

## *Children in power: are children entitled to the right to stand for public office?*

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### Biography:

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### Abstract

This article seeks to address the gap in the literature concerning the right to stand for office by establishing that all children are entitled to run for election. Following a thorough review of the literature on children's participatory rights, this article identifies children's representation as a leading factor in legitimising democracy. Furthermore, it addresses concerns regarding children's competence and practicality issues to guarantee that the realisation of this right does not result in an immoral outcome. Finally, deliberative democracy is considered as an alternative to representative systems, where children can influence policy-making without requiring their assimilation into the adult world.

**Keywords:** [children's rights](#); [participation](#); [representation](#); [deliberative democracy](#); [children in elections](#)

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### Introduction

Children have consistently been marginalised from political decision-making due to their perceived incompetence and lack of self-determination compared to that of adults (Cowden, 2012, p. 365). As a consequence, children's lives have been tied to third parties entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of them until they reach adulthood. In the last hundred years, however, there has been a shift in how children interact with society. Not only have children become the centre of 'huge emotional, cultural, technological and economic investment' (Oswell, 2012, p. 3), but as a collective they have also gained visibility in many issues that affect them globally, such as climate change, famine and the refugee crisis. Children have started to develop their own thoughts and to voice their concerns over policies that endanger

them now more than ever. Nonetheless, despite this increasing presence of children in contemporary issues, they remain alienated from political participation. ‘Children and young people are simultaneously at the heart of contemporary political debate and on the margins’ (Hartung, 2017, p. 3).

From these new times, a key question emerges: how entitled (if at all) are children to being part of the democratic process? Although policy-makers are still reluctant to extend children’s participation to formal political institutions, the scholarship regarding their citizenship and their participatory rights has grown over the last few decades and has managed to gain some influence. There is particular interest in lowering the age to vote, for example, because it would ‘give higher priority and emphasis to policies relating to youth affairs than at present’ (Franklin, 1986, p. 46). The notion that children must have the right to vote as part of their citizenship status combined with an urgent need to increase voter turnout in national and local elections has influenced countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua and Yugoslavia, which have now given sixteen-year-olds suffrage (Wall, 2011, p. 89). Another branch of study is specifically concerned with Article 12 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which states that children have the right to express their views freely. It has been argued that children’s voices should be listened to, to improve the government’s representation of their interests. This concern with children’s consultative rights has been put into practice in certain parts of the world in order to include children’s voices into the public debate. For instance, in 2001, New Zealand created an Agenda for Children in which children were asked to present their views on society’s most pressing issues. In addition, in 2003, South Africa launched a project called Children in Action (Dikwankwetla), which invited children to some parliamentary hearings (Wall, 2011, pp. 87–88). Despite the right to vote and consultation being prime examples of democratic political rights, there is one right that has remained untouched in the literature and that has only appeared on rare occasions in youth rights campaigns: the right to stand for public office. Running for elections is one of the most vaguely defined democratic political rights, as there is no universal consensus regarding the minimum age required to become a political candidate. Whilst the voting age oscillates between sixteen and twenty-one years old, the age of candidacy may range from eighteen to forty years old, depending on the country and the type of election. Political advocates and scholars focus on lowering the age of candidacy to mirror the voting age. This means, however, that little attention is paid to children’s right to stand for office, as they are younger than the voting age. This constitutes a significant gap in the literature concerning children’s democratic political rights. It excludes a human right put in place to encourage the political representation of all members of the state, which is a legitimising factor of the whole democratic process. Therefore, this article argues in favour of the entitlement of *all* children to run for public office.

In order to develop this analysis, I dedicate the first part of this article to providing a review of the literature, in which I present the varied schools of thought concerning the definition

of children, rights and citizenship. The definition of these terms implies political and legal consequences for the young and, hence, they must be clarified early on. In addition, I outline the underlying debate surrounding this piece of research. Behind the entitlement of children to participatory rights, there are two main views that evolve from David Archard's (1993) analysis of the 1970s 'children's liberation movement' and the opposing 'caretaker thesis'. The 'children's liberation movement' advocates in favour of the emancipation of children from their parents/guardians and argues that children should be allowed to make their own decisions. The 'caretaker thesis' establishes that children must have their decisions made for them as a means to protect their future selves. I use this discussion to put this article into context, while also re-evaluating and challenging the association of competence with age that limits children's engagement in active citizenship. Furthermore, I address the literature surrounding children's participation paying particular attention to Hart's (1992) participation ladder and its impact on society's accommodation of children's voices. The second part of the article focuses exclusively on children's right to stand for public office in the context of representative democracy. I analyse why children are entitled to this right to legitimise this form of democratic system and guarantee that the interests of all are mirrored in the government. In addition, I argue that competence is not enough to exclude such a large percentage of the population from running for elections. I shall address concerns regarding the consequences of holding political power for children if elected, particularly focusing on the risk of child labour. Finally, I describe the work of Youth Parliaments in promoting civic education and political literacy. I argue that despite their educational qualities, these organisations are not sufficient to guarantee the representation of children's interests in governments. Thus, they are not a viable substitute to the right to stand for public office. The last part revolves around deliberative democracy as an alternative to representative conceptions of democracy. I use this system to evaluate how children's political participation could achieve a greater impact when traditional electoral processes are not involved. Therefore, I argue that deliberative efforts to improve the inclusion of all communities in decision-making can offer more benefits to children than the electoral process in representative systems.

### **Children, rights and citizenship**

Determining where children stand in society is necessary to understand the extent to which states owe them democratic political rights. The child's entitlement to democratic political rights refers to a moral entitlement, not a legal one. In Franklin's words, 'a moral or human right is a claim for a right which it is believed children, indeed all human beings, should possess by virtue of their common humanity' (Franklin, 2002, p. 21). Hence, the entitlement I focus on does not depend on any legal arrangements but is a universal moral claim that belongs to all human beings. Thus, it is essential to define childhood and establish the nature of its interactions with citizenship and the rights that come with it. Isolating the notion of childhood from the wider definition of humanity is necessary because, whether socially constructed or not, there are evident differences between children and adults used to justify the current alienation of young people from politics and decision-making. As Allison James

describes, every society has shown signs of a conceptual distinction between child and adult caused by both their physical and psychological differences. Each culture's conception of childhood, however, may entail different legal, political and social consequences and may vary in terms of their citizen membership altogether (James, 2011, p. 169). For the purpose of simplicity, I will focus on the Western perception of children.

Childhood as an idea separate from adulthood may be considered both a phase and a permanent state, two terms that despite appearances do not contradict each other (Qvortrup, 2009, p. 23). On the one hand, the developmental model regards childhood as a stage, a period of time that coincides with the cognitive and physical early development of a human being in which becoming its adult form is the goal (Archard, 1993, p. 36). This process is characterised by major changes that transform the individual from an immature, incompetent being into an individual capable of self-determination and taking care of themselves. The outcome of this stage is the improved version of the child, which we call adult. Thus, Western socialisation and education focuses on guiding the child towards overcoming childhood successfully (Qvortrup, 2009, p. 24). On the other hand, childhood is a permanent social structure of society, even if its members are constantly changing (Qvortrup, 2009, p. 25). People belonging to the childhood "group" are entitled to specific rights that other groups do not possess – for example, education – and are granted special protection by the state. This particular relationship between children and the state is embedded in the law, which makes it at least semi-permanent. Hence, childhood is both a phase in which a human being develops the capabilities that will make them adult and a permanent institution that embraces all individuals undergoing this stage. 'Childhood is there as a social space to receive any child born and to include the child – for better or for worse – throughout his or her childhood period' (Qvortrup, 2009, p. 26). For the purpose of this article, I shall limit the definition of children to any individual aged zero to eighteen years old. Therefore, when I argue for the right to stand for public office of all children, I refer to any individual who fits this age requirement.

This dual distinction between childhood and adulthood, however, does not fully explain why there is a difference in their entitlement to certain rights. In the context of this analysis, I refer to democratic political rights. In order to explain this difference, it is essential to describe how these rights are separated from those that belong to all human beings regardless of their child or adult status. According to David Archard, 'rights may be divided into those that require, if exercised, that their possessors do certain things, and those that require of others that they do things' (Archard, 1993, p. 64). I hence call the first kind participatory or active rights and the second kind passive or protectionist rights. The latter are the rights that must be guaranteed and protected by third parties, mainly the state, and are related to social welfare, security, civil liberty etc. They generally apply to all human beings regardless of their age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion or class. The former kind, however, requires that individuals foster specific capabilities in order to put them into practice. Being able to vote and exercising sexual liberty

are the clearest examples. Hence, democratic political rights are a sub-category of active rights. They are specifically concerned with the individual's participation in the democratic process, whether it is through voting, standing for office or having a voice in policy-making. This article's hypothesis stems from this particular sub-category of rights because it depends on a series of competencies that children have been assumed to not possess. This assumption is based on the belief that there exists some correlation between age and competence (Archard, 1993, p. 58). This is why it has been deemed necessary to establish a boundary where society agrees that this incompetence has been left behind. In most countries, this takes the form of age majority at 18 and it determines the time when individuals are no longer children and can, therefore, exercise their democratic political rights. Following the notion that children must be protected from their own choices until they are old enough, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) represents an international attempt to determine how children's passive rights must be protected around the world by third parties, whether it be carers or the state. These rights include that children will have the right to life, health care, education, will be free from any form of abuse etc., and that third actors will be there to ensure these conditions are met (Franklin, 2002, p. 20). Articles 12 and 13, however, do consider participatory rights in an ambiguous manner. They are both concerned with freedom of expression and establish that all children capable of doing so must be able to express their views (UNCRC, 1989). Nonetheless, there is a certain vagueness in terms of how to determine the capability of each individual child and it is, therefore, unclear in determining of what this freedom consists. Thus, children's political democratic rights remain unpractised both at the national and international levels.

This denial of rights according to competence has a significant effect on children's citizenship status. 'At the formal level, citizenship simply denotes the legal status of membership of a nation-state, as symbolized by the right to a passport. However, at a substantive level it means much more than this legally, politically and socially' (Lister, 2007, p. 9). Citizenship is not only a status, but it can also be considered a practice, which means that being part of a community grants both passive and active rights; citizens will enjoy the protection of their basic rights while they actively engage with their community by exercising their participatory rights (Lister, 2007, p. 9). Children should be entitled to citizenship status by simply belonging to a specific territory, but they have a different relationship with their community to that of adults due to their assumed inability to self-determination. As a result, children's citizenship has embraced two different understandings. On the one hand, T.H. Marshall (1950) argues that children should be regarded as potential members; citizens 'to be' rather than citizens in full right (James, 2011, p. 169; Sanghera, Botterill, Hopkins and Arshad, 2018, p. 543). Despite enjoying some social and civil rights, children cannot fully engage with their community because they are not competent enough to exercise their active rights. Hence, it is believed that since there is a clear distinction between children and adults, this should be reflected in terms of their citizenship. Cockburn, on the other hand, supports a re-evaluation of children's contributions to society and argues that today's children already

participate in many aspects of their life and their own upbringing; they are not as hopeless as we depict them to be. Thus, he defends the view that children should be considered citizens in their own right (Cockburn, 2013).

The clarification of these terms is necessary because the definitions of childhood, democratic political rights and citizenship have political, social and legal implications for all citizens. The existing distinction between child and adult is indeed partly biological since both groups of people are at different stages of their physical and psychological development. It is essential, however, to understand that this differentiation is also socially constructed and that by encapsulating children in a world where they are protected from their own choices, we are not allowing them to show their true potential. In Archard's own words, 'children's incompetence is self-confirming. Presumed unable to do something, children may simply not be allowed to show that in fact they can' (Archard, 1993, p. 68). Therefore, the denial of participatory rights to children must be reassessed, as it relies on outdated assumptions of children's nature.

### **The big debate: should children have the same rights as adults?**

The previous section established that the denial of children's democratic rights is commonly justified because they are considered 'morally incompetent, inexperienced and incapable of making rational decisions' (Kellet, 2009, p. 44). Liberals presume that this incompetence is characterised by their lack of 'rational autonomy' (Archard, 1993, p. 65), which is a combination of rationality, maturity and independence. These three aspects determine whether an individual has experienced the world long enough to make sense of it, is emotionally balanced and can therefore sustain relatively invariable interests and can rely on their own resources to survive (Archard, 1993, pp. 66–67). If an individual fulfils the criteria, they are mentally fit to engage actively in the democratic process. These characteristics, however, are for the most part not innate. Children are expected to develop them over time and, thus, they cannot exercise their political rights until they overcome these competency barriers, which is associated with reaching adulthood. From this key assumption emerges what Archard describes as the 'caretaker thesis' (Archard, 1993, p. 51). This paternalistic approach claims that children must have their decisions made for them as a means to protect them from making mistakes that might harm their present selves and their future adult selves (Kellet, 2009, p. 44). This thesis states that 'self-determination is too important to be left to children' (Archard, 1993, p. 51) and it is justified by the notion that children would most likely make choices they would not make if they were competent individuals. Hence, the caretaker – usually but not exclusively the parents – must make decisions on their behalf by becoming the 'trustee of the child's interests who acts to promote them until such time as the child is able to do it for [themselves]' (Archard, 1993, p. 53). Therefore, the 'caretaker thesis' argues against the child's entitlement to democratic political rights.

In strict opposition to this thesis, the children's liberation movement has existed since the

early 1970s and challenges the idea that children cannot make meaningful rational decisions (Kellet, 2009, p. 44). Considered to be the next step in the emancipation of humanity (Archard, 1993, p. 45), this movement categorises the lack of children's rights as a form of institutionalised oppression perpetuated by the family unit and the education system (Ludbrook, 1996, p. 278). This argument is built on various points from which I highlight the three most relevant ones. First of all, the age barrier that separates children from adults is arbitrary and unjust considering that adults may display the same incompetence all children are assumed to have. Consequently, adults are also at risk of making irreversible mistakes that will not only affect them but also the child on whose behalf they have been making decisions. Secondly, children's inability to self-determination based on inexperience is a self-fulfilling argument. Children are denied action in decision-making scenarios because they lack the experience and, hence, they do not have the opportunity to learn to do so (Franklin, 2002, p. 24). Thirdly, paternalist views seem to equate one's entitlement to a specific right with doing the right thing. Children, like adults, can and will make mistakes but if we do not stop one group of people from doing so, it is unjust to stop another for that same reason (Dworkin, 1977, p. 188).

The main criticism to the child liberationist view is that the arbitrariness of age is only realistic when comparing the competence levels of older children – between fourteen and eighteen – and adults. It is not reasonable, however, to generalise this premise to all children. Although there have been studies showing very young children constantly making decisions in everyday situations (Miller, 1999), it is undeniable that the competence displayed by very young children is significantly lower than that of the average adult. Thus, applying the competence-age argument to all children is an oversimplification. Furthermore, child liberationists tend to exaggerate how independent children can actually be. It is clear that children have the means to maintain themselves to a certain level but at the earliest stages of their development they must rely on their carers to survive. It is an overstatement to claim that this dependency is forced upon them because it can in fact be partially natural (Archard, 1993, p. 67). Hence, this article considers these limitations and argues in favour of the right to run for election by disregarding the competence factor, as will be explained in future sections. Instead, it will follow the liberationist notion that humans' moral entitlement to their rights should not be conditioned by their potential mistakes.

This debate is relevant now more than ever. Political discussions concerning the rights of the child are constantly influenced by public perceptions of children. As Franklin explains in his assessment of the shift in media portrayals of young people in the 1990s, 'adults construct the children they need' (Franklin, 2002, p. 29). This means that the narrative surrounding children is flexible to be able to sustain the inflexible character of their participatory rights. The most significant discourses portray children either as vulnerable, passive and pitiable creatures, or as antisocial, irresponsible beings that require monitoring (Franklin, 2002, p. 30). The end of the 1990s and beginning of the new century, however, witnessed a shift from

the former to the latter. This is dangerous for those advocating for an expansion of children's rights because it implies that policy-makers are focusing on how to limit their rights even further. This narrative, however, now clashes with an increasing self-awareness that children seem to be developing all over the globe. This phenomenon is described by Hartung in *Conditional citizens: rethinking children and young people's participation* (2017), as one caused by globalisation, individualisation and democratisation. From these three aspects, I emphasise the importance of individualisation because it stresses the notion of self-awareness. Due to a generalised detachment from tradition and religious faith and norms, young people have started to question well-established institutions and ideologies, becoming responsible for their own actions as a consequence (Hartung, 2017, p. 7). Instead of accommodating these new concerns into the debate, however, policy-makers seem to be willing to dismiss them in favour of traditional perceptions of children combined with this new vilifying discourse. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to challenge the common justifications surrounding the limitations of children's democratic political rights, particularly the right to stand for office.

### Children's participation

Having described the current dichotomy regarding children's participatory rights, discussing children's participation – or lack thereof – in more detail is essential to appreciate the depth of their alienation from any form of self-determining decision-making. Given that we want to make children participants in their own lives, it is worth exploring the literature surrounding children's participation specifically because it shows the importance of generating a discussion for adults to learn how to enable children's participation. The literature that emerged as a result of the child liberationist movement was concerned with establishing a correct way for children to participate in their communities in an unofficial way. It was soon realised, however, that there is no unique way of promoting children's participation. Rather, the literature simply sheds light on the problem and suggests different ways to approach it. This discussion regarding children's informal involvement is relevant because it can be extended to children's political participation; it can help us develop settings where children can exercise their democratic political rights in harmony with adults. For instance, children's right to run for public office requires that adults reconsider the way they promote children's participation and question how prepared they are to welcome children's ideas.

The most important paper on children's participation is Roger Hart's (1992) *Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship*, where he uses Sherry Arnstein's (1979) ladder metaphor to describe eight different levels in which a child can participate (Bartos, 2016, p. 117). Hart regards participation as the opportunity to have a say in the decisions that directly affect our lives, and divides the ways in which children are denied or granted participation in two categories. The first category is non-participation, which includes manipulation, decoration and tokenism as the first three steps of the ladder. This is particularly useful because it has helped practitioners recognise these false types of participation and work to

eliminate them (Shier, 2001, p. 110). The second category represents the different degrees of actual participation, where each subsequent level entails greater participation. Child-initiated shared decisions with adults is the greatest form of involvement (Hart, 1992). His approach, however, was meant to spark a much-needed conversation about children's participation rather than provide step-by-step guidelines on how to make children participate. Hart's ladder 'is largely limited to describing the varying roles adults play in relation to children's participation' (Hart, 2008, p. 20) and it does not cover many of the ways in which children can get involved. Thus, Hart's example is simply meant to emphasise the fact that there is no established approach regarding children's participation. Consequently, the purpose of this literature is to serve as an indicator to evaluate the progress of children's participation (Lansdown, 2010, p. 20) and to set a theoretical framework through which adults can start to question and address the way they interact with children.

Harry Shier (2001) proposed an alternative interpretation of Hart's participation ladder by eliminating the non-participation category. His model creates five different levels of participation, instead of eight. Each level poses three different questions, such as 'Are you ready to take children's views into account?' to help the reader determine where they stand and offer them guidance regarding how to improve (Shier, 2001, p. 110). Similarly, the highest level of participation is 'Children share power and responsibility in decision-making'. This model is significantly more centred in creating a clear pathway towards participation than Hart's ever was. Shier himself, however, clarifies that this model should only be used as the first step in developing an action plan to enhance children's participation (Shier, 2001, p. 116). Hart and Shier's models of child participation exemplify the existing diversity of approaches to promote children's involvement in their own lives and offer us a means to measure, analyse and improve the way we currently protect children (Lansdown, 2010, p. 20). Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that the research surrounding children's participation is still fairly limited and hypothetical. In terms of democratic political rights, these limitations are even more noticeable since voting and consultation are the only two forms of participation that have been explored in depth. Therefore, children's right to stand for public office, being the main focus of this article, is relevant because it presents a new approach to children's participation in the political sphere. It offers them a way to take control of their own existence and represent their interests and that of their peers in official political processes. An additional rung to the theoretical ladder is added.

### **Children standing for office**

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is concerned with the need to secure a functioning democracy to guarantee the protection of human rights in all states. The way to do so is through fair and free elections, which means that the vote must be secret and free of coercion and everyone must be able to run freely. Article 21 states that 'everyone has the right to take part in the government of [their] country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in

[their] country' (UDHR, 1948). Thus, the UDHR suggests that standing for public office is a human right in the context of representative democracies. Before I discuss why this should include children, I want to focus first on how this right is currently applied around the world. If we accepted that due to its participatory nature this right should be reserved to adults, it would be reasonable to assume that the minimum age of candidacy would be equal to the voting age. This, however, is not the case in many countries across the globe, Western and otherwise. The law surrounding political candidates is far from homogeneous and it may even differ within one state depending on the type of election. In Europe alone, most countries allow eighteen-year-old candidates to run for national elections, but there is still a group of countries that reserve this right for twenty-one-year-olds – Poland, Estonia and Ireland being prime examples – and sometimes twenty-five-year-olds or more – Italy, Lithuania, Cyprus etc. (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017). In the United States, the minimum age requirement varies depending on which office one is running for. The President and Vice President must be at least thirty-five years old when assuming office, a Senator must be thirty years of age and anyone running for the House of Representatives has to be twenty-five years old (Bomboy, 2016). Even countries that do accept eighteen-year-olds as candidates have intrinsic barriers to youth participation. Their perceived inexperience, lack of recognition to get public attention and lack of financial resources to sustain a political campaign are the main factors which deter young people from running for office (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018, p. 21). Children's alienation from political life is justified on a similar basis, paying particular attention to the incompetence factor. Both children and young adults are considered to be inexperienced, unknowledgeable and too immature to be in a position of such responsibility. Campaigners all over the world, however, are only advocating for the inclusion of young adults in national parliaments. Thus, as an extension of their efforts, it is plausible to argue that the debate surrounding the need to lower the age of candidacy can and should include children.

In the following sections, I argue in favour of children's entitlement to the right to stand for public office on three different accounts. Firstly, children must be able to run for election to at least have the possibility of seeing their interests directly reflected in their government. Representation is essential to legitimise liberal democracies and so, children need to have a seat at the parliamentary table. Secondly, competence by itself ought not to justify an individual's political status. Adults can behave as incompetently as some children are depicted to do, and excluding a group of people on this basis and not the other must be viewed as unjust. Furthermore, having the right to run for election does not entail winning the elections. The electoral process is built as a filter for incompetence and the voters are trusted to identify the people who are most qualified to represent them. Thirdly, despite not arguing in favour of children winning the elections but just having the possibility to run, I describe the conditions necessary to make the parliamentary environment child-friendly and accessible. Finally, I consider the existing Youth Parliaments and argue that despite the very valuable educational approach, they are not enough to neglect children's right to stand for public office.

## Children as a minority and political representation

Traditional liberal democracies understand representation as the presence of different ideas in a government. Hence, political exclusion in elections will result in lack of diversity and over-representation of some views and under-representation of others (Phillips, 1998, p. 1). This politics of ideas leaves little room for concerns regarding *who* is getting elected. Hanna Pitkin (1967) has described this phenomenon as descriptive representation, ‘where the representative stands for a group by virtue of sharing similar characteristics such as race, sex, ethnicity, or residence’ (Childs and Lovenduski, 2013, p. 490). This type of representation has been heavily overlooked in conventional liberal perspectives because an over-emphasis on the individual components of a government is considered to divert attention from what the government is actually doing. More radical attitudes, however, have identified descriptive representation as essential in legitimising democracy to the point where it has become central to minority and women’s groups advocating to gain presence in the political sphere. Hierarchies and discrimination exist in all societies and, despite it being a human right, access to public office has been repeatedly denied to members of disadvantaged groups – whether they are ethnic minorities or people of colour, women, working class etc. This makes legislatures highly homogeneous since they are largely composed by rich white cisgender men. Before, this kind of social exclusion was regarded as only a matter of expanding the franchise (Goodin, 2003, p. 194). Nonetheless, people from disadvantaged groups cannot expect representatives that occupy privileged positions in society to understand their needs, interests and experiences because they have never faced discrimination based on their identity (Hayward, 2009, p. 113). Thus, granting them the vote is not enough. A democratic system that does not include the interests of all cannot be legitimate. It must make an effort to include explicitly the voices of those who have been excluded from politics for a long time.

Given this premise, do children count as a disadvantaged group that deserves representation? In 1976, *The New York Times* named children ‘the last minority’ in the human rights movement (Margolin, 1978, p. 441). Children constitute a large percentage of the world population, but as a group they remain uniquely uninfluential because they are perceived as vulnerable and powerless individuals. In Joan Lestor’s words, ‘children are the largest minority in Britain’s democracy without a political voice of their own. They do not have the vote, but they constitute almost one quarter of the total population... Because they do not organise or lobby decision-makers, however, they are all too often the statistically unrecognised victims of bad policies’ (Lestor, 1995, p. 102). Indeed, children spend at least eighteen years of their lives being widely affected by government policies without being able to influence them formally. Furthermore, Western countries consider that because they are able to feed, clothe and educate their children, they are entitled to overlook their participatory rights. Nonetheless, children are still regarded for the most part as their parents’ property and ‘any efforts to promote the cause of children’s rights are often interpreted as undermining traditional “family values”’ (Lestor, 1995, p. 100). This mentality may sound familiar, as it has also been used to justify the political exclusion of women (Lister, 2007, p. 6; Anderson, 1992, p. 164). Women were once,

and still are in many places, considered incompetent, irrational and immature, which was used to justify their alienation from politics. Ever since, it has been proven that the association of these qualities with gender is completely arbitrary and so women have technically been emancipated. The question regarding children's competence will be discussed in detail in the next section because the basis for such an assumption goes beyond mere arbitrariness. If we assumed, however, that children are indeed incompetent, which is the main reason that keeps them separated from the adult world, their political exclusion would imply that it is justified to let mental and physical capacities determine one's political status. Letting this factor determine which adults get to participate in politics would be unthinkable because it violates the principle of equality upon which most liberal democracies are built (Fowler, 2014, p. 98). This principle of equality establishes that all citizens are entitled to the same rights by the nature of their status and, thus, cannot be denied those rights on the basis that they are somewhat different to other citizens. As Dworkin puts it, 'the community confirms an individual person's membership, as a free and equal citizen, by according him or her a role in the collective decision. In contrast, it identifies an individual who is excluded from the political process as someone not fully respected or not fully a member' (Dworkin, 1988, p. 4). Therefore, alienating children from the democratic process because of their perceived incompetence is discriminatory as it violates the same principle of equality. This means that children are in fact a disadvantaged group. In being so, their experiences and interests are not appropriately reflected in the composition of governments because they do not have the option of being a part of them. Hence, children should be entitled to run for election because they are necessary agents in legitimising our democratic systems.

It is essential, however, to not undermine the uniqueness of the children's case because it is the only disadvantaged group that, given the time, all members are able to leave behind. Hence, it is important to explain why adults, who have all been children in the past, are still not fit to represent the latter's interests. Firstly, Liebel outlines that interests are 'the expression of a particular life situation and life experience' (Liebel, 2018, p. 598). Thus, as the historical context changes, experiences and therefore interests change as well. For example, the children from twenty years ago did not have to worry about the immediate consequences of climate change in their lives and, thus, it was not necessarily in their best interest to do something about it. Hence, having been part of the same social structure does not mean that adults can properly represent the interests of children as they are today. Secondly, when shifting from a disadvantaged position to a privileged one, it is easy to forget what being a child felt like, especially when adopting the point of view of the carer rather than the cared. Similarly, people suddenly earning enough money to move from one social class to another tend to forget some of the difficulties associated with living under poorer conditions. The same way we would not expect a wealthy person with a humble past to represent the working classes, we cannot expect adults to represent the interests of children accurately. Thirdly, it could be argued that children are volatile creatures and that their prime motivation is the instant gratification of their needs. Hence, they are not aware of the importance of their long-

term interests, both as children and future adults, and would not be able to represent other children appropriately as a consequence. It is hard to describe what the general interests of all children are because it is a heavily heterogeneous group, which means that representing them would not only be a challenge for children, but it already *is* for adults. Children from different backgrounds, genders, races etc. face different situations where their multiple identities intersect and, thus, distinctly different interests arise from their contrasting experiences. For the sake of simplicity, however, let us assume that some interests are common to all children. These interests reflect both their experiences and concerns as children – education and family – and as future adults – pensions, climate change etc. (Cook, 2013, p. 440). The existence of these interests is undisputed, but traditional approaches consider that children lack the self-awareness and autonomy necessary to fight for them. Therefore, adults are expected to preserve them on their behalf. The fact that children have interests at all, however, requires them to be ‘self-acting’ individuals to some extent because it is their experiences and needs that generate them in the first place. Children’s ‘feelings, thoughts and actions are guided, or at least stimulated and influenced by their interests’ (Liebel, 2018, p. 598); children themselves are more likely to understand these motivations better than any adult. Thus, ‘children’s interests [...] refer to a range of commitments, desires and experiences that are better defined by children themselves’ (Wyness, 2009, p. 540).

We see children fighting for these interests on behalf of other children informally all the time. Children’s increasing involvement in activism demonstrates a deep understanding of the current deficiencies of the system in protecting their fundamental rights. As Harvey Day (2019) explains in his article for the *BBC*, ‘a new generation of young activists has proved that many teenagers are, in fact, deeply concerned with social, political and environmental issues – and they’re fully prepared to do something about them’. Emma Gonzalez was just eighteen when she co-founded the gun-control advocacy group Never Again MSD (Day, 2019). She was also at the forefront of March for Our Lives, a student-led movement that seeks to end gun violence in the United States (Holpuch and Owen, 2018). Greta Thunberg was fifteen when she staged her first protest to raise awareness about climate change. Since then, she has inspired over a million students to strike and demand political action in their home countries (Day, 2019). Malala Yousafzai started writing about girls’ right to education in Pakistan when she was eleven (Yousafzai, 2013, p. 154) and was the youngest person to ever win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 (Day, 2019). The undeniable presence of children in activism and advocacy projects shows both a clear concern for the preservation of their present lives and an understanding of the consequences of today’s politics for their future selves (Walker, 2017, p. 22). Furthermore, children already represent other children’s interests in schools as class or student council representatives. Pupil participation has proven to improve the learning experience significantly because not only are children’s voices heard, but also they are the ones directly participating in decision-making. Their understanding of their own needs is more profound than that which any adult mediator could achieve, which leads to more effective policy-making (Welsh Government, 2011, p. 9). This evidence shows that it

is not the case that children are not in touch with their best interests. They are constantly involved in unofficial political endeavours promoting their interests and the interests of their peers. Therefore, if children can fight for less controversial interests, ‘such as a right to safe spaces where they can socialise and congregate, to care and well-being, and to a healthy environment’, they can also claim ‘more controversial rights’ (e.g. political rights to vote or to run for public office) (Sanghera, Botterill, Hopkins and Arshad, 2018, p. 545).

Finally, it could also be argued that children are considered to lack critical thinking skills and, thus, could be easily manipulated into promoting the interests of others rather than their own. The problem of manipulation is complicated, as there are few studies that clarify whether children are in fact easily manipulated or not in a political context. Clemente and Padilla-Racero’s research on manipulation in disputes over child custody, however, establishes that when children become witnesses in a judicial procedure regarding their parents, they tend to stay true to their beliefs and experiences rather than rely on what someone else says is the truth (Clemente and Padilla-Racero, 2015, p. 106). Hence, they recommend always assuming that children are telling the truth. Considering parents are the most influential figures in a child’s life, it is plausible to argue that if parents cannot manipulate their children into lying for them it is unlikely that other adult figures can. In addition, manipulation seems to be of little importance because representative democracies traditionally rely on a party system. Political parties are democratic entities that select the candidates they want to present in elections following multiple criteria. Despite there being different levels of exclusiveness in terms of who can run for office with a specific party, most parties require a pledge of loyalty, which means that the candidates’ values and ideas must align with the party’s ideology (Hazan and Rahat, 2010, p. 20). Each party has a different view on children’s rights, and potential child candidates will want to run for election with the party that best mirrors their own perception of children’s interests. Therefore, if they were to run or even win the elections and become political representatives, they would work under the umbrella of their party, where everyone aligns with a particular ideology. Similarly, parties would not be interested in recruiting someone who did not already share the same ideology. As a consequence, manipulation seems rather unlikely.

Thus, since representation matters in order to legitimise liberal democracies, it is important to not neglect a large portion of the population because of their age. Children as a minority group, in all its heterogeneity, are constantly alienated from important decision-making, which means that their interests are not reflected in the composition of governments. Since their lives are directly affected by policies that condition their experiences as children and as future adults, it only makes sense that they would be morally entitled to run for election freely. Concerns, however, may arise regarding the competency levels of children aspiring to gain political power and represent not only other children but the rest of the population. Therefore, in the following section I present two arguments that challenge this claim of child incompetence.

## The competence bias in democracy

As explained previously, incompetence is what liberals describe as lack of ‘rational autonomy’ (Archard, 1993, p. 65), which is composed of rationality, maturity and independence. Incompetence has traditionally been linked to young age (Cowden, 2012, p. 365), as if it were an ‘all or nothing’ characteristic, when in fact it develops gradually and at different paces depending on the subject area (Grude Flekkøy and Hevener Kaufman, 1997, p. 68). It has been used to justify the paternalist model that currently “protects” children from making the wrong decisions. As a result, children are stripped from their agency, as they are not allowed to contribute to their social environment. Furthermore, it assumes that child development is universal, which means that all children become competent at the same time (Lansdown, 2005, p. xi). Competence is a relevant factor in participatory rights since it is perceived that, in order to engage in the democratic process, one must have some minimum level of mental capabilities (Anderson, 1992, p. 164) because the decisions of one have consequences on the lives of others. In Le Borgne and Tisdall’s words, ‘the individual assignation of incompetence to children reduces children’s opportunities to participate, putting them in a less powerful position than those adults assumed to be competent. The “competence bias” is thus associated with intergenerational hierarchies of power’ (Le Borgne and Tisdall, 2017, p. 123). Therefore, since children are all labelled incapable, they have been denied these rights as a group rather than individually. In standing for office, competence becomes even more significant. In some countries, children are not the only ones excluded, but young adults up to forty years old cannot run for office on the same basis. As stated previously, however, competence alone cannot be enough to designate political status. Hence, instead of arguing that all children are in fact perfectly capable to run for election, I argue that denying children such right because of incompetence is morally wrong.

First of all, I establish that children are more competent than we give them credit for, even when they are very young. For instance, preschool children can appreciate causality, consider other people’s point of view and understand symbolism (Archard, 1993, p. 66). Our tendency to ignore this is fuelled by an unrealistic standard of competence (Anderson, 1992, p. 165) that puts a lot of emphasis on maturity that can only come with age, rather than the social intelligence that very young people can already display. The choice of this kind of rationality over other forms of intelligence seems rather arbitrary, as emotional intelligence and empathy could be just as important as rationality in ruling a country. Hence, children are excluded according to this standard, but they would not necessarily be if such a standard was based on other criteria. Furthermore, the narrative of incompetence and vulnerability that surrounds children creates a world different to that of adults where they are not exposed to real choices and, thus, they do not have the opportunity to learn how to manage adulthood before they reach it. This makes children’s incompetence a self-fulfilling prophecy (Archard, 1993, p. 68). If society gave children a chance to interact in adult contexts, they would develop their capacities faster and more easily. Ann Solberg’s research on hundreds of twelve-year-olds shows that when children are treated with respect, and responsibility is expected of them,

they are able to fulfil expectations and cope with the increasing level of responsibility well. When they are sheltered and regarded as immature, however, they respond with increased dependency and rebellion (Anderson, 1992, p. 175). Therefore, giving children the chance to learn by doing would further challenge the notion that children are more incompetent than adults. This is not to say that I do not recognise that the average two-year-old may indeed be less competent than the average adult. The right to stand for election does not entail a duty to do so and so said two-year-old, likely lacking the capacity to conceive of elections and political institutions, would be unlikely to exercise this right. Nevertheless, I deem it important to clarify that our perceptions of child capacities are not accurate and, therefore, should not be used to justify their political exclusion.

Secondly, the fact that some children are not as competent as the average adult does not mean that all adults are competent. In fact, quite a few adults do not reach the ‘standard of competence’ that is deemed appropriate to hold public office (Archard, 1993, p. 66). Adults are very capable of making mistakes that can have an impact beyond their own lives, especially when they are carers. This is particularly relevant when addressing the right to stand for office because society assumes that this right requires an even higher standard (Ludbrook, 1996, p. 292). People ruling – or attempting to rule – a state are expected to possess relevant skills that qualify them for office. Hence, this participatory right is denied to children and, in some instances, young adults because they have not had the time to develop such skills. The controversial aspect of this assumption, however, is that anyone above the minimum age requirement will be able to run for election regardless of their qualifications because it is a human right. This is problematic because many political candidates that run for election clearly lack such skills. For example, the unorthodox Lord Buckethead in the United Kingdom has stood for public office on multiple occasions as the satirical ‘not entirely stable’ leader of the Gremloids party (Malkin, 2017). This and other satirical parties exist all over the world but have no real intention of ever representing the country’s needs. Furthermore, on a less satirical note, the level of specific knowledge required to be the Minister of a particular government department in the UK is often not matched by the expertise or academic background of the MPs in these positions (Bego, Pilkington and Goujon, 2017). This means that even when they are elected, political candidates do not need to be experts on the subject they intend to hold power over. These two examples show that society considers incompetence to be relevant only with respect to age, which challenges the fairness regarding the exclusion of children. Thus, children’s denial of the right to stand for public office based on incompetence is unjust.

Finally, since the ruling of a country seems to be too important to leave to incompetent people, including children, it would seem necessary to establish a competency test in order to identify the people that should have the right to stand for public office. The validity of this kind of test, however, has been questioned multiple times in the literature, particularly regarding the minimum voting age. Firstly, this kind of test supposes a high risk of corruption and abuse of power. For example, in the past, similar tests have been used to perpetuate racial segregation

in the United States and to reduce enfranchisement accordingly. Where the stakes are as high as having the possibility to run for national elections, governments in charge of such tests have the incentive to reduce political competition (Archard, 1993, p. 64; Cook, 2013, p. 442). Secondly, competence is not a permanent trait and can disappear over time. Thus, competency tests should be taken at multiple stages in life, which would be unsustainable in terms of expenses and management. In addition, they would be endlessly controversial as the standard of competence is culturally nuanced, and it could induce discrimination due to false correlation between ethnicity, gender, class etc. and IQ (Archard, 1993, pp. 63–64). Thirdly, failing the test would entail a denial of citizenship rights to people who already had them, which could significantly harm their self-esteem and affect their social status (Cook, 2013, p. 442). These are a few of the reasons why a competency test would be problematic to determine who can be a political candidate. There is one aspect unique to this particular right, however, that does not apply to the right to vote. The electoral process in itself is a competency test. As Cook describes in his analysis against the minimum voting age, ‘democratic authority is constituted by consent and not expertise’ (Cook, 2013, p. 443). In representative democratic systems, the people choose who they want to represent them. Although adult citizens have the option of running for office, there is a dual electoral system that is expected to filter the most competent candidates. This dual process is constituted by the party selection of the candidates and the elections themselves. As mentioned in the previous section, some parties are sovereign in their selection of candidates and use a series of criteria to decide who has better chances to win the elections (Hazan and Rahat, 2010, p. 20). This does not violate the right to stand for office because those still wishing to run can create their own political parties or choose another party. The party selection process, however, is a first screening in attempting to guarantee that those getting to the election are skilled. In addition, during elections, the voters are entrusted with the ability to choose who they believe is most fit for the job. Despite this not being a perfect system, it does provide a mechanism to separate competence from incompetence (Ludbrook, 1996, p. 292). As a result, children should not be denied the right to stand for office due to their lack of knowledge and experience because the electoral system ensures that they will not have access to power if they are not deemed prepared enough for the role.

Therefore, competence is a controversial factor used to exclude all children from running for office as it disregards the heterogeneous capacity levels that children possess, and it assumes that adulthood and competence are correlated. Since it cannot be proven that all children are incapable of running for office and that all adults are, it is unjust to exclude an entire group of people but not the other. Furthermore, finding alternative methods to determine political status would also be problematic, as competency tests are not free of corruption and involve major management and budgetary challenges. Consequently, we can only rely on the electoral process to filter the qualified candidates from a pool of people that should in fact include children. Therefore, it is unjust and rather arbitrary to use competence as a requirement to have the right to stand for public office because it does not exclude *everyone* based on

incompetence. Instead, it is only a selected group of people whose discourse characterises them as incompetent that gets left out. Hence, since competence is no longer enough to justify the denial of this right, children should have the right to run for public office.

### Children being elected

So far, this article has focused on defending children's entitlement to run for public office. It is not, however, advocating that all children exercise this right. The electoral process is expensive, stressful and invasive and it could be a lot for a child to face. Furthermore, if a child were to become an elected representative, the political environment could be too much for an individual who is still somewhat dependent on other people to survive. 'Elected representatives become public figures and are exposed to the cut and thrust of party politics and the critical interest of the media. It might be argued that even though under 18s should be able to vote they should not be exposed to the destructive aspects of politics' (Ludbrook, 1996, p. 292). Thus, I am not advocating for children quotas but rather I am arguing that there is no reason why children should not have the *option* to run for election. Having a right does not mean being obliged to exercise it, thus children who do not feel prepared for such a responsibility should not run even if they have the right to do so. Nonetheless, it would be unrealistic to expect no children to run for public office and, given that this right is in place for long enough, one would eventually get elected. Hence, in this section I explore the conditions necessary to guarantee a safe and accessible environment for child representatives. This section is of particular importance because for a right to be a moral entitlement, the consequences of exercising it should be moral too.

Being an elected representative is a full-time job, which means that it requires a significant time commitment and it entails income benefits. If children had the possibility to run for election and win, this would be a controversial issue because this activity could be considered child labour. The UNCRC establishes that children must be protected from economic exploitation and, thus, this often translates to protecting children from having to work (Liebel, 2013, p. 225). Children working, however, can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, we can indeed condemn children's work if it takes the form of child labour. The key aspects of this concept are that it replaces what should be children's main priority, education, and that the child is not being duly compensated for their labour. Child labour is considered to deprive 'children of their childhood and also negatively impacts on their welfare, their development and their dignity' (Okyere, 2012, p. 80). On the other hand, child employment is legal and permissible insofar as it is submitted to children's right to education and play. Employing children can be seen as a beneficial initiative since it can teach valuable lessons about responsibility and accountability (Heesterman, 2005, p. 79). Child work takes many forms and it does not always have to be paid – e.g. helping at the family farm – but it is not usually a full-time endeavour. Hence, being an elected representative does clash with this premise. In order to overcome this obstacle, I reflect on the law surrounding child performers. I apply it to my case to prove that children could be able to participate in governments if elected,

granted that we made it accessible for them. I have chosen child stars as an example because theirs is a job of extreme public attention and significant pressure, which is comparable to the circumstances elected representatives face.

Labour laws surrounding child performers tend to be strict in many countries because they recognise that the entertainment industry can be very demanding for young people. In order to ensure that this kind of child employment does not fall into the child labour category, these laws are put in place to guarantee that the child is free from any form of exploitation. This means that the child's interests and needs must be considered and that their decision to work must be free of coercion. Furthermore, their right to work cannot overshadow their other rights, particularly education. This is reflected in UK law, for example, which restricts filming hours to ensure that children can study three to four hours a day and forbids children from working late in the night unless special permission is granted to the filmmakers. The consequences of these measures do in fact slow down the production, but they exemplify the necessary working conditions that are unique to the children's case (Galloway, 2006, p. 43). Another example is the United States, where in 1999 the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) successfully managed to protect children's earnings making them separate property, rather than their parents' (Armbrust, 2005). This guarantees that children are not being exploited by their carers or the businesses hiring them. The problems that would arise from children accessing job positions in parliament could be regarded as similar since lack of education and exploitation are the main concerns. I argue that since compromises have been made in the entertainment industry to include children in the production process, similar arrangements could be considered should children win an election. Their job would have to be adapted to meet their educational needs and have their monetary benefits protected. This way, elected children would have the chance to represent children's interests in a position of political power without giving up their identity as children. Moreover, states would comply with Article 3 of the UNCRC that establishes that 'in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration' (UNCRC, 1989).

The world of politics, however, does present additional limitations beyond the problem of child labour that need to be addressed. Holding public office is a job that has always been reserved exclusively for adults. Hence, it could be a cultural shock to introduce children suddenly into the work environment. UNICEF's *Handbook on child participation in parliament* presents several initiatives to improve parliamentary consultation of children, which could be applied to the case of children actually accessing parliamentary roles. The two most relevant aspects to contemplate are respect and support training. 'Children's views have to be treated with respect, and children should be provided with opportunities to initiate ideas and activities' (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011, p. 18). This means that children's input and proposals must be considered by the rest of the elected representatives as relevant and with the same respect

as any other proposal. Furthermore, support training is essential on two accounts. On the one hand, it is necessary to introduce children to the political jargon, etiquette, processes etc. On the other hand, adults must learn how to communicate in a child-friendly way and how to encourage children's participation. 'Children themselves can be involved as trainers and facilitators on how to promote effective participation; they require capacity-building to strengthen their skills in, for example, effective participation, organizing meetings, raising funds, dealing with the media, public speaking and advocacy' (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011, p. 19). These are only a few suggestions that could be implemented to facilitate a transition towards more child-friendly governments, which I deemed necessary given the possibility that a child could become elected if they had the right to run for election. Therefore, these issues of practicality have been explored in order to guarantee that the consequences of exercising the right to stand for public office are not detrimental to the development of the child. They work to guarantee that the realisation of the moral right children possess to run for office does not result in immoral practical application.

### **Youth Parliaments and why they are not enough**

Currently, one of the most relevant forms of children's political participation takes the form of Youth Parliaments (YPs). They are good examples of children's relevance and competence in formal politics because they offer them the opportunity to participate in institutions that mimic the procedures of adult parliaments without the harms of real political life. This participatory mechanism, however, could be perceived as a viable alternative to the right to stand for public office when in fact it is not enough to guarantee the accurate representation of children's interests in real parliaments. Thus, I address the role of YPs in promoting political literacy and how their existence should be complementary to children's right to run for election rather than a substitute. YPs do already exist in at least thirty countries – India, Norway, Slovenia, Brazil, Congo, Scotland, to name but a few (Wall, 2011, p. 88) – and they are set in place to promote children's participatory rights and introduce them to the democratic process without being officially part of it. This initiative successfully complies with Article 12 of the UNCRC, which explicitly establishes children's right to express their views (Matthews and Limb, 1998, p. 66). Furthermore, YPs are important because of the current disengagement and disinterest in formal politics in young adults, which has contributed to a reduction in voter turnout. 'This phenomenon appears to be more intense for certain subgroups among the young, such as the unemployed. At the same time, it is feared that young people may be more likely to resort to violence when expressing their grievances, as suggested by the average age of those involved in the English riots of 2011' (Shephard and Patrikios, 2014, p. 237). This concern has encouraged national parliaments around the world to prioritise civic education in children to facilitate the "creation" of model citizens rather than merely granting them the vote. Hence, the rationale behind YPs is that involving children in a simulation of parliamentary life will help develop their political interest, while granting them the chance to influence policy and have their voices heard (Shephard and Patrikios, 2013, p. 754). Thus, in order to analyse how YPs are not enough to promote children's interests and voice, I shall

address YP's contributions to political literacy and policy influence separately.

The biggest success of YPs is their role in political education. Child parliamentarians are set in a learning environment where they are constantly encouraged to take on new skills and learn from experts and actual politicians. They familiarise themselves with the institutional procedures and have access to workshops where they develop the key qualities any politician is expected to have – e.g. leadership, communication, diplomacy and research skills (Shephard and Patrikios, 2013, p. 761). This training allows them to organise and deliver meetings where the agenda is discussed, and recommendations and bills are drafted. Furthermore, they engage in other extracurricular activities, such as managing the public aspect of political involvement. They engage in public discussions on social media and simulate press conferences and debates (Shephard and Patrikios, 2013, p. 764). These activities and training sessions facilitate a positive interaction between children and the system, contributing to an increase in their political interest and literacy (Shephard and Patrikios, 2014, p. 250). This initiative, however, also enables children to evaluate the system critically rather than just making them adopt adult values. They are encouraged to discuss in a civilised environment and to identify how current democratic practices fail to reflect their interests (Wall, 2011, p. 96). Therefore, YPs not only satisfy the national governments' need for model citizens but they also promote critical thinking rather than just shaping children into adult form. Hence, I argue that this aspect of YP is essential to awaken children's political interest and to give them a taste of what being an elected representative would look like. If we granted them the right to run for election, YPs would give them a notion of how prepared they are to face its hardships. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to guarantee children's political participation and representation.

The main challenge YPs face is the level of impact they have. As stated previously, YPs are meant to be more than just educational. They are safe spaces for children to participate and have their voices heard not only by their peers, but also by policy-makers. This means that children's political participation would be rendered obsolete if it was confined to the limits of a simulation. Thus, the only way they can have direct impact in real-life politics is if they have some degree of policy influence. In practice, the problem with influencing policy resides on the fact that most YPs' bills are sent to MPs as recommendations and, as a consequence, they are seldom implemented (Shephard and Patrikios, 2013, p. 765). Particularly in Western countries, the real situations in which children do actually exercise their democratic political rights is very limited (Wall, 2011, p. 88). Even when adults do listen to their ideas seriously, they tend to favour the proposals of select groups, usually older children or children who appear to be more experienced, which tends to coincide with the wealthier groups (Turkie, 2010, p. 262). Hence, YPs fail to convey children's voices to national governments and their interests are misrepresented, as only few children from specific, usually privileged, backgrounds are being paid attention to. This does not mean that YPs should be eliminated on behalf of granting children the right to stand for public office. The educational value of

these organisations is commendable and ought to be encouraged to raise children's political awareness. They could be part of the infrastructure needed to integrate children into the political process better, if their right to stand for elections was realised. YPs are necessary accessories in shaping not only the leaders of tomorrow but also the leaders of today. They cannot, however, be a substitute for children joining adult parliaments. Equality and political representation cannot come for children if they are kept in a separate parliamentary system, as it was never the case for any other disadvantaged group. 'This is because a separate process of representation tends toward tokenism, placing an inherent distance between representation and real power' (Wall, 2011, p. 96). Therefore, the role of YPs in supporting children's introduction to political literacy should continue to be promoted. Their existence, however, should be complementary to children's right to run for election rather than a substitute.

### **Children's space in deliberative democracy**

This article has so far defended children's right to stand for public office in the context of representative democracies. I have argued that this right is necessary to represent children's interests accurately in policy-making. Furthermore, children being allowed to run for election is essential to representative democracies because the democratic process cannot be legitimate unless it represents the interests of all citizens. It is important to notice, however, that this right is intrinsically linked to representation, and that children's political inclusion could take different forms in other kinds of democratic systems. Hence, this last section explores deliberation as an alternative to representative democracy. My intention is to analyse how children could be better included in a deliberative system. On the one hand, I consider the macro-level, where the right to run for election is not necessary. On the other hand, I focus on micro-forms of deliberation where representation is necessary, and how children's involvement in deliberative selection processes would be a valuable substitute to children's right to stand for public office.

Deliberative democracy is a model developed from the notion that liberal democracies as they are today do not generate social equality. Research on civic participation shows that wealthier, more educated people tend to have easier access to governments and policy-making, while people at the margins lose interest and become politically disengaged. Thus, representative democracies tend to favour particular groups of people in decision-making while excluding those who do not make the cut from the democratic process (Chappell, 2012, pp. 5–6; Cohen, 2009, p. 248). Democratic deliberation is, therefore, a way to combat inequality by promoting the inclusion of all citizens and their political literacy. Furthermore, deliberative democrats regard electoral systems – and representative democracies by default – as unnecessarily competitive. Choosing one specific ideology or political programme to rule a country implies discarding many other proposals that could have valuable aspects worthy of consideration. Hence, elections are counterproductive in themselves. Consequently, societies would benefit more from 'reasoned discussion and a search for agreement' (Chappell, 2012, p. 3) than from such crippling competition. Thus, from their analysis of the inherent flaws of

the representative system, deliberative democrats advocate for an alternative system of ‘un-coerced, other-regarding, reasoned, inclusive and equal debate’ (Chappell, 2012, p. 7). This means that deliberative democracy puts reasoning at the centre of all decisions and submits the exercise of power to deliberation. In order to do so, all discussions require a common notion of the greater good and the protection of the citizens’ personal liberties. These two requirements are necessary because people must be able to develop their arguments freely, and to set their personal preferences aside in order to decide what to do (Cohen, 2009, p. 251). Hence, the collective acquires new importance as deliberative democracy aims at including every citizen who is affected by policy. Decisions are meant to be reached after considering all relevant arguments. As a result, the discussion cannot take the form of a back-and-forth debate but rather it must be an open communication between citizens where the views of all groups are taken into account (Chappell, 2012, p. 9).

The practicality of such an approach can be challenging since most research is normative, and little is said about how it could be applied to the real world (Hardin, 2009, p. 235). Its basis, however, is still worth considering because it proposes an alternative and healthier way of communicating with each other and making collective decisions. Since it is void of competition, it goes beyond the mere electoral rhetoric and the constant fight between political candidates. Instead, it offers a space where everyone’s opinion matters and is at least listened to. This model is important in the context of children’s democratic political rights because it also considers them as citizens whose voices matter. For this reason, I highlight one of the main objections to deliberative democracy that is directly linked to previously discussed objections to children’s right to stand for public office. Given that reasoning is at the centre of deliberative democracy, it could be argued that this is ‘an acquired capacity, and not equally distributed among all’ (Cohen, 2009, p. 253). Consequently, deliberation could attribute more political power to the naturally gifted with exceptional reasoning capabilities and children would tend to be marginalised as they are perceived as irrational and incompetent. This counter-argument, however, underestimates people’s capacity to acknowledge and address this issue. Since one of the main objectives of deliberation is promoting inclusion and collective discussion, we can assume that participants would always attempt to uphold these principles and constantly work to improve communication. Hence, deliberative groups could ‘undertake affirmative measures to address participatory biases’ (Cohen, 2009, p. 254) and provide training on how to frame one’s arguments in a political environment. Moreover, the fact that a decision is made based on multiple perspectives guarantees that the process is not reduced to the win of the most well-phrased idea. Instead, this means that the resulting decision will be nuanced and accommodating of multiple views, no matter how insignificant they appear to be. This aspect of deliberative democracy would thus benefit children as a group previously assumed to have opinions that need not be considered in decision-making in traditional representative democracies.

Another controversial component of deliberative systems is its selection process. At a macro-

level, deliberation is concerned with including as many diverse reasonings as possible from the people who are affected by specific policies. The construction of a policy proposal through inclusion and discussion is ‘part of what makes a decision right, valid, or legitimate’ (Martin, 2018, pp. 4–5). According to this principle, the deliberative model would have no reason to exclude anyone directly involved from the discussion. Chappell uses non-citizen immigrants as an example because despite their lack of citizenship, they are affected by the policies of the country they are living in. She argues that they should be included in the discussion but could be excluded from the final decision-making, which would be left to the citizens to vote on (Chappell, 2012, p. 45). This example can be applied to children, as it justifies their presence in deliberative democracy. As people who are expected to live longer than adults, they will be affected by certain policies for a longer period of time. Hence, ‘the inclusion of children is as epistemically valuable as the inclusion of any other constituency affected by a political decision’ (Martin, 2018, p. 5). Children from a specific state, however, are entitled to their citizenship status since birth, which means that they should be allowed to participate in the final decision as well. Thus, children can be included in deliberative processes that concern their well-being as individuals and as a group because their views contribute to legitimising the decision being made.

Nevertheless, this inclusive aspect of deliberation is only evident in macro decision-making scenarios where everyone’s opinion counts. It is reasonable to assume that this system would be highly inefficient when running a state. National decision-making tends to require certain promptitude, particularly in times of emergency, whereas this kind of deliberation would turn making decisions into a very slow process. This is why this initiative proposes a micro-level deliberation, where the same principle of discussion applies but people are selected to represent the views of the different constituencies. Intuitively, from our experience in representative democracy, this selection process would be implemented through elections. The competitive aspect of current electoral systems, however, is one of the main characteristics that deliberation rejects. Chappell suggests that in order to maximise representation, ‘constituents will choose representatives who will behave during deliberation similarly to how they would themselves behave’ (Chappell, 2012, p. 43). Despite the logic of this argument, it would be difficult to assess who is most likely to behave as themselves during an election, as people would be tempted to change their behaviour in order to attract more voters. Hence, the most viable alternative would be to select representatives from different communities randomly in order to create an accurate sample of the population to deliberate (Sintomer, 2010). This process would make it easier for children to be included in the deliberative system than standing for public office. Since they offer a unique point of view – nuanced by the intersection of their other identities – that comes from their experience as a traditionally excluded group, their selection would be necessary to legitimise the decision-making. While in representative democracies the right to run for election does not guarantee that children will become elected representatives, this system ensures that children’s voices will be listened to, as all disadvantaged groups are guaranteed a seat at the table. Furthermore, this random selection

process improves representation prospects as it is no longer a given that only children from privileged backgrounds will be heard. Therefore, in deliberative democracy children's right to stand for public office is directly linked to the right to influence policy.

Deliberative democracy also has a positive effect on the whole population due to its transformative nature (Bentley, 2011, p. 51). Two of the reasons behind the need for deliberative political decision-making is that it contributes to informing the public about the national state of affairs, and that it sheds light over the issues traditionally marginalised communities must face regularly. As a result, disadvantaged groups should join deliberative circles embracing their distinctiveness as an independent source of knowledge. This means that normative groups of people – the general public – are given the chance to learn about marginalised communities, while these communities get to make claims about justice and equality. In the context of children, deliberation presents them with the opportunity to 'make claims in the public sphere that reflect needs and interests that the state should take as seriously as any other claim from any other constituency' (Martin, 2018, p. 9). They are given a learning space to discover the intricacies of the democratic process, while adults welcome their ideas leaving misconceptions about children's nature aside. This is particularly positive when compared to the idea of incorporating children to the electoral process. Granting them the right to stand for public office is, as discussed previously, the only way to guarantee that children have at least the chance to represent their interests appropriately in representative democracies. Nonetheless, by including them in adult-managed parliaments, children are "groomed" to acquire adult values and participate in adult frameworks unless they attend Youth Parliaments first where they may learn how to be critical. On the contrary, deliberative democracy offers children the opportunity to thrive in their difference while participating, as it does not force them to reach adulthood early. Rather, deliberation provides a place where children can learn how to articulate and promote their own rights and interests without rejecting their distinctiveness (Bentley, 2011, p. 51).

Despite its unclear applications, deliberative democracy appears to be a viable solution to children's misrepresentation in politics. In the context of representative democracies, I have argued over the course of this article that children should have the right to stand for public office because their interests and identity are not mirrored in national parliaments as they are today. Without the presence of children in the democratic process we cannot ensure that the resulting policies are legitimate, as they have not been directly backed by a significant percentage of the population. I have acknowledged, however, that the complex and stressful nature of adult politics could become a limitation in children's development. Therefore, I have only argued in favour of children having the opportunity to run for election rather than suggesting the need for children quotas to enforce their presence in decision-making. Nevertheless, these limitations can only be considered within the representative framework. Both at the macro- and micro-levels, deliberative democracy solves this problem because its premise is based on inclusion. Its non-coercive, equal and reasoned format eliminates the

exclusive nature of adult representative systems because it allows children to join without giving up their status as children. Children are guaranteed a seat at the table because their experience offers a different perspective that can enrich the process. Thus, they do not have to adopt adult values in elections in order to be considered as valid candidates. In this sense, children are respected as equal democratic agents and, therefore, deliberative democracy becomes a valid alternative that can substitute children's need for the right to stand for public office.

## Conclusion

Children's current position in society has proven to be a controversial one. Despite their increased political awareness, displayed through activism, and their consistent involvement in unofficial political institutions, i.e. Youth Parliaments, children are still marginalised from formal political decision-making. Throughout history, misconceptions about their capabilities and maturity have created a very strict separation between what constitutes a child and an adult, turning the child into an under-developed, incompetent being that needs to be protected from their own decisions. As a result, this has fuelled a societal patronising of children intended to keep their existence separated from the adult world. Increasing political disengagement in contemporary Western societies, however, has made policy-makers and scholars revisit their conceptions of childhood. In an attempt to improve voter turnout and political literacy, children's participatory rights have been brought to the table, paying particular attention to children's right to vote and consultation. Although the literature surrounding children's participation has developed significantly over the last few decades, there is one democratic political right that has remained in the shadows: the right to stand for public office. Thus, this article has explored the gap in the literature regarding this specific right and analysed why it is essential to allow children to run for election in order to legitimise representative democratic systems.

First of all, I have considered the need for this right in terms of representation. Descriptive representation is essential to legitimise political decisions. People belonging to disadvantaged groups, which have traditionally been excluded from the franchise and political participation altogether, cannot expect elected representatives from privileged backgrounds to understand and accurately represent their interests (Hayward, 2009, p. 113). Having argued that children are indeed a disadvantaged group – currently the largest minority in Western societies – and that adults cannot represent their interests appropriately, I have established that their inclusion in parliaments is necessary to legitimise democratic policies and can only be implemented through their participation in free elections. Secondly, I have addressed competence as the main excluding factor keeping children alienated from official political processes. This counter-argument overlooks the heterogeneous capacity levels that children as a group possess, and assumes that competence is directly linked to adulthood. It is unjust to exclude an entire group of people based on preconceived notions of incompetence but allow incompetent people to run for election just because they meet the age requirement. Thus, using competence – or

lack thereof – to justify children’s denial of rights is unreasonable. Moreover, I have argued that the party selection process and the electoral system are competency tests in themselves because they filter the qualified candidates from the unqualified ones (Ludbrook, 1996, p. 292). Therefore, allowing children to run for election does not mean that they will have access to power. It will depend on the voters to determine if they are prepared enough or not. Thirdly, this article has considered possible limitations to children’s right to run for election by focusing on the possibility of them getting elected. Representing the population’s interests in legislatures is indeed a career and, thus, it may cause concerns regarding child labour. Having compared this prospective job to that of child performers, I have concluded that similar arrangements could be made to guarantee that elected children could proceed with their education without neglecting their responsibilities as representatives. Finally, I have evaluated the role of Youth Parliaments in supporting children’s education in politics as a complementary factor to children’s right to run for election. Their existence, however, is not sufficient to grant them political influence and, thus, YPs cannot be considered as a substitute for children’s access to elections.

In the last section, I have considered the issues that may arise from granting such a right to children despite it being the only option to ensure their representation in parliament. By including children in adult frameworks, they are expected to adopt adult values and are groomed to fit in the existing structures as miniature adults. Despite Youth Parliaments encouraging critical thinking through their educational programmes, not all children have access to platforms that enable them to become critical of the system they are joining. Therefore, they may end up rejecting the key aspects that make them children on behalf of an accelerated growth in order to be welcomed to adult institutions. As a viable alternative to these issues, this article has used deliberative democracy as an example to show that other democratic systems could in fact be more inclusive and adaptable to children’s presence than representative democracy. As a normative theory, it does not have clear physical applications, but it can highlight the limitations surrounding children’s inclusion in representative systems. Its non-coercive, equal and reasoned format enables children’s political participation without requesting them to give up their status as children. Instead, they are welcomed to the discussion because their experience offers a different perspective that can enrich decision-making. Therefore, deliberative democracy recognises children as equal democratic agents and can be considered a valid alternative that can substitute children’s right to run for election.

As a contribution to Childhood Studies, this article has intended to show how research on children’s rights has the responsibility to continue expanding to new areas of child participation in order to improve our understanding of the potential of children as democratic agents. Thus, it is important to encourage the reassessment of children’s ability to influence public policy in formal politics in order to give new value to their presence in the democratic process. In addition, the normative approach used to analyse children’s entitlement to run for election is relevant in the wider context of liberalism. I have argued that the alienation of children from

the political sphere violates the principle of equality upon which most liberal democracies are built (Fowler, 2014, p. 98). This means that considering children's right to stand for public office entails extending the principle of equality to recognise children as human beings and citizens in their own right. The present research can, therefore, be used to enrich both the field of Childhood Studies and the wider objectives of liberal political thought. Finally, the content of this article constitutes a critique of representative democratic systems. My analysis of children's participation in deliberative processes shows that representative systems as they are today do not guarantee the inclusion of all identities. Through hypothesising on the potential issues that contemporary institutions would present to the inclusion of children, greater deficiencies are revealed in their inability to represent interests accurately due to their inherent milieu of competition and processes of institutionalisation. Thus, the interests of all citizens are not perfectly represented in many contemporary forms of representative democracy.

The purpose of this article was also to encourage future research regarding the right to stand for public office. My normative study has argued that children are indeed morally entitled to this right. I have paid little attention, however, to the practical issues that could arise from granting it to children. Far beyond the problem of child labour, it is essential to realise the other potential issues that could render this right impossible to exercise. It would be necessary to address the accessibility of adult parliaments and to discuss how disruptive the electoral process could be for children in terms of their psychological development. The risks and threats associated with high-profile politicians, overexposure to the media or the increasingly demonising rhetoric in parliaments are just examples that showcase the potentially damaging nature of holding public office. Hence, there will need to be some guarantee that political exposure will at least be safe for children before they are introduced into parliaments. Furthermore, were children to be allowed to run for election and eventually get elected, future studies ought to examine whether children should be allocated exclusively to child-related departments or whether they are actually capable of undertaking any ministerial job. In addition, questions of taxation and the consequences of child involvement in other professions in the political sector should also be considered. Finally, further research should not only focus on improving the way representative democracies consider children, but it should also continue to explore viable alternatives to integrate children's interests effectively into policy-making, as seen with deliberative democracy. For example, children's increased participation in activism has meant that some of them now hold positions of leadership in many advocacy projects. This could lead to an increased influence of children in society and branch out their participation prospects to other areas such as lobbying. While this multitude of research and normative analyses may appear daunting, such work is necessary to promote and secure the long-ignored moral right children possess to hold meaningful positions in politics.

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