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## Making Children's Rights and Participation Central in Children's Political Development

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In the [Patterson et al. \(2019\)](#) monograph, *Toward a Developmental Science of Politics*, the authors make a strong case for establishing a developmental science of politics beginning in childhood and continuing across the life span. This is a well-written and comprehensive investigation which presents a theoretical model of political participation and an impressive multi-site study of US children's attitudes and knowledge concerning the 2016 presidential election. The authors frame their argument by applying a social-justice lens to children's political development. By now such frameworks have shown their importance in terms of addressing issues of injustice and inequality in the lives of children and youth (Horn, Ruck, & Liben, 2017a, 2017b; Killen, Rutland, & Ruck. 2011; Ruck, Mistry, & Flanagan, 2019; Russell, 2015). As described in the monograph, because of age restrictions, children are prevented from engaging in most electoral processes. Nevertheless, they still have important views and opinions about politics.

In this commentary, we suggest that there is another framing that would benefit the field with regard to how we think about children's political development. In particular, we suggest that developmental science (and specifically young people's civic engagement) would benefit from seriously considering a human rights-based approach or framing.

A good place to start is by considering the U.N. Convention on the Rights on the Child (CRC, United Nations General Assembly, 1989) which gives life to children's rights. Since its adoption by the U. N. General Assembly in 1989, it has been ratified by all member countries with the exception of the United States (Ruck, Keating, Saewyc, Earls, & Ben-Arieh, 2016). The CRC was the first human rights treaty to recognize children's political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights and defines children as all individuals under the age of 18. It serves as a tool for establishing the basic entitlements for children, without prescribing a norm of what childhood itself looks like. The CRC's theme of respect for the dignity and agency of the child is evident in the articles and provisions pertaining to children's well-being and development.

Since the CRC has been discussed in detail elsewhere (see Helwig, Ruck, & Peterson-Badali, 2014; Ruck, et al., 2016; Ruck, Peterson-Badali, Elisha, & Tenenbaum, 2017) we will limit ourselves here to a brief elaboration of the guiding principles making up the CRC. These core principles include: *non-discrimination; the best interest of the child; the right to life, survival and*

*development*; and *respect for the views of the child*. The substantive articles of the CRC are broadly construed in terms of three types of rights: provision, protection, and participation. It is children's participation rights on which this commentary will focus.

Children's right to participation involves allowing children to express their views, listening to their voices, and taking their opinions into account on those matters that affect them. Although some might argue that pre-adolescent children do not have views and opinions about political matters, the findings reported by Patterson et al. in their monograph make it clear that this is not the case. The participants in their study expressed many opinions about many political matters, some of which have the potential to impact their lives in consequential ways. Immigration policy is one of the clearest examples of a policy about which children interviewed had firm opinions. Children were knowledgeable about the candidates' suggested policies about immigration, and indeed some Latinx children appeared to be deeply worried about how such policies might affect their own lives and the lives of their families.

Participation rights "represent the boldest and most conspicuous" rights contained in the CRC (Ruck et al., 2016, p. 8). This includes Article 12 which underpins children's participation rights and articulates the guiding principle of respecting the views of the child and ensure that those views are given due weight in accordance with the child's evolving capacities. Three articles that follow are fundamental to children's political development and include: children's rights to freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of association (Article 15), and access to information (Article 17). Children's rights to participation has become significant not only in its recognition as a fundamental right, but its foundational status to be "considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights" (UNCRC, 2009, p. 3). By becoming parties to the CRC, governments have "taken on the responsibility of providing the conditions necessary for children and youth to exercise participation rights" (Rizzini & Thapliya, 2007, p. 75).

In addition, participation rights as described in the CRC oblige adults (or duty-bearers who are responsible for respecting, protecting, and fulfilling rights) to engage children in the civic and political functions of their communities or governments. This also requires us to move beyond our preoccupation with viewing children as citizens-in-the-making until they reach the adulthood to recognizing them as engaged citizens and political actors or agents in their own right even before the age of majority.

Using the CRC and children's right to participation as our conceptual approach, there is no shortage of examples to illustrate contexts in which young people have been able to participate meaningfully as political actors in ways other than voting. There is a wide variety of children's political participation indicative of the range of contexts and settings where such participation takes place (Couzens, 2017) and in accordance with children's evolving capacities (Keating, 2017). Children's formal political participation can include such things as involvement in local consultation, policy making, information gathering, monitoring government performance, and participatory budgeting (Couzens, 2017; Mniki & Rosa, 2007). Informal political participation can include civil disobedience, online activism, and protests.

For example, in Brazil, youth street workers with the support of adult educators generated a movement that obligated the government to adopt laws and implement mechanisms to accord

children's rights to participation. On this basis, Barra Mansa in Brazil became the first municipality to implement mechanisms for including children in participatory budgeting (Cabannes, 2005). In addition, Children aged 9-15 are elected by their peers (including younger and older youth who may take part in discussion forums) to be delegates who democratically determine how to spend a portion of the municipal budget designated for meeting the needs of children in their community (Guerra, 2005). Catalonia's Children's Councils in Spain elect 10- to 12-year-old children to provide feedback on and propose policies to their City Councils (Agud, Novella Camara, & Berne, 2014). Research with children who participated in these councils reported the acknowledgement of their rights as a key condition for their effective participation in practices that simultaneously develop their capacities for democratic engagement (Agud et al., 2014). These examples exhibit how harnessing a rights-based framework—namely children's rights to political participation—oblige duty bearers to establish conditions that support children's active citizenship which is considered by many as a prerequisite for well-being (Melton, 2005; Ruck, Peterson-Badali, & Helwig, 2013).

We can also look to US-based examples: The cities of Boston, MA; Seattle, WA; and Bloomington, IN have established youth-focused programs for children's inclusion in participatory budgeting, and recently the age limits for participation in municipal participatory budgeting processes were lowered in New York City (City of Bloomington, 2019; La Jeunesse, & Derr, 2016). Additionally, participatory budgeting processes have been implemented in 58 schools across nine states (Participatory Budgeting Project, 2019). The San Francisco Youth Commission was conceived when community youth advocates mounted a campaign to create a mechanism for children and young people to provide feedback on matters referred to them by the mayor, supervisors, and department heads (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005). Although the Commission's role was initially reactive, Youth Commissioners took the initiative to surface concerns through youth-led public forums, proactively interjecting in the city's budgeting processes, and acting as a dissenting voice in statewide policies (Checkoway, et al., 2005).

In the pursuit of climate justice, young people are suing the US government for failing to address the current and impending threats of climate change; at the same time they are organizing nation-wide walkouts (Youth Climate Strike US, 2019; Youth v. Gov, 2018). After the school shooting in Parkland, FL, young people's lobbying spurred legislative reforms in communities and states across the US for school security, mental health programs, and gun control (Haynes, 2018). These changes were fueled by the waves of walkouts, rallies, and marches organized by youth activists that brought over a million people to demand political change (Witt, 2019). The Patterson et al. monograph makes clear that gun policy is also on the minds of young children, and that young children are aware of the potential role of government in the issue. For example, one 6-year-old stated of Clinton, "Lots of people who had guns and liked hunting thought she'd take away all guns instead of just if people were going to shoot someone." These and the other quotes in the paper illustrate the relevance of particular political issues to even young children's lives

Finally, pushing back against unjust policies and practices, children are taking the lead in community organizing and activism advocating for social change across the US and around the world (Global Migration Group, 2013; Seif, 2011). Globally, we have seen children's political participation with respect to the rights of undocumented, asylum-seeking, and refugee children

and youth. Children have also been vocal champions of the LGBTQIA+ issues around the world pushing societies with vastly different histories and values to expand how they think of sexual orientation and gender identity in order ensure that human rights protections are truly inclusive (Costanza-Chock, 2012).

Taken together, these are but a few examples of children developing their political capacities in a variety of environments, through a multitude of practices, and on a myriad of issues. Hence, through these various forms of both formal and informal political participation, children act as political agents capable of acting in ways to improve their and others' lives and challenging traditional notions of citizenship (Ruck et al., 2016).

The current monograph demonstrates that even pre-adolescents have political interests and valuable opinions and are capable of meaningfully exercising their participation rights. However, despite the fact that the CRC has been ratified by nearly all countries, the notion of children as worthy of citizenship and holders of rights remains a highly contested issue (Golombek, 2006). As we have attempted to illustrate in this commentary, children's participation rights carry the "promise of legitimately engaging children in the civic and political functions of their communities and governments" (Earls, 2011, p. 9) and make a case for the importance of the various formal and informal political activities in which children participate and that serve to promote strong and democratic communities.

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