Democracies are not immune to challenge, nor democratic norms to subversion. Even those residing in established democracies over the past decade have cause to acknowledge the fragility of democratic institutions. Brexit, President Trump’s tenure and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. Capitol Riot and state-led de-democratization in Poland, Hungary and Hong Kong have renewed academic debate on democratic backsliding and breakdown. Yet while accounts broadly agree on the principal threats to contemporary democracies, they diverge on two important issues: the cause(s) of these challenges, and the action required to reverse the erosion of democratic norms. Populism has proven particularly challenging in this respect. Not only are its causes a source of lively debate (Hawkins et al. 2017), but the literature in this area affords little guidance for how we might respond to the phenomenon. How, then, should we understand the recent surge of populist movements within Western democracies? And what can be done in aid of repair?

Michael Sandel affords a novel and sobering analysis of these questions in his latest book, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?* Steering away from the parsimonious temptation to construe populism as mere economic protest or an expression of deep-seated prejudice, he instead suggests that the ‘populist complaint is about the tyranny of merit’ (p. 25). It is a response to the elite’s self-aggrandizing belief that the successful are entitled to their success (as it represents their talent and effort), and that those sitting on the lower rungs of society are likewise deserving of their fate. It gives voice and direction to the resentment fostered by this meritocratic belief, serving as a vehicle for resisting the hubris of the meritocratic elite and, ultimately, meritocracy itself.

Sandel identifies two sides to meritocracy (pp. 63–64). Meritocracy’s aspirational side captures the idea that those willing to exercise their talents and effort deserve to rise as far as those talents and efforts will take them. Importantly, it rests on two claims which have their roots in Christian providentialism (p. 42).
The first is that, by dint of hard work, we are capable of rising. As free individuals, we have mastery over our lives and what we make of ourselves, with our successes being a matter within our control. But the meritocratic ethos goes further. As our successes are entirely a matter of talent and hard work, it follows that we ought to be entitled to the fruits of our labor. In other words, we deserve our success. Yet this second claim uncovers meritocracy’s sinister side: if the successful deserve their successes, the less successful must also own their failures.

The so-called ‘tyranny of merit’ arises from the interplay between meritocracy’s harsh and aspirational faces. In particular, Sandel notes how the ‘rhetoric of rising’ gives expression to the aspirational sentiments of self-mastery and desert, with its promise that ‘you can make it if you try’ compounding the dejection felt by those who have not ‘made it’. For the successful, the rhetoric of rising affirms that they are indeed worthy of their success, that they are the deserved ‘winners’ in society. The meritocratic ideal therefore generates hubris in the successful, and resentment and humiliation in the rest. But Sandel correctly observes that the rhetoric of rising does not tell us the whole story about the tyranny of merit (p. 73). First, he contends that the staggering inequality in American society stifles upward mobility, evoking a ‘demoralized discontent’ as individuals struggle to reconcile meritocracy’s promise of ascension with their reality of stagnation (pp. 73–77). Inequality flowing from globalization also gave birth to what Sandel terms ‘credentialism’: the stigmatization of those without a college degree. Initially conceived as a way of enabling the American working class to succeed in the global market, the relentless valorization of college education soon typified the hubristic attitude of the meritocratic elite and fueled working-class resentment. Lastly, the rise of the well-credentialed ushered in a new, technocratic mode of political discourse—one controlled by ‘the smart’, for ‘the smart’. Given these factors, Sandel believes it should come as no surprise that working-class Americans feel disempowered as citizens, demoralized as workers and humiliated as human beings.

At this juncture, Sandel’s critics might question whether his complaint against the ‘technocratic approach to politics’ can be laid at meritocracy’s doorstep. Sandel’s attack takes aim at the way technocratic discourse ‘places decision-making in the hands of elites, and so disempowers ordinary citizens’ (p. 108), and its reluctance to properly engage with important normative questions (p. 112). Yet we might ask ourselves whether American politics has ever empowered ordinary, working-class citizens in a way that allows them to directly influence policy-making and governance. Perhaps at the level of state and municipal decision-making, but it remains open whether technocracy—and, by extension, meritocracy—can be blamed for the disempowerment of citizens at a national level. In a similar vein, we might also question the extent to which technocracy and meritocracy are responsible for shifting political discourse away from tackling truly ‘political’ questions. After all, the populist cry of ‘drain the swamp’ was not so much about politicians failing to debate issues of ‘power, morality, authority, and trust’ (p.112), but was rather a damning indictment of the mistrust that ordinary people had in respect of the answers given to such questions. It was arguably the actual and perceived hedonism of the political class that moved American political discourse away from meaningful discussion,
with technocracy’s value-neutral approach merely being best-suited for a politics of pretense and mistrust.

One of *The Tyranny of Merit*’s resounding achievements lies in its treatment of why working-class Americans rallied to the ‘fake’ populism of Donald Trump (p. 27). Sandel begins his argument with a simple yet remarkably astute claim: work is economic *and* a source of social recognition (p. 198). Work’s value does not consist solely in the amount of money one receives for it; work’s value also derives from the esteem that it attracts from society, its value-contribution to the common good (pp. 198–99). And it is this second aspect of work that the tyranny of merit undermines. Beyond the inequalities flowing from globalization and the relentless march of credentialism, Sandel posits that the working classes are subjected to the additional humiliation of ‘sorting’ (ch. 6). He argues that the ‘meritocratic sorting’ undertaken by university admissions is a primary mode of allocating social esteem within society, reinforcing the view that the admitted are deserving of their places while the ‘rejects’ are responsible for their failures. Following this early exposure to meritocracy’s harsh judgment, those not pursuing higher education enter the workforce. Yet things are no better.

Society’s consumerist conception of the common good, understood as the totality of society’s interests and preferences, entails that a valuable contribution to the common good is one which maximizes consumer satisfaction (p. 208). A worker’s market value is therefore also their social value, with the most valuable individuals in the marketplace being entitled to the greatest amount of social esteem. Pay becomes a strong indicator of social value, and hard work no longer guarantees receipt of social esteem (pp. 134–40). Conjoined with the illusory promise that one can climb up the economic ladder through work, the equivocation of market value and social contribution has had a devastating effect on American workers. Their modest pay signifies the trivial social value of their work and justifies the lack of esteem and recognition that it attracts, thereby ‘eroding the dignity of [their] work’ and spurring ‘anger and resentment’ within the working class (p. 208–09). Consequently, for Sandel, this loss of dignity is the root of the recent populist uprising in America, with inbuilt socio-economic inequalities, globalization and neoliberalism operating as comorbidities which augmented the humiliation felt by working Americans.

The force of Sandel’s argument derives from its parsimony. It is an elegant and intuitive reconstruction of the populist complaint that not only engages with the causes of populism, but also attempts to place proto-populist feelings and attitudes at the heart of its analysis. An interesting though unexplored question that could further develop Sandel’s analysis is whether the claims populism makes as an ideology influenced America’s populist uprising and, if so, in what way (see Hawkins et al. 2017). While Sandel’s analysis mainly focuses on how the meritocratic ideal and working Americans’ sentiments shaped Trump’s populism, this would instead examine whether and how populism’s inherent claims about ‘the pure people’, ‘the corrupt elite’ and ‘the volonté générale’ molded the populist backlash in America (Mudde 2004). Crucially, doing so could shed more light on the contingency of populism in America: was the recent populist uprising merely political discontent that happened to be expressed best via a populist movement, or did the tyranny of merit rouse long-held populist grievances about American democracy’s failings?
Of even greater intrigue are the remedies suggested by Sandel. The first aims to dismantle the ‘sorting machine’ that higher education has evolved into by introducing a lottery-based admissions process at Ivy League and other top universities (pp. 184–95). Simply put, applicants hitting a minimum admission threshold are entered into a lottery from which certain candidates are drawn—the winners are admitted, the losers are not. Sandel’s intentions are clear: by injecting luck into the admissions process, merit is reduced to nothing more than a ‘threshold qualification, not an ideal to be maximized’ (p. 185). Meritocratic hubris will wane as applicants realize that their success was not wholly their own doing, sparing unsuccessful candidates the humiliation of failure. Most importantly, however, the admissions lottery would stop the valorization of college degrees by making the prospect of their attainment a matter of chance, severely weakening the credentialist worldview that talent and effort are the only prerequisites for attending college.

While this solution is certainly seductive, implementing a lottery of this kind could inadvertently deepen resentment rather than cure it. The problem here centres on the distinction between actual and apparent fairness. While Sandel’s proposal would undoubtedly make the admissions system more equitable, it would still be operated by members of the meritocratic elite: the admissions staff and academics. Rather than being seen to make admissions decisions on merit, the lottery officers’ decisions are devoid of content—they are simply a matter of luck. On a more cynical interpretation, however, this means that those decisions are prone to unmitigated bias. So just as populists perceive that the ‘corrupt elite’ are exploiting the system to their benefit, unsuccessful applicants may likewise consider that the lottery officers are manipulating the lottery to continue advancing their now-hidden nepotistic and meritocratic agendas. As a result, it is not the lottery system that has to convince applicants of its detachment from merit; the academic institutions themselves need to abandon the meritocratic ideal, not just in an admissions context, but also in their general activities (e.g., faculty hiring, assessments, public engagement, etc.).

Sandel’s broader answer to the discontent of working Americans is that society ‘must put the dignity of work at the center of the political agenda’ (p. 205). Specifically, we need to reject the consumerist conception of the common good in favor of a ‘civic’ conception, one constituted by the needs and preferences of society which allow its members to flourish and prosper (p. 208). Which ends are valuable to a society is a matter for deliberation by its members, with the value of our contributions being measured in terms of the extent to which they serve those ends (p. 209). Our social value is therefore distinct from our market value, the latter being a matter of supply and demand rather than civic benefit. It is only by reasoning about the common good as a community, by recognizing that our flourishing depends upon the contributions of others, that we can foster solidarity and afford workers with the esteem their work truly deserves. For this proposal to have the remedial effect intended by Sandel, however, it must overcome two related concerns.

The first is that it would be inert against populism and populist movements. The issue is that Sandel’s vision of a society founded upon the civic conception of the common good requires public deliberation, which depends in turn upon ‘seeing ourselves as members of a community to which we are indebted’ (p. 221). But a defining characteristic of populism is that its Manichean discourse, pitting
the ‘virtuous people’ against the ‘evil elite’, creates a near-unbridgeable chasm within society (Mudde 2004, p. 544). We might therefore question the feasibility of deliberating about the common good in the absence of a further mechanism that allows populists to view themselves as members of the same community as ‘the Other’. Of course, Sandel can avoid this problem by pointing to the cultivation of civic virtue, with its focus on generating ‘a concern for the whole, a dedication to the common good’ (Sandel 2009, p. 263). Yet this rests on an important assumption: that citizens will recognize and accept that the common good in question is that of their society or community. And since populists adopt a narrow interpretation of their community (i.e., ‘the people’), there is a real danger that these individuals will simply reject society’s common good and the communal obligations it entails on the ground that it is not their community’s common good. This second concern, like the first, invites further consideration of how a civic approach to politics can respond to the unique difficulties posed by populism.

Looking back at the intervening period between *Tyranny of Merit*’s publication and this review, I wish to conclude by focusing on some developments which highlight the continuing significance of Sandel’s insights. On 8 December 2020, Margaret Keenan became the first person in the world to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. The United Kingdom has since performed over 130 million jabs while the United States has administered around 500 million doses to its citizens, with both countries being among the first to start their vaccine rollouts (Ritchie et al. 2020). What we also saw, however, was the manifestation of meritocratic hubris at a supranational level. Both countries subtly asserted their moral entitlement to the first few batches of vaccine, their claims referencing the fact that the vaccines were developed by companies established or operating within their territories. Less-developed nations had to wait in line as the global meritocratic elite enjoyed the fruits of their labor and scientific talent—fruits they deserved. Thus, we witnessed the unveiling of a global meritocracy, complete with its characteristic feelings of triumph and humiliation, touching the lives of nearly every person worldwide.

Worrisome though this may be, there is also reason for optimism. The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a fierce debate on the demise of our communities, and how we might forge and strengthen our civic bonds. Higher education’s relationship with merit has also been brought into focus, with COVID-19-related disruption to public examinations offering us a glimpse of how universities and students alike respond to the contingency of success. Work, too, has been the subject of scrutiny, with the pandemic prompting many to evaluate whether they have accorded too much or too little social value to certain trades and professions. Consequently, *The Tyranny of Merit*’s greatest accomplishment is that it forces each of us to reflect on not just the flaws in our societies, but also the ends we hope our societies will help us attain. Sandel has therefore already helped us take the first step toward establishing our own politics of the common good, whether we realize it or not.
Declarations

Conflict of interest  The author did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work, nor are there any relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

References

Hawkins, Kirk A., Madeleine Read, and Teun Pauwels. 2017. Populism and its causes. In The Oxford handbook of populism, eds, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, Pierre Ostiguy, 267–286. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Mudde, Cas. 2004. The populist zeitgeist. Government & Opposition 39 (4): 541–563.
Ritchie, Hannah, Edouard Mathieu, Lucas Rodés-Guirao, Cameron Appel, and Charlie Giattino, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, Joe Hasell, Bobbie Macdonald, Diana Beltekian, and Max Roser. 2020. Coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccinations https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations (accessed 27 December 2021).
Sandel, Michael J. 2009. Justice: What's the right thing to do? New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Publisher’s Note  Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.