

Citizens disengagement in contemporary democracy

Michael J. Sandel and his critique of procedural democracy

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Summary: This brief discusses the crisis of democratic participation through the interpretative framework of Michael J. Sandel’s critique of the liberal paradigm of procedural democracy. This argument advances the thesis that citizens’ political disengagement originates in the structural exclusion of self-government within the framework of procedural democracy.

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Introduction

Across contemporary democracies, a recurring and urgent theme dominates public discourse: the crisis of political participation. This debate often produces paradoxical outcomes for a form of government whose very foundation lies in the active involvement of its citizens. Indeed, as Colin Hay remarks in *Why We Hate Politics*, contemporary democracies are marked by a “condition of disengagement and disenchantment with politics itself” (Hay, 2007, p. 4). Figures 1 and 2 show that the crisis of democratic participation is not limited to voter turnout (fig. 1), but reflects a wider disenchantment with politics of large, often majoritarian segments of population (fig. 2).

Figure 1: Voter turnout in latest parliamentary election, early 1990s and early 2020s, percentage of the voting age population. Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) Voter Turnout database, www.idea.int/.

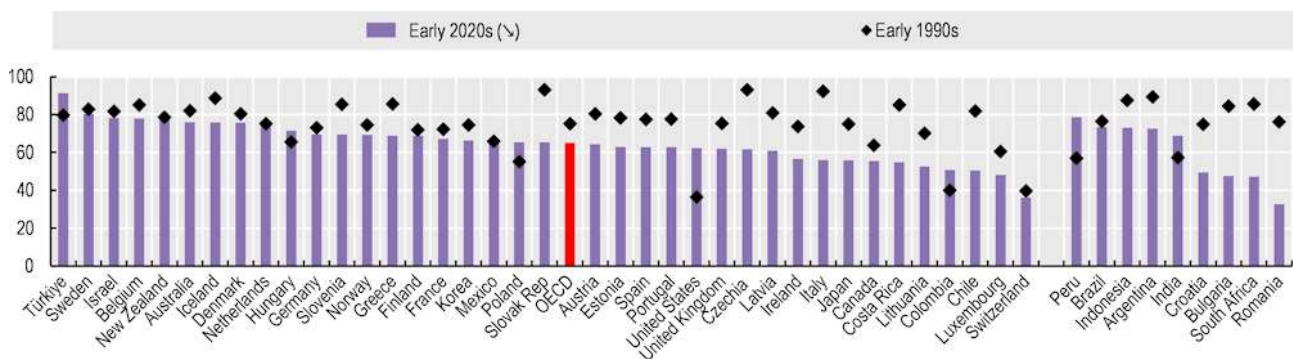
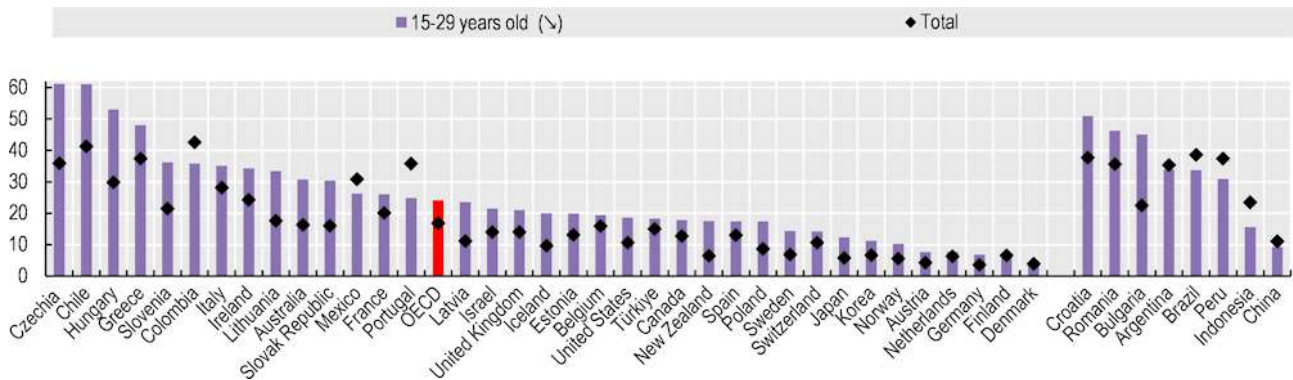


Figure 2: Percentage of people reporting to be not at all interested in politics, by age group, 2022 or last year available. Source: European Social Survey ESS10-2020, ESS9-2018



The discussion about the crisis in democratic participation through the lenses of Michael J. Sandel's critique of procedural democracy will be addressed in three questions:

1. What are the root causes of the decline in democratic participation?
2. What are the consequences of this decline for democratic systems?
3. How might the crisis of political participation be addressed and mitigated?

The argument holds that democratic participation cannot be secured by a procedural democracy, as it requires a society in which citizens are able to cultivate self-government, which, according to Sandel, reflects the principle that in a democracy, freedom and citizenship are intrinsically linked to public engagement, concern for the common good, and to “having a voice in shaping the forces that govern our lives.” (Sandel, 2022, p. 285).

What are the root causes of the decline in democratic participation?

Numerous explanations have been advanced to account for the erosion of democratic engagement. At the political level, these include “changes in the scale of public life; an increase in the complexity of public policy; changes in communications technology” (Dahl, 1992, p. 49). At the social level, “fragmentation among sectoral, territorial, class, or lifestyle communities” (Papadopoulos, 2013, p. 125), as well as “a singular focus on a utilitarian ethos” that results in “moral paralysis and ethical degeneration” (Ventriss, 2012, p. 284), affecting both citizens and politicians. However, Sandel (2022) attributes the crisis to deeper structural features of liberal democratic theory.

According to him, citizen disaffection stems from a dominant cultural self-understanding: “we think of ourselves less as citizens than as consumers” (Sandel, 2022, p. 7). Such a conception of citizenship

is coupled with the idea of a government “neutral toward the moral and religious views its citizens espouse. Since people disagree about the best way to live, government should not affirm in law any particular vision of the good life. Instead, it should provide a framework of rights that respects persons as free and independent selves, capable of choosing their own values and ends” (Sandel, 2022, p.11). Such a framework, grounded in John Rawls’ liberal theory, prioritizes fair procedures over substantive outcomes and can be defined as a *procedural republic*. Sandel identifies this framework as responsible for the decline in political participation, insofar as it promotes a conception of citizenship that neglects the element of self-government. It is precisely from this dimension of self-rule that interest in the common good and in the governance of one’s own society arises.

By limiting itself to providing a framework of rights guaranteed through fair procedures, the procedural republic fails to cultivate in its citizens dispositions and capacities that constitute self-government - dispositions that are, in turn, the necessary conditions for meaningful participation in public life. Indeed, a real form of self-rule, requiring a deliberation with fellow citizens about the common good, “requires more than the capacity to choose one’s ends and to respect others’ rights to do the same. It requires a knowledge of public affairs and also a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake. To share in self-rule therefore requires that citizens possess, or come to acquire, certain qualities of character, or civic virtues” (Sandel 2022, p.13). As just noted, Sandel attributes numerous features and conditions to political participation, and it is precisely the failure of procedural democracy to fulfil these requirements that underlies the decline in democratic participation observed in contemporary society.

What are the consequences of this decline for democratic systems?

The procedural republic outlined above exerts its influence beyond the sphere of political participation, contributing to a substantive redefinition of the public democratic discourse and, consequently, of the democratic agenda. This redefinition takes place by means of an argumentative exclusion: the procedural republic, indeed, excludes issues and themes that do not concern procedures aimed at the guarantee of rights are systematically excluded. In other words, the procedural republic excludes all matters related to the public debate over what constitutes the *good life*. If, as outlined above, the procedural republic seeks to avoid disagreement among citizens regarding the best way to live, public debate will no longer accommodate competing conceptions of the *good life*, since such views would inevitably give rise to conflict. The consequences are twofold.

First, as Sandel observes, “a politics that brackets morality and religion too completely soon generates its own disenchantment. Where political discourse lacks moral resonance, the yearning for a public

life of larger meaning finds undesirable expression” (Sandel, 2005, p. 28). The absence of this moral resonance leads to an impoverishment of public life, which becomes deprived of its most compelling and vital dimensions.

Second, the exclusion of debate over the good life and its constitutive elements creates a growing distance between citizens and politics. A politics that shows no concern for the question of which way of life represents the good life inevitably loses its capacity to engage with what truly matters to people. Politics, when reduced to a mere activity of problem-solving (Bodini, 2024), becomes a science of means (Veca, 1986; Reiss, 2019; Cevolani & Coraci, 2022; Bodini, 2024), increasingly inaccessible to the *average citizen* due to the escalating complexity of political issues (Bistagnino, 2022).

Conclusion: How might the crisis of political participation be addressed and mitigated?

Without attempting to enumerate every possible policy intervention in the field of political participation, this conclusion seeks to offer food for thought for the debate around the crisis of democratic participation. Situating the crisis of democratic participation within the framework of procedural democracy highlights a primary area for intervention. Such an effort necessitates a critical reassessment of the procedural paradigm itself, or at the very least, the implementation of public policies that broaden the role of government beyond merely ensuring fair procedures.

A second recommendation emerging from Sandel’s argument concerns the principle of citizen self-rule. If self-rule is understood as a condition of possibility for citizen engagement in the *res publica*, then public policies aimed at enhancing participation must focus on fostering environments in which citizens can actively practice this self-rule. This includes the promotion of deliberative forums, party assemblies, and informational meetings related to elections and institutional reforms, as well as the promotion of similar practices in the field of young generation education.

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Author biography

Elia Montani gained his MA in Philosophical Sciences at the University of Milan with a dissertation titled: *Revitalising democracy. A knowledge model for a new public ethic*.

His research interest includes studies on justification of democracy, participatory crisis of democracy, public ethic, epistocracy and its critics. He is currently Research Assistant at the Department of Social

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