The Right to Vote by John Holt
(excerpted from Escape from Childhood)

One of the most important rights that should be available to the young is the right to vote. This right does not need to, and should not depend on, a young person having or exercising other rights. In other words, a young person living in every other respect as a child, as a dependent, should have the same right as everyone else to vote, just as many adults living as dependents have it.

Though we will most probably lower the voting age a year or two at a time, ultimately I want the right to vote for people of any age. No one should be left out.

The main reason why people should be able to elect their governments is not that they will necessarily choose better than a group of experts. It is first of all a matter of justice. If I am going to be affected by what you decide, I should have a say in it. If you are going to have control over me, then I should have some over you. Early Americans spoke of the injustice of taxation without representation, but there was, and is, more to it than taxation. To be in any way subject to the laws of a society without having any right or way to say what those laws should be is the most serious injustice. It invites misrule, corruption and tyranny. That every so often the people in power have to make some kind of report to the voters, and get some kind of endorsement for what they have done or want to do, is obviously not much of a check on them. But it is better than no check at all.

The other great reason for giving people control over their government, and hence over their lives, is that it may and probably will make them more informed and responsible. People do not always learn from experience, but without it they do not learn at all. And experience alone is not enough; they must have not just experience but the ability to affect experience. If they think their choices and decisions make a difference to them, in their own lives, they will have every reason to try to choose and decide more wisely. But if what they think makes no difference, why bother to think? It is not just power, but impotence, that corrupts people. It gives them the mind and soul of slaves. It makes them indifferent, lazy, cynical, irresponsible and, above all, stupid.

This has nothing to do with the sentimental belief that the average person or the mass of people have some mysterious wisdom or would never make any mistakes. They would make plenty. People are generally ignorant and fallible. But on the whole, most of the time, every human being knows better than anyone else what he needs and wants, what gives him pleasure and joy or causes suffering and pain. Given real choices, people will choose for themselves better than others will choose for them. What is much more important, every human being is likely to know better than anyone else when he has made a mistake, when a choice he has made is working badly. Given a chance to correct that mistake, he is more likely to do so than someone else.

A young man asked a wise man, a guru, what made a person wise. “Well,” said the sage, “it is mostly a matter of good judgment” The young person asked how he could get good judgment. The sage replied, “By having the right kind of experience.” The baffled young person cried out, “But how can I get that kind of experience?” The sage said, “By using bad judgment.”
But some people will say, what about the people who are always making mistakes, who seem never to learn from them or even to want to learn from me? Why should the rest of us have to keep cleaning up their messes and paying for their mistakes? Why don’t we just say, since you can’t or don’t want to keep yourself out of trouble, we are going to give you a keeper. One reply would be, with a keeper he surely never will learn. But the best answer is that in the long run the keepers wind up costing us more than the kept. Thus, if gambling were everywhere legal, a certain number of people would no doubt gamble their lives away. But the cost of supporting these compulsive gamblers in their habit would have been, and would still be, vastly less than the cost, in money and in the corruption of our governments and society, of our futile efforts to outlaw gambling. The Demon Rum never did this country anywhere near as much harm as Prohibition.

If democracy works as badly as it does, it is not so much because the people make mistakes, though they do, as because the people who run for office, their public servants, are so secretive and dishonest about what they do and mean to do. What happens too often is that people who crave political power decide privately what is best for the people and the country and then make whatever appeals and tell whatever lies they think will persuade people to give them that power. We might say of democracy or representative government what G.K. Chesterton once said of Christianity, not that it had been tried and found wanting but that it had been found difficult and not tried.

Furthermore, to deny the vote to the young is all the more unjust because they are likely to be more deeply affected than anyone else by the decisions the government makes and the things it does. A country may make a decision to go to war, or make a decision that will soon lead to war, in which young people will in a few years have to kill and die, but those young people will have nothing to say about the decision. A strong case could be made that on matters of war and peace no one should be able to vote who might not be called to fight. The matter of war aside, the young are more affected than anyone else by politics, because they will have to live longer with the consequences of what we do and any mistakes we make.

When I say that I want all young people to be able to vote, older people ask with amazement, disbelief and even anger whether I mean children of any age. That is exactly what I mean. I am talking not just about the sixteen-year-old vote but about the six-year-old vote. I think a six-year-old who wants to vote ought to be able to vote.

As it happens, from all I know of six-year-old children, it seems unlikely that in fact many six-year-olds would want to vote - even in a society in which they would be looked at and treated much more seriously and respectfully than they are now and might therefore be quite different from what they are today. However eagerly and freely the young may want to explore the world, and however much we allow and encourage and help them to do so, they have to explore it a step at a time. I doubt that most six-year-olds would have gone far enough in their exploring so that voting would seem to them meaningful or interesting. Some might vote for excitement or novelty, or to have something to talk about to their friends. Some, in families where older people were talking all the time about candidates, issues and voting, might want to do what the older people around them were doing. Most young, children, I think, would not.

The youngest campaign worker I know personally was six when she did her work. During the 1972 presidential campaign her mother went to do some work in the McGovern office. Since she could not afford many babysitters and since her child would usually rather be with her, whatever she is doing, than sitting at home, she brought her daughter along. Seeing everyone busy, the child, like all children, was ready and eager to pitch in. Soon she was
stuffing and stamping envelopes, xeroxing papers and having a wonderful time. She was always sorry to leave and eager to go back.

Would this child have voted in the presidential election if she had been able to? I think she might, though I don’t think she would have given up anything more immediately exciting to do it. (As every political worker knows, it takes only a little rain to keep large numbers of adults away from the polls. And if voting had to compete with Sunday football on TV ...) What did the child know of the candidate or his positions on issues? Very little. McGovern was a name she heard talked about by older people she liked and trusted. She saw that they were excited by the campaign, and from their talk she assumed it had something to do with the war, which she thought was bad. But if her parents and their and her friends had been equally enthusiastic workers for Nixon, she would probably have been just as eager to vote for him. Still, even if she doesn’t know very much about politics and issues, what she knows is important - that it is serious, something adults care about, get excited about and work at. However she might have voted, I think her vote would have been as meaningfully cast as the votes of many adults.

Ten-year-olds, on the other hand, might be quite different. I suspect that quite a number of them might vote, if they could, not just to share the excitement and activity of their parents, but for their own reasons. I have known more than a few ten-year-olds who seem to understand at least as much about the world and its problems as I or most of my friends did when we left college. It is even possible that more people would vote at age ten, when they live quite externally, than would at the age of fourteen, when for many reasons they are more preoccupied with their personal, emotional and social lives. On the other hand, one reason why teenagers seem to be so preoccupied with such things is that we do not allow them to be preoccupied with much of anything else. We have made a cult, a way of life and (for adults) a profitable industry out of adolescence.

There is almost no evidence of what children themselves think about this. The magazine *Kids* printed a letter from me saying that I would Me to know whether readers of the magazine felt that they should be allowed to vote, and if they were allowed, whether they would. One teacher, Mrs Paul, read my letter to her fourth-grade class at the Longfellow School in Holland, Michigan and had them all write me letters telling how they felt. I don’t know whether the children discussed my questions in class, or with their parents, before writing their letters. The children’s replies fall into the following categories, with the indicated number of boys and girls voting in each category:

- I would vote, and we should be allowed to: 8 Boys, 3 Girls
- I would vote: 1 Boy
- I would vote, but children should not be allowed to: 5 Boys, 2 Girls
- I would not vote: 1 Boys (on religious grounds)
- We should not be allowed to: 1 Girl
- I would not vote, and we should not be allowed to: 4 Boys, 4 Girls

Those who said they would not vote, or that they should not be allowed to, gave these reasons (some gave more than one, some gave none):

- Would not know how, not responsible, too difficult etc.: 10
- Not fair to those who had to wait: 4
- Might break the voting machines: 3
- Would vote the same way as parents: 2
It is interesting that seven children should have said that they would vote if allowed but that children should not be allowed to. It reminds me a little of the children in my fifth-grade class, who in a certain setting would say hotly that any child who stole a pencil or pushed someone else at recess should be sent home or suspended from school for a week, though they regularly did those things themselves and would have been furiously (and rightly) indignant if such a severe punishment had been meted out to them. In this class, seven of those who said that children were for various reasons not smart enough to vote did not consider themselves to be one of such children. But much older children (and indeed often adults) say the same thing; any number of high school students have defended the strict rules in their school by saying that although they would behave without such rules most of the students would not.

On the other hand, when these fourth graders said that ‘children’ should not be allowed to vote, they may not have meant themselves but children younger than themselves; perhaps they did not think of themselves as ‘children’. Indeed, many fifth graders I have known were willing to think of themselves as kids, but not as ‘children’.

Two of the children who said that they should not be allowed to vote because it would not be fair to the adults wrote as if they may not have understood the question. They may have thought I was asking if an exception to the law should be made in their case. But I am not sure of this.

Elsewhere I have described a meeting with ninth graders in which about two-thirds of them said that if they could vote, they would. But some of them may have been trying to look ‘responsible’ before the other adults in the room. A friend of mine, also in the ninth grade, asked a number of her friends and classmates whether they would vote if they could; according to her, most said they would not.

But what people say they will do if a situation arises and what they actually do in that situation are often very different. Most political experts believed that during the 1972 presidential campaign eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds would register and vote in very large numbers and that in many states their votes would be decisive. This proved not to be the case. They registered and voted in about the same or slightly smaller percentages as older people, and they voted in about the same way. This failure to register and vote was a most serious and unwise political mistake. Young people explain and defend it by saying that they were disillusioned with both the candidates, the nominating process and so forth. No doubt they had reason to be disillusioned, but their response was unwise nonetheless. Had they registered in force but voted very selectively or not at all, they would have made clear to the political leaders of both parties that there was a large bloc of voters out there who did not like what they were doing but were ready to support candidates they could trust. As things stand they have only convinced politicians that the youth vote is negligible and that anyone who makes any concessions to the needs or wishes of young people does so only at great political risk. Thus it is highly probable that being known as a youth candidate, though it did not get him many young people’s votes, cost McGovern the votes of many older people. This sort of lesson will not be lost on candidates in future elections. They will see, as many do now, that it is much safer to be against the young than for them.

As a practical political matter, the voting age will probably not be lowered from eighteen to, say, sixteen until at least two things have happened. First there must be a large bloc of sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds demanding the vote and saying to politicians, “If you deny us the vote now, we will remember you when we get it.” And the politicians must know they mean it. Secondly, this bloc of sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds must have made an
alliance with some powerful groups of older voters, ‘including, I would hope, most of the
eighteen- to twenty-year-olds. I would like to say to those many young people who are now
struggling to get students’ rights or to reform their schools - shoot at a target worth hitting.
Forget students’ rights and get yourselves the rights of citizens. Get the vote, and when you
have it, get it for those younger than you are. The schools are not going to be reformed from
within; their serious reform is a political matter and will be accomplished, if at all, with votes,
not rallies and seizings of presidents’ and deans’ offices.

What I said earlier about the vote tending to make people more informed and
responsible citizens is equally true of the young. The possibility of voting will stimulate an
interest in voting. The possibility of exercising responsibility draws people towards it. Today,
many young people might say, “Why should I interest myself in politics and voting, since no
matter how much I know or learn, I can’t vote.” Merely knowing they could vote if they wanted,
or knowing people of their own age who voted, would do more to interest and inform the
young about the society around them than anything, however ‘relevant’, we could put in the
curriculum or do in the school. It would be like an open door and a beckoning hand to the
larger adult world. One question would lead to another. Why do people vote? What’s the
difference between those people they are voting for? What do those people do? (Questions,
by the way, that few adults could answer.)

Think of the excitement that is generated in a junior high or elementary school by
nothing more than a school or class election, a Mickey Mouse affair in which nothing at all,
except perhaps popularity, is at stake. Children talk about it and work on it for weeks. We
often take this as proof that their concerns are childish - see how worked up they get about
nothing. But we don’t give them the chance to concern themselves with anything else.

A recent news photo showed a young child wearing a T-shirt marked ‘Snoopy for
President’. Such photos make us think, “Isn’t that cute!” They also help us to feel sure that
children do not really understand what the Presidency means and could not possibly think
sensibly about it. What we forget is that it was not a child, but an adult, who had the bright
idea of putting ‘Snoopy for President’ on that T-shirt. Adults design such shirts, make them,
buy them and dress children in them. But the shirts tell us nothing of what children think or
might think.

For some time I have been discussing these matters with ‘educated’ audiences at
colleges and universities. When I say that very young people should be allowed to vote, many
of them react with fear and anger. At one meeting a man rose, voice shaking and asked me
what made me think - he could hardly get the words out - how could I imagine that a
six-year-old child would know enough to know what to do about inflation. I said, “The
President of the United States doesn’t know what to do about inflation. Neither do the heads
of state of any other countries that I know of. Or if they know, they can’t or won’t do it.”

Most people assume that if young people voted they would vote foolishly, ignorantly,
for trivial reasons. I don’t think their reasons for voting would be any worse than those of
many people who now vote, and often might be better. But even if it were certain that young
people would vote more unwisely than most or all adults, this would not be a sufficient reason
to deny them the vote.

There is much evidence that enormous numbers of people who now vote do so out of
deep ignorance and for the most frivolous and foolish reasons. We have learned time after
time that most people (in spite of their schooling) do not even recognize the Declaration of
Independence or the Bill of Rights when they are typed out on ordinary paper and shown to
them. When they are asked to sign these statements, the most fundamental documents of our
society and supposedly the foundation of our political system, about nine out of often people refuse, calling them radical, subversive, communist, which from the point of view of our present government I suppose they may well be. Two or three years after the start of the Korean War, the daily newspaper of a large city, one with a generally high level of education and culture, ran a current events poll on the sidewalks of the city, asking large numbers of passers-by questions about what was going on in the world. One question was, “Where, roughly, is Korea?” For the purposes of their poll, such answers as, “On the Pacific Ocean”, “Near Japan”, “Near China” and so on would have been judged correct. But more than half of the people asked could not give even that good an answer. More recently, in the presidential campaign of 1972, we had the infamous Watergate scandal, which as I write this (April 1973) is slowly forcing its way to the attention of the American public. But well into the campaign in the fall of 1972, when the Watergate affair had over and over again been in the papers and magazines and on TV, only a third of the people in one national poll could even identify the name and only half of those had any idea of what it meant. And this is one of the most significant and sinister events of American politics in the whole history of the country.

Not long ago there was a very hotly fought congressional election in the district that included part or all of Palo Alto, California. The Republican incumbent had been in the House a long time and supported the Indo-China war; the Democratic challenger, a minister, opposed it. Palo Alto being a rich community, as well as the home of Stanford University, a great deal of money and work went into the campaign. Leaflets and notices were everywhere and door-to-door canvassers talked with large numbers of voters. Probably not in one campaign out of a hundred do the candidates and the issues get such exposure. After the election, which the Republican won, some sociologists decided to find out why voters voted as they did -what they thought of the issues, what issues they thought were important, what kinds of appeals and methods of canvassing were effective and what were not. They found that an overwhelming majority of those voters to whom they talked - a quite carefully chosen sample - knew almost nothing about the issues of the campaign. They had voted as they did because they liked the man’s face, or his name, or because he seemed older and more experienced, or because they thought a change might be good, or because they had always voted Democratic or Republican and saw no reason to change. A considerable percentage of voters even got mixed up about which candidate was for what issues or belonged to which party. “That is, there were pro-war people who voted for the anti-war candidate and vice-versa, and there were people who thought they had voted for the Republican (or the Democrat) who did not know, until the interviewer talked to them, dial they had in fact voted for the opposite party. The lack of information and the amount of misinformation among these voters - and this in a supposedly highly educated community and after an intensely waged campaign – was hardly believable.

No amount of ignorance, misinformation or outright delusion will bar an adult from voting. There are still people in the country who believe that the earth is flat or hollow; yet they can vote. Many still believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, that the world was created in seven days or that Woman was created from Man’s rib, and so on; yet they can vote. Henry Ford, the founder of the Ford Motor Company, was (for much of his life) one of a number of people who believed in a mythical document called the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which purports to be the record of a conspiracy of Jews to take over the world. Yet he could vote. There are people who thought Asia was made of dominoes. There are people who think that all other people are machines. There are, in short, people who believe all manner of absurd, fantastic and even dangerous things. None of them are barred from voting. Why should young
people be? There is no reason to believe that the reasons for which most adults vote are better than the reasons for which young people would vote if they could. Politicians, office-seekers, understand this well. It has been a fundamental principle of American politics for many years, frequently written about, and terrifyingly supported by the 1972 presidential elections, that the surest way to be elected is to stay as far as possible away from the issues and concentrate instead on projecting an Image.

Some ask, “Isn’t there a danger that if children could vote their parents would simply tell them whom to vote for and threaten to punish them if they did not?” Perhaps. But a society which had changed enough in its way of looking at young children to be willing to grant them the vote would be one in which few people would want to try to coerce a child’s vote and in which most people would feel this was a very bad and wrong thing to do. In such a society, whoever tried to coerce a child’s vote would feel a heavy weight of public disapproval, which very few people like or can stand against. And the child himself would feel strongly supported in defying the attempt of his parents, or anyone else, to coerce him. Loving and respectful parents would trust instead in whatever natural influence they might have over him. Even if he voted the opposite way from them, they might well value his courage and independence. On the other hand, if relationships in the family were bad and the parents did not love or respect the child, then he would be all the more ready to defy them. We should remember, too, that many people today vote at first, and often for many years after, exactly as their parents voted. We are all deeply influenced, in politics as everything else, by the words and example of people we love and trust. Children’s votes would, of course, be influenced by their parents. Intelligent and respectful parents, with the natural authority of talent, kindness and wisdom, would probably have the most influence. Why should not the influence of such people be multiplied through the votes of their children? Some ask if this might not give a disproportionate influence to those (usually poor) people in society who had the most children. This possibility, if it exists at all, is certainly no reason for denying young people the vote.

Some have agreed that the principle of allowing younger people to vote seemed right and just, but that there should be some requirements, that they should have to pass some sort of a test. On the face of it, it seems reasonable enough. If someone could persuade me that we had a sure way to measure a person’s wisdom and judgment, as we might put a thermometer in his mouth to take a temperature, I would at least entertain the argument that no one, of any age, should be able to vote unless his wisdom rating was above a certain level. But such arguments are purely theoretical. No such test or measure of wisdom exists, or in the nature of things can exist, and even if it did, there is no way to be sure that such a test would be given and used honestly. From our too recent history we know how the literacy requirement in many Southern states was used to bar from voting black men and women whose learning and judgment were fifty times that of the white people barring them - black lawyers and university graduates would be declared ineligible by white people who could barely write their names. And even in this last election we had case after case, all over the country, in which local election authorities, in clear defiance of the law, tried by various means to deny to young people the vote that the law and the courts had given them. There is simply no way in which we could devise a proper test for voters or ensure that it would be used fairly and not to the benefit of whoever happened to control the election machinery. The only answer is to give the vote to everyone who wants it, do all we can to see that they have access to information that will help them vote wisely and hope for the best.