



Opinion

A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Votes of People with Short Life Expectancy from Being a Long-Term Burden to Their Country

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Abstract: In response to the growing social discontent regarding what is perceived as generational injustice, due to younger generations of voters facing long-term negative consequences from issues disproportionately decided by the votes of older generations of voters, there have been suggestions to introduce an upper age voting threshold. These have been all but universally dismissed as offensive and contrary to basic democratic values. In the present article, I show that the idea is in fact entirely consonant with present-day democratic practices and far from without a precedent. Hence, I describe how the aforementioned generational injustice can be rectified using a simple vote-weighting scheme which is easy to implement and interpret. Lastly, I discuss the societal effects that this alteration of the voting system would have on the distribution of the origins of political power.

Keywords: democracy; voting; ballot; elections; age; ageism

1. Introduction

Modern democracies rely, in one form or another, on collective decision-making by means of consensus (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008)¹. As Collingwood (2004) put it:

“the idea of a community as governing itself by fostering the free expression of all political opinions that take shape within it, and finding some means of reducing this multiplicity of opinions to a unity”.

An interesting challenge to the implementation of this principle in the real world arises when there exists a stark polarization of opinion between two or more social groups (McCoy et al. 2018; Svulik 2019), most strongly felt in majoritarian democracies such as the United Kingdom (Cairney 2018). This challenge is particularly practically significant when it regards an issue which is likely to have profound and long-lasting effects (Ford and Goodwin 2017). The recent referendum vote by the British public regarding the membership of the United Kingdom in the European Union (colloquially often referred to as the “Brexit” vote) illustrates this point most poignantly indeed: exit polls conducted by numerous established polling organizations show a steep and consistent gradient across different age groups (Eichengreen et al. 2021). This differentiation is illustrated in Figure 1 where a close to linear relationship can be observed, with voters aged 65+ more than twice as likely to vote ‘leave’ than their 18–24 year old compatriots.

In the present article I would like to examine an interesting proposal which was put forward by some commentators, as well as academics, in response to this polarizing phenomenon. The proposal is based on the premise that on average, younger voters will experience (or contend with, as their voting tendency would suggest) the effects of the vote for a longer period of time than their older compatriots. Hence, it was argued that the preferences of younger votes should take precedence in some form (Parijs 1998; Volacu 2021). An extreme implementation of the aforementioned idea mentioned by some was to exclude a part of the electorate above a certain age (Stein 2016). The reader may think this



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proposal both objectionable on principle and unworkable in practice. Yet, herein I would like to argue otherwise. Firstly, I demonstrate that the idea is not at all at odds with the well-established practices of Western democracies. Next, I show how a similar proposal can be effortlessly implemented in a principled manner and without awkward ad hoc cut-offs, and even how the power of evidence and data can be harnessed for greater personalization and fairness. Lastly, I analyze the effects that the suggested implementation would have in the real world, which without being such by design, end up consonant with the liberal and meritocratic values celebrated by the democratic world.

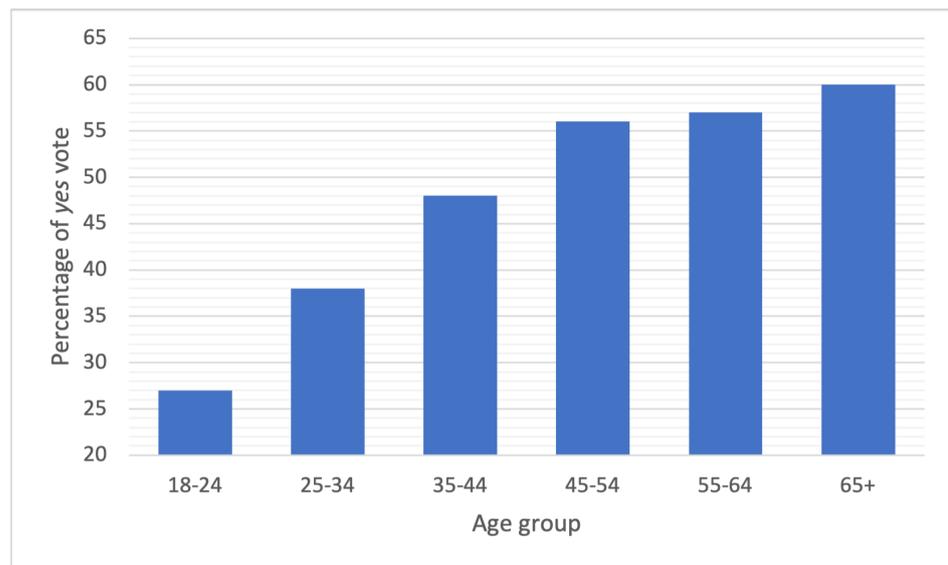


Figure 1. Brexit vote: age based preferences. Data from (Finlay et al. 2019).

2. Analysis and Re-Imagination of the Democratic Vote

2.1. On the Principle

I would like to begin by pointing out that as regards the principle underlying the aforementioned proposal, fundamentally the same idea is already adopted by every democracy in existence. Consider the trivial observation that, say, a Polish citizen is not given a vote in the UK General Election. The reason behind this law is simple enough: while two British citizens by the very virtue of their shared citizenship also share the goal of wanting to make the British society function better, the same assumption cannot be as readily made for a foreign citizen. Two British citizens may of course differ in their understanding of the abstract concept of “better”, or indeed how this betterment may be achieved, which is where the consensual decision-making mentioned in the introduction is expected to play its role.

In this example, the lack of shared interest emerges from spacial (geographic) differentiation (Arandjelović 2021). Fundamentally, the same phenomenon is at the crux of the present argument too, with the lack of shared interest emerging from *temporal* differentiation: ex hypothesi, the immediate stake in the outcomes of a democracy decision of an elderly person approaching the end of their life is more limited in duration than that of a younger person with a longer remaining life expectancy (their mediate interests, e.g., via the interests of their descendant, can be considered to be equal) (Volacu 2021).

Though the example I have just given should serve to dispel such objections, I understand that it is still tempting to see any differentiation of those who are presently eligible to vote as a form of injustice. Indeed, an appealing aspect of democracy lies in the perceived equality between people “at the ballot box”. Thus, any deviation from this state inherently creates inequality amongst those previously seen as equal, and this is all certain to provoke a vitriolic response in many, seeing it as elitism (the kind of elitism will depend on the criteria used to effect differentiation between individuals), disenfranchisement, etc. I expect

that many (or most) would see this as some individuals being seen as “better” or more valued than others. In rebutting this, let us start by observing what ought to be a simple fact: the perceived equality does not exist even now, *even at the ballot box*. For example, all elections require the voters to be at least of a certain age (say, in the United Kingdom general elections, at least 18 years old). This certainly does not mean that children are less valued as individuals (Arandjelović 2022). Equally, in some jurisdictions, people with some mental impairments are prohibited from voting, and yet nobody would suggest that they are any less entitled to happiness, the freedom from suffering, etc. The geographic discrimination I described earlier speaks of this too: two individuals on different sides of an international border do not have the right to vote in the other’s country’s general elections. Here too, it should be clear that the bases for this differentiation are not based on a lesser appreciation of one individual than another, but practical consideration. In short, differential roles in the political process do not imply differential appreciation of individuals, their rights as sentient beings, etc.

2.2. A Fairer System

Having shown that the principle behind the proposal to differentiate between voters on the grounds of what is in effect their life expectancy is nothing that conflicts with the widely accepted practices of democracies as they are today, I would like to address arguments against the proposal based on possible practical difficulties with its implementation. In particular, a convincing case can be made that the choice of the cutoff age would be ad hoc and thus disagreeable to the public. I partially concede to this objection, that is, I concede the point made but not the implication that the associated challenges are particularly difficult to overcome. Hence, I propose a concretization of the original idea, and show that it solves the aforementioned problems in a manner which is principled, as well as simple to implement and to understand as fair.

2.2.1. A Simple Baseline

In order to avoid having to decide on a hard cutoff point at which individuals’ votes would cease to have any contribution to election outcomes, a simple weighting scheme could be implemented. In particular, given L , the life expectancy at birth, an individual’s vote would have a contribution proportional to:

$$w_b(A) = L - A \quad (1)$$

where A is a person’s age at the time of voting (the minimum value of A being the minimum voting age). This technically simple and easily understandable rule has a normalizing effect on the differential remaining life expectancy based stakes in the consequences of a vote. This kind of normalization is not only inherently principled, if not particularly nuanced (which I will address shortly), but also far from being without precedent, one which is already widely used, for example in the determination of insurance life premiums (Beenstock et al. 1986).

2.2.2. A More Nuanced Solution

While what is effectively a modified vote-counting strategy proposed in the prevision section and captured by Equation (1) undoubtedly improves on the current state of affairs which unfairly disadvantages younger generations, it is not difficult to see that it is far from perfect. In particular, life expectancy at birth is a rather crude estimate of a *specific* person’s life expectancy, as witnessed by the high deviation of age at the time of death within a society (Hiam et al. 2021; Tuljapurkar 2010). Adopting and pursuing the revered doctrine of evidence-driven policy making (Marmot 2004; Pawson 2002), it is not difficult to see that a further refinement and improvement of the process can be achieved by exploiting the pervasive availability of data and artificial intelligence, allowing us in effect to modify

Equation (1) to be individual-specific. In particular, a more nuanced version of the vote weighting system can be formulated as follows:

$$w_p(I) = L(f_s(I)) - A \quad (2)$$

where A is as before a person's age at the time of election (the minimum value of A being the minimum voting age), I an individual to whose vote the weight $w_p(I)$ is applied, $f_s(I)$ a certain set of features (e.g., sociodemographic) associated with the person, and $L(f_s(I))$ the predicted life expectancy of the person. The aim of this altered vote weighting proposition is the same as the previous one, to wit, that achieved using Equation (1), but with the life expectancy prediction being more precise, person specific, rather than population based. The more comprehensive the set of features $f_s(I)$ used are—which would in practice be determined both by practical considerations (what data can be collected) as well as legislative considerations which take into account the various issues of individual citizens' privacy—the more precise the estimate would be and the fairer the overall voting system would become.

2.3. Relationship to Alternative Proposals

In order to contextualize the arguments and the proposal introduced in the present article, I would now like to examine how these relate to the previously proposed means, be they direct or indirect in nature, of potential voting power equalization.

One of the best known ideas in the former group, one which has already produced a considerable amount of fruitful debate in the scholastic and legislative circles, as well as been implemented in practice, is that of compulsory or mandatory voting (Lijphart 1998). As the name would have it, jurisdictions with mandatory voting compel eligible citizens (possibly allowing some exceptions) to participate in the electoral process, often but not always levying penalties against non-compliant individuals. As of January 2023, 21 countries implemented some form of mandatory voting (CIA 2020), those with accompanying enforcement of the laws unsurprisingly yielding higher voter turnouts (Donovan 2017). Examples of Western democracies with mandatory voting include Australia, Belgium, and Liechtenstein.

In jurisdictions with mandatory voting, eligible individuals are expected to register at the polling place (Gardašević and Toplak 2023) or to provide an acceptable reason for not doing so, such as disability, infirmity, absence, or a religious objection (Dionne and Rapoport 2022). Where an enforcement of the law is in place, non-adherence results in the imposition of a penalty which can range in severity from being a largely symbolic one (e.g., an AUD 20 fine in Australia's 2013 federal election), over disenfranchisement in Belgium and Singapore, to the three month salary withdrawal in Bolivia. In some jurisdictions, mandatory voting is not applied universally, e.g., in Argentina and Peru individuals over the age of 70 are exempt, and in Luxembourg those over the age of 75. In addition to providing a tangible mandative impetus, some have argued that compulsory voting also has semiotic value, consonant (the proponents claim) with the spirit of the modern democracy; in the words of Engelen (2007), it:

“... sends the message that every vote matters. . .”.

Despite the seemingly coercive spirit of mandatory voting, the practice appears to be generally welcome by the voting public of the corresponding jurisdictions (Bennett 2005).

While the effectiveness of mandatory voting in terms of increasing voter turnout is indisputable (Engelen 2007), the practice continues to be hotly debated within the academic community, raising questions both in the realm of its ethical permissibility (Lever 2010) and the ability to increase voter participation *in a meaningful way* (Jakee and Sun 2006). For example Jakee and Sun (2006) write:

“...compelling those who are not particularly interested in, or informed about, the political process to vote increases the proportion of random votes and we show that under simple majority rule, compulsory voting may violate the Pareto

principle; the less popular candidate is more likely to be elected. Our results cast doubt on the ‘miracle of aggregation’ argument, which optimistically concludes that as long as uninformed votes are not systematically biased, they will have no effect on voting outcomes.”

It is fair to say that at present, a sufficient amount of high quality evidence which would allow for the deconfounding of a myriad of potential correlates, is still lacking, this making a strong intellectual commitment one way or another imprudent.

Other notable means of possible voting participation increase include proportional representation (Blais and Carty 1990), concurrent (Nikolenyi 2010) and less frequent elections (Stein and Vonnahme 2008), and campaign finance reforms (Ortiz 1998; Smith 1995; Strauss 1994), though it remains unclear that the said increase would necessarily be such so as to address the specific concern that the present article focuses on, namely that of generational injustice.

Regardless of what evidence ends up showing as regards the effectiveness of the proposals just discussed, it is important to observe that the idea I propose should not be seen as their alternative, but rather as a reformative change which would coexist and serve to strengthen any one of them which proves itself successful. In particular, note that even if the participation of younger voters is increased, thus serving to increase the electoral power of the corresponding demographic, that itself does nothing to address the highlighted difference in the duration of time that individuals of various ages have to bear the consequences of political decisions. It is this particular aspect of injustice that the proposed change seeks to ameliorate, one which no previous work has tackled explicitly, and which is conceptually orthogonal and compatible with the existing proposals.

2.4. Practical Consequences

Though the primary motivating factor for the proposal herein is rooted in the notion of *justice*, one of the foundational ethical virtues (Huang 2007; Schopenhauer 2009), it is insightful to examine what unintended consequences its employment in practice would have. In particular and with reference to Equation (2), one of the individual features which most strongly predicts longer life expectancy is the individual’s *income/wealth* (Brønnum-Hansen et al. 2021; De Vogli et al. 2005). The reason why this observation is important in the present context is that income and wealth are features over which one can exercise control. For example, attaining higher educational level is means of increasing one’s income and wealth (De Vogli et al. 2005; Muller 2002; Wolla and Sullivan 2017). At the same time, the temptation of achieving the same, that is income and wealth increase, by means which have a negative health effect is moderated by the negative effect that one’s health status, which could be included using various proxy measures in the prediction captured by $L(f_s(I))$, has on life expectancy. The overall effect, though not intended by design, is remarkably well aligned with the contemporary zeitgeist of Western democratic societies: hard work, competition, and healthy lifestyle. Standing back, what we can see emerging from the simple proposals outlined in the previous section is a dynamic and constantly evolving voting ecosystem which rewards and thus incentivizes democratically favored virtues.

Moving away from the in abstracto, to wit, the proximal, immediate consequences of the proposal in the form of behavioral motives, to the in concreto, that is the distal, mediate effects of the aforementioned behavioral incentives, what we can expect to emerge is a class of affluent voters who wield most of the voting power, power which is further strengthened and amplified by indirect means that wealth facilitates (Rueschemeyer 2004). Moreover, the size of this power holding elite can be expected to progressively shrink by virtue of a positive feedback loop, that is by means of their voting choices primarily benefiting the said elite itself, the only curb emerging in the eventual dissent of the disempowered majority, leading either to the restraint of the elite or the breakdown of the entire democratic system (Arandjelović 2021). Thus, ironically, we come back full circle, finding ourselves in a situation of widespread dissatisfaction and polarization which we are observing today.

Hence, one must ask if the current politics may require a means of redress with a greater degree of nuance than that offered by patchwork fixes of the current systems.

3. Summary and Conclusions

The recent phenomenon of growing polarization (Arbatli and Rosenberg 2021; Cho et al. 2020; Graham and Svobik 2020) and discontent (Berman and Snegovaya 2019; Galston 2020; Schmitter 2019) of the public in Western and Western-style democracies is now widely acknowledged both in the mainstream media (Graham 2022; Hasen 2022) and the academic literature. For those who are proponents of democratic governance, for not everybody is (Arandjelović 2021), this trend is creating fears of potential collapse of the democratic systems as we know them. However, for these, there is a silver lining to be found in this, to wit, the exposition of some of the fundamental weaknesses in how we think of and conceptualize, and implement in practice democratic decision-making can be used to improve and indeed save democracy. One of the foremost challenges is that of generational justice. In this article I addressed the concern which emerges from the unequal impact of the consequences of democratic decisions that is borne by voters of different ages. Specifically, my focus was on the calls to restrict older voters' participation in the process, for example by including an upper voting age cutoff threshold. Firstly, I showed that despite vehement reflexive opposition to this very thought that many have expressed, with claims that it opposes some of the fundamental democratic values, the nature of the aforementioned proposal is entirely consonant with the already long-established practices of the existing democratic systems, far from setting a value based precedent. Having showed the *permissibility* of the principle, I next turned my attention to its practical implementation (and thus the objections to the idea on practical grounds) and proposed two simple and viable means by which generational injustice can be reduced, one cruder in nature and the other—which draws its power from evidence and data, and leverages the advances of modern machine learning—more nuanced.

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Note

¹ The reader should not be misled by the word “consensus” and think that by stating this I am assuming consensualism, sometimes referred to as “consensus democracy”, alone; even in other forms of democracy, consensus comes as part and parcel of the democratic system, e.g., even the consensual agreement about the orderly transition of power is a reflection of a type of consensus.

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