

Representing Future People

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Democracy and Future People

Future generations seem to raise a problem for democracy. Democracy is rule of the people *by* the people. What does that mean exactly?

The Voice Principle: If some matter substantially affects a person's legitimate interests, that person must have a voice (however indirectly) in how that matter is decided.

The principle doesn't require that everyone votes on every issue—our voices can be heard *indirectly* through the election of a *representative*.

The Problem: Much (if not all) of what we decide to do substantially affects the legitimate interests of future people. But future people—in virtue of the fact that they do not yet exist—*cannot* make their voices heard in how those matters are decided. So, democracy cannot be fully realized.

Question 1: Does democracy require every legitimate party to have a voice? Or, is it enough for everyone's *interests* to be taken into account?

Question 2: How can we take into account someone's interests—how can we even know what those interests are—if they have no voice in the democratic process?

Question 3: How can we take into account the interests of future people given that future generations are likely to be composed of a people with a plurality of different, incompatible perspectives?

Question 4: How can we reform our democratic institutions to better ensure that the interests of future people are taken into account (given that future people have no realistic mechanism for holding us accountable)?

We will look at two recommendations: *age-weighted voting* (MacAskill) and *youth quotas* (Bidadanure).

Age-weighted Voting

Younger people's votes will be weighted more heavily than older people's.

Democracy: "A method of collective decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the decision-making process," ("Democracy", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

Who counts as a *participant* though?

Is this principle correct?

Worry: What about non-citizens? Regarding many matters (especially in an interconnected, globalized world), the interests of non-citizens can substantially be affected by our policy choices. But democracy doesn't require us to listen to the voices of non-citizens. Or does it?

This question is related to the distinction between representatives understood as:

Delegates, who act in accordance with the expressed wishes of their constituents. (Madison 1787).

Trustees, who act in accordance with their understanding of what is best for their constituents. (Burke 1790).

There are other roles for representatives too—e.g., *Sages*, who act in accordance with their understanding of what is best overall.

This proposal is a species of what is sometimes called *plural voting*—everyone gets a vote, but not all votes count equally. J.S. Mill was a proponent of a similar view, in which the well-educated elite receive *two* votes.

This would lower the effective median voter age, which (according to MacAskill) would “lengthen political horizons” to some extent.

Objection: Weighting votes effectively gives *more* votes to some rather than others. And that is patently unfair and undemocratic!

Response: “In this scenario, all citizens get equal voting weight, it’s just that this voting power is unequally distributed throughout someone’s life.”

MacAskill thinks it’s actually *more fair* than our current system because: (1) the young bear more of the benefits and costs of current decisions and so *should* have more influence over them, (2) the current system gives less voting power to people who die young, (3) if it works, it would be fairer to future generations (who don’t get a vote at all).

Youth Quotas

There should be *youth quotas* (YQs) in legislative bodies—a set number of seats should be set aside for people under 30 years old.

Bidadanure argues that YQs will both: (i) make these institutions more *procedurally just* (by enhancing their intergenerational legitimacy) and (ii) help produce better long-termist policy outcomes (because the interests of the youth are better aligned with the interests of future generations).

Rule of the Young

1. Do younger people actually have more future-oriented views?
2. Are the interests of the young actually well-aligned with the interests of future generations? (There’s a huge difference between 20 years and 200 years—not to mention 2,000 years!)
3. Aren’t younger people less well-informed (about politics and matter of public policy), and so apt to make worse decisions? What about the wisdom of age?
4. Are either of these reforms even remotely feasible? Good luck implementing this in the real world!

Why? Because “generations overlap, and so by doing more to empower younger people today, we give somewhat more weight to the interests of future people compared to the interests of present people. . . . We live in something close to a gerontocracy, and if voters and politicians are acting in their self-interest, we should expect that politics as a whole has a shorter time horizon than if younger people were more empowered.”

What do you think about this?

She makes three arguments.

1. *The higher stakes argument.* Young people have a higher stake in the future than old people.
2. *The stronger concern argument.* Young people are more concerned about the future than old people, which makes them better proxies for future generations.
3. *The diversity and innovation argument.* Intergenerational diversity will produce better, more innovative policy solutions.