

# **Is electoral abstention also a form of democratic participation? Rethinking the value of voting in the young V Republic (1960s-1980s)**

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## Abstract

What does abstention mean for the “election-centered” democracies of the post-war? This presentation will look at the changing interpretations of abstention during the first three decades of the Vth Republic. The new constitution, but especially the Gaullist practice of power, first amplified the meaning of elections and referenda as a means to legitimize and stabilize government. Along with the importance of situationist and anarchist movements, this explains why the French 1968 movements vehemently contested the mere act of voting and electing as a “trap for idiots” (“elections, piège à cons”) ultimately legitimizing the ruling party – a slogan which Jean-Paul Sartre later elaborated in an influential critique of elections. At the same time, the limited alternatives in many elections (particularly in second rounds) led many leftist political actors, intellectuals and editorialists to advocate for abstention, instead of choosing for the “lesser evil”. This framing of abstention as an act of protest was even adopted by Gaullist actors in specific cases, such as the first European parliamentary elections. These stances on abstention thereby questioned the reduction of democratic participation to voting, at a time when new social movements were pushing for local and richer forms of participation.

## Author information

**Zoé Kergomard** is a post-doctoral researcher at the German Historical Institute of Paris. Her postdoctoral project looks at the changing discourses and practices surrounding electoral participation in France, Germany and Switzerland after 1945. Her PhD dwelt with the transformations of representation practices in election campaigns in post-war Switzerland and will be published in March 2020 by Schwabe Verlag under the title *Wahlen ohne Kampf? Schweizer Parteien und ihre Kampagnen, 1947-1983*. She has published several book chapters and articles on the “invention” of the female voter after female enfranchisement in Switzerland, neoliberal discourses and practices in Swiss politics, or “representative claims” in Swiss election campaigns.

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**Monday, 21 June - Session 9 - 9,00-10,30 CET (Webex) - Panel – “Political Participation” in Democracy History: A Contested and Ever-Changing Concept and Practice?**

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