Childhood

Can democracy represent children? Toward a politics of difference

John Wall

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What is This?

Can democracy represent children? Toward a politics of difference

John Wall
Rutgers University, USA

Abstract
Children and youth under 18 have made significant strides in recent years toward fuller inclusion in democratic processes. These strides, however, rarely rise to the level of direct political representation, whether in changing policies, making laws, or voting. This article argues that democracies will be able to represent children only by transforming what is meant by democratic representation in the first place. It shows why democratic theory has traditionally excluded children, how representation is more than just participation or citizenship, and how current children's political movements provide lessons for a more expansive politics of direct representation regardless of age.

Democracies are forms of government that represent 'the people', the *demos*, in the exercise of political power. Over the roughly two centuries that modern democracies have flourished around the globe, the real exercise of power has gradually been extended from wealthy landowning men toward the poor, ethnic and racial minorities, women and other previously marginalized groups, however imperfectly and incompletely. However, this increasing democratic inclusiveness has not generally extended toward children, despite children under 18 constituting fully a third of all humanity. Children and youth rarely enjoy significant democratic rights to influence policies, shape laws, or elect representatives. Indeed, modern political philosophy has long defined democracy as a principally adult realm, children being considered too incompetent, irrational, or dependent to exercise the levers of power for themselves.

My purpose here is to challenge democratic orthodoxy by arguing that the exclusion of children from direct political representation is due to a lack, not in children themselves,

Corresponding author:
John Wall, Rutgers University, Department of Philosophy and Religion, 311 N. 5th Street, Camden, NJ 08102-1405, USA.
Email: johnwall@camden.rutgers.edu

but in existing conceptualizations of democracy. I wish to explore the question of whether democracy can become more fully democratic by directly representing people of all ages instead of only some. This inquiry requires a re-examination of the traditional Enlightenment idea that democratic representation is the expression of independent or developed rationality. The inclusion of children in core democratic processes would require an expanded concept of the political subject and the political terrain. It would involve what I have elsewhere called – in analogy to feminism, womanism, environmentalism, queer theory and the like – an exercise in childism. By this I mean, not just an extension of adult privileges to children, but a restructuring of fundamental social norms in response to children's experiences (Wall, 2010).

My conclusion is that democracy can adequately represent children only insofar as it is reconceptualized as a politics of difference. I take the concept of 'difference' from various forms of postmodern political theory, but I also argue that it too needs revising in order to respond adequately to children. A genuinely inclusive sharing of power by the whole *demos* requires procedures of representation in which differences of experience are able to make a structural difference to the political whole. I make this argument through the lens of political theory. But I do so starting from an examination of actual movements around the world today for children's more direct democratic representation. I then show why these efforts coming from the margins disrupt the usual modern and even postmodern understandings of democratic life and call for a new concept of political representation as such.

Movements for children's representation today

In the past, children have been kings and queens, played important roles in labor movements, marched with Gandhi to liberate India, helped desegregate the United States' South, and been involved in one way or another in all manner of political movements. But to what extent do children exercise modern democratic power? In what ways have democratic structures opened themselves up to children's direct representation? To answer these questions, we can organize children's diverse contemporary inroads into democracy along a continuum of less and more direct uses of power.

Toward the relatively less direct end of the spectrum are efforts by local and national governments, particularly as inspired by the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), to establish government agencies that will listen to children's political voices. These are relatively less directly powerful for children because the whole program is structured and performed by adults. Government agencies have long 'represented' children in some sense: such as by funding their education, protecting their free speech rights and pressing for legislation against child abuse. And governments have long been impacted to varying degrees by children, children's advocates and non-governmental organizations taking stands for children's issues. But recently, many governments have joined what could be called a loose movement to create more systematic structures for listening to the actual voices of children themselves.

For example, in 2001 New Zealand developed an Agenda for Children based on an ambitious national consultative process in which children were asked to express their society-wide problems and desires (Brown and McCormack, 2005). In 2003, South

Africa launched the Children in Action (Dikwankwetla) project to include children in some parliamentary hearings and public debates (Jamieson and Mukoma, 2010). The Israeli Knesset now regularly invites children to participate in its child-related committees (Ben-Arieh and Boyer, 2005: 50). The government of Rwanda holds a National Summit for Children and Youth every year around a particular theme (Pells, 2010). Since 2004, the UK has instituted four Children's Commissioners (for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), whose purpose is to promote children's concerns in government legislation and policy (Williams and Croke, 2008: 184–7). In 2009, the Kazakstan government worked with UNICEF to organize a political consultative process with youth aged 10–24, called the National Adolescents and Youth Forum (Karkara and Khudaibergenov, 2009).

In each of these relatively new activities, children do not exactly exercise political power on their own behalf, but they are at least given a voice that is heard by those who do. It is not assumed that children will be represented merely through the beneficence of lawmakers, concerned adults, or parents. Rather, those who make policies and laws need to hear and absorb children's voices and desires from children themselves. To a certain degree, adults' assumptions about children's political interests are opened up to critique from the point of view of children's own different experiences.

An arguably more direct form of children's representation can be found in the worldwide movement of children's parliaments. At present, at least 30 countries have some kind of children's parliament structure, whether nationally or in cities, villages, or schools. These include India, Norway, Germany, Slovenia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Nigeria, Congo, Burkina Faso, Liberia, New Zealand, England, Scotland, and a Children's United Parliament of the World (Austin, 2010; Cabannes, 2005; Children's United Parliament of the World, 2009; Conrad, 2009). Many children's parliaments, especially in wealthier nations, are more educational than actually exercising democratic rights, though even here adults may be forced to account for children's ideas more fully. Some tend to favor select groups, such as older children, those with a particular interest in politics, wealthier classes, or children who happen to attend a participating organization or school (Turkie, 2010).

Nevertheless, many children's parliaments do in fact enable children to exercise a degree of direct political power. One of the first children's parliaments, set up in the 1990s in village schools in Rajasthan, India, involves 6- to 14-year-olds electing child representatives, who have made significant differences to their communities. Children have changed educational policies, dismissed poor teachers, improved community services and funded new utilities (Bajpai, 2003: 469; John, 2003: 235–9). In Bolivia, a children's parliament was created in 2004 whose representatives make regular formal recommendations to the adult national assembly (Sarkar and Mendoza, 2005). Some of the more local children's parliaments, such as in the city of Barra Mansa in Brazil, have extensive powers over issues concerning children and control parts of the city budget (Cabannes, 2005: 191). Children's parliaments in poorer communities, perhaps because of children's deeper involvement in labor and public life, often exercise greater actual power.

Most directly of all are sporadic efforts to gain children's right to vote. Although the United Nations may not have been thinking of children, its founding 1948 Universal

Declaration of Human Rights calls in Article 21 for 'universal and equal suffrage', on the grounds that 'everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives'. Over half a century later, this 'everyone' rarely includes children. Even the CRC does not mention children's rights to vote.

Nevertheless, in addition to a limited scholarly discussion about children's voting (which we come to later), both children and adults have been involved in various movements advocating children's partial or universal suffrage. The German government began in 2008 to consider a bill to provide the vote to each citizen at birth, to be used by a parent until the child claims it (CRIN, 2008; de Quetteville, 2008). The bill is supported by 46 German parliamentarians from across the three major conservative, center-left and liberal parties. It is sponsored in part by the German youth organization KRÄTZÄ and by the influential German Family Association (German Family Association, 2010; KRÄTZÄ, 2009). A number of countries have recently lowered the voting age to 16, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, Yugoslavia and the British Channel Islands (as well as Germany and Israel for local elections), and others to 17, including East Timor, Indonesia, Seychelles and Sudan (Hurst, 2003). An English organization has convinced the national government to study lowering the voting age to 16 across the board (CRAE, 2010), following similar efforts by the Votes at Sixteen Campaign that was ultimately defeated before the UK Electoral Commission in 2004 (Cowley and Denver, 2004; Folkes, 2004). In the United States, a younger voting age is part of the agenda of the child-run National Youth Rights Association (2009). Several individual states have proposed voting ages of anything from 12 to 17, most famously in California where a bill was defeated to permit a quarter vote at 14 and a half vote at 16 (Calvan, 2004; Cohen, 2005: 235). In some US states, children can now vote at 17 in primary elections if they will turn 18 by the time of the general election.

These are but a few examples of present movements for children's increased political representation. In no case are children democratically represented to the same extent as adults. But, taken as a whole, these various and more or less direct projects constitute a significant historical challenge to the longstanding assumption that direct democratic representation should belong only to adults.

Theorizing representation as citizenship

The childhood studies literature has generally sought to understand these kinds of political activities through the lens of children's citizenship. This lens, I would like to argue here, is helpful but not finally sufficient. It is helpful because it understands children as political agents deserving rights to political participation (Pufall and Unsworth, 2004). Citizenship in its broadest sense means membership in a country, and this should imply, many argue, children's active participation in its politics. The difficulty with the lens of citizenship, however, is that it is generally too broad to focus on the specific problem of children's exclusion from direct political power. Most children technically are citizens while exercising very little actual political influence. The concept of children's citizenship needs to be further refined in order to spell out more precisely what constitutes children's real democratic representation.

There are on the whole three ways in which children's citizenship has been politically theorized in the childhood studies literature: as children's *agency*, *interdependence* and *difference*. Let us examine these different models for their advantages and disadvantages in understanding children's democratic exercise of power.

Citizenship as agency

The agency model of children's citizenship makes the argument that, given the chance, children are just as capable of actively participating in political life as are adults. This model grows out of the founding ideas of the childhood studies movement of children as not just adults-in-the-making but actors and constructors of social contexts in their own right. As Allison James and Alan Prout put it, children are 'actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' (James and Prout, 1997: 4). In terms of political life, children's agency means they deserve an equal voice and influence in public affairs. It points to children 'being active citizens, articulating their own values, perspectives, experiences and visions for the future, using these to inform and take action in their own right and, where necessary, contesting with those who have power over their lives' (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010: 3). While children's citizenship also includes such activities as civic engagement, media use and free speech, it clearly also suggests that children should have a voice and participate for themselves in democratic politics.

This notion of children's agency as citizens has achieved perhaps its most visible expression in the well-known 'participation rights' of the CRC. These rights are the major conceptual advance of the CRC over previous children's rights agreements, adding a third 'P' beyond rights to protection and provision (Wall, 2008). They include (in Articles 12–17) the rights to free expression and being heard; freedom of thought, conscience, religion and peaceful assembly; privacy; and access to information (UNICEF, 2010). Such rights are not necessarily political, and, as already noted, do not go as far as specifying democratic representation or voting. However, as Gerison Lansdown (2010) has argued, the CRC's general affirmation of participation rights has also functioned as a major driver of children's political movements such as those described in the earlier section. It is important to frame children's active citizenship in terms of participation rights if children are to gain political agency in any systematic and institutionalized sense.

While the notion of children as political agents is a great step forward, it also has its drawbacks when it comes to describing children's political power. The difficulty can been seen through Roger Hart's 'ladder of participation', which distinguishes various levels at which children may be permitted active social participation in theory while being denied it in actual practice. At the lower rungs, children's participation can be reduced to manipulation, decoration, or tokenism, meaning their being used in one way or another for adults' own social or political ends. At the higher rungs, children can gain increasingly powerful levels of participation through being informed, being consulted, taking initiative and, highest of all, sharing in actual decision-making (Hart, 1997). As Hart's ladder suggests (as does a similar ladder of Harry Shier, 2001), political citizenship or agency is not necessarily the same thing as political power. Rather, as suppressed

groups throughout history have found, citizenship in name can differ from citizenship in reality. For example, children in civic councils in the UK report feeling that, while they can participate and have a voice, these councils are really controlled by larger institutional structures that are run by adults (Wyness, 2005). What is needed, in the words of Ruth Sinclair, is 'to offer genuine participation to children that is not an add-on but an integral part of the way adults and organizations relate to children' (Sinclair, 2004: 116).

In fact, even though it is a historical step forward to extend political agency to children, the notion of politics as the expression of agency is itself far from new. It has been the bedrock of modern democracies ever since the Enlightenment. The reason why it has all this time been able to render children second-class citizens is that 'agency' is all too readily modeled on autonomous and independent adulthood. Even very recently, the influential political philosopher John Rawls describes political citizenship as the exercise of 'full autonomy' in being able 'to explain . . . the principles and policies they [citizens] advocate and vote for' (1993: 217), which leads him to assume, without argument, that 'equal citizens' refers only to 'adult persons in the society' (1993: 245).

The ability to act politically on the basis of one's own ideas and principles is not of course lacking in children. Indeed, democracy would seem to require not prejudging what counts as political agency in the first place. The problem lies in who has the power to define what political agency really means and to police its rather amorphous boundaries. On the whole, adults have greater experience, education, practice and resources than children in shaping the underlying norms controlling political action. They are more likely, on average, to stand in positions to decide what freedoms and rights are important and what public mechanisms should be used to advance them. From a childist point of view, the traditional idea of political citizenship as autonomous and independent agency does not adequately account for children's experiences of interdependency and imbalances of power. I am not arguing that political agency *could not* have more child-friendly senses, especially when interpreted along more feminist and Foucaultian lines. The problem is that agency itself is a political norm with historically adult-centered biases. The agency model tries to fit children into formerly adult political constructs rather than clearly challenging those constructs themselves.

Citizenship as interdependence

Such difficulties have lead some to propose an alternative model of children's political citizenship as based on interdependence: that is, persons' simultaneously active independence and passive dependence. Fitzgerald et al. claim, for example, in their analysis of New Zealand's Agenda for Children mentioned earlier, that 'children's participation is not tied to the efforts of an individual child asserting a claim, but rather emerges within a mutual interdependence, recognition and respect for children and their views and experiences' (2010: 300). Barbara Bennett Woodhouse has applied this perspective to children's political rights, for which, she claims, 'illusions of autonomy, so dear to adult-centric schemes of rights, would dissolve, making room for the reality of dependency and interdependency' (Woodhouse, 2008: 309). Children can be included as full rather than second-class citizens, the argument goes, if citizenship is broadened to include relational ties and social and political interdependencies.

Some suggest that children's obvious political interdependency illuminates the true nature of citizenship for all. Marc Jans proposes a 'children-sized citizenship' for both children and adults 'based on a continuous learning process in which children and adults are interdependent' (2004: 40). Citizenship is the joint effort of all persons in a society to 'give meaning to their environment' through 'a dynamic and continuous learning process' (Jans, 2004: 40). As Tom Cockburn likewise puts it, 'both adults and children are socially interdependent' through citizens' simultaneous 'responsibilities and duties' (1998: 113). The advantage of basing citizenship on interdependency instead of agency is that children and adults are placed on a more clearly equal footing.

Such models are grounded in newer forms of political theory such as, most prominently, Jürgen Habermas's notion of political life as not individualistic but 'intersubjective' or 'communicative'. According to Habermas, individuals cannot grasp the political landscape alone, but depend on a process of open and real discourse with others in order to move toward genuinely inclusive areas of consensus (1990 [1983]: 66). Or, as Seyla Benhabib has put it, citizenship should be a 'dynamic process' in which no single voice is allowed to dominate, but rather 'claims and principles are contested and contextualized, invoked and revoked' through an open-ended conversation (2004: 211, 179). Political representation on this view means being included in interdependent procedures of dialogue.

Despite its greater potential for involving children, the interdependence model of political citizenship still, however, tends to favor adults. On the level of political theory, no matter how interdependent or dialogical the process may be, there is still the problem of differences in power to control the conversation itself. In a rare reference to children, Benhabib admits that children 'seem to be excluded from the moral conversation', and proposes that 'the moral interests of beings who are not full participants in moral discourses ought to be and can be effectively represented in discursive contexts through systems of moral advocacy' (2004: 14). Advocacy, however, directly contradicts the goal of intersubjective inclusion, making those dependent on it a great deal less powerfully represented than others. More concretely, even if children are more able to speak for themselves than Benhabib thinks, children's relative newness to the conversation will still leave them disadvantaged in an interdependent dialogue. Their voices will still be marginalized by the deeper forces of historical oppression.

Citizenship as difference

A third and even more recent model of children's political citizenship takes on the issue of power directly. On this model, democracy means striving against historical norms of power for the inclusion of the greatest possible diversity of social differences. Nigel Thomas uses the social theories of Iris Marion Young and Pierre Bourdieu to argue that 'representation is most inclusive [of children] when it encourages marginalized groups to express their perspectives' (Thomas, 2007: 210). What is required is a political space in which children are empowered to express their own distinctive and submerged points of view. As Ragnhild Lund puts it, 'the various structural, contextual and geopolitical factors at play will be have to be deconstructed to understand the full significance of participation in creating a significant society and cultural change for

children' (2009: 146). To gain representation as citizens is not just to have a voice or to join in the conversation but most importantly to be empowered to assert one's own difference against others.

This perspective is grounded in part in recent forms of feminist and postcolonialist theory in which political power stands in need of radical critique from the point of view of those it systematically excludes. Ruth Lister (in a critique of the influential autonomy model of citizenship in TH Marshall [1950]) argues that children can be included as full citizens only through a 'differentiated universalism' in which being a citizen enables those historically marginalized from power to engage in 'a struggle for recognition' (Lister, 2007: 709, 715). More specifically, 'our goal should be a universalism which stands in creative tension to diversity and difference and which challenges the divisions and exclusionary inequalities which can stem from diversity' (Lister, 1997: 39). Similarly, Tom Cockburn (in a more recent position than that discussed above) suggests the need for a 'radically pluralistic public arena' in which 'political spaces . . . change themselves to accommodate the everyday worlds of children' (2005: 27). Most radically of all, Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha has argued for a feminist, anti-racist, non-classist and trans-gendered theorization of children's citizenship as 'difference-centered', that is, based on 'the right to participate differently in the social institutions and culture of the society' (2005: 375). The solution to history's 'adultist' constructions of power is a struggle to include children's 'own lived reality' and 'subjective experiences' (2005: 375, 377).

The difference model is based on the political theories of figures such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who argue that democratic representation needs to be understood as an 'agonistic' (and 'antagonistic') struggle for power. Democracy is here a fundamentally 'deconstructive' or 'negating' political system whose purpose is not consensus but conflict, not a unified whole but 'the multiplication of antagonisms and the construction of a plurality of spaces' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 192). As Mouffe puts it in a direct critique of Habermas, 'the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant 'agonistic' public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted' (2005: 3). Young similarly argues for an 'inclusive' democracy that 'encourage[s] the particular perspectives of relatively marginalized social groups to receive specific representation' (2000: 8).

The difference model has the advantage for children of articulating historical marginalization and expanding the exercise of political power to include systematically suppressed differences. It shows how the political stage can be used to deconstruct deeply held normative assumptions that render children less than full political subjects. What is more, the difference view is able to extend power to children, not as a monolithic group, but in their multiple age, gender, ethnic, cultural, class, situational and other kinds of diversity. A street child in Rio de Janeiro may be empowered for political struggle in a different way than a gay teenager in London or a hungry infant in Calcutta.

But this model is also problematic in its own way. While children can certainly engage in agonistic struggles for power, and while political life can always be more inclusive of children's differences, the notion of politics as a power struggle is in the end likely to result in greater power for adults than for children. This is because one of the most important ways in which children are 'different' lies in their likelihood of having had less experience precisely in struggling for power. If nothing else, children have by definition

taken part in political life for fewer years than adults and with less time therefore to accumulate educational, economic and social capital. Age, in other words, makes a genuine difference in one's overall power to struggle on behalf of one's differences. While some children are more politically powerful than some adults, on the whole children will be less empowered across political systems. In a sense what is missing here is a recognition of political interdependency: different groups' reliance on the responsive use of power by others. Insofar as politics merely deconstructs power, it paradoxically marginalizes any group that is less fully equipped for political struggle.

Theorizing children's representation

The difficulties faced by these models of children's political citizenship stem ultimately from their not specifically theorizing children's democratic representation. Concepts such as citizenship, agency, interdependency and struggle move us closer to understanding the problem, but, as is the case for adults as well, do not address the distinctly representational issues involved. As the preceding discussion suggests, a broad focus on citizenship runs into a fundamental dilemma. If citizenship means political interdependence, then children are not sufficiently empowered to struggle against their longstanding historical oppression. But if citizenship means struggle among differences, then children are marginalized by their relative dependence on others for exercising power on their behalf. On current models, it would seem that political actors cannot be interdependently included and differently empowered at the same time – which is precisely what children in particular call for.

The way out of this dilemma is to rethink the very grounds of political representation in a way that is both at once interdependent and difference-oriented. This can be done, I now argue, by learning about the larger meaning of democracy from children's particular experiences. What is learned is that political representation should ultimately mean empowering lived differences to make a difference to interdependent political structures. The negative aim of deconstructing power meets the positive aim of creating community in the truly democratic aim of a difference-responsive political whole.

This notion of difference-responsiveness is grounded in a different strand of postmodernity known as phenomenology. While also having little to say about children, phenomenologists have described human relations as constructed in response to differences of concretely lived experience (Wall, 2005). Difference here is not the end of political life, as for agonists, but the political test required for creating a more inclusively shared political terrain. As Paul Ricoeur argues (adapting Emmanuel Levinas), social relations involve an 'intersecting dialectic of oneself and another' in which 'the other constitutes me as responsible, that is, as capable of responding' (1992: 341, 336). Thus, for example, a child unable to access vaccinations is not simply different, but creates an obligation, based on her difference, for her community to make her a response. Difference is not just struggled for against others, but a demand for more expansive social relations. As Richard Kearney similarly describes it, responsiveness means a self or society's 'openness to others' or 'dialogue of self-and-other', in which one 'wagers that it is still possible for us to struggle for a greater . . . understanding of Others and, so doing, do them more justice' (2003: 81, 232).

A responsive democracy would be one that included its members' differences of experience, not just through rational dialogue or power struggle, but through the continual

reconstruction of the political whole. Responsiveness is a form of responsibility: a capacity to enable differences of perspective to make a difference to the existing social imagination. Democratic representation should strive for the most expansive possible responsiveness to a political community's lived diversity. It should respond to people as whole social persons with both active powers for struggle and passive vulnerabilities and dependencies. It ultimately means using the political power bestowed by the people to make them a politically responsive difference.

Such a model holds greater promise for representing children in politics in at least three ways. First, it decisively expands the sphere of responsibility toward children into the political realm. In classic democratic theorists such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, responsibility is confined to the private sphere of dependent relations, in contrast with the public sphere of autonomous rights (Locke, 1823, 1989; Rousseau, 1947, 1979). Indeed, democracy was thought to require a sharp public–private divide. What children demonstrate, however, is that this dichotomy of political independence and familial dependency is a false one. It does not support but rather undermines genuine democracy for all. Politics and family life are both interdependent, because both demand responsiveness to members' different experiences.

Second, children may not always have as much autonomy or power as adults, but they are every bit as different. If the purpose of democratic representation is to respond to the fullest possible diversity of social experiences, then it includes responding to children – and to children's endless diversity – just as much as it does to adults. Indeed, children would take on a heightened status as the most important test of being democratic, since they are more likely than most to call for political responsiveness from the whole. Being represented in the political sphere should not depend entirely on how competently one can argue for one's interests or how effectively one can struggle against others for power. It should depend finally on how different one's experiences are from those of others.

And third, on this view, children can be understood as not only responded to but also themselves politically responsible. Being represented politically does not simply mean giving voice to one's interests or engaging in struggle. Rather, it means joining with others in creating a more diversely constructed political whole. Both children and adults have the political responsibility of expressing their own differences to others and making others' differences their own response. This circle of mutual responsiveness is what it means ethically to be human. On the whole, children's relative inexperience in political life suggests that they hold relatively less responsibility to the diversity of the political differences around them. By the same token, those with greater age, resources and power hold political responsibilities that are correspondingly more expansive. But these are not separate species of obligation but points along a common political continuum. Children too should have avenues of representation in order both to demand responses from those holding power and to exercise their responsibilities for sharing in power themselves.

The future of children's representation

Such a politics of difference can be fleshed out by returning to our three sets of examples – government agencies, parliaments and voting – and seeing how they might be understood in more fully childist or child-inclusive ways.

Government agencies such as task forces, committees and commissions have long made it possible for those in power to respond more adequately to those they represent, whether children or adults. Merely being voted into office does not suffice for understanding and acting upon the diverse experiences of constituents. The particular problem raised by children, however, is how much historically underrepresented groups are able to make a real difference to this kind of government work.

The goal of such agencies should be to respond to a particular group's differences of experience more fully than at present. Government agencies are not there simply to generate consensus, or to foment struggles for power. They should instead be understood as phenomenologies of the citizenry: attempts to expand political horizons in the direction of a marginalized group's concretely lived realities. In the case of children, this has to include but also go beyond merely giving children a voice. It should aim more radically at responding to children's voices by making a difference to laws and policy, that is, by reimagining the political landscape. It may be (some) adults who wield the most power, but they do so democratically only insofar as they respond to lived diversity. Can the Children's Commissioners in the UK, for example, empower children to make a difference that transforms settled law?

Similarly, children's parliaments are truly representative of children only to the degree that they evoke a response to children's differences in overall government policies. Some children's parliaments appear to have much the opposite function of teaching children to adopt adult values. But others have enabled children to challenge their surrounding political worlds in surprising and unanticipated ways. The goal of children's parliaments should not be simply to provide children a say in political life or to assist them in fighting against adults and other groups. Rather, it should be to represent what is distinctive about the experiences of children and to create political responses.

The question must be asked whether separate children's parliaments can ultimately represent children as well as would children's inclusion in the general parliament with adults. On the one hand, as in other areas of children's lives such as juvenile justice systems and schools, separate structures can help ensure that children are attended to in their distinctiveness. They recognize that children's differences include the potential to be overpowered by adults. On the other hand, no other historically disenfranchised group – whether women, minorities, or the poor – has ever gained equal political power through a separate parliamentary system. This is because a separate process of representation tends toward tokenism, placing an inherent distance between representation and real power.

The more compelling solution suggested by our considerations above is to transform general parliamentary structures to become more radically responsive to difference overall, including the differences of children. Existing parliamentary representation would have to be reconceptualized as a process, not of rational consensus or of deconstructive conflict, but rather of difference-responsiveness. Insofar as any group is marginalized by the whole, the democratic process has failed. Those who stand in government must as far as possible be held responsible to their constituents' fullest diversity. Possibly some representatives should be children themselves, so long as the demands of governing do not interfere with children's education and non-exploitation. In either case – whether through separate or general parliamentary structures – representing children means using parliamentary power to respond to the most diverse possible differences.

This brings us to the most contentious example of children's voting. There is a small but growing scholarly literature on whether children and youth should be provided suffrage and, if so, at what age. As long ago as 1975, John Holt argued for 'the right to vote for people of any age', to be exercised, whether child or adult, solely on the basis of whether one chooses to take part in public affairs (Holt, 1975). More recently, Bob Franklin claims that, while not all rights should be enjoyed equally by children (such as to freedom from parental control), the right to vote should include all children because it is the cornerstone of 'the right to be a citizen' (Franklin, 1986: 24). Not only are children just as politically rational or irrational as adults, he argues, but regardless of competency, children's suffrage would 'give higher priority and emphasis to policies relating to youth affairs than at present' (1986: 46). Others argue for lowering the voting age, usually to 16. Alex Folkes claims that 'lowering the voting age to 16 [in the UK] . . . will re-connect an entire generation of young people with our country's democratic structures', and align with other rights at 16 such as joining the armed forces, working and paying taxes (2004: 52–3; see also Schrag, 2004). Daniel Hart and Robert Atkins claim that children in the United States are developmentally ready to vote at 16 because they share adult levels of political knowledge, interest and skill (2011).

In contrast, Matthew Clayton argues that children under 18 should not have a right to vote because 'democracies require voters who understand the political system and the pertinent social and economic issues that are the subject of political deliberation' (2006: 193). David Archard says that 'we do not know what a child would choose if possessed of adult rational powers of choice because what makes a child a child is just her lack of such powers (her ignorance, inconstant wants, inconsistent beliefs and limited powers of ratiocination)' (2003: 53). Philip Cowley and David Denver oppose lowering the voting age because 16-year-olds 'have little experience of life beyond family and school, and no memory of governments or public affairs going back further than two or three years at most' (2004: 61). Tak Wing Chan and Matthew Clayton claim that voting requires full 'political maturity', meaning voters 'should possess political convictions that are consistent . . . hang together . . . [are] consequentially rational . . . and are not subject to whim or revision' (2006: 542).

My own view is that such arguments against children's suffrage are premised on an adult-centered conception of political representation. This makes them ultimately circular: voting is an expression of political maturity and so should only be extended to the politically mature. From a childist point of view, voting should be redefined as one of the most powerful means for making political representatives responsive to citizens' differences. Even without children having the vote, representatives would still be responsible toward children – just as prior to women's voting, they were still responsible toward women. But with children's right to vote, representatives would be forced to respond more fully to children's diverse lived experiences. Voting so understood imagines democracy as a true *e pluribus unum*. The right to vote should be as expansive as possible because those voted into office are given power over the lives of all. It should be presumed that everyone can vote unless a compelling argument can be provided for exclusion. Children's right to vote is important if elected representatives are to perform their democratic duties of challenging historical marginalization and responding to constituents' fullest differences. While it is impossible to enter into the many issues that are

thereby raised (for example, is the German proposal correct that the youngest children's votes should be given by proxy to their parents?), any form of government that responds only indirectly to a third of its citizens can hardly be called truly democratic.

Conclusion

However it might be worked out in practice, democracy can, then, represent children, but only if it is fundamentally reimagined. Democratic representation turns out to be less than fully democratic if it is merely understood, in the traditional sense, as an expression of individual autonomy or agency; or even, in more recent senses, as a process of inter-dependent consensus-building or a struggle among irreducible differences. Representation also requires rethinking citizenship, but in a way that is focused on the specific question of the direct use of democratic power. A childist or child-inclusive system of political representation would aim toward the political whole's responsiveness to lived experiences of difference. A political community should be considered democratic to the extent that its members' differences make a difference to the exercise of political power. Only in this way can it truly represent the people.

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