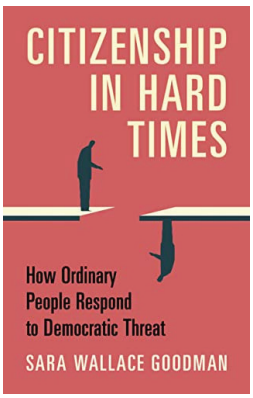
Book Review

Citizenship in Hard Times: How Ordinary People Respond to Democratic Threat by Sara Wallace Goodman

Julian Perry



Democracies derive legitimacy from the support of their citizens. Whether democracy can survive during moments of crisis, then, depends on how citizens respond to those moments: do they stand their ground and support the norms of democratic citizenship, or do they abandon those norms to favor the short-term interests of their political factions? Sara Wallace Goodman aims to answer this general question in her new book *Citizenship in Hard Times: How Ordinary People Respond to Democratic Threat*. Using survey data from Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom, Goodman argues that citizens' responses to democratic crises are dependent on their "positional incentives" as partisans and as supporters or opponents of the incumbent government—a verdict with significant implications for both theoretical understandings of democratic citizenship and practical initiatives to more effectively educate citizens.

In Goodman's representation of democracy, the norms of good citizenship exist in three categories: norms of behavior, such as voting and protesting; norms of belief, such as accepting diversity and understanding the opinions of others; and norms of belonging, such as the feeling of being American (or German or British) and generally supporting the actions of one's government.[1] These categories provide a theoretical foundation for the empirical component of the book, which is centered on survey experiments Goodman conducted in 2019. The surveys — one conducted in each country — asked respondents to rate the importance of citizenship norms associated with the three categories Goodman outlines. Additionally, to measure the effect of democratic erosion on these norms, two treatment groups in each survey were first assigned to read a short vignette about a threat to democracy — one about polarization, the other about foreign interference in elections.

Goodman argues that when citizens do not view democracy through the lens of crisis, different political groups exhibit little disagreement about what comprises good citizenship. To make this point, she cites her control group, in which partisanship had little effect on how respondents in each country rated the importance of the citizenship norms described to them.[2] But when respondents are exposed to vignettes that activate a fear of democracy's fragility, the effect is not uniform. In the case of the respondents exposed to the polarization vignette, those who supported the party in power showed similar responses to the control group; opponents of the status quo, meanwhile, increased the value that they placed norms of belief in liberal democracy.[3] A similar pattern occurs among respondents exposed to the foreign interference vignette: supporters of opposition parties showed higher support for a number of citizenship norms, while supporters of the parties in power were less likely to exhibit any difference relative to the control group.[4]

Goodman explains her findings in terms of positional incentives created by partisanship. When a citizen supports a party currently out of power, that citizen benefits from the preservation of competitive elections, which offer chances to change the status quo. When a citizen supports a party already in power, however, that citizen faces fewer incentives to keep democracy intact. One limitation to this analysis is that in all three countries Goodman studies, the national leaders at the time of the surveys belonged to conservative parties, raising the question of how much ideology, rather than status as the incumbent or part of the opposition, influenced their supporters' reactions to democratic threats. Goodman's response to this line of reasoning is to highlight how members of Germany's center-left SPD—at the time a junior partner in the country's coalition government—gave similar survey responses to members of Angela Merkel's center-right CDU.[5] But it is not evident that the same positional cleavage would apply in, say, the United States, where opinions about core democratic issues are deeply divided along lines that may endure past one party's stay in power.[6] This is one area where further research, under a Democratic administration in the United States or a Labour premiership in the United Kingdom, would be able to test the robustness of Goodman's argument.

In the conclusion that follows this analysis, Goodman acknowledges a limitation to the book, which is that it fails to offer policy solutions to the problems that it outlines.[7] But implicit in that modest confession is precisely what gives the book novelty: *Citizenship in Hard Times* is not primarily about policy choices or what actions political elites can take. It is about the citizens themselves and how they as individuals react to crises. Much of the existing scholarship on democratic decline focuses on the elite-driven, top-down lens of viewing democracy; examples include Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's widely acclaimed *How Democracies Die*, which emphasizes how elites' abrogation of democratic norms influences democratic backsliding.[8]

But the cooperation of elites is not, on its own, enough to ensure democracy's survival—democracy requires citizen input, and if citizens fail to uphold democratic norms, then it is destined to implode. Political science, therefore, cannot afford to overlook the role of individual citizens' adherence to these norms, even if the problems that this scholarship identifies lack clear policy solutions.

Because the expression of citizenship norms is an issue over which policymakers hold an uncharacteristically low degree of influence, *Citizenship in Hard Times* does not fall into the genre of scholarship whose central aim is to provide recommendations to political elites. However, this does not mean that the book's findings cannot be used in service of social causes, including the defense of democracy. Even though some political scientists do find an audience among politicians—Levitsky and Ziblatt being notable examples—the more reliable audience that professors can count on having is the audience of their students.[9] Those students have the potential to rise to the standards of citizenship that Goodman describes, and one way that political science can strengthen democracy is for professors to educate students on how to reach that potential.

For many professors, orienting the classroom to put citizenship at the center may mean navigating unfamiliar terrain — pedagogies that focus on the practical issues of students' roles in democracy are unlikely to resemble those that train students to become dispassionate, impartial social scientists. A blueprint for the former vision can nonetheless be found in what the political philosopher Peter Levine calls "civic studies," a proposed discipline that draws from political science and related fields to engage with the question of how students can become effective citizens.[10] Even though readers of all stripes, from individual voters to influential policymakers, stand to benefit from reading about the tenets of good citizenship, such scholarship reaches its fullest potential in the hands of educators who translate these values into lessons for their students. With its theoretical and empirical analysis, both of which speak to the individual reader's role in democracy, *Citizenship in Hard Times* will be a valuable addition to curricula that are crafted in this citizenship-centered model of civic education.

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Endnotes

1 Sara Wallace Goodman, *Citizenship in Hard Times: How Ordinary People Respond to Democratic Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) 85.

2 *Ibid.,* 109.

3 *Ibid.,* 142.

4 *Ibid.,* 175.

5 *Ibid.,* 115.

6 "In Views of U.S. Democracy, Widening Partisan Divides Over Freedom to Peacefully Protest," Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/02/in-views-of-u-s-democracy-widening-partisan-divides-over-freedom-to-peacefully-protest/ (date accessed: 13 December 2022).

7 Sara Wallace Goodman, *Citizenship in Hard Times: How Ordinary People Respond to Democratic Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) 188.

8 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

9 Susan B. Glasser, "American Democracy Isn't Dead Yet, But It's Getting There," *The New Yorker*, 27 May 2021.

10 Peter Levine, "The Case for Civic Studies," in Civic Studies: Approaches to the Emerging Field, Peter Levine and Karol Edward Soltan, eds., (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2014) 7.