



HINTALOVON

Gyermekjogi Alapítvány

A CHILDREN'S RIGHTS 101 FOR POLITICIANS AND ORGANISERS OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

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PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN POLITICAL COMMUNI- CATIONS

The approaching election campaign affects children both directly and indirectly. The messages projected by the large billboards towering over school-grounds, the advertisements interrupting favourite TV programmes or the parties distributing politically fueled flyers on the way to the playground all affect children. The general elections provide an opportunity to educate and socialize children's political and civic behaviour as well as to familiarise them with democratic values.

However, amid the political hustle of the elections children might easily fall prey to political games and manipulation. Political actors often try to use children in their attempt to emotionally persuade the electorate. Campaigners in the bosom of their children in the newspapers, politicians visiting schools in the social media, portraits at the bus stops of ideal families voting for the party, student chorus at the party's event or representatives of student councils under political pressure are just a few examples that endanger the enforcement of children's rights.

A child is not a tool nor a decoration, rather a citizen holding rights. Exploiting children or otherwise using them to gain political advantage violates their rights.

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), that was inaugurated in Hungary by the Act No. 64 of 1991, children have the right to be heard in all issues concerning them. Thus, children have to be guaranteed the opportunity to freely make their own responsible decision whether they would like to participate in a certain campaign of any given political party. The right to participate also provides that children may stand for their opinion collectively, as a group. Responsible adults support these efforts rather than exploiting it.

Provision, protection and participation, referred to as "3 Ps" in international literature, stands as a clear principle also applicable to political campaigns. Children have to be prepared properly to empower them to be able to make an informed decision on their participation as well as to partake in decision-making processes. Protection of children stands for the responsibility of parents, experts, adult society and the state, as well as the defenceless and vulnerable side of children. Despite the consent of the parent or legal guardian, showing a child for political purposes will not ever be compatible with the child's best interests. Participation explicitly refers to the above discussed principles and rights deriving from the UNCRC.

During this period it is even more important for children and adults (especially parents and schools) to be sensitive about the significant difference between participation and exploitation of children; they have to be conscious when approving or denying the involvement of children.

Even though politicians nowadays are more conscious than the creators of the highly-debated American presidential political campaign movie *Daisy*¹ of 1964 were, children are still regularly used as tools in both the domestic and international political scene. It can often be observed that children are only appealing to politicians as long as their political image can bene-

fit from them smiling adorably and assisting to their purposes. As soon as children speak up and stand for their opinions, the child-centered, child-friendly image immediately shatters. However, the game of politics will not stop at that: by politicizing views and opinions and influencing or stigmatizing of certain rights' groups, children may also become political weapons.

Before involving children in a political campaign one should consider whether it truly supports or instead, violates the rights of the child. When deliberating this, it is inevitable to consider the following aspects.

1. Children need to be protected from manipulation. They cannot be the target of election campaigns.

The use of children in political communications usually originates from two aims: to influence parents through their children or to gain political advantage by using them.

Children are susceptible to manipulation. As the Media Act regulating advertising prescribes that advertisements cannot take advantage of children's trust towards their parents, teachers or other persons, or of the inexperience and naivety of children, the same is applicable to political communications. Children are less conscious consumers, they are more likely to judge based on emotions or feelings, their access to information is limited, and they have a strong desire to comply socially.

For this reason, the Advertising Act prohibits advertisements in child protection institutions, nurseries, schools, dormitories – and that is why it is important to apply the same to politics and party politics.

Educational facilities provide grounds for learning and preparing children for real life. Their neutrality and freedom from campaigns is vital not only vis-a-vis toothpaste or candies but also when it comes to politics.

1. The infamous campaign movie created for Lyndon B. Johnson shows a little girl picking off petals, which then turns into a countdown before the nuclear launch.

2. Children have the right to be informed properly on politics. They need to be supported in understanding the role of politics and party politics in shaping public life.

The process and results of the general elections affect both the present and the future of children. They grow up in the same political environment and culture as the adults live in, while their political socialization plays a key role in them becoming legally aware citizens.

Children require assistance to understand the nature of political campaigns, especially if they are in some way directly involved in it.

Without proper information there is no real freedom of expression or empowerment; only influencing. Still, it may often seem as if politicians tried mainly to convince children while informing them is lacking. The former delivers a passive image of children, whereas the latter would be based on children as autonomous, competent persons, including (or from a politician's point of view: risking) them developing their own views, that might be contradictory to political interests.

According to the UNCRC, all children have the right to get proper information. For this, the following should be fulfilled:

- Children are to receive broad-scoped, valid information: one-sided information, over-politicized programmes, mixing political messages with issues of public life or provoking fear are all irresponsible and unacceptable.

- Adults also have to assist children in learning that there might be many ways of shaping public life, and party politics is only one of the many. Instruments of direct democracy such as demonstrating, organising a movement or an awareness-raising campaign are also possibilities that everyone is entitled to as fundamental rights.

- It is vital for children to understand the information they receive. Parents and schools, for example, have to do their best to make sure that children understand the aims and conditions of a student demonstration, the significance of the general elections or how to differentiate between public life, politics and party politics. They have to be given the opportunity to ask questions, to debate and to form their own opinion.

This is ensured if the informing party is unbiased, having no interest in political orientation. Therefore the role of parents and schools in the political education and socialization of children is of utmost importance. It is primarily the parents' responsibility to give guidance and set an example for their children.

It is highly important to discuss issues of public life and politics in school. However, party politics have no place there.

3. Children should not be used for political purposes.

Children are not a piece of decoration that makes a political party more likeable, or a tool to bring in emotion-based votes. From time to time politicians visit communities of children to talk to them about the responsibilities of citizens and issues of their future, they bring them tablets, chocolate and other gifts or help to serve food at the canteen so that later a charming report can be delivered emphasising how important the well-being of children and the future generations are for them.

This is not the involvement of children, it is merely their utilization. When children are not explained what they partake in or if they are not mature enough to understand what they are being dragged into, especially when they are not given a choice on participation (imagine a child in a campaign movie screaming and shouting against his participation), they are being objectified, utilized.



"The not-so-secret life
of five-year-old politicians"
– the Green Party of England & Wales
pictures 'childish' politicians in their
2016 election broadcast.

Roger Hart (1992) explained the difference between genuine participation and non-participation of children in his ladder of participation as follows:

Participation	Rung		Initiated by	Choice	Understanding of the aim	Understanding their own role	Role of children	Decision-making	Feed-back	Example
Non-participation	1	Children as tools (manipulation)	adult	none	no	no	Children are used as subterfuge for the real purposes of adults (make-believe that something derives from their needs or is being done in their interests).	lacks influence	none	1. Children distribute political flyers about a conference on educational reform without even understanding what it is about. 2. An educational project is shown as the initiative of children, whereas it has been developed by adults based on a school survey; however, children are given no feedback about the findings and the utilization of such survey.
	2	Children as decoration	adult	none	no	no	Children are present only as part of the formalities, without any relevant connection to the theme, they are present as decoration rather than on behalf of themselves.	lacks influence	none	Selected children present a dance show at the conference, greet the new arrivals or deliver the bouquets, but they do not really understand what the event is about.
	3	Apparent participation (tokenism)	adult	none/apparent	yes	no	Children are seemingly given an opportunity to speak and participate. However, they are being depicted in a role that does not sincerely exist or reflects the views of someone else.	lacks influence	none	Children selected for the conference beautifully represent a given message; however, they had no opportunity to discuss with their represented peers and formulate their own views.
Genuine participation	4	Children assigned but informed	adult	voluntary	yes	yes	Children understand the assigned role and participate autonomously, presenting their informed opinion.	lacks influence	none	Children were given the opportunity to understand the aims and process of the conference and were given an important role to escort the speakers to their places in the right time. Their role was clear for themselves and others alike.
	5	Children consulted and informed	adult	voluntary	yes	yes	Children develop an informed opinion, which is taken seriously and might influence the decision-making of adults.	bears influence	present	The organisers of the educational conference on educational reforms consider the opinion of children articulated in the survey, then consult them regarding the findings of the survey and how it is going to be used.
	6	Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children	adult	voluntary	yes	yes	Children are given more autonomy in their participation and might influence the process itself with their own ideas.	shared	present	Adults involve children in the organisation of the conference, consult them on the findings of the survey and harmonise their views with the opinion of the children to finalise the programme of the conference.
	7	Child-initiated and directed action	children	voluntary	yes	yes	Children deliver their own initiatives, autonomously, in their own sphere.	shared	none	Children initiate a conference among themselves to discuss their opinion on education. Adults provide a location for the event but do not otherwise intervene in the organisation process.
	8	Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults	children	voluntary	yes	yes	Children involve adults and develops their initiation in partnership.	shared	present	Older children initiate a conference on education and involve adults into drafting the programme together.

The worst form of utilization of children is *manipulation*, when adults pretend that an issue is raised for the benefit of children, in their best interests. This can be observed when students' participation in public life becomes politicized, for instance, by concealing a new legislative reform as if it were the demands of students after a group of student demonstrators had raised concerns regarding the issue.

Children's participation as decoration, in a role that is irrelevant to the cause and not truly representing themselves, also constitutes a use of children for political purposes. This is the classic scenario when the 'adorable-factor' is deployed: for example, when selected children cut the national themed ribbon while appealing pictures are being taken for the media, whereas the children have little idea what the entire celebration or inauguration is all about.

Illusory participation of children also implies political interests rather than genuine participation. Although children are given the opportunity to speak in this scenario, they are presented in a merely virtual role or to be presenting someone else's views. This is the case when student councils fall under political influence and the chain of representation is reversed: children are representing political views. Also, when politicians in their gala speeches boast with the success of negotiations with student councils, whereas in reality the councils' opinion and initiatives are neglected.

To ensure that children's participation in political communications is not just an empty formality, and to safeguard them from being objectified or used as decoration, the following criteria have to be met:

- Children understand the aims of the campaign and their own role in it.
- They are given the opportunity to decide on their participation after being properly informed.
- Their role is meaningful.
- They receive feedback on who and based on what grounds made the decision and how their consent has been used.
- All of the above are clear and visible towards everyone, including the outsiders.

In the final rush of the election campaign one may, even despite his or her best intentions, cross the line and make choices that violate children's rights. Anyone resorting to the involvement of children or the youth is also responsible for the entire process being clear to everyone. Situations infringing children's rights bear equally negative messages towards society – thus, towards children, too – even if parents or the children have given their consent to participate in a campaign.

4. Children are not public figures: use of their personal data and images may violate their rights and best interest.

A politician may easily infringe children's right to privacy when posting on social media a picture of a visit to a children's home or a picture of him- or herself talking to a family with little children. Any picture, video or voice recording of children belong to their privacy, thus they have the right to decide who they would like to share it with. It is irrelevant from a children's rights point of view whether the legal guardian of the child has consented to it.

Informed consent of the child presumes that he or she is not only aware of the freedom to say "no", but also of the fact that becoming involved in any given person's or organisation's political communication through the use of his or her personal data requires explicit approval. The children have to be provided with proper and clear information of the aim, method and possible consequences of the use of their personal data. A further requirement for freedom of choice is to be safe from

any possible reprisal, for instance. A child's appearance may prove to be viewed as a political stance, thus the child has to consider and weigh whether he or she would truly like to stand for that politician and political programme. A real consent reduces the possibility of misuse, although it does not rule it out completely. Sharing pictures of the children may put them in a vulnerable state immediately or at a later point in the future: they might be mocked or stigmatized, and their "political footprint" may affect their future career opportunities. As children below the age of 14 usually cannot be considered mature enough to make such a choice with significant impact on their future, it is best to keep them from these situations.



"I wish people could see him as I see him"
 – Barbara Bush in Sr. George Bush's
Family/Children campaign movie of 1988

Children shown in a vulnerable state may specifically be subjected to the harmful consequences. For instance, a politician posting pictures of him- or herself joking with a child in pajamas during a visit to a children's hospital or while distributing food to children in need dressed in ragged clothes violates these children's dignity.

A further point has to be made regarding children whose parents run for office. Sharing family portraits and other private, personal information is a rather popular element of election campaigns. However, despite the parent being a public figure, their children are not. These children also have a right to decide whether they would like to participate in the campaign with their faces, names and other personal data. They are naturally subjected to the effects of media publicity and direct political commitment, thus their protection should be even more justified.

The use of children's images raises the issue of actor or model children; however, the above described principles are similarly applicable to them as well. That is why "child face" stock images receive so much criticism from children's rights organisations, as those children have no influence or real influence on the use of their images.

5. Children have civil rights and are entitled to participate in issues of public life that concern them.

Children have the right to formulate and express their own opinion and to be actually involved in issues of public life that concern them. This is true for the individual child as well as for a given group or community of children. Children's opinion on their participation in political advertisements should be taken into account, and they should be allowed to express their opinion collectively via students' councils or at demonstrations.

The UNCRC pays special attention to participation of children. Even though the expression does not appear explicitly in the convention, it is a general principle that is fundamental for the enforcement of the rights of children. It has close ties to a series of civil rights: it serves as the basis for the right to freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of assembly and association, the right to privacy and access to information (Articles 12–17) and can also be noticed as an underlying principle of the evolving capacities of the child (Article 5).

Commitment to children's civil rights provides a paradigm shift between the traditional power dynamism of the different generations and replaces the paternalistic approach with one that is based on mutual respect. The basis of a child rights approach is that children should be viewed as autonomous, competent persons in charge of their own rights. This may raise plenty of concerns among adults, it is common thought that *"children do not know that"* or *"they are already granted far too many rights"*. When they demonstrate, they merely want to rebel, skip school or are just lazy in general. However, these experiences have significant effect on the entirety of their future lives in terms of taking responsibility, autonomous decision-making, democratic values and respect towards adults.

Children's freedom of expression is greatly defined by the environment and culture they live in. It is not uncommon for children to refrain from sharing their views or from standing up for themselves or their peers due to

being afraid of the possible consequences. However, the law guarantees that children may not suffer any disadvantages for practicing their fundamental rights granted by law, such as participating in a demonstration. At the same time, the legal restrictions apply to children's civil rights unaltered, such as the obligation to notify the police of any demonstration, the prohibition of hate speech or even the regulation on school absenteeism.

All children are entitled to the right to participation: even if they are – due to their age or ability – unable to express it or their personality prohibits them from speaking up in public forums. Children are also granted the right not to engage in public affairs, public life or politics. They also have a right to participate differently, to take responsibility on various different levels. Some may only watch in silence, some may prefer expressing their opinion only online, while others prepare a speech for a student demonstration. That is the level of genuine participation.

The most vital principle is the freedom of choice: programmes should be organised in a way that allows children to participate at the highest possible level according to their abilities and interests.

All children have the right to genuine participation in public issues concerning them. This is realized if, for instance, politicians negotiate with an advocacy organization regarding a proposal on the improvement of children's safety, provide it with all the necessary information on the process, take its views seriously and integrate its feedback into the reform programme. An even further step towards participation of children is achieved if children initiated projects are similarly taken into account if decision-making is shared or at least their opinion is given an adequate weight.

Participation in public affairs does not necessarily mean a political stance. Politicizing children's opinion may raise concerns of exploitation (see section 3).

WHY TO BE DELIBERATE/ CAREFUL WHEN USING CHILDREN IN CAMPAIGNS?

The election campaign rush is no reason to violate children's rights.

It would be a delight to come across campaigns based on genuine participation rather than (intentional or habitual) exploitation of children. This is not so easily achieved of course. It is a challenge for those working for children's rights everywhere in the world to properly answer the regularly occurring question of parties: *"Why would it be worth it to respect children's rights when children are such convenient and effective campaign tools?"*

Our answer is as follows: Children's rights are legally enshrined valid rights, respecting them cannot be voluntary just as it is not for committing a car theft. Furthermore, children's rights originate directly from their needs: their development and growth cannot be ensured without fulfilling them. The possibility of participation of children is not a gift from the adult society, but the right of the child,

since the experience of participation is necessary in their development to become a responsible, legally aware and law abiding citizen – which is in the interests of the entire society. In case they are elected, the candidates currently preparing their campaign will take an oath to follow the laws of the country. The seriousness of this undertaking can already be shown during their campaign: it could begin by understanding and respecting the rights of children.

One step further from politicians' individual responsibility, children's participation bears relevance on a larger scale, for the entire society: it contributes to their development, protection, teaches them about democratic values and respect for others, enhances sense of responsibility, legal awareness and last but not least it might lead to better decisions overall. Better choices may be made in issues concerning children if they are truly involved in the process.

SUMMARY

Manipulative use of children severely violates their rights and dignity. Based on that, the main aim is often to convince the voters that the campaigner is not someone to be afraid of, he or she is a good person who cares deeply about children. This image usually serves manipulative purposes, should there still be a voter susceptible to the child-loving-politician scheme.

We strongly believe that a more valid child-centered image can be built by presenting the agenda that has been developed by the campaigner with the participation of children and which he or she as a politician intends to carry out in their best interest. Moreover, this is more associated with the theme of elections.

If a politician values the well-being of children and wishes to demonstrate his or her child-friendly agenda, it should begin with respecting children. Children should be taken seriously and not taken advantage of as a political weapon. Public affairs belong to children too. They have the right to represent themselves in them.

As the child rights ambassadors of the Hintalovon Foundation have voiced: *"A child should not be involved in a campaign merely because of being a child, rather because he or she has a message to deliver. If it is not the child's opinion and experience that counts, it can only be considered exploitation."*

Children's enjoyment of their civil and political participation rights as well as the children's protection from political exploitation is our common goal and responsibility. Striving to achieve it, the Hintalovon Child Rights Foundation initiates the development of such guidelines by the local elections of 2019 that would serve as a rule of thumb in the role of children in public affairs and their participation in political communications.



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