they are typically not allowed to vote in most countries, despite their active involvement in democratic processes through protests or engagement with policymakers (for example Fridays for Future or Black Lives Matter).

Nowadays in most countries, the legal voting age is 18, yet prior to the Second World War (1939-1945) the average voting age across the world was 21 or higher. The first country to lower the voting age to 18 was Czechoslovakia in 1946 and many more followed afterwards. The United States, for example, reduced the voting age from 21 to 18 with the 26th Amendment in 1971, mainly due to the pressure of the Vietnam War, as many young Americans argued that if they were old enough to fight a war, they should be old enough to vote (Wray-Lake et al. 2020).

Calls for universal suffrage or enfranchisement from birth are getting louder, meaning that every citizen has a right to vote including adolescents and children. The involvement of the younger generation in decision-making processes becomes more crucial in the context of intergenerational fairness and demographic ageing. Allowing children and teenagers to vote can be a corrective action to make sure that their interests and concerns are fairly represented in legislative and policy choices.

There is no valid reason to exclude young people from voting and the assumption that suffrage is exclusively for adults needs to be challenged. A new approach such as 'voting rights by registration' will give many adolescents and older children the chance to be included in decision-making that affects their future as well as future generations, while also fostering a sense of civic engagement and responsibility.

This policy paper intends to examine the significance of political participation among young individuals while analysing the arguments related to voting age policies. By conducting a thorough examination of research, as well as increasing support for children's suffrage, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the importance and impact of voting rights for adolescents and children. Our focus is to underscore the value of their participation in democratic processes and to promote a more inclusive and responsive democratic society.

2. The Need for Intergenerational Justice

2.1. Young People Want a Say in Their Own Future

Including young people in electoral processes will strengthen intergenerationally just policies. This refers to the idea of fairness and justice between different generations regarding economic, psychological, and sociological aspects, and as such means, fairness must be upheld in interactions between young people, adults, the elderly and both current and future generations. The German philosopher and political scientist Jörg Tremmel distinguishes two main realms of intergenerational justice (2009, 19-33):

- 1) between young and old, and
- 2) between people living today and people living in the future.

For instance, rapidly growing national debts and eroding pensions, the cost-of-living crisis, and high housing costs are some of the policy areas where young people are currently losing out – this is contained in the first realm. Accelerating global warming, escalating (nuclear) arms races, the loss of biodiversity or unaligned artificial intelligence, on the other hand, are long-term problems that fall within the second realm.

While the transition from realm 1) to realm 2) is somewhat fluent, the problem of the disenfranchisement of young people falls into the first realm, i.e. justice between young and old. A shift in political priorities can be noticed when considering the significance of young people's voting interests. There are strong arguments (shown in the following paper) that suggest that issues such as climate change, the environment, the conservation of nature, peace and democracy, education, media policy and culture will become increasingly important and be more influenced by the views of young people. As such allowing adolescents and children to vote would also show them that their interests and concerns are respected and that they are encouraged to engage in the community.

Moreover, young people show time and again that they want to be included in the conversation with their unwavering participation in or initiation of political activism. Because they are not given a voice in political elections, this allows young people to voice their opinions, particularly about issues that concern them the most. Thus, we can observe a high youth turnout at protests that are highly relevant to them, e.g., concerning climate change or school education reforms.

One of the most recognisable examples of such youth-led movements are the Fridays for Future and School Strike for Climate protests against global warming and the climate crisis, which were called into life through the actions and efforts of then-15-year-old Greta Thunberg from Sweden. The movement was centred around the idea that young people could make their voices heard by skipping school on Fridays to protest climate policies and voice their discontent with the fact that politicians are not doing enough to protect the future of young and coming generations. From one girl in Sweden, who began her strike alone outside the Swedish parliament in Stockholm in August of 2018, to millions of people

participating, this quickly became a worldwide youth-led movement that has reoccurred almost every Friday for five years.



Picture 1: Left: Greta Thunberg sits outside the Swedish parliament building to raise awareness for climate change on 28 August 2018 in Stockholm, Sweden. Right: People protest during a Climate Strike march in San Francisco, California, 20 September 2019.

Source: Business Insider – Michael Campanella/Getty Images and Reuters/Kate Munsch

Another remarkable example of youth activism that inspired change is the story of Malala Yousafzai, who was only 11 years old when she started anonymously blogging for the BBC against the Taliban while they threatened to close girls' schools (Alexander, 2020). She received international support and recognition for her activism for female education, initially in Pakistan, after she was shot by the Taliban in 2012 and has since then been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and is the reason the UN initiated its campaign for global children's education.

So far, we have recognised young activists speaking out on issues of climate change and women's rights, but young people have also been advocating against specific policies that have affected them in the most terrible ways. The United States experienced an exponentially high number of school shootings, as only in 2021-22 there have been a total of

327 shootings in both private and public schools (The Guardian, 2023).¹ The Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in 2018, in which a 19-year-old killed 17 people and injured 17 others, instigated a youth-led movement to reform gun control legislation nationwide. It included school walkouts, an advocacy group called *Never Again MSD*² (Seelinger, 2018) and the *March for Our Lives* student-led demonstrations in support of gun control legislation (March for Our Lives, 2023).



Picture 2: Young protesters hold placards at Hyde Park in Sydney, Australia, 24 March 2018, during the March for Our Lives protest.

Source: ABC News 2018 - Danny Casey/EPA-EFE via REX/Shutterstock

These are some of the issues that young people care about and there are many reasons why, but the most important of them all is that they care because it directly impacts their lives. Yet, apart from advocacy and protests, they are not given a voice to be included in discussions and decisions around policies that directly affect them (take school shootings, for example). This is not to say that older generations do not care about the issues presented above, because they do, it is more to say that depending on your age you have different political priorities. However, from an intergenerationally just perspective, young people need to be given the right to vote. The decisions concerning which politician should be representing the people and thus, what issues policy-makers will focus on, are affecting their future and the future of the next generations, so it cannot be fair that they do not get to make that decision themselves. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

¹ They are classified as “school shootings” when the “incident involved a gun being brandished and fired or a bullet hitting school property” (The Guardian, 2023)

² Never Again MSD is an American student-led political action committee for gun control that advocates for tighter regulations to prevent gun violence (Seelinger, 2018).

"A lot of young people think they have no power, they can't control what's going on. We can choose who we want to elect, and we can be the ones running for office. I want to see more action and less talking." (Naomi Wadler, a 13-year-old activist on gun violence and discrimination against African American girls, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, 2020).

"They have a lot of experience, but we have ideas, we have energy, and we have solutions for the now problems and the ones that are coming up... So we need to collaborate. [...] We don't want to intimidate them too much... we can ride on [their] power, foster our agenda, but then partner. We're not just going to tell you what we want to happen, we want to be involved from the start to the end." (Natasha Mwansa, a youth activist, on comparing young activists and older generations at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, 2020)

"You say that you love your children above everything else. And yet you are stealing their future." (Greta Thunberg, in a speech at UN Climate Change COP24 Conference, 2018)

2.2. Demographic Change Means Policy Change

Figure 1 (Population Reference Bureau, 2022) shows the share of the population in stated age groups, under 15-year-olds versus over 65-year-olds.

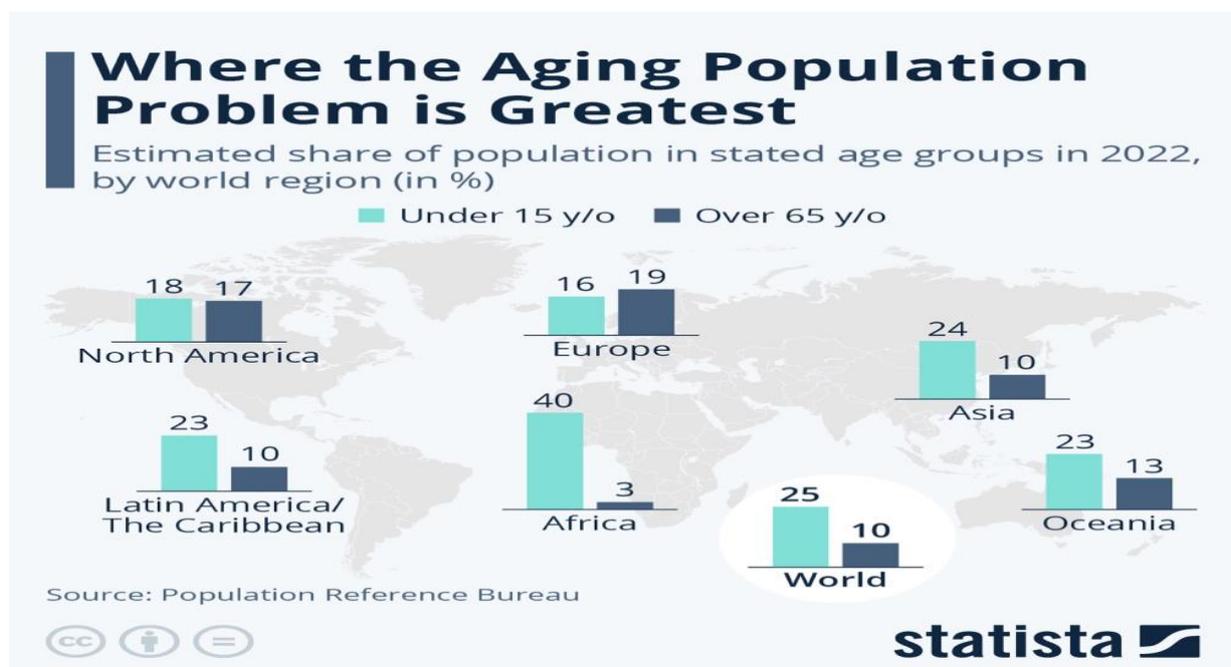


Figure 1: Where the ageing population problem is greatest
Source: Population Reference Bureau (2022)

While North America seems to be balancing the numbers of these two population groups, in Europe the older share of the population is already bigger than the younger share. Decreasing birth rates and rising life expectancies will accelerate this development and will lead to societies in which the old outnumber the young.

Globally, 10% of the population is over 65 years old, compared to an estimated 25% of people who are under the age of 15 (Population Reference Bureau, 2022). The data shows that the size differential between the youngest and oldest population groups is by far the greatest in Africa (Population Reference Bureau, 2022).

2.2.1. Germany

First, we will consider Germany as an example of differences in political interests based on age. In Germany, there is ample research that shows that older voters are far less inclined than younger voters to favour policies like raising child benefits, cutting taxes for parents, or expanding public child care, especially those older voters without children (Wilkoszewski, 2009). For instance, a 65-year-old is 50% less likely than a 20-year-old to support more flexible working hours for parents, and they are 85% less likely to support raising child benefits. At the same time, older people frequently back laws that burden the younger generation, like several pension laws. This is particularly an issue in Germany, where pension laws are governed by a sort of 'intergenerational contract'.³ The demographic ageing of the German population makes these differing policy preferences increasingly crucial. People under the age of 20 made up almost one-third of the population in 1960, while people over 60 made up one-sixth.

Young people will barely make up one-sixth of the population by 2030, whereas senior people will make up more than one-third of the population. There is an increasing risk that older people may dominate the political agenda and obscure future-focused issues as a result of this dramatic shift in age demographics.

2.2.2. Africa and the Youngest Population in the World

When we talk about youth enfranchisement, including many new younger voters in our European electoral processes would create potentially around two million new votes. Moreover, we argue youth or even universal enfranchisement from the standpoint of intergenerational justice. Whereas the population in Europe is ageing, especially with the

³ The phrase 'intergenerational contract' is often used concerning statutory pension insurance arrangements, where it describes the agreement to fund pensions for the retired generations through contributions from the working generation. An intergenerational contract is a reliance between generations that is predicated on the idea that, in keeping the agreement, later generations will assist a younger generation that has previously helped an older generation.

baby boomer generation reaching the age of retirement, we are increasingly concerned about youth representation in electoral processes to make decisions for younger and future generations. Young people should be allowed to vote because they should be able to make decisions impacting their future based on their best interests just like any other voter is allowed to.

But let us demonstrate an even extremer situation, which is what we encounter on the African continent. Here we have a unique situation: according to the Population Reference Bureau (2020, see Figure 2), 41% of the African population is below the age of 15, effectively making this the world’s youngest population.

Effectively what this means is that at least 50% of the African population is not allowed to vote, as the voting age in all African countries is 18 years old. Due to high levels of poverty and unemployment, the African youth is often frustrated and particularly unhappy with the political and social circumstances, as Kaplan (1996, 16) notes: “out of school, unemployed, loose molecules in an unstable social fluid that threatened to ignite.” This frustration stemming from many socioeconomic issues and a sense of hopelessness among younger people increases the likelihood of social unrest and the risk of children being pulled into the radical scene or even civil conflict. Therefore, children under 18 need to be given their right

Population Age Structure

age distribution by sub-region

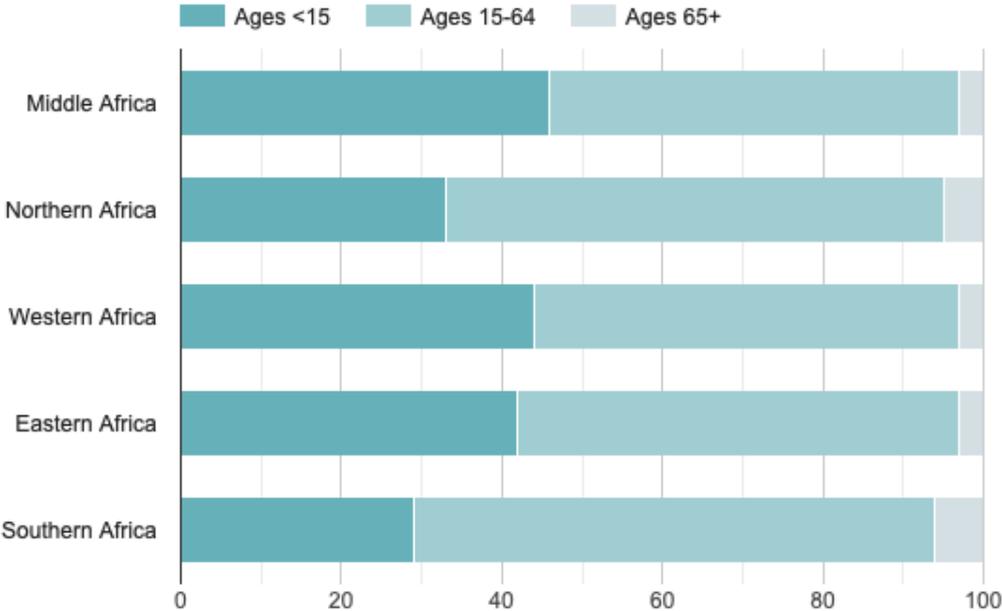


Figure 2: Population Age Structure Africa – age distribution by sub-region
Source: Population Reference Bureau 2020

to voice their opinions and interests and be able to make decisions that will impact their future. Including children in electoral processes will boost the democratic system and the political climate. It will make for a more inclusive society where everyone is fairly and accordingly represented.

2.2.3. The Rise in Elderly Population in the UK and USA

Like in many European countries, in England and Wales, the share of 65+ people has increased and become larger than the percentage of younger people. According to recent census data from 2021, 11.1 million people in England and Wales, or approximately one in five adults, are over the age of 65 (see figure 3). The proportion of people in this age group is at its highest level ever, indicating an ageing population that is getting ready to retire.

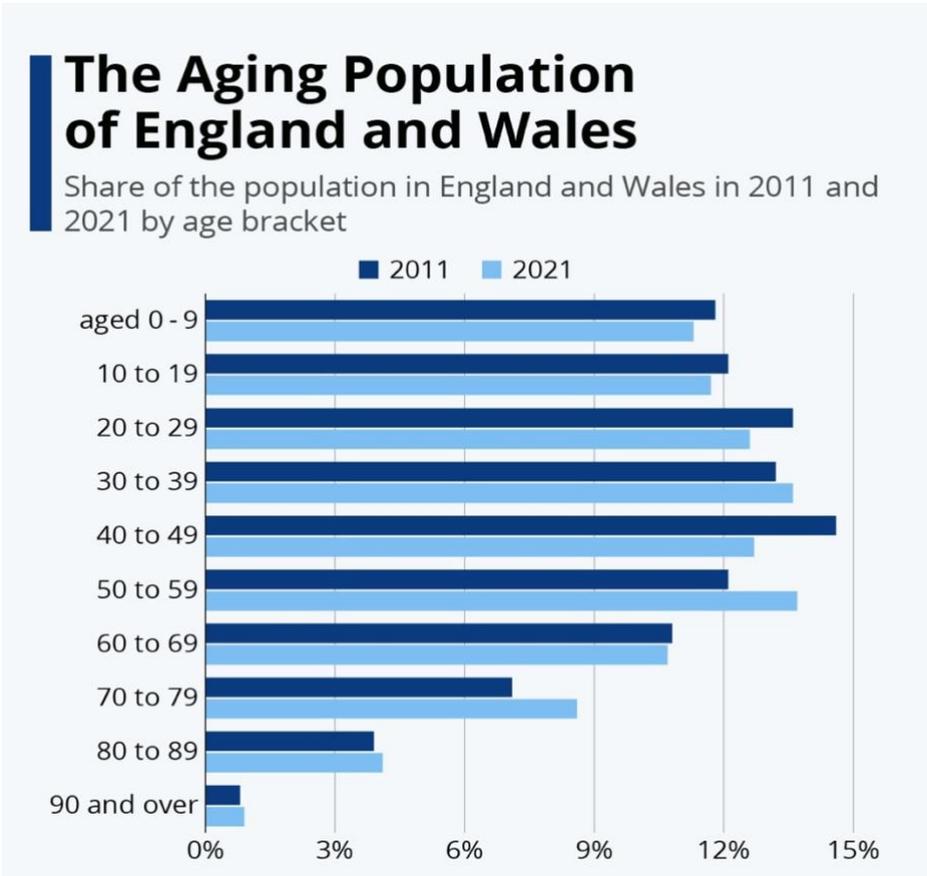
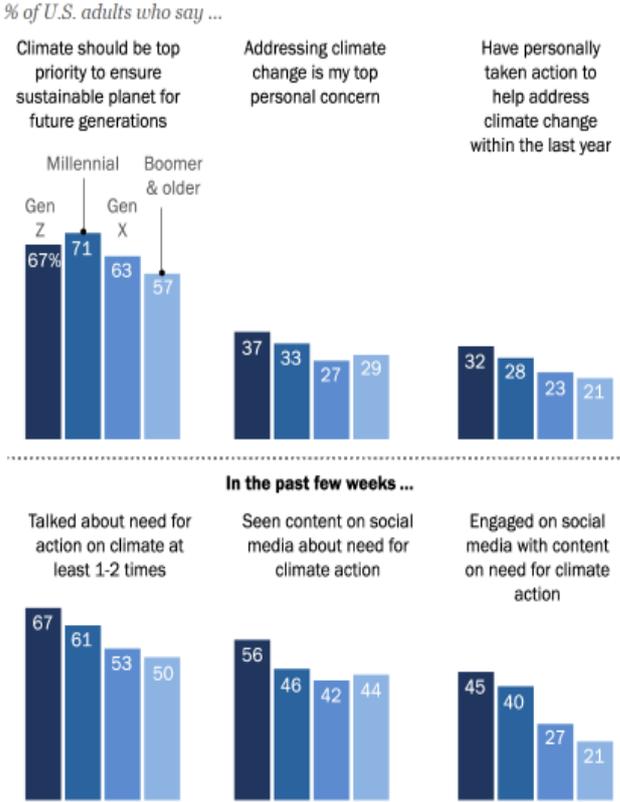


Figure 3: The Aging Population of England and Wales
Source: Office for National Statistics 2021 - Statista

Henn et al. (2002) discovered that in the UK, young people were dissatisfied with politicians because they did not concentrate on the topics that young people believed to be most crucial to the youth, for example, such as the environment and civil liberties (Resnick and Casale, 2011, 56).

Demographic ageing can also be observed in the United States. Between 2010 and 2020, the share of under 25-year-olds dropped from 34.3% to 31.5% whereas the share of over 65-year-olds increased from 12.8% to 16.8% (Population Reference Bureau 2020). The rising number of older people and the decreasing number of younger people means that issues that especially the younger generation (Millennials but particularly Generation Z) support will be overpowered by the millions of older people heading to the polls. In the United States, one of the issues that would gain significance when including the votes of young people and older children is climate change, according to Pew Research Centre the younger generation is more active than older generations in addressing climate change on- or offline (2021). There is a significantly higher percentage of Generation Z, who were born after 1996⁴, who either believe climate change is their top personal concern, have personally acted against it, or are vocal about climate change issues on and off social media (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

Gen Z, Millennials more active than older generations addressing climate change on- and offline

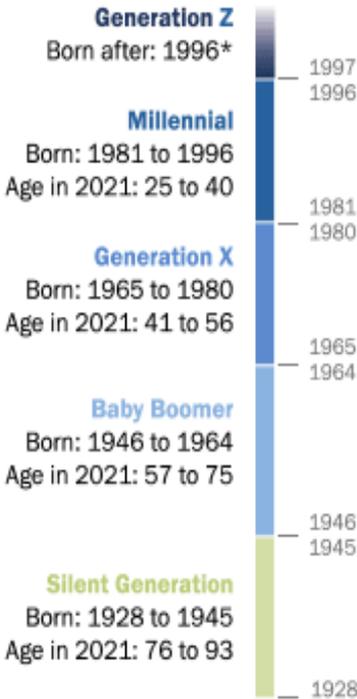


Note: Respondents who gave other responses or did not give an answer are not shown. Seen content on social media and engaged with climate content based on social media users.
 Source: Survey conducted April 20-29, 2021.
 "Gen Z, Millennials Stand Out for Climate Change Activism, Social Media Engagement With Issue"

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Figure 4: Gen Z, Millennials more active than older generations addressing climate change on- and offline.

The generations defined



*No chronological endpoint has been set for this group. In this analysis, Generation Z includes those ages 18 to 24 in 2021.
 "Gen Z, Millennials Stand Out for Climate Change Activism, Social Media Engagement With Issue"

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Figure 5: The generations defined.
 Source: Pew Research Centre 2021

⁴ No chronological endpoint has been set for this group. In this analysis, Generation Z includes those ages 18 to 24 in 2021.

In addition to environmental issues, public policies have been a major focus of attention. The ageing population has renewed interest in the fairness of public policies, such as health care and pensions, among popular and academic circles. Public policy experts have proposed three main ideas: (1) presently, the older generation receives more public transfers than the generation that was old in the past; (2) on average, older individuals receive more benefits than children; and (3) in several countries, the proportion of public resources allocated to the elderly has increased relative to the number of resources allocated to young people (see Vanhuysse/Tremmel 2018 with further references). Because older voters make up a higher fraction of the electorate, their ability to advance their own material interests at the expense of the interests of younger voters may be a result of this demographic change (Mulligan and Sala-i-Martin, 1999). This could be called a 'gerontocracy'.

There is no way to counteract the trend of an ageing population, yet including younger people in electoral processes can at the very least attempt to balance out the differences in generational representation on a political scale to ensure that their interests and wishes will not be neglected.

3. Democratic Principles and Youth Enfranchisement

The topic of youth enfranchisement has generated a lot of discussion and interest in modern political theory (see, for instance, Hamilton (2012); Tremmel et al. (2015); Wall and Munn (2014); Olsson (2008); Wiland (2018); Douglas (2017); Seleman (2020)). Tremmel/Wilhelm (2015, 132) describe this so-called 'all-affected principle,' based on which every citizen should have the right to vote, as such: "A system of government requires justification; such justification requires that those who are subject to that system of government have an equal and universal right to participation. In democracy, this justification comes from the fact that all those who are subject to the rule of a government and its decisions can exert power through elections to affect that very government. This allows all to have influence over the laws which regulate their lives."

The principle of popular sovereignty, which maintains that all state power comes from the people, is the cornerstone of democracy. By guaranteeing that every individual has an *equal* right to take part in the exercise of governmental authority, universal suffrage reinforces this concept. Holt (1975) argues that all children "should have the same right as everyone else to vote [... since ...] to be in any way subject to the laws of a society without having any right or way to say what those laws should be is the most serious injustice." Societies face the risk of compromising this equality principle by limiting voting rights based on age, as this creates a gap between those who have voting rights and those who do not. The basic principle of all modern democracies — 'one person, one vote' — is directly derived from the postulate of the equal value of all people. Bartolini (2000, 127) therefore refers to the principle of 'one person, one vote, one value': every vote(r) has an equal value and an equal weight. Regardless of age, *all* citizens must be treated with respect and dignity following the concept of equality before

the law. Young adolescents and children are not given equitable representation in the political process when they are denied the ability to vote, which diminishes their viewpoints and interests. Universal suffrage in a democratic system ensures a just process for political representation and resolving conflicts. As it is a basic consensus that all citizens in a democracy are in principle entitled to influence the composition of their government through elections, there is a shift in the burden of proof. "It is not young people who must justify why they should be permitted to vote, but those who wish to deny that right to young people." (Tremmel/Wilhelm, 2015, 134)

The argument in favour of extending voting rights to adolescents and older children is anchored on the idea that they have unique needs and experiences that differ from those of adults. This, in turn, could lead to the formulation of better-informed laws and policies that benefit not only adults, but also educators, health care professionals, and business owners (Wall, 2022). A more inclusive and useful set of policies might be developed if young people's experiences are taken into consideration. Furthermore, extending voting rights to them could foster greater political engagement among them and promote accountability on the part of governments, in an effort to avoid a slide into authoritarianism (Wall, 2022). John Wall, a childhood studies professor argues: "Not only are most children not incompetent to vote, but children's voting would positively benefit democratic societies. This, indeed, is the real reason to give children the vote. It is not just that children should not be denied this right, but also that democracies need them to have it." (Wall, 2022)

Expanding voting rights to young people strengthens democratic governance and ensures that the voices and interests of the entire citizenry are heard and represented. Furthermore, the political election cycle of most government officials spans primarily at least four years. Thus, disenfranchisement does not end on a person's 18th birthday, but rather it ends on the next election after their 18th birthday, meaning that some young people could be disenfranchised until the day before their 22nd birthday. Moreover, in the United States, the Senate has a six-year electoral cycle, which means that someone aged 23 years old may have never been able to vote for the Senate.

4. Proxy Voting for Parents and Legal Guardians

4.1. Demeny Voting and Other Parental Proxy Voting Systems

There are two systems of voting that advocate, at least according to the nomenclature, for universal suffrage, including people below 18 years of age:

- 1) A 'proxy voting right' for parents, where they would cast votes on behalf of their children until they reach legal adulthood.
- 2) A 'direct' right to vote for adolescents and children, meaning young people execute their right when they feel fit to do so, regardless of their age (voting by registration).

Very young children, like babies or toddlers, cannot take part in the democratic process themselves. Consequently, FRFG wants to provide young people with the flexibility to exercise their voting rights when they are prepared and able to do so on their own. From the same matter of fact (the inability of very young children to vote) others draw the different consequence that their votes be transferred to their parents. In this policy paper, we will address the parental proxy voting system first and then go on to suggest a 'voting by registration' right for adolescents and older children.

Parental proxy voting is the idea in which, parents or legal guardians of children⁵ receive the right to vote on behalf of minors until they reach legal adulthood. It is also called 'family voting' or Demeny voting, named after the demographer Paul Demeny. He believed children "should not be left disenfranchised for some 18 years: let custodial parents exercise the children's voting rights until they come of age" (Demeny, 1986). Parents would choose how to cast each child's proxy vote under a Demeny voting system. Some systems might provide a split vote if the parents had different political ideologies. Either when they reach a particular voting age or whenever they feel ready, children would be granted the right to vote. Variations have been proposed. Jane Rutherford in her journal entry for the Minnesota Law Review "One Child, One Vote: Proxies for Parents" (1998) offers criteria for a potential proxy voting system adapted to the United States: "(1) the representative should have a stake in a very substantial shared venture with the child; (2) the representative should be personally familiar with the needs and circumstances of the child; (3) the child should have ready and frequent access to the representative so the child can express herself in her own terms whenever possible; (4) the representative should be accountable to the child in some fashion, either emotionally or legally; and (5) the representative should share an emotional bond with the child that promotes caring, sympathy, and empathy."

Even while supporters claim that these strategies respect the different experiences of young people and empower them, there are strong counterarguments against parental proxy voting.

4.2. Criticism of Parental Proxy Voting

Allowing parents or guardians to cast ballots on behalf of their minor children raises concerns regarding representation and legality. Children's voting rights could be abused or manipulated if parents don't always act in their best interests. There are concerns about whether parents can actively represent the political preferences their child has accumulated. This might cause parents to vote against their children's interests in favour of their own opinions.

The system of proxy voting through parents or legal guardians just assumes that every child not only – to put it blatantly – *has* a parent or legal guardian much less one that has their best

⁵ Demeny voting must be distinguished from voting schemes in which adults have commissioned a guardian to cast their adult votes.

interests in mind and is knowledgeable enough to make choices on their behalf. Not all children are lucky to have the support from parents and legal guardians to assist them in acquiring this political knowledge and help them make the best decision for themselves. As such, proxy voting unintentionally marginalises underprivileged children and, moreover, risks that in the political process, their voices may already be limited.

Furthermore, there is the question of accountability. Parental proxy voting may make it harder for elected officials to be held accountable to their younger constituents. If the young people are not the ones actively voting it may diminish the influence of younger people on the outcomes of political elections.

To sum up: Two parents with four little children would have two extra votes, each, in addition to their votes. The idea of 'one person, one vote' would be challenged by such a system, which would really give parents numerous votes, therefore, instead of addressing any democratic shortcoming, this would generate one.

5. The Alternative: Voting Rights by Registration

5.1. Basics of a New System

The Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations believes the idea of giving children voting rights by registration to be the democratically fairest and most viable option to move towards the idea of universal enfranchisement. The idea is that instead of 'handing over' voting rights at birth, this method lets young people decide when they become a rights-holder. Compare it with the right to speak your mind at the Speakers' Corner, an area in Hyde Park in London, where free speech open-air public speaking, debate, and discussion take place. Theoretically, everyone could be granted the right to speak there, including newborn babies. But to what avail? This right of free speech has a character of 'potential' or 'sleeping' right until the rights-holder reaches the age when they actually want to exercise the right for the first time. Likewise allows the idea of voting rights by registration young people to choose when they are prepared to vote. Intent is prioritised over age restrictions. Young people would be personally responsible for registering as voters once and could then vote in all future elections.

According to Wall (2022), the basic desire to vote should serve as the benchmark for voting proficiency. Voting competency is based on three skills: using the voting process, identifying various political viewpoints, and selecting a voting alternative. No matter their age, the desire to vote shows that voters are capable of doing so.

Table 1 shows the assumed shares of willing registrants according to age for the US, the UK and Germany.

Age cohort	Number of young people			Assumed percentage of willing voters (%)	Additional new voters/number of excluded voters		
	US	UK	Germany		US	UK	Germany
17	2,420,000	665,300	846,000	55	1,331,000	366,000	465,300
16	1,940,000	648,000	823,000	45	873,000	292,000	370,350
15	1,480,000	650,900	791,000	35	518,000	228,000	276,850
14	1,040,000	640,700	788,000	25	260,000	160,000	194,500
13	820,000	629,100	802,000	20	164,000	126,000	160,400
12	620,000	618,900	817,000	15	93,000	93,000	122,550
11	410,000	605,500	791,000	10	41,000	61,000	79,100
10	210,000	586,800	774,000	5	10,500	29,000	38,700
9	80,000	571,900	772,000	2	1,600	11,000	15,440
8	40,000	572,800	738,000	1	400	6,000	7,380
Sum	9,060,000	6,189,900	7,932,000		3,292,500	1,372,000	1,730,570

Table 1: Estimation of underage people who want to vote in the US (2010), UK (2011) and Germany (2013)
Source: Tremmel/Wilhelm 2015, 140.

Different nations might gain millions more votes if young people were granted the right to vote through registration.

5.2. A Caveat to Avoid Possible Abuse

Arguably, young voters should be permitted to cast their ballots in person to reduce the possibility of coercion and prevent undue influence by parents or guardians on them. After all, in the ballot box, they would be alone while this could not be guaranteed in their parent's living room. Thus, young voters should be steered away from casting mail-in ballots to avoid electoral fraud and risk their votes becoming tainted in any way. The integrity of the voting process must be protected, and policymakers must take steps to prevent the abuse of children's votes.

6. Electoral Decision-Making Competence

6.1. Presumptive Inclusion or Privileged Exclusion?

'Presumptive inclusion' is the idea that someone should first be presumed to be included and only omitted after the fact has been justified. This principle holds that every citizen should be granted the right to vote by default and only be removed if the government can decisively justify why someone should not have the right and therefore be excluded (Hamilton, 2012).

Based on this principle, the burden of proof for exclusion from electoral processes falls upon the state.

Critics of voting rights for young people justify their electoral exclusion by a lack of competence. It is true that wisdom is acquired over time and therefore correlates with age. But competence is something different. Young people can be very competent in matters of their daily lives. And to the degree that their lives are different than the lives of their parents and grandparents, this competence is exclusive. The paternalistic conception that men understand women's needs better than women themselves was successfully rejected by women during their long battle for the right to vote. By the same token, we deny that the interests of Afro-Americans could have been adequately represented by the white population during the era of slavery, which was neither demanded by —nor beneficial for— the represented. Thus, the reasoning behind accepting competence as a legitimate reason for restricting suffrage is an outdated one at best. Influential anti-democratic thinkers like Gustave Le Bon and Émile Faguet argued that the masses lacked knowledge and were easily manipulated resulting in a fear that incompetence would lead to the election of incapable leaders (Olsson, 2008). As such it was decided to make exclusions based on citizenship, sex, race, and competence (Wall, 2014). This is something democracy theorists prefer to avoid when discussing competence due to the historical abuse in using it to disenfranchise certain groups such as women, African American people and of course, young people. The competence criterion is a brainchild of discriminatory historical thinking and its spokespeople.

Associating adulthood with voting competency is historically skewed and unfounded. Maturity and political competence are not factors by which we judge adults who want to participate in electoral processes. If the lacking competence argument were justified, then adults lacking knowledge and thus, competence, should also be excluded.

The Berkeley Institute for Young Americans (BIFYA) suggests another argument in their policy report "Should California lower the voting age to 17?" (2023): Allowing adolescents to take on other 'adult roles', such as driving in the United States at the age of 15, drinking in Germany at the age of 16, working and paying taxes, consenting to sexual activity, or being tried and sentenced as adults in criminal courts, but not giving them an early responsibility to cast a vote is at best a double standard. If young people are considered mature and competent enough to fulfil civic duties, why restrict their civil rights?

Daniel Hart and Robert Atkins (2011) examined a variety of poll questions from a 1996 American survey to gauge conceptions of political citizenship among 14–30-year-olds, such as civic awareness, political skill, political efficacy, and political interest. Overall, the evidence demonstrated that by the time they were 16 years old, American teenagers had acquired citizenship traits akin to those of people who could vote at age 18 or older. Notably, the authors discover that the citizenship measures for teenagers under the age of 16 showed more pronounced variations, with 14- and 15-year-olds being less likely to demonstrate civic enthusiasm, civic awareness, political competence, and tolerance than older age groups. Yet, this contributes to the argument that encouraging more political education in schools and

including young people in voting processes can lead to creating a healthy voting habit and higher regard for civic duty and engagement from a younger age.

6.2. Incapacity and Cognitive Development

Hamilton's (2012) and Wiland's (2018) research indicates that adolescents acquire the relevant cognitive-processing abilities in their mid-adolescence (i.e. around the age of 15), with the capacity to make competent decisions. While most of the research in cognitive development is done with results concerning children 15 years and older, empirical evidence as such dismantles the most common argument against lowering the voting age, which is claimed to be that young people under the age of 18 have underdeveloped cognition and do not have the mental capacity to vote.

Relevant research in developmental science has been conducted in recent years, from which we can reasonably say that young people from the age of at least 15 years show adequate levels of cognitive capacities including planning, logical reasoning, verbal fluency and working memory as adults (Icenogle & Cauffman, 2021; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). In 2022, Oosterhoff and colleagues argue that voting requires a longer time commitment because voters must register, know where to vote, show up at the polls on time, and take the time to learn about candidates and hot-button issues. As a result, young people (here: 16 and 17-year-olds) are capable of making thoughtful, deliberate, and independent decisions that result from mature reasoning and decision-making. They also discovered that teenagers are better able to engage in complicated thinking than adults in one fascinating study of cognitive reasoning including a sample of adolescents and adults (Oosterhoff, 2022). When questioned about their opinions on lowering the voting age, 16 and 17-year-olds were more likely than those 18 and older to integrate numerous viewpoints to develop a judgement and more likely to cite multiple reasons to back their judgement.

In the United States, one of the renowned psychologists who has conducted extensive research on adolescent brain development and decision-making is Laurence Steinberg. His work, which mostly focuses on developmental psychology, emphasises that adolescents and young adults have more developed cognitive skills than was previously believed (Steinberg, 2014; Steinberg et al., 2009, Steinberg & Icenogle, 2019). Steinberg's research offers strong support for the notion that many young individuals possess the mental capacity and decision-making abilities necessary for informed and ethical voting.

Political or civic knowledge is situational and collective; not all voters aim for instrumental decision-making based on knowledge. As such behavioural decision research recognises that voters are not always rational and often use heuristics to make decisions with limited information (Hamilton, 2012). In fact, it is even shown that limited knowledge may improve objective analysis of new information, whereas practice can rather enhance reasoning (Hamilton, 2018).

To sum up: The grounds on which young people and children are excluded from voting up until a certain age are based on the fact that they have been deemed incapable. However, this umbrella definition excludes many capable young people who are in a position to be able to cast a vote and yet, incapacity has never been a justification to exclude adults from the electoral process.

7. Empirical Evidence from Countries that Lowered the Voting Age

Findings from empirical data across countries that have lowered the voting age to 16 report that those young voters experience higher levels of political trust, interest, and support for democracy (see a recent literature review by Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021). In the following, we will examine examples from Latin America, Austria, and Scotland.

7.1. Latin America and the Trust in Democracy

Studies from many nations around the world demonstrate that decreasing the voting age has no unfavourable consequences. On the contrary, it has been linked over time to higher levels of institutional trust and more positive perceptions of the lower voting age. For instance, a significant correlation between trust in government and voting age was observed in a study conducted by Constanza Sanhueza Petrarca in 2020 on various Latin American nations that decreased it to 16 years. She particularly focuses on data from Cuba, Nicaragua, and Brazil, which were “world pioneers as they granted voting rights to 16-17-year-old voters in the 1970s and 1980s” and Ecuador and Argentina, which “by contrast, adopted such laws in 2008 and 2012.”

Young people who have gained voting rights in these nations have demonstrated improved levels of political trust and increased contentment with democracy (see table 2). The democratic environments, the engagement of social movements or the government, the ideological leanings of the ruling parties, and the character of their electoral rules have all had an impact on the participation of young voters.

At the time of youth enfranchisement, Cuba and Nicaragua had low democracy scores, suggesting a lack of fundamentally democratic systems. While Argentina had the highest level of democracy at the time the new electoral law was approved, Brazil and Ecuador adopted the laws after only just having made the transition to a democratic state. Unfortunately, some of the nations still have illiberal governments and weak democratic institutions, which reduces the political influence of young voters.

	<i>Model 1</i> <i>satisfaction</i> <i>with democracy</i>	<i>Model 2</i> <i>Trust in</i> <i>government</i>	<i>Model 3</i> <i>Trust national</i> <i>parliament</i>	<i>Model 4</i> <i>Trust in parties</i>
<i>Allowed to Vote</i> <i>at 16</i>	0.204* (1.89)	0.055 (0.88)	0.320** (2.69)	0.304** (2.83)
<i>Age</i>	0.003 (1.54)	0.011*** (6.14)	0.0018 (0.59)	0.002 (0.67)
<i>Female</i>	-0.244** (-3.17)	-0.076 (-1.26)	0.075 (1.30)	-0.001 (-0.15)
<i>Education</i>	-0.030 (-0.94)	0.057** (2.61)	-0.000 (-0.02)	0.012 (0.38)
<i>Left-right</i> <i>self-placement</i>	-0.001 (-0.02)	-0.006 (-0.17)	0.059** (2.87)	0.012 (0.66)
<i>Voted for win-</i> <i>ning party</i>	1.275*** (6.66)	1.967*** (7.32)	0.714*** (4.50)	0.805*** (4.61)
<i>Personal</i> <i>socio-economic</i> <i>situation</i>	0.102* (2.17)	0.074 (1.61)	0.051 (1.41)	0.042 (1.11)
N	7350	7466	7346	7404

Table 2: The estimated relationship between voting at 16 and satisfaction with democracy and political trust
Source: Sanhueza Petrarca, Constanza, "Does Voting at a Younger Age Have an Effect on Satisfaction with Democracy and Political Trust? Evidence from Latin America" 2020

The study also investigated whether early enfranchisement was associated with political attitudes in various Latin American nations in this part. According to the data, voting at the age of sixteen has a small but significant beneficial impact on one's level of happiness with democracy. This is particularly important for the movement of youth enfranchisement as numerous studies have shown a fall in political trust and contentment with democracy in Latin American democracies. As such discovering that early political participation might contribute to reducing citizens' feelings of dissatisfaction is potentially significant given that satisfied citizens provide legitimacy to the political system and that democracy is at risk when citizens believe they are subordinate to weak institutions.

In conclusion, studies of nations with lower voting ages show that 16 and 17-year-olds participate in elections actively and with comparable levels of political interest and participation as older voters. Lowering the voting age encourages young people to become politically engaged and active citizens. Especially when given the chance to vote, young people feel more politically efficient and have a stronger feeling of national identity. Therefore, they are more inclined to participate in non-electoral political activities and resonate more deeply with the value of political participation.

7.2. Austria and Participation Rates

Due to different social effects, much of the available research on voting behaviours in Europe is focused on older young people, between the ages of 18 and 24, and may not be immediately applicable to the lower age range. The Scottish independence referendum in 2014, in which 16 and 17-year-olds were permitted to vote, and Austria's reduction of the voting age to 16 in 2007, both afforded exceptional opportunities to provide essential insights into the possible effects of early enfranchisement.

Austria lowered the voting age for nationwide elections and referenda from 18 to 16 in 2007, adding approximately 150,000 new voters to the electorate.⁶ The decision was part of a larger electoral reform package that included measures to enhance civic education in schools and awareness campaigns. As such, Austria became a pioneering country in Europe by allowing 16-year-olds to vote in all elections. Multiple empirical studies conducted by Julian Aichholzer (in 2014 with Eva Zeglovits; and in 2020 with Sylvia Kritzinger) have shown that 16 and 17-year-olds have a high level of political interest and confidence in governmental institutions. Their research is very supportive of the idea that reducing the voting age can facilitate the development of voting habits and help to increase young voters' electoral engagement. The change in electoral Austrian laws sets a great example for youth enfranchisement. Not only did the study find that political interest rose among adolescents after the voting age reduction, but those not engaged in political activities in school exhibited higher political interest as well. Similar trends can also be observed in figure 6, which has been taken from a 2013 study by Zeglovitz and Zandonella. Here, before the shift in voting age, 16 and 17-year-olds' interest in politics was significantly lower than after the policy change. The participants were asked to state how interested they were in politics, with answers ranging from "not at all interested" (grey) to "very interested" (dark blue). The responses are presented in percentages.

⁶ Germany has also lowered the voting age to 16 for the elections for the European Parliament, in local elections and in "Länder" (i.e state) elections for roughly half of its states. In contrast, the voting age in the national elections for the Bundestag still stands at 18 years.

Numbers are indicated in %

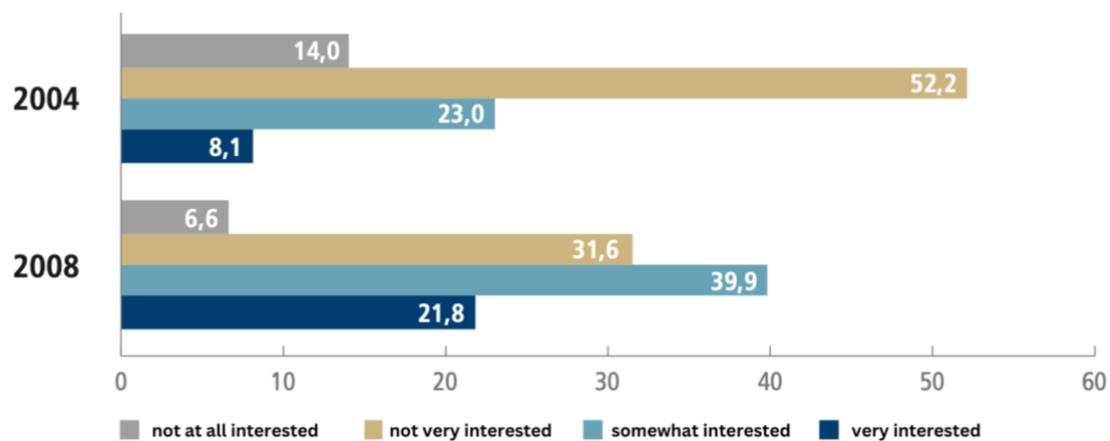


Figure 6: Political interests of 16- and 17-year-olds in Austria before and after the lowering of the voting age in 2007

Source: Zeglouitz and Zandonella, 2013

n = 209 (2004) and n= 719 (2008) surveyed first-time voters under 18 years

The Austrian case offers convincing proof that decreasing the voting age to 16 would be beneficial. Firstly, young voters continue to turn up in consistent or even increased numbers, dispelling worries about any disinterest and whereas initially it seemed younger voters had a marginally lower level of political interest, they are more satisfied with democracy and external efficacy⁷. With time, there are fewer differences between 16 and 17-year-olds and older first-time voters, which could be a result of early political socialisation and education.

In conclusion, the Austrian experience shows that decreasing the voting age to 16 can increase youth turnout while retaining a level of political maturity that is comparable. The evidence indicates that getting young people involved in politics at a young age can benefit both their short-term participation and their long-term political engagement.

Furthermore, the turnout among 16 and 17-year-olds in regional elections was found to be comparable to, if not higher than, that of 18 to 20-year-olds. The same is shown in a 2015 study by the Bertelsmann Foundation, which calculated prospective voter turnout rates for the 2013 federal elections in Germany, while hypothetically lowering the voting age to 16 (Verhkamp et al., 2015). Whereas actual voting turnout rates are described, the study intends to demonstrate how lowering the voting age to 16 would influence electoral engagement. Moreover, while 64.2% of the 18-20-year-olds voted in the 2013 federal elections, the turnout rate for 16-17-year-olds was predicted to exceed this by far, ranging up to 85% (Verhkamp et al., 2015).

⁷ = Trust in government responsiveness

7.3. Scotland and the Referendum

In the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, 16 and 17-year-olds were permitted to vote. The key difference here that we need to note is that whereas in Austria, teenagers, aged 16 and 17, are allowed to vote in all general and regional elections, this ruling in Scotland was specific to the referendum. This paper draws on a study conducted by Jan Eichhorn titled "Votes At 16: New Insights from Scotland on Enfranchisement" (2018) which investigates the differences in political attitudes and behaviour between Scottish 16/17-year-olds and their counterparts in the rest of the UK (RUK). This empirical data will be utilised further to emphasise the benefits younger enfranchisement will have on politics, democracy, society, and children's rights.

As we have mentioned previously, the general justifications that critics make for not extending other citizens' rights to 16-year-olds stem from a lack of political knowledge, awareness, and competence. Yet, compared to their slightly older classmates, 16 to 17-year-olds may be more ready to participate when offered the opportunity to vote, and prior early voting experiences may have a habit-forming influence. It's also crucial to recognise that young people participate in politics in a variety of ways other than just casting a ballot.

Reasons for voting

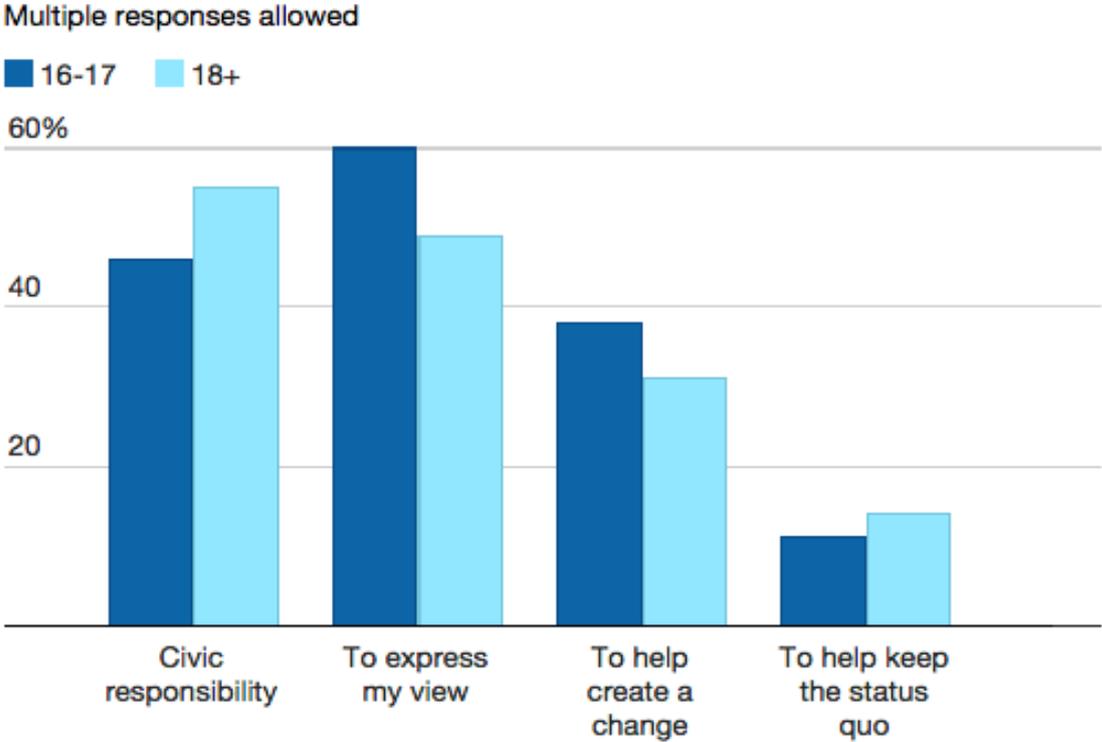


Figure 7: Reasons for voting
Source: ICM 2014/The Guardian, "Do Scottish 16- and 17-year-olds want to vote?"

The ICM, a marketing services company, conducted an impactful post-referendum survey with a total of 1,852 interviews (112 of those were with 16- and 17-year-olds) for the Electoral Commission. While civic responsibility, recorded through responses such as “it is my duty to vote”, “everyone should vote” and “it is my right” (Guardian, 2014) is always an important reason for voters, the main reasons for voting were the desire to express their views and to help facilitate and create change.

Allowing voting from 16

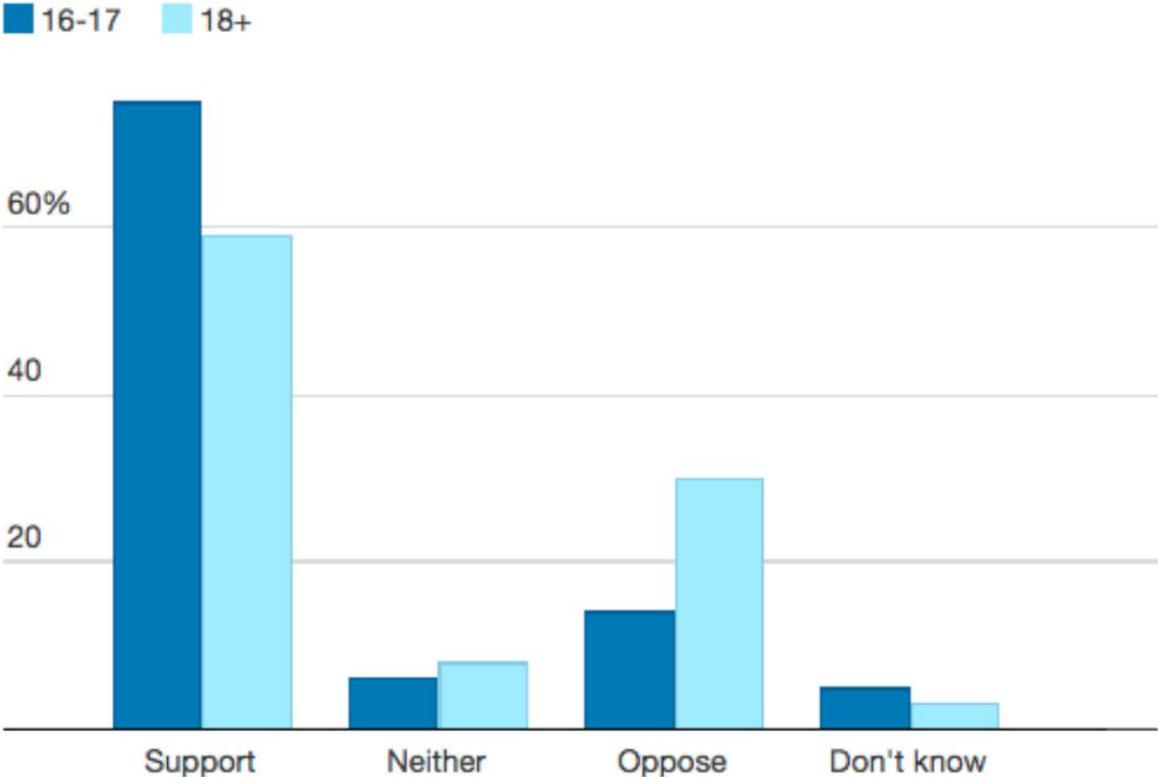


Figure 8: Allowing voting from 16
 Source: ICM 2014/The Guardian, “Do Scottish 16- and 17-year-olds want to vote?”

The survey also found that there is increasing support for younger enfranchisement, roughly 60% overall and a sizeable 75% majority among the 16/17-year-olds. This shows that teenagers want to be included in the electoral process and they want to be given a voice. Moreover, ICM’s research came to show that whereas, all age groups had a high level of referendum knowledge, 16 and 17-year-olds had clearly educated themselves on the issues as they were more likely (68%) than any other age group to say they had enough knowledge of the consequences of the vote and found it to be easily accessible. Young people’s political ideas and behaviour are influenced by a variety of socialising factors, including their parents and their schools. This marks just how important civic education in schools will be in educating children and teenagers to ensure successful political results and to be vital in facilitating the voting process. The manner in which civic education is delivered, whether

through official instruction or informal discussions of political problems in the classroom, can have an impact on the abilities and attitudes created.

8. Conclusion and Demands

Children and adolescents, as part of the younger and future generations, are deeply affected by policies related to education, environmental sustainability, employment opportunities, and social equity. Yet, they do not possess the inherent right to vote and as such to express opinions on matters that concern them the most, especially where government decisions impact their lives significantly. Despite making up a sizeable section of the world's population, children often are not allowed to cast ballots in most nations. On top of that, they demonstrate time and again how eager they are to be included in the discussion by actively participating in democratic processes through protests or interactions with decision-makers.

The Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations (FRFG) is advocating for universal suffrage, which would grant all citizens the right to vote, not just young adults who are 16 years and above, but also teenagers and children. This should be achieved through a system of 'voting by registration', in which any citizen regardless of age can register to vote when they feel ready to do so. This is to not exclude children and teenagers under 18 years and violates their right to participate in the electoral process rather based on when they desire to and not an age requirement.

The democratic principles of respect for human dignity, equality before the law, and universal suffrage are all upheld by granting voting rights to young people. Democracy's cornerstone is the popular sovereignty idea, which holds that all state power originates with the populace. Universal suffrage supports this idea by ensuring that every person has an equal right to participate in the exercise of governmental authority. By restricting voting rights based on age, societies run the risk of undermining these democratic foundations since it creates a divide between those who have voting rights and those who do not. In the context of intergenerational justice and demographic ageing, the younger generation's input into decision-making processes becomes even more important, to ensure that their interests and concerns are appropriately represented in legislative and policy decisions.

The FRFG strongly believes in the significant perspectives and insights that older children and adolescents can bring to more comprehensive and efficient policymaking. Enfranchising this group allows them to participate actively in determining their future by recognising their developing cognitive capacities and ability for civic involvement. Furthermore, societies can create the groundwork for lifelong civic habits. Voting at a young age instils in people a feeling of civic duty and a conviction that their opinions matter, creating a lifelong commitment to taking part in democratic processes.

This policy paper makes the case that granting children the ability to vote gives parliamentarians a platform to directly address these challenges, allowing them to consider their distinct perspectives and give priority to policies that appeal to the youth demographic. We seek a world in which teenagers and children play a crucial role in the political process. Governments and institutions may foster a more inclusive, equitable, and participatory democracy that amplifies the voices of the youth by implementing the suggestions made in this paper. This protects their rights while also fostering a more progressive and long-lasting future for all.

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The Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations (FRFG) is a non-partisan advocacy group for future generations, led by one of the youngest foundation boards in Germany. We award prizes, conduct scientific research, publish books, position papers, and press releases, initiate campaigns for intergenerational justice, and organise seminars and symposiums. Our focus areas include environmental policy, pension policy, financial policy, education policy, demography, labour society, and political participation. The foundation is financially independent and is not affiliated with any political party.

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