

Silent Citizenship

The politics of marginality in unequal democracies

Edited by
Justin Gest and Sean W.D. Gray



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What does silent citizenship mean in a democracy? With levels of economic and political inequality on the rise across the developed democracies, citizens are becoming more disengaged from their neighbourhoods and communities, more distrustful of politicians and political parties, more sceptical of government goods and services, and less interested in voicing their frustrations in public or at the ballot box. The result is a growing number of silent citizens who seem disconnected from democratic politics – who are unaware of political issues, lack knowledge about public affairs, do not debate, deliberate, or take action, and most fundamentally, do not vote. Yet, although silent citizenship can and does indicate deficits of democracy, research suggests that these deficits are not the only reason citizens may have for remaining silent in democratic life. Silence may also reflect an active and engaged response to politics under highly unequal conditions. What is missing is a full accounting of the problems and possibilities for democracy that silent citizenship represents. Bringing together leading scholars in political science and democratic theory, this book provides a valuable exploration of the changing nature and form of silent citizenship in developed democracies today.

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Solace for the Frustrations of Silent Citizenship: the Case of Epicureanism
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Domination, global harms, and the problem of silent citizenship: toward a republican theory of global justice
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Silent citizenship among Asian Americans and Latinos: opting out or left out?

Justin A. Berry and Jane Junn

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INTRODUCTION

Silent citizenship: the politics of marginality in unequal democracies

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The aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis has seen a renewed focus on the costs of economic and political inequality for democracy. Where levels of inequality are high, many citizens no longer feel that they have an effective voice in the democratic process. And, when high levels of inequality persist, these feelings of marginalization are entrenched: the perception that the democratic process is unresponsive to the needs and concerns of vulnerable citizens reinforces their unwillingness to participate. The result is an underclass of silent citizens who are unaware of public issues, lack knowledge about public affairs, do not debate, deliberate, protest, or hold office, and, most fundamentally, do not exercise their voice in elections. The goal of this special issue of *Citizenship Studies* is to investigate the relationship between silence and citizenship. We ask: What does silent citizenship mean in a democracy?

The answer is almost entirely taken for granted in empirical and normative scholarship: silence indicates a lack of voice and a deficiency in democratic citizenship, a sign of citizens' exclusion from democratic politics through lack of opportunity, resources, confidence, or competence (Gray 2014). Silent citizenship, on this predominant view, is evidence of a dangerous disconnection from democratic politics – one that is best solved by devising new ways to mobilize citizens' voices.

Yet, while silent citizenship can and does indicate democratic deficits, three problems undermine the view that deficits are the only reason for silence in the developed democracies. The first is that empirical findings are split on its conclusion: in-depth studies of disadvantaged groups confirm that while silent citizens might decline to voice their preferences at the polls, they do have preferences and these differ substantially from those who vote and who get elected (Gilens 2009; Leighley and Nagler 2014; Page and Jacobs 2009; Standing 2011). For example, silent citizens are more likely to favor government action on climate change, income inequality, universal healthcare, and public education (Bennett and Resnick 1990; Wlezien and Soroka 2011). Of those who did not vote in the last election in the United States, a majority reported feeling that their elected representative did not speak for them (Blais, Singh, and Dumultrescu 2014).

A second problem with standard interpretations of silent citizenship has to do with the changing character of political participation across the developed democracies. Citizens

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are steadily migrating away from traditional forms of participation, like voting, because they often fail to elicit responsiveness from elected representatives (Dalton 2007; Neblo et al. 2010). Part of the reason has to do with institutional incentives for democratic responsiveness: evidence suggests that representatives are most responsive to the preferences and concerns of the most affluent in society – a trend that would continue *even if* silent citizens were mobilized to vote (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014). As a result, citizens, especially younger citizens, are turning to acts that bypass electoral politics to challenge politicians and elites more directly, including abstentions, boycotts, vigils, petitions, and social media (Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009; Norris 2011; Shames *forthcoming*).

A third problem follows and it concerns citizens' motivations for silence: equating silent citizenship with disempowerment and disengagement ignores a range of motivations for silence, some of which are active, engaged, and contentious. In particular, silent citizenship provides a possible frame for understanding the increasingly oppositional attitudes of marginalized individuals and groups, including immigrants, ethnic and racial minorities, women, and the working poor (Gest 2010; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2011; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). When silent citizens come to believe that they do not control what is done in their name, they grow disaffected and lose faith in the democratic system as a whole.

There are already widespread fears about the corrosive effects of silent citizenship on long-term trust and support for democratic institutions and practices (Coleman 2013; Green 2010; McCormick 2011; Rosanvallon 2008, 2011; Urbinati 2014). Whether these fears prove to be well founded will depend, to a significant degree, on our ability to accurately map and assess the implications of silent citizenship for democracy. This requires grappling with several empirical and normative challenges. We need conceptual tools that help us identify what different forms of silent citizenship look like empirically, and that clarify the likely effects of specific forms of silent citizenship. We need normative criteria by which to judge different cases of silent citizenship as more or less threatening to basic norms of democracy. And we need to feed this knowledge back into discussions of strategies for correcting the imbalances in influence caused by rising economic and political inequality.

Rethinking the meaning of silent citizenship in contexts of inequality raises two distinct sets of questions around which this special issue of *Citizenship Studies* is organized. The first set of questions is conceptual and normative. Here, we need to ask: what possible motivations (if any) lie behind silent citizenship? Can silence be seen as a distinct way of communicating politically? If so, under what conditions are political expressions of silence compatible with norms of democracy? The changing character of citizenship and political participation in democracies also raises a second set of equally difficult empirical questions: what do active versus passive forms of silent citizenship look like in practice? Are there observable features that distinguish the active silences of citizens from more disempowering forms of silent citizenship? Finally, can active expressions of silence be found even among marginalized and excluded groups of citizens?

In attempting answers to these and similar questions, our aim is to define the issues involved in the complex relationship between silence and citizenship. We also hope to move conversations about silent citizenship past the mostly accurate, but sometimes overgeneralized, identification of silence with *barriers to voice* and political participation. The articles in this special issue are interdisciplinary, and many combine theoretical analysis with empirical findings. This diversity in approaches is deliberate: the topic of silent citizenship raises questions and issues that require contributions from philosophy,

political science, sociology, economics, history, and anthropology, among others. While the authors have sought to adopt a similar terminology in order to speak to one another across disciplines, there are of course still tensions that reflect distinct disciplinary orientations and priorities, as much they do disagreements about the multiple meanings of silent citizenship today.

Conceptual and normative challenges in the study of silent citizenship

The first four articles in this special issue focus on conceptualizing and judging silent citizenship from a theoretical perspective. Karl Marx was perhaps the first modern theorist to recognize that a democracy full of silent citizens serves only the interests of the wealthy and powerful, because silence dampens organized dissent and prevents the disruption of market forces (see Giddens 1971). Within liberal democratic theory, J.S. Mill ([1879] 2003) and John Dewey (1927) are also notable for their emphasis on the egalitarian conditions necessary for citizens to meaningfully participate in processes of democratic political decision-making (see also Knight and Johnson 2011).

Sean Gray opens the special issue by arguing that democratic theorists today are, likewise, primed to hear the silence of democratic citizens to be a straightforward indication of disengagement or disempowerment. This is because most contemporary democratic theorists subscribe to what Gray calls a *vocal ideal of democratic citizenship*: they focus, sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly, on the task of empowering the voices of citizens in the democratic process (see also Green 2010, chap. 1; Przeworski 2010, chap. 5; Shapiro 2003, 52–53). While careful to note that the vocal ideal is not ‘wrong,’ Gray suggests that it predisposes democratic theorists to listen only for those silences that reflect the failed or absent voices of citizens. One result is that democratic theorists are led to overlook a range of other possible motivations citizens might have for silence, some of which might in fact be active and politically engaged. The silence of citizens who are generally satisfied and trust their elected representatives is surely different, for example, from a silent refusal to participate by those who feel alienated from democratic politics. Gray argues that if silent citizenship is conceptualized based on the attitudes citizens might hold in silence, it is possible to identify five distinct *degrees of silent citizenship* – decision, awareness, ambivalence, aversion, and disaffection – that vary in their level of disengagement from politics. Not one of these degrees of silent citizenship meets the ideal standards of vocal citizenship commonly embraced within contemporary democratic theory. Yet, conceiving of silent citizenship as a spectrum, Gray observes that the closer a citizen’s motives for silence come to reflecting an active decision about politics, the more politically engaged their silence is likely to be. How democratic theorists hear silent citizenship thus matters a great deal.

Jeffrey Green’s article begins with a similar recognition of the failure of contemporary democratic theory to adequately come to terms with the realities of silent citizenship. To the extent that most citizens most of the time have only a passing, spectatorial engagement with democratic politics, Green argues that we need to confront the problem of silent citizenship, not *just* as an issue to be overcome, but also as a condition that is to a large degree inescapable in modern mass democracies. Thus, the task for democratic theory should not only be to find new ways of empowering the voices of ordinary citizens. It should also be to find ways providing solace to silent citizens, so as to manage the frustrations that an incomplete and highly unequal political life is likely to cause. For inspiration, Green reaches back in history to consider the extrapolitical Epicurean doctrine of *critical indifference* espoused by ordinary, mostly silent, plebian

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citizens during the later years of the Roman Republic. As with democratic citizens today, Roman plebeians often found themselves confronting extreme economic and political inequality on a daily basis. In response, they taught themselves *not to care* about politics – to periodically withdraw from active political life, in order to find private fulfillment to compensate for frustrated political ambitions. Green finds in Epicureanism a means of understanding why democratic citizens might in some respects embrace silence – avoiding politics and living contented private lives – instead of growing frustrated with watching politics, but never meaningfully participating in it. The lesson for contemporary democratic theory is that silent citizenship can represent a periodic, principled, and therapeutic withdrawal from democratic politics that should be respected on the same basic egalitarian grounds that elsewhere and otherwise might inspire more vocal political engagement.

Bryan Turner takes a different view of the increasing withdrawal of democratic citizens into silence and political passivity. Reflecting on the social and communal ties that, historically, have provided the lifeblood of democracy, Turner worries that growing economic and political inequalities will have the effect of degrading citizens' sense of community, leaving them *unable* to take up the burdens of democratic citizenship. Turner considers two opposing perspectives on the decline of social and communal relationships in modern democratic societies – one liberal and one conservative. Although both liberal and conservatives identify silent citizenship with weak and declining communal relationships, conservatives are more comfortable with the idea of silent citizens, just as long as this silence is not permanent. US President Richard Nixon, for example, famously worried the 'silent majority' of citizens were becoming isolated and resentful of their opinions being ignored by the popular media, in favor of a 'vocal minority' protesting the war in Vietnam. More recently, the economic, social, and political fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis has led to spontaneous expressions of popular voice, including the Occupy Wall Street movement and the so-called 'Arab Spring.'

While these cases testify to enduring capacities of silent citizens for collective organization and resistance, they also represent a new, potentially dangerous and destabilizing form of voice and participation. In strong communities, citizens have the ability to vocalize minor causes of dissent face to face. But the rise of silent citizenship in modern mass democracies now means that, when dissent does break out, it can quickly cascade into a torrent, as citizens discover for the first time that others share the same grievances. In this way, silent citizenship may undermine the capacity of democratic governments to mediate conflict and channel disagreements in more productive directions (see Gurr 1970; Gaventa 1980; Tarrow 2011).

James Bohman rounds out these theoretical considerations with a timely reminder about the implications of silent citizenship from the perspective of global justice. As Bohman points out, because of the vast inequalities in life prospects across the globe, the silence of citizens in underdeveloped states is fundamentally different from the silence of citizens in developed democracies. Within the developed democracies, silent citizenship is the direct result of forms of apathy, disengagement, or disempowerment that, in combination, preclude citizens from voicing their preferences and interests in processes of democratic decision-making. But in underdeveloped states, silent citizenship is the result of deeper injustices that reside at a global level, including the vast economic inequalities that exist in and between states. Global inequalities and poverty produce silent citizenship *not just* because they undermine capacities and opportunities for voice (as perhaps is the case within developed democracies), but also because they expose already vulnerable peoples to more and more extensive patterns of domination and oppression. Factory