

CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO VOTE: THE MISSING LINK IN MODERN DEMOCRACIES

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Rulers and ruling classes are under a necessity of considering the interests and wishes of those who have the suffrage; but of those who are excluded, it is in their option whether they will do so or not; and however honestly disposed, they are in general too fully occupied with things they *must* attend to, to have much room in their thoughts for anything which they can with impunity disregard.

– John Stuart Mill (1861) (*italics in the original*)

The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds.

– John Maynard Keynes (1936)

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, we want to show how children and minors are fundamental in any consideration of the major issues and goals of economics and politics, especially with regard to the relationship between democracy, well-being and economic development. Children's well-being is a valuable goal in itself, and given that minors represent the long-distant future, it is also a measure of the economic potential of each country and the world. Despite its inherent value and economic importance, children's

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well-being is an issue largely overlooked by politicians, and the main theme of this chapter is that this is inevitable because there is no political incentive for politicians to address it. As a consequence, the second aim of this chapter is to argue that granting children the right to vote would provide the best political incentive, as well as the missing link in modern democracies. We propose some reasons as to why extending the right to vote to minors represents the full achievement of universal suffrage for a mature society, rendering democracy absolute and improving its economic potential. Parents, who already represent their children's interests in everyday decisions, should naturally be entitled to represent them in the polling booth as well, qualifying their participation in the functioning of democracy through their role as parents. We argue that this change in electoral rules would force politicians to consider children, pushing minors' well-being to the top of all political parties' agendas and prompting the market and politics to ensure a better allocation of resources between generations.

The chapter is organized as follows. In Sections "Children, missing endowments, family decisions and the market mechanism" and "Children, missing interests and democracy," we lay the theoretical economic and political foundations for our arguments, pointing to the consequences of the missing vote for children and their unheard voice in the decision-making processes of democracy. Sections "Intergenerational resource allocation and child poverty" and "History matters: Irreversibility and efficiency of early childhood investments" analyze the two main issues concerning children's well-being: the question of intergenerational equality (see also the chapter by Johansen, this volume) and the crucial importance of well-being during early childhood for later achievement as a youth and adult. Section "Equality of opportunity from birth, incentive and 'good' consequences" further analyzes the issue of the moment of birth as the starting point for pursuing real political equality of opportunity, putting the relationship between merits and rewards into a clearer context. Section "The economic risk of childbearing and the fertility rate: Private virtues and social vices" further analyzes intergenerational equality from the point of view of the risk of childbearing and its consequences on the fertility rate. Section "Do suffrage and political 'sympathy' matter for the achievement of social outcomes?" asks the question of whether changing the rules of the political game also implies a change in political decisions and the related allocation of resources, and brings together recent studies which indeed confirm this relationship. Sections "Who should represent the economic interest of minors politically?" and "Parents represent their children's interests in everyday life: Why not in politics too?" ask who should represent the

economic interests of minors politically, and we give reasons as to why their parents would be the most natural answer. Extending the right to vote to children would complete the democratic process, with potential social and economic advantages.

CHILDREN, MISSING ENDOWMENTS, FAMILY DECISIONS AND THE MARKET MECHANISM

The theory of competitive markets assumes the existence of two agents, the household and the firm (Arrow & Hahn, 1971); although the "black box" inside the firm has been explored over the past thirty years, its counterpart within the household still requires closer investigation, especially with regard to internal decision-making processes. The theory of market mechanisms assumes that households have preferences and an initial endowment of goods and a potential labor supply as exogenously given; the inclusion of children in this framework raises some new and interesting questions, as regards both preferences and initial endowment.

The assumption of a positive initial endowment is necessary because it is essential for exchanges in the markets, and therefore for their efficiency. Household members will go to the market and exchange goods or labor services with a positive value there, for other goods or services in such a way as to maximize the household's utility according to their given preferences. If and how children have a special role in this process has still to be investigated. It would seem obvious that the initial endowment cannot include child labor for physical reasons (see the chapters by Close and Qvortrup, this volume); this is certainly true while they are still babies or toddlers, but it is a sad historical fact that during the early stages of the industrial revolution, the exploitation of child labor was common, to the point that the abolition of child factory labor, together with free education, was proposed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848) as one of their required changes for a new society in their *Manifesto*. A succession of factory acts gradually extended the protection of children in economically advanced countries, but the problem still exists and is widespread in less-developed countries. The exploitation of child labor is normally driven by the fight for survival, the accomplishment of the latter usually being taken as an assumption in theoretical analysis. However, the adoption of a "survival assumption" is a weakness because it takes as given what should instead be proven, that is the market mechanism can achieve efficiency while allowing children to survive.

Thomas Payne was clearly aware that initial endowment was a problem when, in 1796, he proposed that out of a national fund "there shall be paid to every person, when arrived at the age of twenty-one years, the sum of fifteen pounds sterling, as a compensation, in part, for the loss for his or her natural inheritance" (quoted from van Parijs, 1997, p. 45). This proposal, which has received attention from scholars and politicians in more recent years, suffers from a crucial flaw in that at the age of twenty-one inequalities and disadvantage are already established: if the initial endowment is intended to compensate for social and natural inheritance inequalities, it should be granted at least partially from birth, possibly diluting its distribution until the age of majority.

With regard to households' preferences, children are valuable in the marketplace as far as their needs have a market value, as expressed on their behalf by their parents; we must note a crucial distinction between family and markets, because markets are supposed to reward agents according to their merits, whereas inside the family resources are usually allocated according to needs rather than merits, which is obvious in the case of early childhood. If families with children are financially constrained, the satisfaction of the children's needs will also inevitably be constrained, in some cases to the bare minimum, whereas a socially desirable goal would be that children should be the least constrained. To the question of whether the market mechanism can achieve this socially desirable goal through the working of a competitive price system, the answer is no, because the children's needs that society would want to satisfy (almost) without economic constraints cannot be fully included in a low-income household's effective demand at the given prices. To achieve this socially desirable goal for children, the efficiency of the market mechanism would have to be supported by an appropriate reallocation of resources (possibly with a larger share for unconstrained in-kind programs). This is known as the Second Theorem of Welfare Economics (Varian, 1992).

The presence of children implies a generalization of the concept of incentive compatibility, originally introduced by Hurwicz (1972, 2006): the basic idea is that to achieve a socially desirable goal, such as the aggregation of decentralized decisions of firms and households in the marketplace, we need rules and institutions that give these actors the incentive to reveal their true preferences. A well-known example is Vickrey's auction mechanism, which is ingeniously designed so as to give the bidder the incentive to reveal his true willingness to pay: he submits his offer in a sealed-bid auction, with the known rule that if his bid is the highest, he will pay the second-highest price. It is intuitively clear that he will respond to the incentive to reveal his

true willingness to pay given that he will not have to pay this amount, while he would like to avoid being outbid. The question is whether we can conceive of an analogous mechanism by which children's preferences and their long-term interests can be transmitted to the market through a political mechanism, to achieve their needs with the minimum amount of constraints, as a socially desirable goal.

CHILDREN, MISSING INTERESTS AND DEMOCRACY

Although prices are the main factor in the market mechanism, votes are the main factor in the political mechanism. Votes can be considered as the equivalent of a voice, as proposed by Hirschman (1970). The analogy of competition for sales between firms and competition for votes between political parties follows Schumpeter (1942) and his widely accepted concept of democracy, defined as the "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (p. 269). According to this view, competition is the driving force in both the market and the political arena; there are however major differences. It is politics, through parliament and the government, which chooses the most suitable mechanism for achieving the desired goal, and as a consequence the institutional organization and market rules which are implied. Moreover, a relevant share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is allocated following political, rather than market, rules: public expenditures represent approximately 30% of the GDP in the United States and Japan and approximately 45% in Europe.

The principal-agent framework is useful for explaining the conflict of interest in all the economic relationships where the outcome desired by the principal, for example a patient, can only be achieved through the decision of an agent, for example a physician; the problem is the potential conflict of interest if the physician's utility function is not the same as the patient's. The principal-agent relationship is also a useful framework for analyzing the political relationship between citizens and politicians: the voting citizen is the principal, whereas the politician and his political party are the agent acting in his interest. The politician seeks election and political clout, competing with other politicians for citizens' votes, whereas his party seeks parliamentary majority. In striving to achieve electoral success, the

politician or his party try to discover, aggregate and satisfy citizens' preferences, according to the equality principle implied by the rule of "one man one vote." The crucial point here is that minors, a substantial share of the population, are missing from the political competition, and, as a consequence, their economic and social interests are largely overlooked: according to UN statistics in 2006, the percentage of the population less than 15 years old was 28% worldwide (1,846 million out of a total population of 6,593 million), 41.2% in Africa, 29.5% in Latin America and the Caribbean, 20.3% in Northern America, 27.6% in Asia, 15.7% in Europe and 24.7% in Oceania (United Nation, 2008, p. 52). The close relationship between interests and political representation was clear to John Stuart Mill (1861) who neatly understood that

rulers and ruling classes are under a necessity of considering the interests and wishes of those who have the suffrage; but of those who are excluded, it is in their option whether they will do so or not; and however honestly disposed, they are in general too fully occupied with things they *must* attend to, to have much room in their thoughts for anything which they can with impunity disregard. (*italics in the original*)

Children's interests are missing in the competition for votes to win the elections, thus inevitably distorting attempts to achieve justice, welfare and liberty, to which all modern constitutions are committed; this issue, despite its numerical and political relevance, has received only scanty attention from scholars and social scientists.

Robert Dahl has perhaps provided the most compelling political argument against the inclusion of children in the political process: he provides an extensive discussion of different views on the concept of citizenship, and considering too narrow and only procedural Schumpeter's concept, he proposes a view of democracy and political equality, which applies only to adults "because the only defensible ground on which to exclude children from the demos is that they are not fully qualified [to govern] ... [and as a consequence] any assertion of a universal right of all persons to membership in a demos cannot be sustained" (Dahl, 1989, p. 127). He also proposes exclusion from the class of adult members of transients and persons judged to be mentally defective. Admittedly Dahl's arguments rationalize a view that is nowadays commonly accepted, as it was commonly accepted until a century ago that women were not qualified to vote. Oddly enough he does not raise the question of whether the aims of democracy such as effective equality of opportunities could be seriously undermined by the fact that the interests of a significant share of the population (approximately 20% of the European population is less than 18

years old) are denied political representation. In fact, as Dahl (1989, p. 129) himself concedes, democracy is an instrument for achieving common desired goals, but "an exclusive demos is unlikely to protect the interests of those who are excluded. 'Universal teaching must precede universal enfranchisement', Mill wrote. But it was not until *after* the extension of the suffrage in 1868 that Parliament passed the first act establishing public elementary schools. The historical record since then has demonstrated even more fully that when a large class of adults is excluded from citizenship their interests will almost certainly not be given equal consideration. Perhaps the most convincing evidence is provided by the exclusion of southern blacks from political life in the United States until the late 1960s."

Democracy is a social institution, a mechanism like the market, and what matters is how the goals that a society wants to realize are really achieved; these goals are in turn the result of the common and shared values of a community, ranging from the family to the whole of human society. In fact, the election of a United States President of African origin would have not been conceivable fifty years ago, but on closer investigation this is in fact the outcome of new rules and institutions.

INTERGENERATIONAL RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND CHILD POVERTY

All official sources show clearly the existence of a serious inequality problem regarding intergenerational resource allocation according to age, which substantially penalizes minors and children; recent significant results include the following.

A new OECD Report (2008, p. 191) for the main advanced countries shows clearly that minors experience the heaviest burden of material deprivation, as measured by situations such as inadequate heating, restricted food choices, overcrowding, poor environmental conditions, arrears in paying utilities, arrears in mortgage or rents and inability to make ends meet. This result is very important because it points directly to the outcome of not having a monetary measure of the level of subsistence, which we now analyze.

Another report by the European Commission entitled *Child Poverty in the EU* (2008) shows that although in 2005 the population aged 0–17 in the EU-27 was 97.5 million, 10 million less than that in 1995, "yet, in 2005, 19 million children lived under the poverty threshold in the EU-27, meaning that 19% of children were at risk of poverty, against 16% for the total

population" (*ibid.*, p. 13). In all European countries, the risk-of-poverty rates for children increase with the size of the family and are highest for single parents (*ibid.*, Table A1). The report explains differing child poverty rates with three main factors: whether both parents are working, their work "intensity" (ranging from joblessness to full-time job) and government social transfers. The first two factors are market-related, whereas social transfer is instead policy-determined; in this regard the report shows "a strong relationship between the amount spent on social protection (excluding pensions) and the impact of social transfers measured as the percentage of reduction in the poverty rate once social benefits other than pensions are taken into account" (*ibid.*, p. 39). The report provides much new information on child poverty but it is, perhaps inevitably, rather non-specific when it comes to policy proposals.

UNICEF and Innocenti Research Centre (2007) have recently addressed the broader issue of child well-being from a wider perspective, ranking the more advanced countries on the basis of six criteria, which include, beyond material well-being and poverty, aspects such as education, family and peer relationships, behavior and risks, subjective well-being. One of the main findings of the report is that "no country features in the top third for all six dimensions of child well-being (though the Netherlands and Sweden come close to doing so)." Although these results show that no country is without problems, perhaps the main contribution of the report is the endeavor to break down the major aspects of child well-being, many of which have a direct political implication and afford a richer notion of democracy. A step forward is the effort to address the issue in absolute terms, rather than in the form of rankings, indicating an absolute level of well-being for children, which an advanced democratic society cannot fall short of understandably a difficult undertaking.

To better assess the impact of social transfers – clearly the result of a policy decision – on poverty rates, we take as a specific measure of their efficiency the decrease in the population at risk of poverty after social transfer in the EU-27 countries, as officially measured by Eurostat in 2006. We run a simple Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, taking the efficiency of social transfers (excluding pensions) as a dependent variable, measured by the decrease from ex-ante to ex-post risk-of-poverty rates (DEC), and two specific items within all the social transfer programs as explanatory variables, namely transfers for family and children (FAM) and transfers for disability (DIS), as a percentage of GDP. Regression estimates (Table 1) show that the efficiency of social transfer improves with increasing resource allocation to families, children and the disabled; this is a clear

Table 1. Efficiency of Social Protection Expenditures.

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	Probability
C	0.772236	1.366521	0.565111	0.5772
DIS	2.479314	0.694015	3.572422	0.0015
FAM	2.138589	0.780091	2.741461	0.0114
R-squared	0.686504	Mean dependent variable		9.777778
Adjusted R-squared	0.660379	S.D. dependent variable		4.651992
S.E. of regression	2.711040	Akaike info criterion		4.936981
Sum squared resid	176.3938	Schwarz criterion		5.080963
Log likelihood	-63.64925	F-statistic		26.27800
Durbin-Watson stat	2.604266	Prob(F-statistic)		0.000001

Notes: Dependent variable: DEC; method: least squares; sample: 1 27; included observations: 27. DEC = decrease: ex-ante risk-of-poverty-rate – ex-post risk-of-poverty rate; C = constant; DIS = transfers for disability as a percentage of GDP; FAM = transfers for family and children as a percentage of GDP.

indication that in many countries political decisions are clearly wide of the mark with regard to child poverty. The missing original endowment for children, as measured in monetary or multidimensional terms, is therefore the other side of the coin of their missing representation: the missing political representation of children is not only an issue concerning equality but also a matter for concern as regards efficiency.

HISTORY MATTERS: IRREVERSIBILITY AND EFFICIENCY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD INVESTMENTS

A growing body of research shows that what happens in early childhood, in terms of quality of health and nutrition, material deprivation and poverty, lack of parental care and presence, poor emotional environment, has a profound and enduring influence on educational and economic achievements later in a child's life, while still young and then in adulthood. Cumulative effects, so common in social sciences, are clearly present in early childhood, and as a consequence any deprivation suffered by a child is likely to have consequences for the rest of his or her life, worsening rather than improving. The history of early childhood determines the path (dependence) of the adult, and when children reach the age of 18, they are already endowed with character, personal traits and values, education, income and peer relationships; most of what really matters for their future has already

happened. The crucial political implication is that the goal of ensuring equal opportunities, central to all modern democracies, is meaningless unless it is pursued as of birth. The economic implication is also crucial, in that public and private resources devoted to early childhood are much more in the nature of irreversible investment than current expenditures.

When the initial conditions of a dynamic process, such as a child's birth and early childhood, heavily influence the direction of its further evolution, we are in a situation where "history matters," and because of the influence of the initial conditions, this evolution is called "path dependent" (David, 2007). As Arrow (2004) states, there is path dependence if the limit of an evolving system depends on the initial conditions, as in the case of a drop of rain falling on a hill and which will eventually go into a valley, but which valley depends on the point of initial contact with the ground; his crucial suggestion is that the root of path dependence lies in the irreversibility of investments. He concludes that the aspect common to all the examples of path dependence is the durability of the capital, to be taken in a broad sense, such as the irreversibility of human capital investment.

Overcoming the empirical problems of collecting long-term panel data, in recent years, a growing body of economic research has confirmed how crucial early childhood investments are for the future outcome of the ensuing adult, as well as for overall economic efficiency. Feinstein (2003) shows the existence of a strong relationship between the socio-economic status (SES) of children at their birth and the subsequent development of their cognitive abilities. The gap between high and low SES is self-reinforcing over time and further polarizing, because children whose initial abilities are low are less compensated than those of the families with a high SES. He argues that "family background clearly plays a tremendously important role in determining the continued development of ability of UK children."

Recent works by James Heckman have further extended our knowledge of the relevance of early childhood on the subsequent economic performance of the adults and the economy. His insight, again, concerns the crucial importance of early intervention, because skills beget skills, and learning begets learning according to a cumulative process that influences the quality of the labor force and, through this channel, output and productivity growth too (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). Moreover, there are also substantial social benefits associated with less crimes and social deviance. Heckman (2008) estimates that about half of the inequality in the present value of lifetime earnings is due to factors determined by the age of 18, whereas the family plays a powerful but not adequately recognized role in shaping adult outcomes.

The traditional concept of human capital is becoming richer, to include not only formal education, i.e. cognitive ability, but also values and behavioral traits such as motivation, tenacity and discipline in pursuing a goal, which seem to have an economic value in the marketplace and which are known as non-cognitive abilities. Recent literature has tried to identify which personal traits are more relevant, and there is at present a consensus on a group of five, the so-called big five, which are Openness to experiences, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism (emotional stability) (summarized by the acronym OCEAN). The policy implication is also relevant: although schools and universities play the major role in cognitive development, for values and personal traits the major role is played by the family, especially during childhood.

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY FROM BIRTH, INCENTIVE AND "GOOD" CONSEQUENCES

The principle of equal opportunity, central to all notions of democracy, is compatible with that of meritocracy to the extent to which each individual can be taken as fully responsible for his efforts and choices. On the contrary, the incentive argument behind the relationship between efforts and choices is constrained by equality considerations if equal opportunity is not fully feasible. We can represent this fundamental trilemma in Fig. 1.

Adult rewards and merits are fully deserved as long as they are the result of effort and choice, if there is equality of opportunities; otherwise, inequality of opportunity puts a constraint, either mild or strong, on merits and rewards. The choice of whether to give equality from the moment of birth is aptly summarized by Romer (2000, p. 18) who argues that "there is

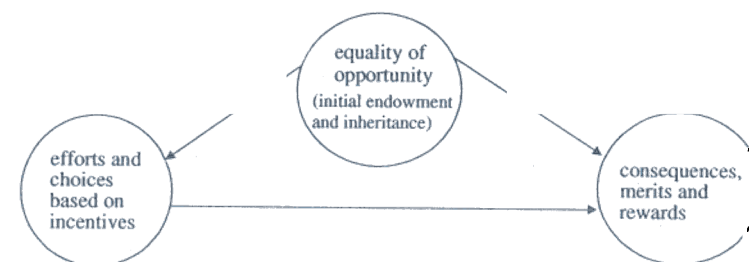


Fig. 1. The Social Trilemma.

in the notion of equality of opportunity a 'before' and an 'after': before the competition starts opportunities must be equalized, by social intervention if need be, but after it begins individuals are on their own. The different views of equal opportunity can be categorized according to where they place the starting gate that marks the point after which they are on their own". In our view there is in fact a road, with an initial and a final gate: the initial gate is the moment of birth, whereas the final gate is the conventional age for adulthood; this view seems to be coherent with Heckman's empirical results, quoted earlier, but at the same time we have to recognize that the trilemma is the symbol of an intrinsic tension between political values and economic incentives, even if both point to same goal of efficiency and meritocracy.

The word "meritocracy" was introduced by Young (1958), whose formulation of merit as the sum of intelligence and effort ($M = I + E$) is still quoted, although inappropriately, because he also underlined how much education builds on initial mental endowment. In other words, genetic and cultural endowments are closely intertwined. Moreover, as Sen (2000) argues merit and rewards are indeed instrumental with respect to the consequences of the actions taken on their basis; "good" consequences need to be evaluated with reference to a notion of a "good" and just society, of which distributional concerns should be part, as happens with payments to top executives. Rawls' (1971, p. 101) theory of justice is in this respect rather radical because he regards "the distribution of natural talents as a common asset" whose benefits are to be commonly shared, a view which is questioned by Arrow (1973, p. 99) who points to the economic and ethical tension between equality of opportunity and rewards, because of the conflict with the "productivity principle" whereby individuals are entitled to the results of their efforts.

Rawls' approach does however have a solid rationale: he argues that "no one deserves his place in the distribution of native endowments, any more than one deserves one's initial starting place in society." He goes even further, arguing that "the assertion that a man deserves the superior character that enables him to make the effort to cultivate his abilities is equally problematic; for his character depends in large part upon fortunate family and social circumstances for which he can claim no credit. The notion of desert seems not to apply to these cases" (Rawls, 1971, p. 104). In fact, we need to generalize Rawls' intuition and address the generally neglected question about meritocracy, i.e. the fundamental issue of inheritance. Inherited economic wealth, both real and financial, as well as parents' values and human wealth, define how wide the field of opportunities open to each

child is. The issue of initial endowment is fundamental for any economic policy striving to achieve effective equality of opportunity.

The perspective proposed here allows us to draw some general indications: first, the goal of equal opportunity for each child has to be put properly in the context of his family, as growing empirical research confirms. More specifically, the problem of initial endowment, or wealth inherited, is fundamental, although really difficult to tackle; however, the ideal of equality of opportunity is meaningless without efforts to achieve more equality of initial wealth. Second, the crucial importance of non-cognitive abilities and personal traits acquired in very early childhood stress the role and responsibility of the family; the concept of human capital needs to be enlarged and enriched accordingly. Third, distributional issues implied by assuring equal opportunity from birth to each child in a "good" society can be empirically tested against the degree of social mobility measurable in a society. In this regard, it is worth noting the persistency of intergenerational correlation in socio-economic conditions and adverse trends in social mobility, as evidenced by research in many advanced countries, including the United States, which have always seen themselves as the "land of opportunity." Despite this common belief, the intergenerational elasticity of permanent income remains high (0.6) and one in two of the children born into a household in the lowest income decile will not rise further than the lowest third. Fourth, it is always worth remembering that equality of opportunity does not imply equality of results, outcomes, income distribution, health or SES: equality in one domain such as the life opportunity inevitably implies inequality in other domains. Even at a theoretical level, *ex-ante* equality does almost always imply *ex-post* inequality, in a world of uncertainty (Hammond, 1981). The real issue is therefore determining the levels of *ex-post* income and social inequality, of income and (even more so) of wealth, that a society is willing to accept and, in addition, the safety net to be provided should this level not be reached.

THE ECONOMIC RISK OF CHILDBEARING AND THE FERTILITY RATE: PRIVATE VIRTUES AND SOCIAL VICIES

There are major issues, ranging from the environment to the public debt, for which politicians ask citizens to make sacrifices for the sake of the future, embodied by our children; there is obvious incongruity in calling for these

sacrifices while denying the children any weight as citizens. Although they do indeed represent our common future, or better our main common good, in contrast with other kinds of public goods, family and households are required to bear most of the cost of childbearing and child raising. A steady population requires a fertility rate of 2.1, but in the EU countries only France has recently come very close to this value, while for many years Germany, Italy and Spain have been recording a much lower value, which is now around 1.3, despite the contribution of new immigrants. The dramatic change in age structure of the declining population in many European countries has already had a distinct and slowing impact on potential economic growth and productivity, whose more serious and immediate consequences imply serious imbalances for the pension system and the labor market. Children are the common good of our future, but their cost is mostly a private family concern, and as a consequence an economic risk too often borne privately rather than socially. The private cost of childbearing is too high, and the common good of the future embodied by our children is therefore under provided for. The following analysis provides new empirical evidence for this claim.

Family/household size has a direct impact on the welfare of the children and the decision to have the first or a further child; the crucial point is that the risk-of-poverty rates for children increase with the number of children. For the EU-25, the child poverty rate is 19% on average: it increases from 12% for couples with one child to 14% for couples with two children and to 25% for couples with three children or more. The pattern is common to the majority of the EU countries, with the exception of Finland, Denmark and Germany (European Commission, 2008, Table A1); however, there are no exceptions for couples with three or more children, whose poverty rate is uniformly higher than that of the couples with two children. The decision to have one more child is economically risky in many countries for couples who already have one child and is much more risky in all countries for the couples with three children or more. We have to remember that the fertility rate compatible with a steady-state population is in fact the average of a statistical distribution representing the most private and decentralized family decision, the trade-off between actual and desired number of children, given economic and social constraints.

To gain a deeper understanding of the economic and social variables that influence a family's decision to have a child or one more child, we draw on a wide survey carried out by the Eurobarometer program, with regard to "Childbearing and Family Issues in Europe" (Eurobarometer Special, 2006).

The data available are for 29 European countries in 2006, on which we run two OLS cross-sections; the dependent variable is the fertility rate, whereas as independent variables we take:

- a) the percentage of women aged 15–39 who when responding to the question "Generally speaking, what do you think is the ideal number of children for a family?" answered three children or more (THREE). The percentages range from a high of 46% for Sweden, 45% for Finland, France and Ireland and 41% for Denmark to a low of 7% for Romania, 8% for Austria, 16% for Portugal and Malta, 18% for Germany and 19% for Italy (*ibid.*, Table 5). This measure is intended to capture the cultural dimension of families' fertility decisions, but it is also a critical value for a stable population, given the distribution of fertility rates around the value of 2.1 children;
- b) the percentage of males 15–39 who when responding to the question "According to you, how important is each of the following in the decision on whether to have or not to have a/another child?" answered referring to the working situation of the father and the working situation of the mother (*ibid.*, Table 21). The importance of the father's work (MWMale), as viewed by the males, ranges from a high of 87% for Greece and 83% for Bulgaria to a low of 36% for Finland and 28% for Denmark. The importance of the mother's work (MWFemale), as viewed by the males, ranges from a high of 58% for Portugal, 55% for Turkey and 54% for Spain to a low of 17% for Denmark and Finland and 15% for France. This measure is intended to capture the family's economic constraints from the man's viewpoint;
- c) the percentage of females 15–39 who when responding to the question "According to you, how important is each of the following in the decision on whether to have or not to have a/another child?" answered the working situation of the father and the working situation of the mother (*ibid.*, Table 21). The importance of the father's work (FWMale) ranges from a high of 90% for Greece and 85% for Turkey to a low of 24% for Denmark and 34% for Finland. The importance of the mother's work (FWFemale) ranges from a high of 68% for Portugal and 63% for Spain to a low of 11% for Finland and 25% for France. This measure is intended to capture the family's financial constraints from the woman's point of view.

The estimates of the regressions (Table 2) show that according to the interpretation given to the dependent variables, cultural and economic

Table 2. Fertility Rates.

Variable	Coefficient		t-Statistic	Probability
C	1.860747	0.154197	12.06737	0.0000
THREE	0.006417	0.002170	2.956571	0.0069
MWMALE	-0.006522	0.002227	-2.928674	0.0073
MWFEMALE	-0.003582	0.002826	-1.267427	0.2172
R-squared	0.733470	Mean dependent variable		1.485000
Adjusted R-squared	0.700154	S.D. dependent variable		0.219435
S.E. of regression	0.120159	Akaike info criterion		-1.268442
Sum squared resid	0.346515	Schwarz criterion		-1.078127
Log likelihood	21.75819	F-statistic		22.01542
Durbin-Watson stat	2.198427	Prob(F-statistic)		0.000000
C	1.752875	0.145817	12.02106	0.0000
THREE	0.007203	0.002130	3.382057	0.0025
FWMALE	-0.003469	0.002315	-1.498266	0.1471
FWFEMALE	-0.005225	0.002482	-2.105105	0.0459
R-squared	0.729370	Mean dependent variable		1.485000
Adjusted R-squared	0.695541	S.D. dependent variable		0.219435
S.E. of regression	0.121080	Akaike info criterion		-1.253175
Sum squared resid	0.351846	Schwarz criterion		-1.062860
Log likelihood	21.54445	F-statistic		21.56066
Durbin-Watson stat	2.265366	Prob(F-statistic)		0.000001

Notes: Dependent variable: FER; method: least squares; sample: 1 28; included observations: 28. FER = fertility rates; C = constant; THREE = percentage of women who consider "ideal" a family with three children; MWMALE = percentage of males who consider the work situation of the male important; MWFEMALE = percentage of males who consider the work situation of the female important; FWMALE = percentage of women who consider the work situation of the male important; FWFEMALE = percentage of women who consider the work situation of the female important.

factors influence simultaneously a family's decision to have the first child or more children. The estimates suggest at least two interpretations:

- a) the critical number of three children can, indeed, be interpreted as a cultural and social value interacting with the fathers' and mothers' financial situation, which is statistically significant from both the male and the female points of view. In others words, the fertility rate is positively influenced when three children are considered an ideal "normal" family size, as in Sweden and France, while taking into account the interaction with the family's financial situation; this appears

to be a fundamental condition for achieving a stable level of population and a well-balanced age structure;

- b) the work situation of the family members represents an economic constraint (negative sign) on the couple's decision to have the first or more children; estimates show that the work situation is relatively more important for the males, from their perspective, as it is relatively more important for the females, from their perspective. It is however true that in absolute terms, the importance of the male's work, from the male perspective, is uniformly higher than the importance of female's work, from the female perspective.

As is revealed quite clearly by the cases of France and Sweden, having one or more children is therefore less risky in the countries where the ideal family size of three children can be considered "normal," given a distribution of fertility rates around this value and institutions which support this common and shared knowledge in financial terms; in the European countries, financial constraints are revealed as being crucial for the planning of offspring. As a consequence, the ex-ante number of desired children does not materialize as the ex-post actual number, and although the mean ideal number of children is above 2.1 for males and females in all countries, with an average of 2.25 for EU-15 and EU-25, the fertility rate is well below this value for many countries such as Germany, Italy and Spain, and with the exception of a few countries such as France and Sweden. Along with cultural values, there are financial and other interacting constraints, and our estimates are compatible with this empirical evidence. According to the survey, financial constraints may be relaxed with work income, more so for the male, together with a policy of income transfers, as shown previously. A policy for improving job opportunities and family income stability for men and women is crucial for the relaxation of financial constraints, as are policies for improving the reconciliation of work with family life; together with a comprehensive policy for social transfers to the family, this policy can help to reduce the financial risk of having more children.

Private costs interact at the intergenerational level with some of the most pressing social macroeconomic issues in European economies, particularly for the labor market and even more so for the pension system, which is basically a problem of transferring goods, services, assets and purchasing power over time for each generational cohort, from youth to old age. The proper working of a pension system implies that society will have a future in the long run and a balanced age population structure; this is not the present

situation. The old-age-dependency ratio, that is the percentage ratio between the total number of persons aged 65 or over and the number of persons of working age, 15–64, was highest in Germany and Italy (30.4) and lowest for countries such as France (25.0) and the Czech Republic (20.5) (Eurostat, 2008). The average for the EU-27, which will be 25.9 in 2010, is projected to reach the ratio of 31.05 in 2020, 38.04 in 2030, 45.36 in 2040 and 50.42 in 2050. Addressing the financial imbalance of the pension system implies dealing with the consequences of the problem rather than its original cause, which is the gap between the actual and desired number of children. Children are a common good, whose costs are born mostly privately while their wider benefits are commonly shared; this is an example of the private virtue of the family corresponding to a public vice in the political system. In fact, despite its importance, economic policy regarding the family and children is in general rather meager, and the extent to which politicians are willing to listen to children becomes a basic issue concerning both economic efficiency and social justice. The question arises as to whether we can create channels and incentives that can implement the social goals of children's well-being, with a view to the future of democratic societies.

DO SUFFRAGE AND POLITICAL "SYMPATHY" MATTER FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SOCIAL OUTCOMES?

We ask therefore whether a change in suffrage, namely its extension, or a more "sympathetic" parliamentary assembly (to be defined later) could modify the outcome of political decisions. Changes in the eligibility to vote at political elections span at least two centuries of history, following a pattern of a gradual extension of male suffrage until universal suffrage for male adults is reached, and a subsequent extension of the suffrage to woman, then a gradual lowering of the minimum age to vote; the pattern has been that of diffusion, with one country starting and the others following suit.

The first country to introduce universal adult male suffrage was France as of 1792, with no property or tax restrictions for eligibility; it is however in the period 1848–1918 that the diffusion of universal male suffrage reached its highest momentum. The democratic upsurge for universal suffrage in Europe was accompanied by the diffusion of social reforms, with the German Reich taking the lead "for the foundations of a much praised and

widely imitated policy of social insurance ... [and] also the roots of an effective policy of workers' protection and of a socially conceived labor legislation" (Hentschel, 1989, p. 755). For that period Rimlinger (1989, p. 599) notes that

there is a general pattern in the emergence of social security programs. The right to compensation for industrial injuries regardless of fault almost everywhere preceded any other form of income protection. Most European countries guaranteed this right before 1914. The next program introduced was usually sickness or pensions in case of disability or old age.

With regard to women's universal suffrage, the first example was Wyoming in 1869, spreading from there to the United States as a whole and Europe, where Finland was the first country, in 1904, which extended the right to vote to women. Again the pattern of diffusion is repeated with Germany, Austria and Russia following suit in 1918, but it took many decades to reach Switzerland (1971), Portugal (1976), Lichtenstein (1984), Kazakhstan and Moldavia (1993) (Bard, 2001, p. 459). The possible relationship between the extension of universal suffrage and the birth of the twentieth-century welfare state is worthy of further analysis.

Some recent academic works have put this insight on firmer ground, taking advantage of the availability of more detailed data and some significant "historical experiments." Husted and Kenny (1997) draw on the social and behavioral break brought about in the United States by two voting rights acts: the first, in 1965, asserted the non-constitutionality of poll-taxes (implementing the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the US Constitution, prohibiting poll taxes), whereas the 1965–1970 Voting Rights Act prohibited literacy tests, which were known to lower voter turnout, to the disadvantage of lower income voters. The authors' econometric estimates show that poll taxes and, to a minor extent, literacy tests do indeed have an impact on welfare spending: their central result is that welfare spending increases as the pivotal voter becomes poorer. They conclude that "welfare spending rises as political power shifts from a state's richer citizens to its poorer citizens. The elimination of poll taxes, a fall in the income of voters relative to that of population, and a shift from Republican to Democratic control all lead to higher welfare spending." Using a similar approach, Abrams and Settle (1999) consider the case of Switzerland, where the female franchise was granted recently (in 1971), showing that the extension of eligibility brought about an increase in social welfare spending, as well as of the overall size of the Swiss government.

Lott and Kenny (1999) take advantage of the fact that granting the right to vote to women took place across the United States over many years, both during and after World War I, allowing them to pinpoint with more accuracy the effect on turnout, spending and revenues. On the basis of their estimates, granting women the right to vote increased the turnout and an immediate rise in public expenditure (14%), which further increased to 28% over 45 years. Education, sanitation and hospitals seem to be the main expenditure items influenced by the extension of women's suffrage. Women's electoral impact is clearly significant and large, especially in terms of the gender gap, but still requires a convincing explanation. A further qualification is suggested by Campiglio (2005), who points to the significant correlation for European countries between the percentage of women appointed to ministerial positions and the percentage of GDP devoted to public expenditure for children and the family.

To explain why the extension of the suffrage to women has this effect, we can draw on the concept of sympathy to which Adam Smith devotes the first chapter of his "Theory of Moral Sentiments." Following Smith (1761),

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation ... sympathy, though its meaning was, perhaps, originally the same, may now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever ... sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it ... [and, as an example, Smith asks] What are the pangs of a mother, when she hears the moaning of her infant that during the agony of disease cannot express what it feels?

This seems a convincing explanation of why women and poor people would favor with their vote an extension of welfare expenditure, either for their personal needs or out of their (Smithian) sympathy for how other people live. This line of argument is consistent with recent results that show how even political decision-making can be influenced by the "sympathy" of the legislator for her or his own family (Washington, 2008).

On the basis of historical and empirical evidence, we conclude that the extension of suffrage is very important for achieving a given social goal such as a wider and better welfare system. In Europe, the welfare system would have been shaped differently under different suffrage rules; in the United States, the welfare system would probably be different and wider were there a much higher turnout at the political elections. Eligibility rules and women make a difference in achieving the goal of a better life for children.

WHO SHOULD REPRESENT THE ECONOMIC INTEREST OF MINORS POLITICALLY?

Democracy is an instrument that should enable citizens to achieve participation in the political process and represent their interests; according to the prevailing view, participation is not a value in itself but rather a way for each individual to express his or her own good or interests, to be counted equally in a social decision-making process through which a social goal, deemed "good," is chosen by a community. As shown earlier, eligibility rules are crucial in defining and achieving a given social outcome, and therefore, it seems odd to exclude children from the count. Indeed, we suggested that the problem of the "missing children" dramatically distorts resource allocation, worsening their well-being and undermining any reasonable notion of equal opportunity, central to all democracies. We may take the view that democracy is a process of participation by competent adults, but even so the difference in position between parents of children and individuals without any offspring should be acknowledged, and the former weighted according to the number of children they have.

The question of children's political representation therefore calls for an urgent solution, without which generations of young people will continue to be excluded from democracy – which itself cannot be considered fully realized. The problem of children's political representation is deep-rooted in the conventional wisdom of past history, but nonetheless is indirectly coming to public attention; in this regard Austria's recent decision to lower the voting age to 16 (as of 2008) represents a turning point, as do the reasons for which the decision was taken by the Austrian Parliament, with a large majority. Austria's Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer advocated the measure "as a means to react to the population aging and caring for the youth"; the decision took other European countries by surprise, and as in the past, other countries are likely to follow suit sooner or later. The crucial point is that the decision reflects uneasiness regarding tackling the deeper question of how to represent children's interests politically.

At the same time, we have to record a historically significant official declaration by the European Parliament whose general acceptance of the idea is a sign, which should not be overlooked, even though it is without practical consequences. The Castex Report (European Parliament, 2008) on the demographic future of Europe, approved by a large majority as the European Parliament's Resolution of 21 February 2008 declares (art. 102) that it "considers that the crucial issue in an ageing society is that of the political representation of minors, who represent the common future (and hence the political future) of the community, yet currently have no voice

and exert no influence in decision-making." In the same session, it was acknowledged as an Opinion of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, that (art.3) "an increase in the birth rate is a priority; it is emphasized that this priority can be pursued through efficient family and social policies fighting the poverty of certain families, reducing the number of children at risk of poverty and promoting equal opportunities."

If we assume that the Parliament is expressing some socially desirable goals, the question arises of which mechanism, and therefore which kind of political rules and incentives, can be used to ensure their achievement. One could argue that some European countries are much closer to achieving these goals without introducing any new mechanisms, as in the case of France and Scandinavian countries. It is arguable that in the Scandinavian countries concern about keeping the economy growing, in the face of the risk of a smaller and declining population, is probably the main drive behind a deliberate policy in favor of a higher fertility rate, even though the level of children's well-being is not yet satisfactory. It would still be the case that political competition arising from children's political representation would improve public efforts to promote their equality of opportunities, especially with regard to inequalities arising from the economic conditions of their childhood.

The case of France is in many ways subtler: as Pedersen (1993) convincingly shows, France, with its renowned favorable approach to family and children, is in fact the unintended outcome of quite different and less worthy motivations, such as the view of children as future soldiers. Pedersen's conclusion is that "children should be seen in part as a collective charge ... a greater recognition of the claims of children form a necessary pillar to any modern welfare state" (Pedersen, 1993, p. 426); the same approach is argued by Gosta Esping-Andersen (2002, p. 26). The policy problem is how the new child-centered welfare state he convincingly sustains could be implemented. Counting on politicians' benevolence or their farsightedness is bound to lead to disappointment for the reason so well anticipated by Stuart Mill, whereas (Smithian) sympathy, exercised by women in parliament, would be a step forward but still a modest second-best.

PARENTS REPRESENT THEIR CHILDREN'S INTERESTS IN EVERYDAY LIFE: WHY NOT IN POLITICS TOO?

The idea that parents could represent their children politically goes back, as far as we know, to Antonio Rosmini, who in Proposition 8 of his

constitutional project of 1848 proposed that a man could cast his vote as the representative of his children and wife: it took about century to complete women's universal suffrage while, it has to be admitted, the push was not equally strong for attributing the right to vote to parents as representatives of their children. There have been some attempts in France, documented and analyzed by Van Parijs (1998), and more recently in Germany, but without sufficient strength and conviction to achieve the necessary political support.

Indeed the very notion that parents could cast a vote in the name and interest of their children seems bewildering to those who, erroneously, assume that a child has a political opinion that could be represented by the parents; parents represent their children's interest in everyday life, sometimes on matters of life and death, and it is hard to understand why they should be barred from representing them at elections too. In many countries, parents, already vote for their children in elections for class representatives in school councils. Parents represent their children's interest according to the principle of "one man, one vote": if a parent has two children in different classes at the same school he/she will vote twice. Democracy in schools means allowing the parents to participate in the name and interest of their children through their elected representatives in the school decision-making processes. Allowing parents to choose political representatives in the name of their children follows the same idea.

The crucial point that needs to be grasped is that the driving force for a mechanism of complete universal suffrage is *not* how parents can represent the political preferences of their offspring, which is obviously meaningless especially when children are very young, but rather how their needs and votes, proxied by their parents, could become a vital issue on the agenda of each party and indeed politician, who would try to win an election by taking the demands of the enlarged constituency into account. The driving force would be political competition, and we know that franchise rules make a difference in determining socially desirable goals; universal suffrage extended to each newborn child is a system which would, at last, reconcile the long-term view of society with the short-term view of the political process. Moreover, the view of democracy as participation and dialogue would achieve completeness, granting parents a right on the same ground to those with no children.

Children's voting rights, exercised on their behalf by their parents, is now a missing link in the social chain which brings together all the member of a given community; a democracy that leaves its future to the short-sighted political process is bound to fail, sooner or later. Moreover, minors'

exclusion from the status of citizen is a form of age discrimination which it is hard to defend. This missing link is the cause of embarrassment and puzzle on many critical issues: for example Bennet (2003) points to the problem of defining the size of the population on which to fix constituency boundaries for elections. The inclusion or exclusion of minors can make a big difference and for this reason the matter has been the subject of two judicial sentences by the US Supreme Court. Moreover, if one applied the old dictum "no taxation without representation," there is no doubt that children, as members of a family taking financial decisions, do indirectly pay taxes, without being represented.

The growing generational imbalances we are trying to tackle are probably the reason why a number of scholars from different cultural backgrounds have recently made the same proposal of extending the franchise to children; they include Campiglio (1997), Schmitter (2000) and Bennet (2003), all of whom have made the same proposal independently from the point of view respectively of the economist, the political scientist and the scholar of law. The system by which to assign to each parent the right to vote on behalf of their children is still a matter of debate: Campiglio (2005) favors giving the vote to the mother, because she usually better understands the child's needs, especially at an early age, and furthermore, this is a simpler eligibility rule that could favor better political competition, given the low number of women appointed as ministers in national parliaments. Other scholars prefer different schemes such as splitting delegation according to the age of the children, for example the mother until the age of 9 and the father from 10 to 18, or alternating the delegation of voting between the mother and the father; still other schemes can be conceived, but we think this represents a secondary task upon which agreement would be easy to achieve. The main task is to convince scholars, politicians and the people to recognize the problem as such, asking them to find a better solution. As Keynes aptly wrote in 1936, at the end of the introduction to "The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money": "The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds."

CONCLUSIONS

We have shown how economic inefficiency and generational injustice is the inevitable consequence, in the market as well as in the political process, of the lack of child representation and the consequent lack of information

about children's interests. Intergenerational equality is a fundamental problem, to the disadvantage of the young and especially the very young; we draw attention to the importance of enriching the concept of human capital to include values and personal traits, which are mainly acquired through the family in early childhood. Private and public expenditure during this early period of a child's life is more in the nature of an irreversible investment rather than an expenditure. We provide empirical estimates showing that social security expenditures for the family, children and the disabled are especially effective in reducing the number of children at risk of poverty; we provide further empirical results concerning the impact of economic and work constraints on the decision to have one or more children, as well as the interacting notion of what the ideal size of a normal family is. We show that changing the extent of suffrage has a significant impact on political decisions, both directly through political competition and indirectly through female sympathy. We discuss the merit of extending universal suffrage to minors as of birth, with delegation to their parents while the offspring are under age, and we underline the importance of focusing on political competition as the main driving force for achieving the desired goal. Children's well-being will rank very highly on the political agenda of parties and politicians if their needs become decisive for winning elections. Children are not imagined as having political preferences which parents should translate in votes; rather parents are only required to seek their children's interest, as they hopefully do in everyday life. Competition between parties and politicians trying to win elections is the mechanism on which we can really count to achieve the desired social goal of improved well-being for children.

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