The Role of Reasoning and Arguing in Youth Democratic Participation in Canada

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In 1970 the voting age in Canada moved from 21 to 18. Since then, there have been calls to lower it further, most commonly to age 16. Against the motion, however, it has been argued that youth may lack the ability to exercise a mature and informed vote, which I take to mean a vote exercised on the basis of informed reason. This paper aims at testing the veracity of this worry.

KEYWORDS: youth, voting, democratic participation, informed reason, decision making.

1. INTRODUCTION

Youth have plenty of reasons to participate in political dissent. Like adults, cultural shifts over time may change the focus of their interests, but they never eliminate them. Today, perhaps most prominently, we see global youth action aimed at fighting the climate crisis. In the past year young advocates such as Autumn Peltier and Greta Thunberg have captured global attention for their clarity, determination, courage, and remarkable poise while advocating for climate action in the presence of some of the world's most powerful people. Beyond exceptional exemplars, however, youth are also becoming increasingly visible supporters of non-binary gender policies and protecting and promoting educational quality.

Unfortunately, however, in many countries youth are prohibited from one of the most basic forms of political recognition – voting. In Canada, my home and native land, the legal age for voting is 18. This means that 7, 176, 144 people (19.35% of the population) are restricted from voting (www.statscan.ca). Nevertheless, a country that restricts nearly 1/5 of its population from voting prides itself on providing "universal" suffrage. I argue below that although the colonial government of Canada has been expanding suffrage since its independence, at least one of the arguments against lowering the voting

age, namely that youth cannot come to a mature and informed decision regarding who to vote for, is unconvincing.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section I will offer a very brief overview of the expansion of the right to vote in Canada, focusing on an articulation of some of the reasons youth are restricted from voting and on the claim that youth cannot come to a mature and informed decision. The third part of the paper offers a review of some of the literature focused on youth's ability to reason and argue. The fourth section demonstrates young peoples' political competency by showing how their abilities are already often employed in a number of political activities. In the conclusion, I tie together the argument against the claim that 16-year-olds cannot come to a mature and informed decision and should thereby be prohibited from voting.

2. CANADIAN SUFFRAGE – A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

On July 1, 1867, the day Canada became a country, it only included four provinces: Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. At that time, "control of the federal franchise would remain a provincial matter until Parliament decided otherwise" (Elections Canada, p. 40). Though there were some individual differences, at confederation the provinces each maintained three common conditions an individual must meet to be eligible to vote - being male, having reached the age of 21, and being a British subject by birth or naturalization. By 1885 when the federal government first gained control of the franchise, additional conditions requiring the would-be voter to own property and/or meet a minimum income level were also in place. It then took until 1918 before women successfully won the right to vote and until the 1960's before Inuit and "status Indians" could effectively vote (Dabin et al. 2019).[1] In 1970, the Canada Elections Act, passed under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, lowed the voting age from 21 to 18 with little resistance, with calls to lower it to 16 occurring regularly ever since.

In 1989, the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, better known as the "Lortie Commission",[2] was established to review the Elections Act and make recommendations. Among other items within its purview, the Lortie Commission specifically addressed the question of lowering the voting age to 16, concluding that despite evidence 16-year-olds have a significant stake in the society, can exercise a mature and informed vote, and that they generally act

[1] I use "effectively" because while the Inuit were legally granted the right to vote in 1950, the practice was only really made possible when ballot boxes were placed in more Inuit communities in 1962. See Leslie (2019).

[2] In honour of its chairman Pierre Lortie.

responsibly when they participate in public affairs, "[u]ltimately, any decision on the voting age involves the judgement of a society about when individuals reach maturity as citizens" and that "there remains a strong conviction that the time has not come to lower the voting age" (Lortie, 1991, pp. 48-49). This conclusion was so persuasive that it was still being appealed to in 2005 during debate of bill C261, another attempt to lower the voting age. In that same debate, arguments against the ability for 16-year-olds to exercise a mature an informed vote were also still being forwarded by the opposition. Most recently, on May 1, 2018, Green Party MP Elizabeth May introduced Bill C-401, which proposes that "Every person who is a Canadian citizen and is 16 years of age or older on polling day is qualified as an elector."

As long as calls to lower the voting age to 16 have been proposed, they have been met with vehement opposition. Wall (2014) categorises the opposition into two broad categories: a lack of capacity and the potential to cause harm. In terms of harm, allowing children the right to vote has some people worried that it may cause harm to other children, adults, and the culture more generally. In terms of capacity, Wall distinguishes arguments that children lack 1) the competency to make rational judgements, from 2) knowledge of political systems, and 3) independence from outside influence. In this paper, I am only concerned with the claim regarding competency. In political forums (for example, the debate on Bill C261) and the popular media alike (e.g. Lum, 2018, Burnett, 2017), this opposition is usually described as the inability for 16-year-olds to exercise a mature and/or informed vote. In what follows I first review some of the literature arguing for youth's competency and then look at how these abilities are put into practice in non-voting related activities every day.

3. WHAT DO THE STUDIES SAY?

It is important to first identify the target, in other words, what I mean by "competency". To do so, it may be helpful to distinguish decision-making competency from excellency. Articulating decision-making excellency would require a determination of *how well* 16-year-olds can make an informed decision. Since our concern is with competency rather than excellency, we only have the less complicated task of determining if 16-year-olds can reason *well enough* to make an informed decision, i.e., whether they meet a certain standard or threshold. It seems fitting then to make that standard the rough equivalent of the competency of the majority of the rest of the voting population.[3] In this spirit, Wall (2014,

[3] One could argue that we need only measure against the competency of the lowest common denominator in the voting citizenry. I specify, "majority of the

p. 110) has identified competency as, "the capacity for political reason as expressed in such abilities as public critical thinking, discourse with others, and the ability to weigh society-wide outcomes of decisions." I appreciate this characterization for its flexibility and applicability and thus take it up as the target for the remainder of the discussion.

So, what does the literature say about the ability for people 16 years of age (and under) to meet our target? In an excellent doctoral dissertation, Schär (2019) has pointed out that the literature on youth reasoning and argumentation tends to fall into two broad streams. The first stream is product focused and looks at the ability for youth to reason individually. In other words, competency is assessed by looking at the argumentative products – essays, scores on tests, etc. – that youth produce. This approach is developed most prominently by Dianna Kuhn (1991). The second stream is process focused, and more often looks at the role of reasoning and decision-making in social, or group, contexts. In other words, the argumentative behaviours of youth are monitored in social situations where people interact and argumentation emerges (or doesn't emerge) within their discussions. Both streams, however, are clear that 16-year-olds maintain at least equal competency to their older counterparts.

For example, Kuhn argues that age matters until around the age of 14, and then education takes over as the most important determinant of reasoning ability. She states,

> After ninth grade, educational level (college vs. noncollege) takes over as the factor predictive of [argumentative] performance, as found here. Young adults with at least several years of college performed significantly better than ninth-graders, while *the performance of noncollege young adults was intermediate between that of sixth- and ninth-graders*. (Emphasis added. Kuhn 1991, p. 285)

This means that if competency ought to be a measure of eligibility for voting, many noncollege adults ought to be prohibited as well, since they demonstrate performance equivalent to children aged from approximately 11 to 14 years.

The shift that Kuhn identifies as occurring around the age of 14 involves metacognitive tasks. She argues that prior to ninth grade (approximately age 14), youth can still apply theories to evidence, but are not as good, or may be unable, to conduct the metacognitive tasks of

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rest of the voting population", however, so as not to measure the general population of 16-year-olds against the sub-set of people over the age of 18 with mental disorders and illnesses, all of whom were granted the right to vote in Canada in 1988.

"specifying forms of evidence that would show a theory to be correct or incorrect and to evaluate the bearing of forms of evidence presented by the interviewer on different causal and noncausal theories" (284).

At this very conference, Kuhn (See also Kuhn 2019, pp. 155ff.) also noted that educational intervention with students aged 11 to 13 enabled them to competently discuss and decide on questions such as "Should people be required to pay a social security tax from each paycheck that will provide money when they retire, or should people save on their own for their retirement?" and "Should a powerful nation intervene to help another nation in trouble or only focus on its own problems?" These questions are obviously political, and the transcripts Kuhn provided at clearly showed how the children met all of Wall's criteria to demonstrate political competency.

The process-oriented study of youth reasoning and argumentation is currently being developed in Switzerland by scholars such as Greco, Mehmeti, Perret-Clermont (2017), who found that students aged 8-13 discussing environmental issues were largely able to meet the demands of the ideal model of a critical discussion proposed by van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1984, 2004). As opposed to asking students to complete a test or write an essay individually, in this study children were encouraged to interact and discuss issues with each other with a teacher facilitating. The study shows that these students were able to "open new issues for a discussion; they advanced standpoints and arguments in support of their standpoints. Moreover, they were able to follow the teacher when she shifted the issue and opened new paths for their discussion" (p. 213).

Another proponent of the process approach, Hugo Mercier (2011), has argued that reasoning is innate and that it evolved to improve argumentation. As evidence for the innateness of reasoning, he points to studies demonstrating that by age 3, children have "recourse in argumentation to social rules, to the material consequences of action or the consequences for others' feelings" (182). He further highlights that children, like adults, reason and argue better when motivated to do so – e.g. when facing or anticipating disagreement. This motivation is also, like adults, closely linked to the confirmation bias:

> In another study it was found that the large majority of 9-year-olds' utterances supported their own point of view (Pontecorvo & Girardet, 1993). It is important to stress that this early emerging confirmation bias does not entail a lack of ability to attack arguments—when they are the arguments of the other party in the conflict (Howe, Rinaldi, & Jennings, 2002; Tesla & Dunn, 1992).

Like Mercier (2011), Kuhn in her more recent and more process-based work (2019, p. 154) highlights differences between individual and social argumentation. While in written essays, most evidence produced by children is in support of their own position, "an average of one third of evidence-based claims served the function of weakening the opposing position (versus under 10% in the essays of these same participants)". In her talk at this conference, Kuhn concluded that children best 1) Support own standpoints (confirmation bias), 2) find weakness in others', 3) find strength in others', and 4) see weakness in their own. She also noted that youth, like adults, reason and argue far better when they have more access to more information. Thus, all three of the studies looked at thus far recognize the ability for young children, well below the age of 16, to generate and support their standpoints and find weaknesses in others'. These results align well with the same strengths in adult reasoning performed in light of the confirmation bias (Kahneman 2011). Thus, from the two main streams of research into youth reasoning and argumentation, there does not appear to be any significant difference between how a 16-year-old and an average person of the legal voting age would form an opinion.

4. YOUTH POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Given that the literature points to the ability for youth to reason and come to an informed decision, it is unsurprising that they also exercise these abilities in a number of forums where they demonstrate their ability to meet the aforementioned "capacity for political reason as expressed in such abilities as public critical thinking, discourse with others, and the ability to weigh society-wide outcomes of decisions."

Take, for example, the recent global marches for climate. Before, during, and after these events, youth are engaging in discourse with others, especially about the society-wide outcomes of decisions. Before marches, young people are discussing current and potential policy changes and costs. They do so at home, at school, and often on social media. The marches themselves are a manifestation of at least two conclusions drawn during these previous discussions, namely, that something must be done to solve the climate crisis and that so far there is little enough public momentum do to anything that the urgency must be expressed through public protest.

The movement has been some time in the making but has consistently been led by young people. For example, Autumn Peltier, from Wiikwemkoong First Nation on Manitoulin Island in Northern Ontario made headlines in 2016 when she confronted Prime Minster Justin Trudeau about his broken environmental promises. She has also now spoken at to the General Assembly of the United Nations in both

2018 and 2019 (Manitoulin teen, 2019). In the United States, 11-year-old Amariyanna (Mari) Copeny, gained international attention in 2016 when she received a response from American President Barack Obama regarding the water crisis in her hometown of Flint, Michigan (Wikipedia). She has been fighting for clean water since, recently running a successful GoFundMe campaign to provide water filters to the community.

More popularly, 16-year-old Greta Thunberg's School Strike for Climate, which has now evolved into a mass movement taking place around the world, has put youth political reasoning competencies on full display, with more and more youth voices hitting the airwaves on major networks as recognised knowers on expanding social and political topics. Indeed, two of the six main political parties in the 2020 Canadian election have now committed to lowering the voting age should they win in part due to this visibility.

When not striking, many secondary school students are exercising their political competency through school-based activities, such as mock voting preparation and execution (www.studentvote.ca), which are aligned with real elections. In these events, like adults, students learn about each candidate and the implications of their platforms. They compare and contrast candidate platforms, and eventually cast a mock ballot. But their participation is not limited to the municipal, provincial, or even national level. On the international scale, students also participate in political forums such as the model U.N. and NATO summits wherein they roleplay representatives from participating countries and make decisions based on complicated country profiles. It should be noted that all of the school-based activities mentioned thus far are also happening in addition to every student's participation in their mandatory civics class.

Finally, outside of school, youth often sign petitions after discussions with advocates on the street, engage in debate about political issues with their families at home, and some even join the youth wings of adult-run political parties and organizations, most of which in Canada welcome all participants 25 years of age and under, despite the legally recognized 18-year-old voting age.

5. CONCLUSION

As mentioned at the outset, I have only addressed one of several arguments forwarded for restricting 16-year-olds from voting. I believe there are other responses to the other arguments, but I leave them for another work. For now, three important lessons emerge when considering the results of the academic literature and observations regarding youth democratic participation. First, if an age had to be

selected for cognitive development, 14 would make more sense as that is the age at which the last major cognitive development occurs. Second, education is much more important than age for making an informed decision. Since this is also the case for adults, we should not be surprised that it also holds for the young, and we can see it both in the academic studies as well as in the forums where youth participate in politics before being allowed to legally vote. The consequence of this result is that if one feels understandably uncomfortable with restricting the uneducated from voting, s/he ought to at least feel as uncomfortable restricting 16-year-olds. Third, like adults, youth demonstrate better reasoning and decision-making abilities when they are motivated to do so (have a stake in the game, so to speak) and have the chance to investigate and learn about a topic. When others disagree with them, or when they are operating in a political context, youth regularly demonstrate their abilities to meet Wall's conditions for political competency. This suggests that engaging, motivating, and informing young people would suffice to ensure they meet the standard of the average of their adult voting counterparts. Further, since educating the electorate is a standard goal of all liberal democracies, including the young should not require a foundational shift – it would simply require recognizing 16-year-olds as a valuable voting demographic, with their unique interests and abilities, much like all of the existing demographics already considered.

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