

“Good Citizens” in Democratic Hard Times

By

SARA WALLACE GOODMAN

How do citizens define their civic obligation when their country faces a democratic threat? Do citizens of a democracy think it is important to uphold liberal democratic values or to participate in governance? Do they embrace values that protect democracy, or do they just protect their political party or “side”? I examine changes to citizenship norms in the context of democratic threat using observational data from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. I compare trends between 2004 and 2019, which show a weakening in the consensus of “good citizen” norms. Specifically, partisans on the Left are more likely to value diversity, vigilance, and tolerance; while partisans on the Right become more supportive of values like obeying the law. These differences are reduced in consensus-based political systems, but still the consequences are concerning: when the ties of citizenship norms become weaker, so too does national unity, which is integral to democratic legitimacy and stability.

Keywords: citizenship norms; obligation; democratic threat; liberal values; partisanship

Citizenship is the bedrock of democracy. Citizens acknowledge that their status comprises rights and responsibilities, but they disagree over what those rights and responsibilities are. For some, citizenship is a set of behavioral obligations. For these individuals, what it means to be a “good citizen” is being politically active: voting, helping others, maybe protesting. For others, citizenship is a set of values. For these individuals, good citizenship is expressed in a series of commitments to liberal democratic norms: mutual toleration, forbearance, accepting diversity, and equality. And

*Sara Wallace Goodman is an associate professor of political science at the University of California, Irvine (UCI). Her research interests are in citizenship and national belonging. She is the author of *Citizenship in Hard Times* (Cambridge University Press 2021) and coauthor of the forthcoming *Pandemic Politics* (Princeton University Press).*

Correspondence: swgood@uci.edu

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for some, citizenship is a strict category of belonging, where a “good citizen” is patriotic and speaks the national language. These varieties of citizenship norms coexist, overlap, and mostly lie dormant. In quotidian times, most citizens do not consciously engage in acts or beliefs of citizenship, and this “blend of activity and passivity” (Almond and Verba 1963, 347) is unproblematic for democratic flourishing.

But these are not quotidian times. We are witnessing widespread democratic backsliding around the globe, including in some of the oldest and most-consolidated democratic states. Interchangeably referred to as deconsolidation, erosion, and decay, all refer to the weakening of key political institutions, including electoral integrity and the practice of rule of law. And because this is a state-led process of deconsolidation (Bermeo 2016), most of what we know about the democratic crisis focuses on the role of elites (e.g., Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

We know much less about the role of everyday citizens in times of democratic crisis. What do citizens think their obligations are in the face of democratic threat? We can ask about attitudes toward candidates that violate democratic principles (Graham and Svobik 2020) or support for democracy more generally (Mounk 2018), but we do not know about what citizens think *their* role is *as citizens* when faced with a democratic threat. Do democratic citizens think it is important to uphold liberal democratic values? Participate? Are they embracing values that protect democracy or protect their political party or “side,” recognizing that these may not always be compatible, particularly when the source of democratic erosion is frequently found within parties themselves?

In this article, I provide a conceptual framework for thinking about citizenship norms during democratic hard times. I begin by centering the institution of citizenship in our understanding of democratic stability, focusing on the importance of cross-group consensus and overlapping commitments. I then move to citizenship in the face of instability. What does it mean to be a “good citizen” in the context of democratic threat? I present comparative empirical evidence from the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany—three consolidated democracies that face extant threats to democratic quality—that shows citizens are increasingly divided about what it means to be a good citizen, and that this division is driven by partisanship. This sideism is not merely a product of polarization (McCoy and Somer 2019; Mettler and Lieberman 2020), but it makes democratic hard times worse. It reduces cross-cutting cleavages and, with it, opportunities for compromise and negotiation; and it critically reduces the number of value overlaps required for national unity—a prerequisite for democracy (Rustow 1970).

What Are Citizenship Norms?

Citizenship norms comprise “a shared set of expectations about the citizen’s role in politics,” telling “citizens what is expected of them, and what they expect of themselves” (Dalton 2008a, 78). As the study of citizenship norms is typically conducted by political behavioralists, these norms are usually limited to civic duties like voting and participation (Blais and Achen 2019; Dalton 2021). But

norms crucially also include commitments to liberal democratic beliefs, for example, rule of law, equality, tolerance; as well as features of national belonging, for example, a citizen speaks English or is Christian.

Why do we care about norms? A focus on norms is vital to understanding democratic continuity or erosion because it *precedes* behavior. There is an accumulation of evidence pointing to norms as a motivation to vote (Blais and Achen 2019; Blais 2000; Riker and Ordeshook 1968) or participate more generally (Bolzendahl and Coffé 2013). But looking at behavior only captures observable consequences of norms and provides a very narrow understanding of what citizens value. As Russ Dalton (2008b, 11) succinctly puts it, norms of citizenship “are the key to understanding what is really going on.” Oftentimes authoritarian leaders gain power not because individuals voted for them but because they did nothing to obstruct a power grab.

If democratic backsliding has shown us anything, it is that it is a mistake to take core democratic features for granted. And that includes citizenship. Citizens give democracy legitimacy and are, therefore, a core democratic institution. As threats to democracy occur around them, like undermining electoral integrity, we need to know what happens to citizens in these contexts. How do they interpret their civic obligation in response to change? Do they see themselves as subjects or as agents for offsetting threat?

Citizenship as a Source of Democratic Stability: The Importance of Consensus

Citizenship not only makes democracy legitimate, but it also makes democracy stable. Citizenship establishes national unity, balancing and subduing otherwise divisive group differences through a consensus of ideas, establishing cross-cutting ties and predictable interactions (e.g., rule of law). It coordinates most different citizens to establish shared goals and convey legitimacy. Citizenship does not reduce differences but defangs them to allow for democratic governance.

Many scholars discuss the critical role of mass support for democratic stability. Almond and Verba were early observers of this phenomena, noting civic culture plays a stabilizing role in democracy because it establishes consensus over values: “If there is no consensus within society, there can be little potentiality for the peaceful resolution of political differences that is associated with the democratic process” (Almond and Verba 1963, 358). Dahl also observed demarcating a national political community through inclusive citizenship conveys democratic legitimacy (Dahl 1989).

Yet disagreement and variation remain within that community. These differences not only *shape* the liberal democratic nature of citizenship, where competition of ideas is just as vital as competition of parties and candidates, they *reflect* it, through values like mutual toleration. At a minimum, the liberal beliefs that support democratic citizenship include equality—that individuals merit equal concern, rights, and respect (Dworkin and Hampshire 1985)—and limited state power, out

of fear it may favor one group over another or infringe on individual autonomy. These basic liberal commitments allow for the inherent differences of opinions, and other characteristics of a diverse society, to flourish while being bound together in common national purpose, in other words, national unity. These differences may reflect any number of salient cleavages that shape political identity, including partisanship, age, occupation, gender, ideology, religion, to name only a few. In fact, national unity among diverse citizens does not demand the homogenization or flattening of differences; nor does it imply nationalism. Instead, national unity establishes a “fellow feeling” comprising shared system goals and common purpose. As J. S. Mill (1963, 923) succinctly writes, “We mean a feeling of common interest among those who live under the same government.”

This liberal democratic core of overlapping commitments is critical. In fact, as Dankwart Rustow (1970) argues, national unity (in which “people agree that they are a political entity”) is the “single background condition” for a thriving democracy (see also Berman 2019). This unity precedes accommodation, conflict, consensus, and decision-making inherent to democratic governance. We do not have a perfect sense of what national unity means, but we do know that in the absence of national goals, deeply divided societies “lack consensus,” which allows for sub-national (or other groupings) to serve as the “primary basis of citizen loyalty” (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972, 12).

This is where *liberal* norms are vital for stability. Liberal values make democracy possible not only in sectarian contexts but in demographically diverse societies, keeping ethnocultural impulses at bay or, at least, in check. A strong, well-functioning democracy requires citizens to engage with one another, respectfully, even on controversial subjects (Lipset 1959). Conflict may be a feature of democracy, but ties that enable compromise are necessary for effective governance (Schattschneider 1960). It also confers on a democratic government legitimacy to represent and make rules that reflect common group goals.

What Happens in Democratic Hard Times? Breaking of Shared Values

Taking a long view of democracy, it has always been the case that some individuals uphold antidemocratic practices and countermajoritarian institutions to retain power (e.g., Mickey 2015). But the confident assertion by Francis Fukuyama (2006) that democracies had triumphed at the “end of history,” with liberalism beating out competing ideologies, did not simply fail to preempt new, outside competitors to liberal democracy (e.g., Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan, capitalist authoritarianism in China), it also underestimated *internal* competitors to liberal democracy: that democratic citizens themselves might exhibit waning support for democracy (Foa and Mounk 2017), trade off democratic principles to support copartisan elites (Graham and Svobik 2020), and embrace illiberal acts of violence as a means of political gain (Kalmoe and Mason 2022).

But citizens can weaken their commitments to democracy in ways beyond choosing nondemocratic leaders and violence. Vital overlaps in normative commitments across deeply divided societies can disappear. When the fault lines align with previous divisions—and any type of ethnic, sectarian, political, or social group can shape a salient identity in this way—it reduces the necessary cross-cutting cleavages to reaffirm national goals and, therefore, substantiate legitimacy and provide stability for a democratic regime.

In the remainder of this article, I show how partisan divisions evolve in the evaluation of what makes a good citizen. Citizens see different obligations in hard times, and these norms align with partisanship. Put another way, individuals act to protect the party, not (necessarily) democracy. In this, citizens can be the source of great instability. In different threat contexts, we might expect other types of identities (e.g., sectarian, race) to be similarly activated, although, as the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates, even nonpolitical threats can become partisan (Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky 2021).

A Look at the Evidence: The Good and the Bad of Partisan Citizenship

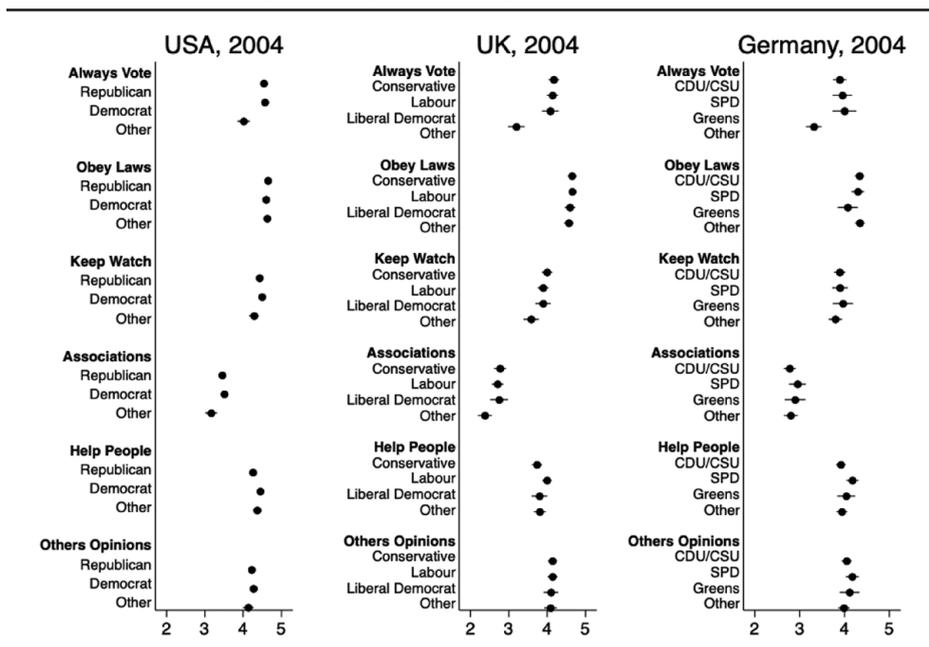
I examine changes in citizenship norms in three advanced democracies—the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany—using observational data from two time periods: 2004 (a snapshot predating democratic decline) and 2019. These countries have all faced democratic threat—from electoral interference and voter suppression to populism and the rise of the far Right. Importantly, these cases also exhibit variation in political institutions, from zero-sum, winner-take-all systems (United States, United Kingdom) to positive sum, consensus-style systems (Germany). This, in addition to increasing number of parties across electoral systems, respectively, allows us to gain additional leverage on the context of partisanship.

Much of what we already know about citizenship norms comes from the United States. And there is some evidence that shows Americans already thought about citizenship norms differently, that is, before democratic decline. For instance, “Democrats attach more importance to social duties and rights for political participation and minority groups” (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2011), a finding consistent with the literature on tolerance (Adorno et al. 1950; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Republicans are more likely than Democrats to emphasize duty-based citizenship (Dalton 2021, 47), like voting and serving in the military.

The cross-national literature on citizenship norms is comparatively sparse. In theory, we should expect democratic citizens to embrace similar, democratic values in similar regime types. We also do not have many clues about how these baseline quotidian norms might adjust in response to threat. We might also expect, however, that political institutions play a key role in eroding national consensus, namely, polarized contexts with zero-sum, two-party systems.

In our first snapshot, I use data from the omnibus International Social Survey Programme (from 2004) to map good citizenship norms cross-nationally by

FIGURE 1
Citizenship Norms by Partisanship in Three Countries, 2004

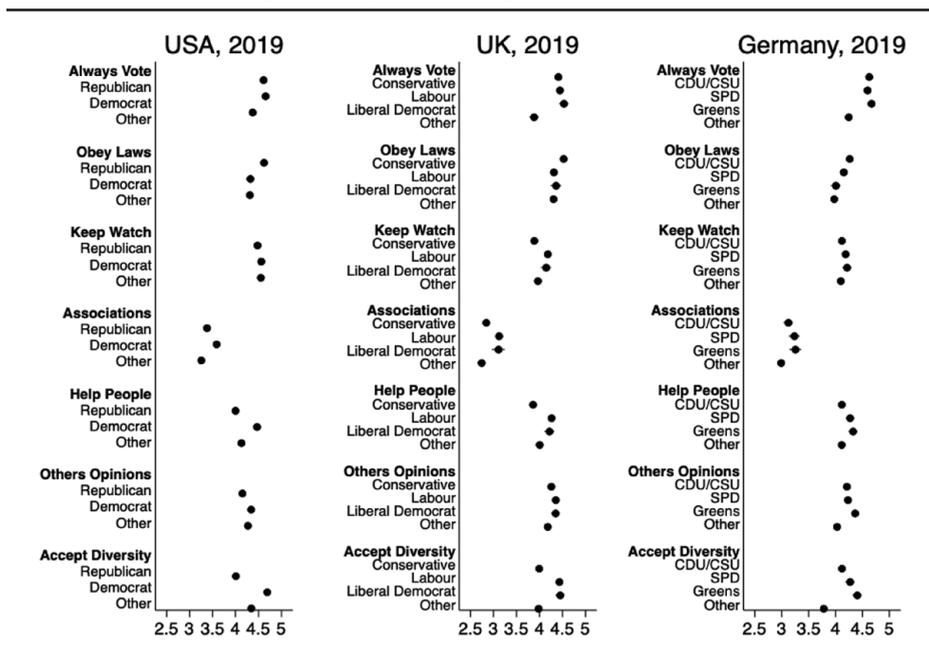


partisanship. Respondents were asked the following: “There are different opinions as to what it takes to be a good citizen. As far as you are concerned personally on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all important and 7 is very important, how important is it. . .” (and then a variety of items). As the goal is to see whether partisans hold similar or different citizenship norms at a time preceding widespread democratic backsliding, I selected six key liberal democratic items—a good citizen: always votes, obeys laws, keeps watch on government, participates in social and political associational life, helps people, and respects the opinions of others.¹ Responses are rescaled to 1 to 5.

Figure 1 conveys some important information. First, there is a lot of cross-partisan consensus. That is, partisans on the Left and Right exhibit strong agreement in what it means to be a good citizen, rating different items both high and similarly. This is true for almost all parties across systems. The only item on which we begin to see differences by partisanship is when it comes to helping people in your country, where Democrats (United States), Labour voters (United Kingdom), and Social Democrats (Germany) are slightly more inclined to think helping others is an attribute of good citizenship. In a second, predictable difference, individuals with weak partisan identification (“Others”) in all three cases think voting is a less important attribute of good citizenship compared to partisans. But, by and large, the takeaway here is a consensus in democratic citizenship values.

What happens in democratic hard times? We now look at the same items of good citizenship asked of nationally representative samples in June to August of 2019, a time when democratic deconsolidation was pervasive and the specter of

FIGURE 2
Citizenship Norms by Partisanship in Three Countries, 2019



further erosion on the horizon, to see whether this pattern of cross-partisan group consensus holds. Figure 2 presents the same items on a scale of 1 to 5.

Figure 2 reveals a dramatically altered picture. Where 15 years prior, the only difference between partisans was in helping others (and the difference was slight), we see in this second snapshot several items of disagreement. In the United States, Democrats are more likely to value associational life and respecting opinions of others as values of good citizenship. Moreover, the gap between Democrats and Republicans in “helping others” has widened significantly. For Republicans, respondents are significantly more likely to value obeying the law. This portrays a clear erosion of overlapping norms, on almost every item with the exception of voting and vigilance (“keep watch”).

Last, I added an item to the 2019 surveys, to probe commitment to a key but previously omitted liberal democratic norm: accepting diversity. As expected, the last line—a good citizen accepts people of diverse racial and religious backgrounds—shows stark partisan differences. Republicans rate highly accepting diversity (on average 4/5), while Democrats on average rate it over a half a point higher, on average. In fact, Democrats rate accepting diversity as among the most important aspects of good citizenship, at the same level that Republicans rate obeying the law, and both rate voting. This is a clear cleavage in citizenship norms between partisans.

We see a similar pattern when we look at the United Kingdom. Support for voting remains a stable and overlapping norm and, reassuringly, so does respecting others’ opinions. But beyond these baseline liberal norms, we see stark

differences. Labour supporters continue to value helping people more than Conservatives, but value vigilance, associational life, and accepting diversity (along with the other major national party on the Left, the Liberal Democrats). This last item—like Democrats to Republicans—posts a large difference between partisans on the Left and Right. For Conservatives, the one item of “good citizenship” they are more likely to support is obeying the law, compared to partisans on the Left. To put these differences in an institutional context, a multiparty system does not inherently preserve cross-cutting ties.

Looking at Germany, we see where a consensus-based political system, which is constructed on positive sum interactions and coalition governments, exhibits more agreement in citizenship values. There are few differences between the center-right Union parties (CDU/CSU; Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the center-left party and long-time coalition partner with the CDU. When we instead compare the CDU to the Greens, a Left party outside of government, we see some differences. Consistent with the other cases, the mainstream Right party (CDU) is more likely to value obeying the law compared to the challenger Left party (Greens). And Greens are more supportive of accepting diversity than the CDU and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD; Alternative für Deutschland). The AfD consistently exhibit more illiberal values than other parties, but we otherwise see a strong consensus in norms of good citizenship across liberal democratic parties.

Discussion

These observational patterns should be of some solace to democratic doomsayers. They show that there remains essential overlap in citizenship norms. There is consensus among democratic citizens—in the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany—that, regardless of partisanship, a good citizen always votes. In the United Kingdom and Germany, good citizens also value the opinion of others. In the United States and Germany, good citizens also keep watch on government. These are vital cross-cutting norms for preserving national unity and democratic legitimacy. And, overall, even when there is disagreement between partisans, each of these citizenship norms is highly rated. Associational life is consistently the lowest-rated citizenship norm, but almost all other norms are highly valued.

But differences by partisanship exist where they did not before; and if the trajectory of norms follow that of democracy, it does not portend optimism for future national unity. Moreover, these survey questions were fielded *in the context* of democratic threat but not *in response* to threat. Put another way, the question of “what make a good citizen” was without reference to specific national threats. In a series of survey experiments elsewhere, I show that citizens respond to information on foreign interference in elections and polarization (Goodman 2022), as well as an immigration threat (Goodman 2021), by valuing civic obligations that protect the interests of their party, which are not always compatible with the goals of protecting democracy. In brief, I find that responses to the

corrosive problem of polarization reflect status quo incentives, where incumbent partisans remain unmoved and challenger partisans support tolerance and national pride. When presented with information on foreign interference in elections, a threat that is further removed from citizen agency, only challengers see incentives in responding, where electoral “losers” express support for government vigilance, national pride, and less support for values like forbearance (also see Tomz and Weeks 2020).

This raises a final question. Are these partisan differences a function of programmatic preferences—where the Left is historically more other-oriented and the Right more aligned with law and order—or is it a function of a party’s role as an incumbent or challenger? There is not enough variation across cases—conservative parties are all in power in 2019—or time, which would require studying manifestos and legislative records to definitively parse between the two, but the case of Germany provides useful leverage on this question. SPD and Green supporters respond differently in almost every threat context, as well as in observational results reported here, which—as both are Left parties—suggests partisans respond in accordance with their party’s position, while the content of those responses may align with ideology.

Conclusion

How do democracies rebuild consensus in citizenship norms? Citizens need sufficient commitments to liberal democratic norms. When these are minimal or trending toward threadbare, national unity becomes fragile and vulnerable to further erosion. A divided citizenry makes confronting democratic problems harder, as it reduces a shared sense of group goals that underscore democratic legitimacy. There is a large literature aimed at rebuilding intergroup trust, using tools like interparty contact and deliberation to de-escalate polarization (Fishkin et al. 2021). These are promising exercises, and it follows that increased cooperation outside of partisan silos may increase a shared sense of civic obligation and group goals.

But the crux of building up a liberal democratic core of overlapping commitments is that there is interparty agreement that democratic threats are shared threats, not simply a threat to the party in power or an opportunity for the challenger. Citizens need to agree that threats are threatening, that democracy is worth saving, and that there is a shared civic obligation—from liberal democratic commitments to behaviors to dimensions of national belonging—to offset erosion.

Note

1. Out of the ten available items on “good citizenship,” I exclude “never try to evade taxes”; “to choose produces for political, ethical or environmental reasons, even if they cost a bit more”; and “to be willing to serve in the military at the time of need.”

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