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The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication

Volume I
A–Int

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several different inflections. One major strand of usage sees "civic" as pertaining to citizens, and the engagement is understood as relating to the life of democracy. Thus, civic engagement in this sense is understood as having to do chiefly with the modes and extent of citizens' involvement in politics, as traditionally understood. While some scholars see civic engagement as a theme relevant only to the formal electoral political arena, most writers today see politics—and hence the question of civic engagement—in broader terms that include extraparliamentary or alternative politics. A definitional issue sometimes arises in regard to un- or antidemocratic groups, such as racist parties or neo-Nazis: should such participation be deemed civic engagement? The tendency seems to be to reserve the terms for engagement that is committed to democratic values.

Another vector of usage of the term makes an etymological link between civic engagement and the notion of civil society. This is a somewhat difficult and at times contested term, but most definitions see it as the "third sector" of society, the one between the state and the economic sphere. This intermediary domain is comprised of public societal spaces where citizens can freely gather together and freely express themselves to pursue common interests; many argue that a robust civil society is absolutely as essential for democracy (Putnam, 2000). Concretely, civil society is often understood as the realm of civic associations or networks, ranging from national professional associations, religious organizations, labor unions, and advocacy groups, to local sports clubs, choir groups, and hobby collectives. Particularly from a republican view of democracy and citizenship (e.g., Barber, 1984), civic engagement in civil society is good not only for the vitality of democracy, but also for the development of the individual. Some scholars posit that civic engagement is of relevance for both politics and civil society, arguing that democracy is dependent on the good functioning of both domains.

A key tension here in the concept of civil society is whether or not it should be seen as a terrain of politics. Some definitions highlight volunteerism, and all manner of behavior which can be seen as socially considerate or beneficial, for example charity work, donating blood, turning off mobile phones at concerts and in the cinema, and not littering. Others argue that it is the publicness and the freedoms associated with civil society that make it a prerequisite for participating in politics, linking the term in various ways to the concept of the public sphere. Indeed, such authors argue that civic engagement has to do with politics, and civil society is the site of such engagement.

From the horizons of radial democracy, which emphasizes social differences and sees politics as an always present dimension of the social world (Mouffe, 2013), a distinction is made between politics as a formalized arena of conflict (usually electoral) and the concept of "the political." This notion is a category of social life: collective antagonisms continually generate a "we" and a "them," which appear anywhere on the societal landscape. Democracy is seen as the best way to deal in a civilized way with such societal conflict. From these horizons, civic engagement takes on a broad character since it includes involvement in the political at any point where it may materialize.

"Engagement" is sometimes uses as a synonym for participation (and some authors use involvement as a third synonym). Others distinguish between engagement and participation; Ekman and Amnå (2012), for example, differentiate between manifest

"political participation," which includes formal political behavior as well as protest or extraparliamentary political action, and less direct or "latent" forms of participation, conceptualized as "civic engagement" and "social involvement."

Others (e.g., Dahlgren, 2009) make a distinction that sees participation as manifest actions or practices, while engagement is used to indicate the subjective states or dispositions that facilitate the participation. Participation too can have different valences; not least in media contexts, it often refers to practices that some authors contend would be better termed access or interaction. Carpentier (2011) and other authors posit that one should not confuse participation *in* the media with participation in social and political processes *via* the media. The point is that often the latter may be very engaging, particularly in the strongly affective environments that one may encounter on the Web, but that it becomes a contained experience that does not impact on society or politics at large. Participation has to do with sharing in decision-making in some way, however remote; it involves power relations.

Basic economic realities in their more drastic forms can inhibit democratic participation in direct and material ways. A good deal of the political disinterest we observe today can be attributed to the profoundly stressful circumstances under which large segments of the population live. The harsh demands of work life that families experience, often coupled with extensive economic insecurities (the threat of unemployment, low wages, and rising costs of social services), can readily deflect civic engagement. Child-rearing, personal relationships, long-term planning, leisure time; these and other aspects of private life come under severe strain. For the unemployed, of course, the situation is all the more grim. Economic disempowerment, creeping further down into the middle classes in recent decades, is a significant barrier to civic engagement. We are reminded of Marshall's (1950) three key dimensions of citizenship which must be fulfilled to promote engagement: the *civil*, which guarantees the basic legal integrity of society's members; the *political*, which ensures the rights associated with democratic participation; and the *social*, which addresses citizens' general life.

The dynamics of civic disengagement

Though there is a recurring rhetoric circulating in society about civic duty, from the horizons of citizens' own lives there are a number of reasons why nonengagement in electoral politics or even civil society associations may often be the more likely option. Certainly laziness and other less attractive attributes of human character may at times be at work. Yet to see low or nonengagement merely as a lack of civic virtue to be countered by campaigns for moral uplift, or to lament the prevalence of some mysterious "apathy," is to ignore central structural features in society that can impact on participation in the public arena. A good deal of nonengagement can be explained by the undemocratic features of modern society: "Inequalities of class, sex, and race substantially hinder the extent to which it can be legitimately claimed that individuals are 'free and equal'" (Held, 2006, p. 210). Thus, specific social, economic, political, and cultural factors that impact on the resources of particular groups can be barriers to democratic participation.

Among citizens as a whole, the declines in participation in the formal political arena can be traced to erosions of engagement at the subjective level, which in turn are fed by undercurrents of distrust, powerlessness, cynicism, and ultimately meaninglessness. There is a growing erosion of trust in the social institutions that undergird democracy, as many citizens feel that their visibility and voice are losing political impact. In commenting on these developments, Hay (2007, p. 39) specifies three basic perceptions that undermine public trust and legitimacy: (1) Political elites subvert the collective public interest for party or self-interest, while at the same time claiming to serve the public; (2) Political elites are captured by corporate interests; and (3) Government is inefficient in using public funds.

These factors can generate a sense of personal powerlessness and despair over one's life circumstances, or perhaps a bitterness of having been abandoned or betrayed by the political elites. To feel, for example, that the power elite continuously turns a deaf ear to one's efforts to intervene tends to undercut participation in the long run. Such feelings are not ungrounded: In both the established and emerging democracies, the dangers of ruling oligarchies and entrenched power interests are ever-present. Thus, the vision of genuine democracy represents a threat to those whose hegemony is based on anything other than the legitimate consent of the governed.

Hay further posits that we should take a historical perspective on civic disengagement; such dissatisfaction is nothing new, nor is even the threat of delegitimation of democratic governments. In fact, one can argue that democracy historically has always been potentially vulnerable. Hay cites the British political philosopher John Dunn, who noted that for large segments of the population, democratic politics has been "consistently disappointing." What is surprising, according to Dunn, is not that democracy often disappoints its citizens, but rather, given its track records of failures, it still has thus far managed to maintain reasonably high expectations. Indications are that these are in the process of being further reduced to troublingly low levels by an array of stresses and strains on democratic systems.

A specific major structural problem for participation (and democracy generally) that has long been present but has intensified in recent decades is the tendency for genuine political power to drift away from the formal, accountable political system and into the private sector, in the logics of neoliberal versions of societal development (see, e.g., Harvey, 2006). This not only subverts democracy, but leaves social devastation in its wake. When market dynamics are presented as the most suitable path toward a better future, the opportunities for meaningful political engagement become eroded. Normative frameworks that concern justice are subverted, as economistic values seep into and put price tags on just about all areas of human life, derailing the foundations for democratic political discussion (Sandel, 2012). The upshot of such currents is often a process of depoliticization, whereby issues that are normative and political in character become rendered in terms that are technical or administrative, undermining the meaningfulness of participation. This carries with it feelings of disempowerment and ultimately disengagement.

How much engagement is actually "sufficient" for democracy to function or flourish is difficult to determine in the abstract. Historically in Western democracies, especially in recent decades, the levels of civic engagement have been seen as problematic to various degrees. For example, in the United States the participation in presidential elections has long hovered around 50% of the citizenry, and much lower in state and municipal elections. Apparently it is possible that seemingly low levels of participation can be "normalized." Yet, waning participation can also raise serious concern about the dangers, such as declining legitimacy. Thus, while participation in national elections among European Union member states has varying patterns, voting in the European Parliament elections has been decreasing steadily, giving rise to much concern.

Civic reengagement

However widespread and deep, civic disengagement is of course not the whole story. For one thing, if we see politics in a wider sense, then such disengagement can at times be potentially understood as a political act, a considered and rational response under prevailing circumstances. Further, if we then look at the field of alternative political participation, arguments about apathy crumble as we see many citizens engaging politically, but outside the electoral system, finding new routes to engagement and participation. Some forms of engagement are leading to new kinds of political practices, new ways of being citizens, effectively altering the character of politics in some contexts, as citizens explore "life," "identity," and "cultural" politics, along with—or instead of—traditional politics. Indeed, the realm of politics is transmuting, as citizens broaden the notion of what constitutes political issues (e.g., Bennett, 2012). Democracy needs both a functioning party system and a viable domain of extraparliamentary politics; both at present are in transition.

Thus, parallel with the developments of declining involvement with electoral politics and an erosion of certain aspects of democracy, we also note a renewed engagement on both the Left and the Right, as well as within political shades that do not fit neatly into these classic categories. An array of groups enter the public sphere to pursue their own interests or their visions of a better world, operating outside the confines of party politics but often trying to impact on legislation. On the political stage we can observe many established single issue organizations and loose collectivities, temporary issue publics, lobbying outfits, NGOs, social movements, protest activists, citizen networks, and other formations, active at local, regional, national, and global levels.

Engaged—and often enraged—citizens in democracies from Slovenia to the United Kingdom, from Portugal to Australia, from Greece to the United States, are finding alternative paths to political involvement, though not always with great effect. One might look with dismay, for example, at how Occupy gained much attention when it was first launched, but failed to revive in a robust way the following year. In explicitly authoritarian contexts, the efforts to move society toward democracy have also met with varying success: in Burma there is a guarded optimism, while the protests in Iran after the 2009 election, Ukraine after the Orange Revolution, and Belarus after the regime aborted the elections of 2010, have not been able to claim significant and lasting gains. In Egypt after the Arab Spring, the situation remains ambivalent—and volatile at the time of this writing.

Alternative politics operating outside party structures is hardly a new phenomenon within democracies, though the character evolves across time. A century ago, for example, much extraparliamentary politics in Western Europe and North America was embodied by unions and other mass movements striving for social transformations (for example, women's suffrage or temperance issues). Alternative politics of recent decades is shaped by many of the social and cultural currents of late modernity, not least the evolving character of democratic systems themselves. Democracy is being transformed as its social, cultural, and political foundations evolve, and the character of engagement and participation is a part of these large developments.

Toward empowerment: Civic cultures

While the emphasis on structural features is essential, it is important not to lose sight of the dimension of agency: It is people, individually and collectively, who will experience civic engagement and participate. Where is the subjectivity of such engagement to come from? One way to begin to answer the question, both conceptually and empirically, is through the framework of civic cultures (Dahlgren, 2009). Civic engagement can arise if structural contingencies permit, but it must also be supported by and integrated within a larger cultural milieu that has relevance for participation. Civic cultures form a framework intended to help illuminate the conditions that are necessary for engagement, for the subjective dispositions that can nourish participation. The research concern with the subjective dimensions of civic engagement is growing, and even includes analyses of the experience of voting (Coleman, 2013).

To the extent that they are compelling, civic cultures operate at the level of citizens' taken-for-granted horizons in everyday reality. I use the plural form to indicate that in the late modern world there are many ways in which participation can be accomplished and enacted; there is no one universal civic culture, but many versions that can sustain civic engagement and promote something we would call democracy. Civic cultures are historically shaped by an array of factors, including structural relations of power, but also by institutions and patterns of interaction from everyday life. Certainly media play a central role; their form, content, specific logics, affordances, and modes of use can serve as resources. Robust civic cultures are necessary for the functioning of democracy as a system, but also for the empowerment of citizens, how they come to see themselves as members and potential participants in societal development. I conceptualize civic cultures as consisting of six interdependent dimensions: knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices/skills, and identity.

Knowledge

That knowledge about the world, about society, and one's place in it is an important dimension for civic cultures is quite obvious; we should also keep in mind, however, how media give rise to new forms of knowledge, as well as how it is stored, retrieved, and produced. This is leading to new ways of thinking, to new cognitive architectures.

Values

Democratic values of tolerance, reciprocity, equality, solidarity, and so on usually circulate implicitly; these are essential if democracy is not to become an empty, formalistic shell. Such values can be challenged not just by instrumental logic and consumerist values, but even by faith-based world views on how the social world should be organized.

Trust

This is often formulated in terms of people's (vertical) trust toward institutions, but here (horizontal) citizens' trust toward each other is more relevant: Is one willing to cooperate for social or political goals with people one does not know personally? The role of networking, and its "loose bonds," becomes relevant here.

Spaces

Where do citizens meet and communicate with each other? Where does democracy "take place"? We still find it in physical places, such as cafés and lunchrooms, certainly, but increasingly also online.

Practices

To participate, and especially to mobilize, takes the form of (mostly communicative) practices, and the skills to enact them. Voting is a classic civic practice, but there are so many more forms of practice: organizing, generating enthusiasm, calling and running meetings, debating, and so on.

Identity

All the dimensions impact on each other, but perhaps the most important consequence is in regard to civic identity, the capacity to see oneself as a participant in the social and political world. This is the foundation of empowerment and the first step toward civic engagement. To feel empowered as a civic agent permits one to draw upon and generate new knowledge and experience; this can strengthen values and trust; which can lead to the use of ever more cyberspace, where new skills are developed, and so forth.

The contested role of the media

Discussions on whether the media promote civic engagement or foster passivity go back to the early 19th century; given the centrality of media in the public life of democracies, research and debate have often focused on the consequences of their structural organization and ownership, their modes of representations (especially in regard to journalism), as well as their use and impact on citizens. In particular, journalism has been the focus of ongoing critical debate in democracies; while it has