

Proportional democratic weight: votes that track how long you live with the result

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Proportional democratic weight: votes that track how long you live with the result

Democratic systems weight votes by body, not by stake. Those who will live longest with a decision often have the least influence over it, and those who cannot yet vote have none at all.

By Darach Ó Braonáin

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THE ASK

That age-weighted voting and custodial representation for children be applied first to constitutional referenda, introduced through a manifesto commitment or a Private Member's Bill.

A constitutional referendum decided this year will bind a newborn for seventy-five years and a 75-year-old for perhaps fifteen. The franchise gives the pensioner a full vote and the newborn nothing at all. Nobody ever argued for that ratio. It is an inheritance from a period when lives were shorter and most decisions resolved inside a generation.

Two changes would bring vote weight closer to stake. The first is a modest age-based multiplier that scales with a voter's remaining consequence horizon. The second is a custodial vote for every child from birth, held in trust by parents and handed to the child at the franchise age. One principle runs through both. The weight of a vote should track how long the voter lives with the outcome.

A country that will not invest in its own future

The evidence is a pattern rather than a single decision. This country has repeatedly declined to invest in the people who will inhabit it longest.

Consider what a political system oriented toward its own future would prioritise, and compare it to what this one does. At the start of 2026, more than one million people aged 16 to 24 in the UK were not in education, employment or training.^[1] The figure had not passed a million since 2013, and it has risen every year since the pandemic. A cohort is being detached from the labour market at the point of entry. If parties competed seriously for the interests of the young, the design of a credible response would be a central electoral battleground. It is not.

Housing tells the same story over a longer horizon. The median home in England now costs around 7.6 times median full-time earnings, against a long-run first-time-buyer ratio closer to 4.^[2] The binding constraint for younger buyers is the deposit, inflated by rents that consume the income they might otherwise save. Meanwhile ownership has concentrated upwards. The number of households owning their home with no mortgage rose by 1.3 million over the past decade, almost entirely among the over-65s.^[3] The asset base is accumulating with the generation that already holds it while the one beneath is locked out. Decades of housing policy have failed to change this, because the median voter is a holder of housing wealth, not a frustrated buyer of it.

University funding shows the intergenerational transfer at its starkest. A graduate in England now leaves with average debt of around £53,000 against a tuition cap of £9,535 a year.^[4] The political generation that designed and voted for this regime was, overwhelmingly, educated for free. Those who received a public good voted to charge their successors for it. The next disruption is already visible. Artificial intelligence is cutting into both the number and the quality of entry-level jobs, the rung the young most depend on, while its regulation remains light and contested. The cohort most exposed to that shift has the least influence over how it is governed.

These are policy outcomes rather than natural disasters, and they share a cause. A system competing for the median voter has progressively less reason to invest in people who vote in smaller numbers, later, or not yet at all. The interests of the young are not contested ground because the young are not a constituency worth contesting.

The democratic franchise was designed for a world where life expectancy was shorter, information was slower, and policy consequences resolved within a generation. None of those conditions hold today.

The loop is demographic, and it tightens on itself. As an electorate ages, the median voter's interests shift from investment in future capacity toward consumption of accumulated entitlement. Pensions, healthcare and asset protection rise in priority; schools, childcare, job creation and housing supply fall. UK fiscal allocation already shows the pattern. The state pension triple lock is treated as politically untouchable while child benefit has been frozen and cut in real terms, per-pupil school funding stagnated through the 2010s, and housing supply has been constrained in part by older homeowners protecting asset values through the planning system. Children benefit most from long-horizon investment and carry no electoral weight at all, while the cohorts that benefit from disinvestment hold a growing majority of the weight. Left uncorrected, the loop tightens with every year the population ages.

Short-termism is unfair to the young, and it is also a structural disadvantage for the country. China's rise is usually credited to sustained infrastructure build-out, to industrial strategy held across decades and to long-run investment in energy and skills. All of that is the product of planning horizons electoral democracies struggle to match. One need not admire China's political system, or ignore the failures that unchecked long-termism also produces, to draw the relevant lesson. A democracy that optimises for the next electoral cycle has almost no structural counterweight to its own impatience. Weighting the franchise towards voters with longer personal horizons is one way a democracy can lengthen its planning horizon without ceasing to

be one. A greater electoral stake for the young pulls policy towards patient investment in education, housing, research and national capability, which is precisely what a short electoral cycle starves. The case for the proposal is that it is fairer, and that it makes the country better at the things that require patience.

Brexit is the most-discussed single instance of the same mechanism, and it deserves to be stated precisely. In 2016 the UK voted to leave the European Union by 52% to 48%, a margin of 1.3 million votes. Voters aged 18 to 24 backed Remain by roughly 73%; those over 65 backed Leave by roughly 60%.^[5] By the end of 2025, credible estimates put the long-run cost between around 4% of gross domestic product, from the Office for Budget Responsibility, and the 6 to 8% found by the National Bureau of Economic Research's decade-on study.^[6] The point here is not the merits of leaving. It is that a permanent, hard-to-reverse decision was settled by the cohort with the shortest remaining stake in it, over the objection of the cohort that would live with it longest. By Jun 2026, 56% of Britons judged the decision wrong against 31% who maintained it was right, and on demographic estimates the original majority has since reversed through mortality and replacement alone.^[7] The outcome stands regardless. Nothing in the design allows a changed public mind to reopen it.

Weighting by remaining stake

The proposal is a continuous age-based multiplier applied to vote counts in national elections and referenda, anchored at 1.0x for the median adult lifespan cohort and scaling modestly upward for younger voters and downward for older ones.

The pivot sits at the 45 to 54 band, centred on age 50. UK adult life expectancy from age 18 is approximately 62 further years, placing the midpoint of adult life at around 49 to 50.^[8] The pivot comes from the lifespan data, not from political convenience. Bands adjust by 0.1x per decade either side, and the maximum spread runs from 1.3x to 0.7x.

AGE BAND	WEIGHT	RATIONALE	EFFECT PER 100 CAST
0-15 (proxy)	0.5 per parent	Custodial vote, held in trust	See below
16-24	1.3x	Longest direct consequence horizon	130
25-34	1.2x	Early career, high-stake decade	120
35-44	1.1x	Peak family and economic stake	110
45-54	1.0x	Midpoint of adult lifespan	100
55-64	0.9x	Post-peak consequence horizon	90
65-74	0.8x	Shorter remaining stake	80
75+	0.7x	Minimum floor, not exclusion	70

The multipliers are deliberately small. A 1.3x maximum means a young adult's vote carries 30% more weight than a median vote, not several times more. This is a correction, not a transfer of power. It is also calibrated against an imbalance that already exists, because turnout among 18 to 24 year olds runs around 50 to 55% against 70 to 75% for over-65s, and at maximum spread the weighting largely offsets that participation gap.^[9] In a normal general election the practical effect is modest. The weighting bites hardest on high-turnout constitutional votes, where older voters currently decide outcomes that younger people carry for decades.

A vote for every child, held in trust

Age weighting corrects the imbalance among adults who can already vote. It does nothing for children, who have the longest consequence horizon of any citizen and no electoral weight at all.

The proposal is that every child carries a vote from birth, exercised on their behalf by their parents until they reach the franchise age. The vote is the child's own, not a new entitlement for parents. It is held in trust by the custodian society already entrusts with every other decision shaping that child's life.

Each child's vote splits in two, half to each parent or legal guardian. Where parents agree, the two halves are cast together and the child's full weight is expressed. Where parents disagree, the halves cancel toward neutral, which is the correct outcome when a household genuinely differs about the child's interest. For looked-after children, the corporate parent casts on the child's behalf. The resident parent or guardian is the default in cases of dispute or sole custody.

The weight transfers at the franchise age. On the child's 16th or 18th birthday, the custodial weight passes from the parents to the young citizen, who now exercises it directly at the 1.3x band. While the child is a minor their vote is worth 1.0, expressed as two custodial halves of 0.5. On majority they enter the highest-horizon band and vote at 1.3x in their own right.

The step from 1.0 to 1.3 is deliberate, not an accounting error. Weight tracks consequence horizon at every life stage rather than following a person unchanged. While the child is represented in trust, their stake is expressed through two custodians. When they become a direct voter, they enter the band reserved for those with the longest remaining horizon. The increase is the mechanism working as intended. It sharpens the incentive for politicians to compete for the support of younger citizens at exactly the point those citizens gain their own voice.

Take two parents in the 35 to 44 band with three children. Each parent holds their own vote of 1.1 plus three custodial halves of 0.5, totalling 2.6. The household casts 5.2 weighted votes across five people, of which 3.0 represents the three children's own stake held in trust. As individuals the parents hold their band weight of 1.1 each and nothing more; the rest is their children's representation, carried until those children can carry it themselves.

Cutting the franchise off at 18 was always the arbitrary move. A newborn has the longest consequence horizon of any citizen and the least voice. Extending representation below the franchise age completes the principle rather than stretching it.

Objections

It creates two-tier citizenship. Progressive taxation does not create two tiers of citizen, and neither does this. The same rule applies to every citizen; the rate varies by a continuous, publicly known variable that applies identically regardless of identity, class or geography. Every voter knows their weight, and every voter ages through every band across a lifetime.

The formula is arbitrary. The pivot is derived from life expectancy data and anchored to an objective external measure that adjusts as life expectancy changes. The formula should be codified in statute with revision tied to decennial Office for National Statistics life expectancy publications, removing political discretion from the calibration.

Parents cannot be trusted to vote in a child's interest. This is the central objection to the custodial vote, and it does not survive contact with how society already operates. Parents are entrusted with every decision that materially shapes a child's life: medical consent, education, where the child lives, what they eat, what they believe, what opportunities they are given. These decisions carry higher stakes and far less reversibility than a single vote. To accept parental authority across all of them and then withhold the vote alone requires explaining what makes voting uniquely unsafe to delegate. No such explanation exists.

The burden of proof therefore inverts. It is not for the proposal to prove parents will act in their children's interest, because society has already answered that in every other domain. It is for the objector to explain why this one delegation, and only this one, should be refused. Absent that explanation, zero representation is simply the worse option, and caution is the wrong word for it.

The objection also applies a standard the existing franchise does not meet. It rests on the fact that some parents will not exercise the proxy faithfully. The same imperfection is tolerated, by design, at the other end of the age range. A person in their seventies does not lose the vote at the first sign of cognitive decline, even though in some cases their vote will no longer reflect competent judgement. The franchise operates on categories rather than case-by-case fitness tests, and accepts that a workable universal system will always contain some imperfectly exercised votes. The objector cannot demand perfect fidelity from the child's proxy while accepting imperfect fidelity everywhere else.

It is an attack on older voters. It is not, for two reasons. First, the child's proxy weight is not an augmentation of any adult's franchise. Each parent's own vote remains 1.1, or whatever their age band dictates; the additional weight they carry is the minor's stake, exercised in trust and surrendered at majority. The correct comparison is not one adult holding extra votes, but a household of citizens each holding their own stake, with the youngest no longer set to zero.

Second, the adults who carry the proxy weight are the same working-age cohort responsible for the care of their own ageing parents. This is the sandwich generation, with direct line of sight to the needs of both the children above them and the elderly below. Far from being hostile to

pensioner interests, they are the most balanced voters in the system, because they live the full intergenerational picture from both sides. Concentrating weight on them puts the decision with the people who can see both ends of it.

Wisdom comes with age, and discounting it is a mistake. Experience is valuable, and this proposal does not dispute it. Experience and stake are different variables, and the framework adjusts for the second. A decision can benefit from the judgement of those who will not live with it while still being, primarily, the decision of those who will. Wisdom should inform the choice. Stake decides whose choice it chiefly is.

One version of this argument has to be ruled out. The case for weighting does not rest on any claim that older voters are less competent, less informed, or less able to understand a fast-changing world. That argument is wrong, and it is also unnecessary. Fluency with new technology is not the same as good judgement about its consequences, and the young are not uniformly better judges of a world they have spent less time in. The design avoids litigating competence at all. The weighting tracks how long a voter lives with an outcome, nothing more. An informed, engaged 75-year-old is not a worse citizen than a distracted 25-year-old. They simply have less of their life remaining inside the consequences of today's structural choices, and the system asks only that this, and not their judgement, sets the modest difference in weight.

It is a slippery slope away from equal votes. The proposal is bounded by a principle that does not generalise to the cases this objection fears, and two features contain it. First, it is universal. Every citizen passes through every age band, so over a complete life everyone is weighted identically, and no permanent class of advantaged or disadvantaged voters can form. Second, it makes no judgement of worth. The weighting tracks how long a voter lives with a decision, not how good, deserving or capable they are. A weighting by race, gender or education fails both tests at once. Each assigns a fixed advantage based on a trait or status a person never moves through, and each can only be justified by a claim that some citizens are worth more than others, which this proposal never makes and does not need. Age is the one variable that adjusts for stake without ranking persons.

It is politically impossible. Difficult is not impossible. The franchise was extended to men without property, then to women, then to 18-year-olds, and each extension faced this objection before prevailing through sustained pressure and generational change. Any party whose coalition skews young, or which seeks to build one, has a structural incentive to champion this. As demographics shift and younger cohorts gain electoral significance, viability rises rather than falls.

The pathway

Commission an independent actuarial review to formalise the age-weighting multipliers against Office for National Statistics life expectancy data.

Define the custodial allocation rules in statute, including defaults for sole custody, separated parents, and looked-after children.

Introduce the reform as a manifesto commitment or Private Member's Bill by a party with, or seeking, a young electoral coalition.

Apply it initially to constitutional referenda, where the consequence-horizon imbalance is most acute and most defensible.

Extend it to general elections following a review period.

Tie all formula and threshold revisions to decennial Office for National Statistics updates, removing ongoing political discretion.

The principle underneath

The current system gives every adult identical weight and every child none, whatever the length of the shadow a decision casts over each of them. For routine, reversible policy that is a workable simplification. For structural and irreversible decisions it hands the outcome to the people with the least at stake.

Vote weight should track consequence horizon. Age weighting applies that principle among adults, and custodial representation extends it to children. Nobody loses a vote, and no class, region or affiliation gains an advantage. The single variable being adjusted for is measurable, universal and directly relevant to what representation is for.

Weighting a 75-year-old at 1 and a newborn at 0, on a decision they will live with for fifteen years and seventy-five, is not an accurate reading of democratic intent. Nobody has yet defended those two numbers on their merits.

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