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EDITORS' 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 2016).

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; Rosanvallón 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 failures 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

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 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

workers in China, for example, undoubtedly have a fundamentally different experience of silent citizenship than do apathetic citizens in the developed democracies. In this context, Bohman convincingly argues for the need to *give priority* to overcoming global injustices that lead to disempowering forms of silent citizenship. An important consequence of this view, according to Bohman, is that developed democracies have an obligation to take the lead in uprooting structural forms of domination and oppression that erode the standing of citizens across borders and beyond states, before tackling less urgent problems of silent citizenship that exist closer to home.

Empirical findings about silent citizenship

The second set of articles in this special issue of *Citizenship Studies* aim to provide some much needed empirical grounding to conversations about silent citizenship. Since the 1960s and 1970s, the concentration of wealth in the top 1% of households in the United States has nearly quadrupled, while the proportion of families living below the poverty line has doubled (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012, 72–73; see also, Piketty 2014). Similar trends can be observed in Canada, the UK, and other developed democracies. What is more, unions and social welfare organizations are increasingly powerless to protect the most vulnerable citizens, and many democratic governments are increasingly unwilling to intervene if it means further disrupting the markets (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005; Hacker and Pierson 2011). For empirical scholars, the problem is that it is incredibly difficult to determine the impact of these trends on the attitudes and preferences of silent citizens, precisely because they have no political voice (Berinsky 2004). This problem is particularly acute when it comes to racial, cultural, and ethnic minorities living on the margins of democratic societies.

Justin Gest tackles this measurement problem head-on by arguing that empirical studies of silent citizenship need to do a better job distinguishing the different orientations silent citizens might have toward the political system. Whereas most empirical studies of political participation draw simple lines between active participation (voice) and passive nonparticipation (silence), Gest draws a series of more fine-grained distinctions between pro-system and anti-system political behavior. Silent citizenship, Gest suggests, can fall on both sides of these empirical measures, covering orientations that range from violence to withdrawal. To demonstrate the utility of his approach, Gest provides cases studies on three different group experiences with silent citizenship in democratic societies. The first case involves the experiences of Muslim citizens in countries in Western Europe, North America, and Australia. Although the majority of Muslims in these countries are politically active and peaceful, a small fraction belong to exclusivist Islamic religious sects that aim to overthrow the current political order. The second case concerns the experiences of Eastern European Roma, a substantial number of who live in self-imposed isolation from the rest of society. The third and final case concerns the experiences of the white working class in North America and Europe, who are struggling to adapt to post-industrial realities in their home countries. Their political behavior ranges from xenophobia, racism, and low-level violence, to passive cynicism and distrust of mainstream politics. Gest argues that each of these cases of silent citizenship is best distinguished and understood in terms of people's orientations toward democratic politics, instead of using blanket terminology, such as voice and silence, or participation and nonparticipation.

Shauna Shames's article asks why women – and, more specifically, women of color – are disproportionately silent when it comes to putting their name forward to run for office. Previous findings suggest that women of color are silent in politics simply as a result of a

lack of confidence in their own abilities (e.g., Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014). Drawing on data collected from an original survey and interviews with a unique pool of highly eligible candidates, Shames finds that strong candidate deterrent effects exist, which prevent women of color from ever considering running for office. In particular, many women of color are deterred from running by perceptions of high costs and low rewards. They anticipate facing an invasion of privacy, either their own and that of their friends and relatives. They are faced with forgoing private-sector salaries, which has an even greater opportunity cost when considered in light of their desire to contribute financially to their families. And they anticipate strong racial and gender biases in the political realm. Interestingly, the same deterrent effects are not found among men of color. What Shames finds particularly troubling, however, is not that these ambitious women make reasoned decisions to remain politically silent, but that this silence might in turn deprive already marginalized groups of their most qualified, potential female political leaders. This contributes to the underrepresentation of the preferences and interests of women of color at an aggregate level. It can end up reinforcing distinct patterns of disadvantage, which are based on the historical exclusion of women and racial minorities from democratic politics. Thus, although silent citizenship is in principle compatible with democracy, robust and inclusive democracies require a diversity of voices that the silence of certain citizens may sometimes undermine.

Justin Berry and Jane Junn end this special issue with an article on the unequal integration of immigrant communities into developed democracies. Democratic theorists, following Dahl (1961), have long held that thriving, pluralistic democratic societies enable the integration of immigrant communities by providing immigrants with resources and opportunities for voice and political participation, as well as opportunities for upward mobility. The problem, however, is that many established immigrant communities – including Asian Americans and Latinos – continue to be silent and politically inactive despite resources and opportunities. For example, in terms of politically relevant resources for voice and participation – time, money, and education – Asian Americans living in the United States do quite well, but often decline to participate in democratic politics. Likewise, though comparatively poorer and more likely to not enjoy the rights and standing of citizenship, Latinos in the United States display high levels of *interest* in political engagement. Nevertheless, they are also largely silent.

Are Asian Americans and Latinos silent because they are left out, or are they opting out? Analyzing survey data collected from national samples of Latinos and Asian Americans, Berry and Junn assess the role that individual-level resources and willingness to participate play in explaining the silence of these minority groups. They find that, despite the relatively high availability of resources for voice and participation, Asian Americans and Latinos are not just silently ‘opting out’ of politics; they are being silenced and shut out. Berry and Junn identify less obvious factors that can influence whether minorities become silent citizens or vocal citizens, including age, strength of partisanship, associational ties, as well as past experiences of racism and discrimination. Their conclusion is that we should make generalizations about the meanings of silent citizenship with a great deal of caution – what at first glance might appear to be a conscious choice to withdraw from politics might actually be a reflection of deeper, structural impediments to voice and participation.

Setting the agenda for future studies of silent citizenship

None of the articles in this special issue of *Citizenship Studies* claim to offer a definitive answer to the question of what silent citizenship means in democracies today. The answer

is not obvious. On this at least, all of the authors in this special issue can agree: the meanings and implications of silent citizenship for democracy are highly contingent and contextual. This being said, each author also makes clear that there is a definite connection between rising levels of economic and political inequality across the developed democracies, and the increasing prevalence of silent citizenship within these democracies. Three general lessons can be drawn from the conversations in this special issue that we hope will inform future research on the topic of silent citizenship.

First, for normative and democratic theorists struggling with problems of inequality, the articles here offer some much needed criteria to determine when silent citizenship is compatible, or at least not threatening, to basic norms of democracy. Together, the articles in this special issue also offer a deepened understanding of the complex relationship between silence and citizenship. In particular, each of the articles suggests that silent citizenship is as much a structural consequence of inequality as it is an active response to politics under conditions of inequality.

Second, for empirical scholars more broadly, many of the articles in this special issue highlight an array of expressive strategies citizens often use to respond to the collective powers that shape their lives. As a device for registering voice and influence in collective decision-making, it is increasingly becoming apparent that elections fit poorly with the realities of marginalization and exclusion faced by a growing number of democratic citizens (Urbinati and Warren 2008). These citizens are voting less, but searching for ways to engage more. They want more political choices and they want those choices to have more of a direct impact on politics (Dalton 2007). These are goods that elections, and specifically electoral representation, can no longer provide as inequalities increase.

Third and finally, for political practitioners and policy-makers, the discussions of silent citizenship presented here might help to identify supplementary mechanisms that, were they designed into democratic institutions, would help to offset the unequal distributions of wealth and power that so often lead to disengaged and disempowered forms of silent citizenship. For example, recent institutional experiments with citizens' assemblies, citizen juries and panels, deliberative polls, just to name a few, have the potential to represent views and opinions held in silence, which might otherwise go unrepresented (see Smith 2009; Gray 2014). These innovations reflect an emerging awareness of the critical role played by citizens' perceptions of their place and power in society on their political behavior (Gest 2010). Importantly, they also have the potential to enable silent citizens to have greater control over what is said and done in their name, which in turn might begin to correct for rising levels of economic and political inequality.

Note

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