



Should We Increase Young People's Voting Power?

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Abstract

This paper argues that democratic collectives have reason to increase the voting power of their younger members. It first presents an intuitive case for weighted voting in general, before drawing support from a prominent principle of democratic inclusion – the all-affected principle. On a plausible understanding of that principle, a decision may affect people to varying degrees, and this variation should be reflected in the strength of their say. The paper then argues that exposure time to a decision's effects is typically a good proxy for tracking such variation, such that collectives have reason to gradually reduce their members' voting power as they grow older. This holds, for example, in the ordinary parliamentary elections in representative democracies. It is then argued that we may build a similar case for age-weighting on a plausible version of the all-affected principle's main rival, the all-subjected principle. The paper ends by addressing various objections. It argues that none of them undermine the case for age-weighting, and that some might even support age-weighting over its non-weighted ('one person, one vote') alternative.

Keywords Age-weighting of votes · Proportional voting · Plural voting · Unequal voting power · The all-affected principle · The all-subjected principle

1 Introduction

Weighting of votes is highly controversial. Lay intuitions tend to dismiss it out of hand, treating 'one person, one vote' as democratic dogma. And if you ask philosophers, you might well find that plural voting has few friends among them too. While opposition to something like Mill's (2010 [1861]) infamous scheme of increased voting power for the highly educated is rather understandable these days, one might be more surprised to find few defenders of increased power for *young citizens*. Young people, after all, shall inherit the

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world. They shall reap the benefits. Or clean up the mess. So why not give them a weightier say in our collective world-altering decisions?

Several philosophers have aimed to justify *some* sort of political empowerment of young people. While you may find some defenses of youth citizen assemblies (John 2023), proposals typically revolve around lowering the voting age. Often somewhat moderately, to sixteen (Peto 2018) or twelve (Umbers 2020). Sometimes dramatically, defending the enfranchisement of “babes in arms” (Goodin and Lau 2011, 162, n.19). Few, if any, however, at least in the recent debate, have argued for gradually decreasing people’s individual voting power as they grow older. When age-weighting of votes has been discussed at all, the idea has been largely dismissed (Poama and Volacu 2021; Gosseries 2022; Volacu 2023). An important exception, published back in the 1990s, justified reducing the voting power of the elderly on purely consequentialist grounds (Van Parijs 1998). Because such a view implies that democracy is merely instrumentally valuable – in Van Parijs’s case, for the pursuit of just distributive outcomes – it was and still is a hard pill to swallow for many.

In this paper, I aim to shake up the lopsided debate on age-weighting by offering a non-outcome-oriented case for increasing young people’s voting power. More specifically, I shall argue that the two main principles of democratic inclusion – the all-affected principle and the all-subjected principle – when plausibly understood, both support age-weighting of votes.

Some have argued that the all-affected principle or the all-subjected principle give reason to lower the voting age (Beckman 2009, 93–99). Others have argued that we should understand these principles as favoring weighting of votes in general (Brighouse and Fleurbaey 2010; Owen 2012). No attempt has thus far been made, at least to my knowledge, to defend age-weighting of votes based on these principles of democratic inclusion. That is the gap I aim to fill.

The paper unfolds as follows. I first give some intuitive support for weighted voting per se. I then strengthen that case by showing how it coheres well with the all-affected principle. Formulated in the abstract, the all-affected principle gives a person a say in a polity’s decisions if those decisions affect her interests (Arrhenius 2005; Goodin 2007). After giving grounds for why we should endorse a version of the principle which weights people’s say in proportion to their affectedness, I argue that this weighting-sensitive version will normally imply age-weighting of votes in various types of political decisions. As we shall see, my argument is empirically contingent. Yet I hope it is strong enough to at least establish a *presumption* in favor of age-weighting over the non-weighted (‘one person, one vote’) alternative. I then consider the other main inclusion principle in the literature: the all-subjected principle. Formulated in the abstract, the all-subjected principle gives a person a say in a polity’s decisions if she is subjected to those decisions (López-Guerra 2005; Erman 2014). I argue that we may build a similar case for age-weighting on a plausible version of the all-subjected principle.

For present purposes, I assume that we accept the all-affected principle or the all-subjected principle in the abstract. My case for age-weighting is thus conditional: *if* we accept either principle, then we have reason to accept the requisite weighting-sensitive version of either principle, and in turn to accept age-weighting of votes.

As mentioned, weighting of votes based on age is highly controversial. The paper’s second part therefore considers possible objections to my analysis. I argue that all can be handled, thus leaving my case for age-weighted voting in decent shape. Because I assume

support for the all-affected principle or the all-subjected principle in the abstract, I set aside objections that apply also to non-weighting-sensitive versions of those principles. Moreover, for reasons of space I only discuss principled objections. While challenges arising at the implementation stage are undoubtedly important,¹ they must be discussed elsewhere.

2 Intuitive Support for Weighted Voting

Consider

Friday Night: A group of people plan how to spend their evening. Annie, Bonnie, Connie, Donnie, and Ronnie will first go to the movies together, where they may watch a drama, a romantic comedy, or a horror movie. Afterwards, Donnie and Ronnie shall head home together, and will order Thai, Indian, or Italian takeaway with their babysitters, Sonny and Tonny. The others will eat separately. While all enjoy both movies and food, they prefer different genres and cuisines. How should they settle which movie to watch and what food to eat?

While people's preferences in Friday Night differ, we may imagine that they have similar intensity. Who should have a say, then, and with what weight? My intuition is that there should be two separate votes, one on which movie to watch, and one on what takeaway to order. In the movie-vote, Annie, Bonnie, Connie, Donnie, and Ronnie should have a say, while Sonny and Tonny should not be included. In the takeaway-vote, Donnie, Ronnie, Sonny, and Tonny should have a say, while Annie, Bonnie, and Connie should not be included. Moreover, I find it intuitively plausible that each of those included in the respective decisions should have an *equal* say.

Consider now

Saturday Night: Same as Friday Night, but now we imagine that Annie's movie-preference is more intense. After watching romantic comedies she tends to have nightmares for a couple of days. Moreover, Donnie's food-preference is more intense. Having grown up in an Italian household, he is quite fed up with Italian cuisine.

Who should have a say, and with what weight? In this scenario, my intuitions change. While I still find it intuitively plausible to hold two separate votes with two different electorates, it no longer seems plausible to give those included an equal say. Instead, Annie should have a weightier say in the movie-vote, and Donnie should have a weightier say in the takeaway-vote. As we shall now see, these intuitions can be straightforwardly explained by (a certain version of) the all-affected principle.

¹ One might worry, e.g., that the measurements needed to properly assign weights might be infeasible (Poama and Volacu 2021).

3 Theoretical Support for Weighted Voting: Equal Respect and Personal Autonomy

When formulated in the abstract, the all-affected principle entails nothing about weighting of votes. It is widely observed, however, by proponents and critics alike, that the logic of the principle arguably implies that people should be included on different terms depending upon their degree of affectedness (Brighthouse and Fleurbaey 2010; Angell and Huseby 2020; Valentini 2014; Erman 2014; Bergström 2007). Consider this passage from Erman:

[S]upporting proportional influence seems sensible [from the all-affected principle's perspective] since it is affectedness that motivates a right to participate in the decision-making in the first place; it is one of the features that makes the principle attractive from a normative point of view. Consider the alternative, according to which those whose interests are affected should have the same degree of influence. This would draw an indefensible dividing line between those who are not at all affected and those who are very little affected (on some 'significance' scale of affectedness) (2014, 537).

I agree. Moreover, I believe that Erman's message – about the 'indefensibility' of a weighting-*insensitive* understanding of the all-affected principle – may be plausibly supported by a widely held and compelling theoretical commitment: to show *equal respect* for persons. Although traditionally thought to support equal voting power (Brighthouse 1996; Christiano 2008), the equal respect commitment is now increasingly recognized as a fundamental ground for weighted voting (Brighthouse and Fleurbaey 2010; Valentini 2014; Angell and Huseby 2020). As Brighthouse and Fleurbaey explain:

The standard argument that goes from equal respect to equal power generally considers a context in which, implicitly, stakes are roughly equal, as for general issues of political organization. In situations where stakes are blatantly unequal, the argument becomes much less compelling. It is then an equal allocation of power which appears disrespectful to those who are thereby unduly submitted to the will of the unconcerned or the less concerned (2010, 141).²

Another widely recognized ground for a weighting-sensitive version of the all-affected principle is a commitment to *personal autonomy* (Brighthouse and Fleurbaey 2010; Angell and Huseby 2020). The idea here is that, for irreducibly collective decisions, weighted voting increases the autonomy of all affected parties relative to a 'one person, one vote' scheme. Here is Brighthouse and Fleurbaey again:

[F]or issues which affect several individuals, it is better for their autonomy if those with greater stakes in some issues have greater power in the related decisions. Equal autonomy could perhaps be achieved by giving equal power to all in every decision, but it would be a low degree of autonomy, because everyone would be under the

² This insight also falsifies an influential 'relational egalitarian' view which condemns unequal voting power as objectionably hierarchical (Kolodny 2014; Viehoff 2014). At least in its standard anti-caste form, this objection dissolves if such power inequalities are justified in terms that treat people with equal respect (Viehoff 2019, 23–25).

dominion of the collectivity. Starting from this low point, a proportional allocation of power is bound to enhance autonomy (2010, 142).

The commitments to equal respect and to personal autonomy are independent but compatible grounds for distributing voting power in proportion to affectedness. If we find one or both of them plausible, we have good reason, I believe, to endorse the following version of the all-affected principle:

The All-Affected Principle (AAP): A person is entitled to a say in a polity's decisions in proportion to her affectedness; if unaffected, proportionality implies no say.

From here on, unless otherwise noted, I focus strictly on this *weighting-sensitive* version of the all-affected principle.

To be clear, when I say that a decision 'affects' a person this is equivalent to saying that she has a stake in it. A person has a stake in a decision if at least one of its choice alternatives will frustrate or promote her interests relative to the status quo. Because people's stakes are determined *in the choice situation* – that is, prior to the outcome – which alternative the collective ends up choosing is irrelevant for determining people's stakes.³ From hereon I use the terms 'stakes' and 'affectedness' interchangeably.

The AAP can easily explain the intuitions about inclusion and weighting in the Friday Night and Saturday Night scenarios. In both, there should be two separate votes because the movie-decision and the takeaway-decision affect different sets of persons. In Friday Night, for each vote, those included should have an equal say because their stakes are equal. In Saturday Night, Annie should have a weightier say in the movie-vote, and Donnie should have a weightier say in the takeaway-vote, because their stakes in the respective decisions are higher.⁴

³ Does this standard understanding of stakes, which the AAP shares with most other versions of the all-affected principle, have a perverse implication? Imagine a small minority group whose limited electoral significance means that major parties A and B ignore them. Its members' interests are thus equally well (or poorly) served *regardless of whether A or B wins* the election. Does it not (perversely) follow that minority group member M has no stake in this election, and hence no voting power? [Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this worry and for help in formulating the case.] First, such upshots are presumably rare. Because M's stakes are determined *in the choice situation* it is enough if a minor party C (attentive to M's interests) *is on the ballot*. M then has a stake even if the only likely *winners* are A or B. Second, even without a party C, M may still have a stake if we use a baseline for decision alternatives other than the status-quo. Such a baseline might refer to all possible alternatives (Goodin 2007) or to the alternative(s) to which people are morally entitled (Miklosi 2012). With such baselines, M may have a stake even if all actual alternatives preserve M's status-quo.

⁴ What if some people's stakes are very much higher? Is majority voting then appropriate at all? Imagine that Donnie has severe allergic reactions to Italian food. If so, it might seem plausible to give him a right to veto that food option, thus effectively precluding a relevant majority vote. Interestingly, as Arrhenius notes, the AAP is arguably much better equipped to explain such a veto (or minority protection) right than *weighting-insensitive* versions of the all-affected principle (2019, see especially 181–182). I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to address this matter.

4 Differential affectedness in practice: a *Presumption* in Favor of Age-weighting

For the AAP to imply increased voting power for young people, (increasing) age must be a plausible proxy for (decreasing) affectedness. One of my present aims is to say something useful about certain types of real-world cases where we may plausibly expect the AAP to imply age-weighting of votes. Exactly how affected people will be by this or that decision is of course ultimately an empirical question which cannot be settled in a theoretical paper. What I shall try to establish here is thus nothing more than a *presumption* in favor of age-weighting.

In the next couple of sections, I shall argue that age can be expected to work quite well as a proxy for affectedness. When making my case, I shall focus on an important subset of decisions in real-world politics: the *parliamentary elections* in representative democracies. (This, however, is not meant as a scope restriction. As I shall later underline, I expect my analysis to hold for various other types of political decisions.) As will become clear in the next section, the proxy I shall use is, strictly speaking, not age, but people's *length of exposure* to the relevant effects of political decisions. For presentational ease, I shall use the terms 'age' and 'exposure time,' interchangeably.

5 The Interdependent Interests Assumption

In representative democracies, most people participate in political decision-making indirectly. In periodic parliamentary elections, they vote for candidates who shall decide on their behalf in parliament's day-to-day legislative activities. Obviously, the elected representatives will make several single decisions during the legislative period each of which may have different effects upon the interests of different persons. However, when those decisions are taken together, it seems plausible to expect that they will affect people's interests *roughly equally*. The reason is the significant interconnectedness of policies and the deeply interwoven structure of people's interests and pursuits in complex modern societies. Here I draw significantly upon Thomas Christiano's idea of 'a common world.' As Christiano writes, such a world – characteristic of "[m]odern political societies" – is "marked by a deep interdependence of interests among its members" owing to the existence of "comprehensive systems of provision and regulation of the basic needs of all the citizens" (2008, 80). I shall call this 'the interdependent interests assumption.'

Now, Christiano famously uses this empirical assumption about interdependent interests, as part of his defense of 'one person, one vote' arrangements. As he writes, due to interdependent interests, "each person has roughly equal stakes in the shape of the common world" (2008, 81). The interdependent interests assumption has been well-received in the literature and is accepted by proponents as well as critics of equal voting power. Owen, who favors weighted voting based on a weighting-sensitive version of the all-subjected principle, calls Christiano's use of the assumption, a "sophisticated way of avoiding [the] issue [of differential subjection]" (Owen 2012, 152, note 29). Poama and Volacu, who reject weighted voting, echo Christiano's assumption when they write: "For most elections, the relevant interests *belonging to citizens with voting rights* are on average equally affected, such that

their electoral influence ought to be equal as well, at least following [a weighting-sensitive all-affected principle]" (2021, 12 emphasis in original).

Following the lead of these and other theorists, I shall now grant the interdependent interests assumption, at least as a plausible point of departure. Given my aim of justifying age-weighted voting, this might be surprising as the interdependent interests assumption is typically used to *reject* weighting of votes – as in Christiano's common world analysis. As I shall now argue, however, *pace* Christiano, the interdependent interests assumption will imply equal stakes, and hence support equal voting power, only under highly unrealistic circumstances (to be spelled out below). Under the more realistic circumstances that concern us, the idea of interdependent interests can instead be used to strengthen the case for age-weighting of votes. How?

A new parliament will normally legislate, directly or indirectly, on virtually all policy areas until the next parliamentary election. Consider, for example, the comprehensive effects of budgetary spending decisions. Christiano's interdependent interests assumption thus seemingly implies that those who shall be exposed to the decisions of the new parliament have roughly equal stakes in the parliamentary election. However, stakes will be roughly equal in that election only if we add (at least) one further assumption, namely: that all those who vote in the parliamentary election will be exposed to the new parliament's decisions *throughout* the parliamentary period, which lasts, say, four years.

Although most voters will typically be exposed to the legislative decisions for the full period, some will pass away during the four years. A person's interests can only be (plausibly) affected when she is alive.⁵ Because a subset of the electorate will pass away between parliamentary elections, E1 and E2, the members of that subset are less affected by E1 compared to those who remain alive at E2. Hence, the AAP implies reducing the former's voting power in E1, even when we assume that people's interests are interdependent. A person's exposure time therefore becomes a fairly accurate proxy for her stakes in the parliamentary election.

This is of course only an approximation, and we may easily imagine exceptions. Consider person A, who is strongly affected in year one of the parliamentary period and would be moderately affected in year two. Person B is only moderately affected in year one of the parliamentary period but would be strongly affected in year two. Both pass away (as expected) at the end of year one. When we use exposure time as a proxy, we give both equal voting power. Yet their degree of affectedness differs. Be that as it may. The case I make, as we may recall, is only meant to establish a presumption in favor of age-weighting (over 'one person, one vote'). That presumption is vindicated if an age-weighted arrangement typically brings us *closer* to the AAP's implications *compared to the 'one person, one vote' alternative*, all else being equal. There is no need to establish a perfect fit.

At this stage, one might accept that exposure time is a good (if not perfect) proxy in parliamentary elections, yet object that my analysis has bite only for a relatively small subset of the electorate. It seemingly implies reduced voting power only for those who are terminally ill (and only in their final parliamentary election).⁶ Can we somehow expand the implications to other parts of the electorate? I think we may.

⁵ I write 'plausibly' to account for an ongoing debate about the possibility of posthumous harm (see below).

⁶ I bracket cases where people remain alive but stop being affected, e.g., because they move abroad during the parliamentary period.

6 Informal Path-dependency in Public Policy

Consider the following uncontroversial contingency: past decisions tend to significantly influence future ones. Call this the phenomenon of ‘informal path-dependency in public policy.’ In theory, a new parliament may change *any* law.⁷ In practice, however, its options may significantly depend upon the decisions of previous parliaments. Because several laws may be very difficult to change, at least in the short-term, the parliament elected in E1 will thus create various informal path-dependencies. The effects of its legislation may be felt *beyond* its legislative period, influencing the choices available to the parliament elected in E2, et cetera. The Brexit referendum, which has comprehensive implications in virtually all policy areas, is a prime example of a single decision with very strong influence on future decisions. Yet, it seems plausible that parliamentary elections also typically give rise to significant informal path-dependence in public policy. If so, the stakes in each parliamentary election will increase for those who shall live to be affected by several of them, all else being equal.

The informal path-dependencies created by political decisions may of course be burdensome or beneficial, putting people on a path towards inferior or improved option sets. The point is merely that present-day decisions affect current people’s interests – ‘negatively’ or ‘positively’ – by making their political goals more difficult or easier to attain in the future. The AAP does not distinguish between ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ affectedness. It thus enfranchises affected people regardless of whether the relevant path-dependencies are burdensome or beneficial. If parliamentary elections have informal path-dependency effects, the AAP may therefore imply a gradual reduction of voting weights *over several elections* during a person’s life.

By combining the ideas of interdependent interests and informal path-dependency we may thus significantly expand the AAP’s age-weighting implications. Age-weighting is now implied, not only for the terminally ill in their final election, but for all those affected by one or more of the state’s parliamentary elections during their lives. In reaching this result, note how we have ended up circumscribing the validity of Christiano’s ‘common world’ analysis. Recall that Christiano’s analysis moves from interdependent interests to equal stakes and then to equal voting power. As I hope is now clear, that analysis is valid only in worlds consisting of a single age-cohort (consisting of members with equal longevity). That, of course, is nothing like the world we inhabit. In real-world representative democracies, members of different age-cohorts live together. But under such realistic circumstances, the interdependent interests assumption no longer supports equal stakes. For one thing, some individuals, typically the elderly, will pass away during any parliamentary period while others live throughout it. More importantly, there will be informal path-dependency in public policy. As a result, stakes will tend to decrease with age, even when people’s interests are interdependent.⁸

⁷ This is not the case, of course, if the law is constitutionally protected (such that more than one parliament is required for constitutional amendment) or where the legislature is subject to an absolute executive veto.

⁸ Note that my analysis is deliberately vague on the specific rate by which people’s voting power dwindles over time. This flexibility makes my analysis adaptable to different empirical findings concerning the strength of informal path-dependency for different types of decisions.

7 The All-subjected Principle and Age-weighting

Before we turn to address objections to my AAP-based case for age-weighting, let us consider whether the all-affected principle's main rival – the all-subjected principle – may undergo a similar analysis. When formulated in the abstract, the all-subjected principle gives a person a say in a polity's decisions if she is subjected to them (López-Guerra 2005; Beckman 2009, 47–52; Abizadeh 2008; Owen 2012; Erman 2014). Proponents of the all-subjected principle typically accept that it risks counterintuitively giving transients as much voting power as those who spend (much larger parts of) their lives subjected to the polity's laws (Owen 2012, 146). Some try to exclude transients by appealing to ad hoc rationales. Another option is to defend a *weighting-sensitive* version of the all-subjected principle. As David Owen writes,

it is perfectly compatible to hold that treating people as political equals requires taking subjection as a *non-scalar* property in terms of entitlement to membership of the demos and as a *scalar* property in terms of, say, the weighting of their votes within the demos (2012, 147).

I agree. When formulated in the abstract, the all-subjected principle entails nothing about weighting of votes. In its most plausible version, however, the all-subjected principle is not only compatible with but also implies that the extent of a person's subjection is morally significant, and that differential subjection supports weighted voting.⁹

How may we ground such a weighting-sensitive version? Here we may appeal, again, to the value of *personal autonomy*. Most proponents of the all-subjected principle believe that a person's being subjected to state decisions infringes her autonomy, and, moreover, that enfranchising her is a fitting way to justify that infringement (López-Guerra 2005, 219–21; Abizadeh 2008, 39–41; Owen 2012, 147). On such a view, I submit, it is arguably better, autonomy-wise, to be subjected to a lesser rather than larger extent, all else being equal. If so, it seems plausible that the longer a person is subjected, the stronger the need for justification, all else being equal. And if giving people voting power is the fitting way to justify their subjection, it seems fitting to weight their say in proportion to the relevant autonomy infringement. If so, proponents of the all-subjected principle have a non-ad hoc ground for weighting people's votes in proportion to their subjection. They thus have good reason to endorse the following version of the all-subjected principle:

The All-Subjected Principle (ASP): A person is entitled to a say in a polity's decisions in proportion to her subjection; if not subjected, proportionality implies no say.

We may now ask whether this weighting-sensitive version of the all-subjected principle implies age-weighting in parliamentary elections? I think it does. To see why, take Owen's proposal. He suggests that people may be subjected to different extents insofar as their "subjection to the decisions of the polity is (in certain respects at least) more consequential in virtue of being of greater *temporal duration* as well as, typically, more *encompassing with regard to the various dimensions of their life*" (2012, 146, emphases added). Recall Christiano's 'common world' analysis, which inter alia regards people's interests as interdepen-

⁹ For a similar view, see Goodin and Arrhenius (2024).

dent. Recall, moreover, that in Owen's view, Christiano's analysis is a "sophisticated way of avoiding [the] issue [of differential subjection]" (2012, 152, note 29), such that, whenever it holds, the ASP will support equal voting power.

As we have already discussed, however, Christiano's analysis does not hold under realistic circumstances (with multiple cohorts and informal path-dependency in public policy). The issue of differential subjection must thus be reassessed. How? Consider the first element in Owen's two-fold account of differential subjection: the 'temporal duration' of people's subjection to political decisions. Temporal duration is effectively like *exposure time*. We have already seen how differential exposure time creates differential *affectedness* with regard to the AAP. Consider now the second element in Owen's account of differential subjection, which refers to how legislation may have differential effects upon 'the various dimensions of [people's] lives.' Let us now assume (plausibly, I think) that this 'dimensions of life'-element largely overlaps with plausible metrics of affectedness. If we (contingently) accept something like Owen's differential subjection account – which I think we should – then we have good reason to expect the ASP, like the AAP, to imply *age-weighting* of votes in parliamentary elections.

This concludes my positive case for age-weighting of votes in parliamentary elections.¹⁰ If I am correct, that case is robust because it is supported by both of democratic theory's main inclusion principles (in weighting-sensitive versions). However, I recognize that weighting of votes is controversial. So, even if my positive analysis is correct, democratic theorists might happily reject the AAP and the ASP rather than accept my case for age-weighting. In the remaining parts of the paper, I shall therefore defend the case for age-weighting from several objections. (When doing so, I revert to focusing on the AAP.)

Before discussing objections, however, let us briefly consider my analysis' implications for the *voting age* issue. In my view, on both the AAP and the ASP, people are enfranchised only when they meet a threshold of agential capacity. They must qualify as agents capable of living an autonomous life.¹¹ If an affected or subjected 15-year-old passes that threshold (which, I think, they often do) *and* has more remaining life years than an affected or subjected 18-year-old agent, she should also have a weightier say, all else being equal. If we accept this agency-requirement, my age-weighting analysis has very significant (but not extreme) upshots for most real-world democracies: it gives them pro tanto reason not only to *lower the voting age* (presumably to at least 15) but also to give those newly enfranchised voters *more power* than other members of the electorate.

8 Objection One: A fair (Egalitarian) Distribution of Voting Power

Some believe that electoral influence is a valuable good which ought to be distributed equally as a matter of distributive fairness. There are two main versions of that idea. The 'non-lifetimetist' view is concerned with synchronic power assessments. The aim is to distribute power *on each* election equally to all affected parties (Brighouse 1996). The 'lifetimetist'

¹⁰ While my analysis has focused upon parliamentary elections, I expect it to hold for any kind of political decision-making which creates informal path-dependencies. This includes referenda (like the Brexit referendum), presidential elections in non-parliamentarian systems, and smaller-scale local elections, to mention just a few.

¹¹ This requirement arguably sits well with the grounding of both principles in the value of autonomy.

view is concerned with cumulated power assessments, summing up the affected parties' power *across all* relevant elections during their lifetimes. The aim is to distribute an equal sum total of voting power to all parties (Goodin and Tanasoca 2014). To what extent do these egalitarian views challenge age-weighting of votes?

The non-lifetimist view can be set aside quickly. In its typical version, it regards equal synchronic influence as "the proper institutionalisation of [the presumption of equal respect for all citizens]" (Brighouse 1996, 124). As already noted, the commitment to equal respect supports distributing power in proportion to stakes; it favors equal power only incidentally. Let us therefore focus on the lifetimist view.

To get a better grasp of what the lifetimist view implies, consider Art and Bart, two fellow citizens born at the same time but with different life expectancies. Both get a total of 100 votes, which shall last them a lifetime. Art's 100 votes shall be distributed across all elections that affect him, in proportion to his stakes. The same goes for Bart. Due to their different life expectancies however, Art will experience one more election than Bart. Being longer-lived, Art's 100 votes must thus stretch thinner. To keep it simple, imagine that Art and Bart are equally affected by each election they participate in, and that there is no informal path-dependency. Bart participates in elections E1-E4. Art participates in elections E1-E5. Their voting power distribution is thus:

E1-E4: Art=20, Bart=25

E5: Art=20

Although Bart starts out with more synchronic power than Art in E1 and keeps that advantage until he dies, both end up with equal cumulated voting power (100 votes).

With the lifetimist view before us, we may now ask to what extent it troubles my age-weighting analysis. The answer, I believe, is 'not much.' To see why, consider what happens when we bring informal path-dependency into the picture (such that affectedness decreases with age). The distribution then becomes (e.g.):

E1: Art=33.33, Bart=40

E2: Art=26.67, Bart=30

E3: Art=20, Bart=20

E4: Art=13.33, Bart=10

E5: Art=6.67

Here we see that Bart again starts out with more power than Art, but that his power in later elections becomes equal to or lesser than Art's. Despite these variations in relative synchronic power, Art and Bart again end up with equal cumulated power (100 votes).¹² This means that we may: distribute Art's and Bart's synchronic voting power such that each person's cumulated power becomes equal (as required by the lifetimist view) *and* gradually reduce their synchronic voting power in accordance with how both men's affectedness

¹² How power differentials develop depends upon people's longevities. Had Bart only participated in E1 and E2, e.g., his synchronic power would invariably exceed Art's.

decreases due to informal path-dependency (as suggested by my age-weighting analysis). In short, my case for age-weighting is (largely) *compatible* with the lifetimetist view.¹³

Non-age-weighted (i.e. ‘one person, one vote’) arrangements, in contrast, can ill afford incorporating the lifetimetist view. Unless people’s life expectancies are uniform (which is extremely unrealistic), giving them equal power in each parliamentary election inevitably yields cumulated *inequality*. The lifetimetist view, then, perhaps surprisingly, turns out to *favor age-weighting* over the ‘one person, one vote’ arrangements that currently abound in our electoral systems.

9 Objection Two: Causing Additional Harm to the Unjustly Disadvantaged

Here is another apparent objection. Assume that some people are unjustly disadvantaged and that this reduces their life expectancies. By using differential exposure time as a proxy for affectedness, my analysis seemingly gives them relatively less cumulated voting power. This may be construed as *causing additional harm* to the already unjustly disadvantaged.¹⁴ However, because my case for age-weighting may (largely) incorporate the lifetimetist egalitarian view, it need not give shorter-lived people (significantly) unequal cumulated power. Hence, the objection, at least on an egalitarian construal, (largely) dissolves.

10 Objection Three: Higher Stakes in One’s Final Election

My age-weighting analysis claims that, under realistic circumstances, people’s voting power tends to gradually decrease up until they die. An anonymous reviewer has suggested that this pattern is not fully correct. Although people’s stakes gradually decrease during most of their lives, they rise again in people’s final election – the one that shall affect them for *the rest of their lives*. Hence, the AAP should *boost people’s voting power in their final election*. To motivate this proposal, or so the reviewer’s suggestion goes, we may reimagine the case of Art and Bart as follows:

Art is expected to live four more years and Bart 20 more years. If party A is elected in the next election, E1, this would negatively affect Art, but positively affect Bart, and if party B is elected the reverse would happen. In at least one sense, Art has more at stake in E1 (and should be given greater weight), since if A is elected, he will be negatively affected for the rest of his life. If B is elected, this would not mean the

¹³ Note that the lifetimetist view is controversial among proponents of the all-affected principle. While some defend it (Goodin and Tanasoca 2014), others regard equal cumulated power as merely incidentally justified (Angell and Huseby 2020). The latter view assumes that some people may be systematically more affected by elections than others. To limit the election-indexed power of such more affected people in order to achieve lifetimetist equality, is to move away from the logic of the AAP understood as enfranchising people in strict proportion to their affectedness (Angell and Huseby 2020, 372–73). For present purposes, I bracket the relevant disagreement.

¹⁴ Friends of this type of objection sometimes use the term ‘compounding’ injustice. I prefer the formulation ‘causing additional harm,’ for reasons given in Lippert-Rasmussen (2022).

same for Bart, since there is still the chance that, in the later elections, E2-E5, party B would be elected.¹⁵

Does this case justify boosting people's power in their final election? I doubt it. The intuitive plausibility of the claim that people have increased stakes in the election that shall affect them for 'the rest' of their lives might depend upon how we construe the *length* of that 'rest.' To test this, let us introduce a third person, Cart, to the Art and Bart example. Cart is like Art in all respects except for being slightly longer-lived. While Art dies at the end of E1's four-year parliamentary period, Cart dies four weeks (days/hours/seconds) into election E2's four-year parliamentary period. If people somehow have a special stake (on top of how we otherwise measure affected interests) in the election that affects them for the 'rest' of their lives, then Art should receive a boost in E1 and Cart should receive a boost in E2. But this is counterintuitive. Cart's life, just like Art's, is overall much more affected by E1 than E2. At the very least, it is far from obvious that we should boost *Art* in E1, but not Cart. To my mind, this suggests that the consideration from 'the rest of one's life' is wrong guided. All else being equal, what matters is not that an election affects the 'rest' of one's life (whatever that means), but the extent to which a person is exposed to the election's effects. Art and Cart are both exposed to E1's effects for the full parliamentary period. Being equally affected by E1, their (E1-indexed) power should be equal. The fact that E1 is Art's 'final' election is irrelevant.

When reaching that result, note that we made no appeal whatsoever to informal path-dependency. If we had, then E1 would affect *Cart* more than Art, thereby further challenging the proposal to give *Art* more voting power in E1 than Cart.

What if we still insist that people, for some reason, do typically have more at stake in their final election? If the stake distribution is indeed like this, I am happy to concede that the AAP will support their relevant power boost. Even so, my analysis would, I take it, remain significant enough: establishing a presumption in favor of *continuously decreasing* people's voting power *up until* their final election.

11 Objection Four: 'Posthumous Interests'

There is an ongoing debate about whether the living (i.e. antemortem persons) may have relevant interests in *what happens after they die*.¹⁶ Assume for the moment that they do, and that political decisions may relevantly affect such 'posthumous interests.' One might then object to my age-weighting analysis as follows. Consider two fellow citizens, 80-year-old Juan and 20-year-old Juana. While alive, Juana will be exposed to the effects of their polity's parliamentary elections for several decades longer than Juan. That difference in affectedness, however, is virtually eradicated if we also consider posthumous exposure time. Death being infinite, the initial difference between Juan's and Juana's affectedness (due to

¹⁵ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing and formulating this case, and for suggesting it as the best interpretation of Poama and Volacu's following claim: that the AAP implies granting older citizens more voting power than younger citizens in "elections where [their] interests are *equally* affected" (2021, 15, emphasis in original). (If the reviewer's suggested interpretation is correct, Poama and Volacu's phrasing should, strictly speaking, read: '*equally* affected in all other respects.')

¹⁶ For a helpful review, see Taylor (2012).

differential pre-death exposure) becomes infinitesimally small. Juan might thus effectively sustain his antemortem voting power in parliamentary elections by appealing to posthumous affectedness. My age-weighting analysis may then be correct in principle, while irrelevant in practice. Will this objection from ‘posthumous interests’ work?

Although not without intuitive appeal, the idea of posthumous harm (or benefit) has proved difficult to explain satisfactorily. The main philosophical challenge is to explain how an antemortem person can be harmed (or benefited) by something that happens to the postmortem person without relying upon the metaphysically dubious idea of backwards causation. Because it is implausible to claim that there is no difference between a person before and after her death, and because postmortem persons cannot plausibly be harmed, *what happens to the postmortem person* must be shown to *cause harm to the antemortem person* (Pitcher 1984). As Taylor has argued, in my view persuasively, there are significant gaps in all the main attempts to avoid relying upon backwards causation (2012; 2013). At any rate, if the objection from posthumous interests does rely upon the controversial idea of posthumous harm, it poses, I submit, at best a potential challenge to my analysis.

Interestingly, however, Bengtson (2020) has argued that we need not rely upon the idea of posthumous harm to show that the AAP implies enfranchising the dead. Instead, we may appeal to what he calls ‘legal affectedness.’ It is worth considering whether his analysis may support a version of the present objection. What Bengtson has in mind is being subject to laws that “confer the power to establish legal relationships,” such as those “defining the terms of valid patents” (2020, 93). Noting that Steve Jobs was legally “conferred 141 patents posthumously,” Bengtson claims that, “if the polity decides to vote on [whether to sustain that power-conferring] law [...] Steve Jobs has a claim for being included” (2020, 93). Importantly, because Bengtson wants to show *that posthumous harm is unnecessary* for AAP-based inclusion, he claims that the postmortem person’s being subject to power-conferring laws *as such* is sufficient for inclusion (i.e. regardless of whether those laws harm or benefit the antemortem person): “[s]uppose the dead person is granted legal power of patent but the person, while alive [...] did not care. [...] However, he would still be legally affected [although receiving the legal power] posthumously would then clearly neither harm nor benefit him” (2020, 94).

Should ‘legal affectedness’ in Bengtson’s sense count as being relevantly affected? I think not. Consider two problems. First, because the antemortem person is stipulated not to care about whether she has the posthumous legal power, the interest of hers that is allegedly affected by the decision has no bearing upon how she lives (lived) her life. Enfranchising such interests yields an intuitively implausible account of the AAP’s metric. At the very least, such metrics, to my knowledge, have not yet been defended by any proponent of (any version of) the all-affected principle.¹⁷ Second, and related, because antemortem people are stipulated not to care about the posthumous patent law decision, it becomes unclear whether the antemortem person can even be said to have a stake in that decision in the first place. On the present (and normal) understanding of stakes, for a person to have a stake in a decision, at least one decision alternative must frustrate or promote her interests relative to the status quo. Because the antemortem person in Bengtson’s case, by stipulation, is *neither harmed*

¹⁷ Metrics instead focus upon interests that people find (more or less) significant in how they go about leading their lives. Examples include interests in the satisfaction of one’s “vital needs” (Held 2010, 72) or “basic human rights” (Gould 2014, 203), or in living an autonomous life (Angell 2019).

nor benefited by the decision, she has no stake.¹⁸ Bengtson's proposal, then, is irrelevant for the AAP (as it is normally understood). What he calls 'legal affectedness' involves no affectedness at all. Hence, it cannot trigger inclusion of the dead, and is therefore unable to support the present objection. The objection from 'posthumous interests' must thus revert to relying upon the controversial notion of posthumous harm, and its challenge to my analysis remains inconclusive.

12 Objection Five: Gosseries on the Elderly's Self-respect

Axel Gosseries has recently argued that a 'core objection' to reducing the elderly's voting power is that doing so threatens their sense of self-respect (2022, 164). Loss of self-respect is clearly a significant bad, and I cannot rule out that it might ensue if the age-weighting scheme I suggest is implemented. Having said that, it seems to me equally pertinent to worry about young people's self-respect under current voting arrangements. Their having no more power than the elderly, despite being affected to a much larger degree, might threaten young people's self-respect. If so, my proposal might effectively balance or even outweigh the bad of losses of self-respect among the elderly. Gosseries' objection will then not undermine my age-weighting analysis. It might instead be inconclusive or even supportive of my case, because age-weighting might perform no worse or even better than its non-age-weighted alternative.

Moreover, if people were to acknowledge (correctly) that proportional voting does *not* imply that those with lesser power are moral inferiors, a loss of self-respect would be avoided. Age-weighted voting could thus be combined with policies that help combat erroneous beliefs among voters. If they work, then Gosseries' objection becomes at most a transitional worry.

If self-respect losses are sufficiently bad and unfixable, I concede that my case for age-weighting might be overridden. However, it is important to underline that age-weighting would then be defeated not because it lacks democratic credentials, but because it tends to produce (too) bad consequences.

13 Other Proxies?

Let me now end by raising an issue which is not so much an objection to my analysis as a call for further inquiry. I have argued that voting power should be proportional to stakes and that age is a good proxy for affectedness. Even if one accepts that, one might wonder if there are *other* relevant proxies. The most plausible candidate here is arguably people's *socioeconomic status*. The idea is that poor people are typically more vulnerable to political decisions. Consider rollbacks of the welfare state. If we reduce public spending on education, health care, et cetera, poor people cannot to the same degree as rich people offset those policy changes by buying services on the private market.

¹⁸ It makes no difference here to introduce 'possibilist' or 'normative' decision alternatives (see note 3). Because Bengtson aims to establish the relevance of legal affectedness *as such*, he must assume that the antemortem person is *indifferent* also to such alternatives.

Now if the socioeconomic status variable does have such effects, I am happy to combine it with my analysis. In fact, on the reasonable assumption that wealth tends to accumulate with age, adding socioeconomic status to the mix only *further increases* young people's relative affectedness, thus *reinforcing* the weighting pattern I defend. Indeed, it would be astonishing if using socioeconomic status as a proxy turned out, in general, to fully counteract the pattern suggested by my age-proxy. For that to be the case, young people would presumably have to start out at the top of the wealth pyramid before gradually becoming poorer until they die. While such patterns are certainly not impossible – perhaps resulting from carefully designed tax and inheritance policies – it is very hard to envisage that they would ensue more spontaneously.

To be clear, I do not intend to claim that age is the only relevant proxy for affectedness and hence for people's voting weights. My present message is rather that age is a good one, at least in normal circumstances. If it eventually turns out that people's overall affectedness, either in general or in specific cases, is better tracked by one or more other proxies, I shall have no quarrel with those results. At any rate, the present analysis, or so I believe, is sufficient to establish a presumption in favor of age-weighting of votes.

14 Conclusion

Many believe that a properly democratic polity includes all those affected by or subjected to its decision-making. Many also believe that age-weighting of votes has no place in a democracy worthy of the name. If my analysis is correct, these two beliefs sit uncomfortably together. Those who accept the all-affected principle or the all-subjected principle in the abstract have reason to endorse a weighting-sensitive version of the relevant principle, and in turn to endorse age-weighting of votes in various types of political decisions, at least under realistic circumstances.

I have no illusion that my analysis will make age-weighting significantly less controversial. However, I hope to have done enough to show that we may build a case for age-weighting from either of the two dominant principles of democratic inclusion; that several important objections to age-weighting – and to weighting in general – overstate their own strength; and that some of them might even support age-weighting. As I have indicated where appropriate, I have not shown that my age-weighting analysis may decisively overcome all the objections. So the debate surely remains open on several fronts. I nonetheless conclude, at least for now, that the case for increasing young people's voting power is – perhaps surprisingly – in quite decent shape.

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