

## Votes for children

The Cranky Professor

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The voting age in Canada is eighteen. It ought to be sixteen, if not fifteen or fourteen or thirteen.

“But sixteen year-olds don't have the knowledge or experience to vote responsibly.” Well, neither do twenty-two year-olds, one might respond. In any case, not everyone who does possess the knowledge or experience needed to vote responsibly chooses to vote responsibly. Should we, then, address these facts by instituting tests to determine who is qualified—by reason of knowledge, experience, and responsibility—to vote, and deny the franchise to the unqualified? Should we not at least draw on social scientific research if we have to set a universal voting age? Let's ask our social scientists at what age 60%, say, of Canadians become experienced and responsible. That's how we'll set the voting age.

The problem with both these proposals is that we have no idea what to count as knowledge, experience, or—especially—responsibility, independently of our assessing as knowledgeable or responsible the choices a person makes. We discover who is a responsible chooser by noting who tends to make responsible choices—responsible by our lights, of course. To assign and deny the franchise on the basis of tests, then, would be to privilege one set of lights over others.

This argument also tells against the fairly common notion that elections are about finding the best leaders among the candidates for office. The thought here is that the results of voting express the collective wisdom of a people, that through individual votes emerge the best values and highest aspirations of that people. (A recent editorial in the *Chronicle Herald* rested on this view.) But, of course, we have different ideas about what would make a leader the best, and about what our values and aspirations should be.

Voting and democracy are not about being responsible to higher values and they are not about placing in office the best among the candidates on offer. They simply cannot be about these things; anyway, they shouldn't be even if they could. What an election does is to give every holder of the franchise an opportunity to register, as effectively as everyone else, her preferences, whatever they are. The point of this exercise is simply to confer legitimacy on those who come to hold office and, derivatively, on the decisions that affect us. Legitimacy attaches to office holders, decisions, and policies only because we've each, as individuals, had an equal shot at determining who holds office. If you are to be held to policies and laws, on pain of fines

or jail, you had better have had a fair opportunity to determine the content of those policies and laws. One cannot consent to being governed, especially against one's interests, if one hasn't had a fair opportunity to act in support of one's interests.

Sixteen year-olds live a little less within the public sphere of law and government policy than do eighteen year-olds, but just a little less. Unlike ten year-olds, on the other hand, sixteen year-olds do move in social and public spheres beyond the world set by their parents. They have money of their own, they attend school at their own pleasure, they may drive, they may work, they may live on their own, they pay taxes. It is simply unfair to them that they have no formal say regarding the conditions under which they do these things, for without such say they cannot consent to the rules to which they are subject.

That is why the voting age ought to be sixteen, if not lower. As it is right now, sixteen year-olds have public lives and interests but lack the ability to consent to public arrangements. That situation is unfair and it is contrary to the principle that a government is legitimate only if it governs with the consent of all of those whom it governs.