

At what age does one become a citizen?

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Nearly a quarter of all Europeans are denied the right to vote. Why? Because of their age. This article considers the absence of children in the political field, and the contribution to democratic inclusion made by ‘municipal councils of children and young people’. These institutions are found across France and other European countries.

Inclusions and exclusions

The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man states that “everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives” (article 21). So, if we continue to refuse children the right to vote, it is because we do not consider them citizens.

Giving children the status of citizens from birth, and in particular the right to vote, seems to us inconceivable. Defining a legal age is generally considered self-evident. Why should that be the case?

Restrictions on the right to vote, past and present, have had the same rationale: the capacity for discernment. Those who decided on the original application of ‘universal’ suffrage decided that the poor, women and children lacked the capacity to make a proper choice. While history has led our rulers to overturn the first two criteria, the third has never been fundamentally criticised. Even if the legal age for voting has been reduced, the principle of using the ‘age’ variable to define legal status has never been questioned in France.

And yet every year in France, hundreds of thousands of children have the opportunity to take part in elections to choose councillors in their ‘commune’. A revolution in democracy? Perhaps. I refer, in fact, to around 25,000 municipal ‘child councillors’, the youngest of whom can be seven or eight years old, elected to the 1,300 councils of children and young people.

What are these councils?

Councils of young people were first set up in France between 1963 and 1967, as an initiative by secondary school pupils and students. But it was in the 1980s that the movement really began to grow, in France and other European countries, especially Belgium, Germany and Switzerland. In the 1990s there was further expansion, especially into Eastern Europe. Since the 1980s, local politicians took the lead. Power speaks to children and young people, and invites them in. But to do what?

A children’s council(1) is set up and run by a local community, which puts together a group of children or young people of a specific age residing in that area. These children represent all the children from the area concerned. Selection is usually through elections in schools. This provides a captive audience which raises electoral participation significantly, and guarantees a certain legitimacy for the structure. The chosen children then work on various projects such as improving security around schools, cleanliness in the commune, access to and diversity of leisure facilities, and availability of playgrounds. Certain other social problems (such as racism or poverty) may be dealt with under the heading of humanitarian projects, or awareness and information campaigns. These projects are worked on by small groups within a framework of committees - just as the municipal council is run - under the

direction of adult group leaders. The adults are either elected local politicians or people selected specifically for the task.

How well do they work?

This way of working is not without its problems. These raise questions about the purpose of these councils – and are usually kept quiet. A typical example is the dialogue between elected children and elected adults, often set down as an objective. In practice, the dialogue is often poor and limited to the group leader, who is considered by the children only as a leader and not a politician. Children's councils are presented as a testing ground for new forms of democracy (direct, participative). In fact the councils are no such thing: they use *exactly* the same model as traditional representative democracy. Not surprisingly, the process of delegation via election leads to a corresponding shedding of responsibility and interest by the electors. A further problem concerns taking account of children's voices in projects. Group leaders, often lacking the necessary skills, give precedence to exchanges between children and group leader, rather than a discussion between the elected children. The group leader does in fact lead the group, often directing the project(2).

Written reports, evaluations and press comment on the work of the councils rarely hint at these problems. They wax lyrical about the 'child-citizens'. Even local political opposition rarely attacks this municipal activity, and those who have done, bitterly regret it. To criticise the council is, indirectly, to criticise the children, and to criticise them is to attack those who are considered fragile, and whom the law requires us to protect above all. To criticise the council, and so the child, would also be to criticise the families. So potential detractors of a children's council may well decide that they have no interest in criticising it publicly (3).

Concepts of citizenship

Hidden behind the running of these councils are different concepts of citizenship of children and the role of councils. Some see it as a matter of training 'future citizens', others of enabling children, who are 'already citizens', to participate. For the former, working on small projects has pedagogical virtues; it is an apprenticeship, an initiation, as is the big moment of election. More prosaically, carrying out specific projects also serves to maintain the children's motivation, which would otherwise decline quickly. For the latter, projects serve to involve children in the local decision-making processes, and resolve real problems in the commune.

In my research, I have been able to show that although political parties share an apparently identical concern to promote citizenship, this conceals different political conceptions. Children's citizenship as the exercising of a right is a common view among parties of the 'left' (particularly the Greens); whereas children's citizenship in the sense of practising for the future is rather more characteristic of those on the 'right'. Herein lies a difference between the 'lesson in civics' which the children *take* from their elders, and that which they *give* to adults through their original ideas and involvement. There is a third tendency, characteristic of the French extreme right, whose representatives do not recognise the capacity for the child or adolescent to exercise any power at all, even consultative, within a municipal structure.

The question of age

Are these councils a sign of the promotion of a new political citizenship before the legal age? Are we witnessing a change of mentality on the part of certain politicians? Beyond the speeches, the promoters

of children's councils who really consider children as genuine, full citizens are exceptional. Most of them consider that the children have above all to learn: the child remains legally incapable, an unfinished being, to educate and form.

Politicians focus very quickly on the age range for these councils, but more as an organisational than a political issue. Indeed, the choice of the children's age in the process of setting up a council reveals the paucity of reflection on its objectives. The definition of an age range also reveals the reproduction of a more basic way of thinking: the idea that a legal age is necessary to participate.

Certain questions are often asked. From what age can a child be conscious of the structure and the workings of the local authority? At what age can a child participate in the public democratic debate and on what kind of questions? From what age is he/she capable of grasping local issues?

But is age a valid criterion for defining such capacities? I do not believe so. It suits us, and it reassures us, to use age to define certain rights and duties in our laws and rules. All our institutions tend to make us believe that there are those under and over legal age: children and adults. To speak of adults and maturity is to accept the incompetence of childhood and youth. To speak of children as future citizens is to disqualify their current capacity. To speak of 'age range' contributes to the denial of the condition of human being and citizen from birth.

Why not allow children, as soon as they wish or feel capable of putting themselves on the electoral register, to participate in elections and even present themselves as candidates? Let the electors judge if the child has enough experience to fulfil the role of elected representative. As far as the vote is concerned, children could, if they mobilised themselves, hold a certain electoral weight which would allow their interests to be taken into account at all levels of decision making. Today, with our so-called 'democratic' electoral system, and taking account of the absence of children and different other kinds of exclusions, as well as abstentions, the mayors of our towns rule a population only a sixth of which has voted for them. Is this still acceptable?

1. In France, most of these councils are composed of children around 12 years old (eg. from 9-13 years old). In small communes, there may be a wider age range, for example 10-17 years. In some communes, councils only include adolescents, for example 14-17 years. Sometimes there may even be two councils in the same commune – a 'children's council' and a 'young people's council'. I have chosen to call them all 'children's councils' to simplify what is, in fact, a complex and varied situation.
2. Siena, E. (1998) *Le Conseil Municipal des Enfants de Pessac pour les élus et pour les électeurs*, mémoire de Maîtrise, Bordeaux III. (<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/rxina/ecriture/memoirecme.htm>)
3. These and other analyses are based on a study of 17 communes in the Alsace region, and are taken from Koebel, M. (1997) *Le recours à la jeunesse dans l'espace politique local. Les conseils de jeunes en Alsace*, doctoral thesis at Marc Bloch University, Strasbourg. This thesis and several articles can be found at <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/koebel/ListePubli.htm>

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