

Rethinking the ‘Good Citizen’

Juxtaposing everyday practice and public discourse in Oslo

Ideas about the ‘good citizen’ are increasingly debated in western Europe. This growing interest relates to pressures on the welfare state, concerns over migration and a sense of a ‘crisis of democracy’. Research on everyday perceptions of civic participation and belonging shows that debates on the ideal-type ‘good citizen’ affect how residents of Oslo judge their own and others’ contributions to society. We find that active citizenship takes on a range of forms of participation and belonging, requiring us to rethink norms about good citizenship as only taking place in the public sphere and as limited to a single, national, community.

Brief Points

- This brief explores perceptions on what constitutes a good citizen and how these perceptions relate to everyday practices.
- Data from 50 in-depth interviews and six focus groups in Oslo illustrates how residents of Oslo assert and contest norms about good citizenship.
- Research participants understand civic participation to take place in private as well as public spaces.
- Civic participation and belonging take place within as well as beyond and below the national scale.

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The 'Good Citizen'?

Active citizenship is seen as a central part of any well-functioning democracy. While this is an old ideal, a renaissance has occurred in which the 'good citizen' is increasingly understood as someone engaging in 'desirable civic activity'. In this perspective, being a 'good citizen' requires participation within a political community. Belonging to this community is closely inter-linked with civic participation: as a member of this community, one is expected to participate to contribute to the common good.

The ideal-type good citizen in Scandinavia contributes through work and paying taxes, through volunteering and raising new citizens. The increased focus on the good citizen can be understood within a larger political context where there is growing pressure on the welfare state model, concerns over migration and migration-related diversity, and anxiety about a crisis of democracy. Beyond Scandinavia, similar concerns are reflected in debates about Brexit and the presidential elections in the United States.

Given the increasing diversity of populations in European cities, also in Scandinavia, we ask: do normative ideas about the 'good citizen' reflect people's lived experiences? Who defines what active citizenship is? And to what extent do new civic practices impact understandings of community and social trust?

Data

For this policy brief, we draw on 50 life history and semi-structured interviews and six focus group discussions with 79 residents in Oslo. These residents were selected from three city boroughs in east, central and west Oslo. Søndre Nordstrand, Gamle Oslo and Vestre Aker differ substantially in terms of achieved levels of education, income, employment rates, voting patterns, and health indicators.

Conducting research in these different boroughs in Oslo allows us to include residents with a range of age, life cycle, ethnic, religious and class backgrounds. Our research design does not presuppose that particular individual characteristics – such as ethnic or religious background – influence civic virtues and participation. Rather, we aim to empirically study the relevance of these personal characteristics and the neighborhood context.

Where does the 'good citizen' act?

The 'good citizen' is seen as contributing to the common good. This common good, in the context of citizenship, is by definition placed within the nation-state, as the citizen is a member of a national political community. Yet, citizens act not only within, but also above and below the national scale. They participate in local neighborhoods and engage transnationally, sometimes in the interests of a national common good, other times perhaps a local common good, sometimes also within other nation-states. Therefore, the normative idea of the 'good citizen' does not necessarily only refer to one national collective. Rather it may extend to a range of scales of community: local, national and transnational. This often reflects multiple forms of belonging which exist in parallel in an individual's life, shaping their societal engagement.

In much of the normative discourse on the 'good citizen', the location for action is the public sphere, which is firmly placed within one nation-state context. Iris Young has shown how the public sphere is perceived as a space of collective norms and values whereas the private sphere is understood to be driven by particular interests linked to the individual and the family. She argues that this idea serves to make the interests of dominant groups appear as universal and those of marginalized groups as particular. If actions of the good citizen are tied to the public sphere, then it becomes problematic if this public sphere is not a level playing field for all members of the given political community. Consider the situation of religious and life-stance minorities, for instance, in relation to the division between what is a public or private sphere act.

It is clear that the nation-state is a key political community for the good citizen, just as the public sphere is a central focus of civic action. In arguing for a reconceptualization of the good citizen, we do not aim to challenge this. Rather we ask: what may be obscured when focusing on some sites of participation and some scales of belonging, over others? We will explore answers to this question through our research findings. But first, we will provide the necessary background to the Norwegian context in which the study is situated.

Expectations of Civic Participation in Norway

Social policy in Norway heavily draws on the figure of the good citizen as an active citizen. At the same time, the state plays a strong guiding role in defining the values upon which citizens are expected to act. These values are largely produced through participation on the local level, where civic participation most often is expected to take place. Central values advocated in Norway include egalitarianism, anti-authoritarianism, autonomy, gender equality, international solidarity, volunteering and participating in communal activities. The welfare state instills these values through financial support for associations and organizations that promote such values, often on the local level.

Dugnad: a culture of volunteering

The Norwegian concept of *dugnad* refers to communal work that is usually unpaid and voluntary, and commonly done within the local community to support the collective or individuals within it. Typical examples include bi-annual neighborhood cleaning exercises, earning money for a sports club or school through baking and selling cakes, or organizing flea markets. There are also national-level *dugnad* initiatives where the main aim is to raise money for a Non-Governmental Organization to support an international development, humanitarian or human rights cause. *Dugnad* is seen as typically Norwegian, and participation is expected.

Volunteering and other practices of 'good citizenship' in Norway take place in a highly organized manner, both within a wide range of formal organizations and arenas and in informal contexts such as neighborhood *dugnads*. Several residents in Oslo lament this situation:

Engagement and volunteerism has become very professionalized. That has to change. So that we will go back to a situation where all can feel that they can participate in something without having to be specialists (Sigrid Johaug, pensioner, Vestre Aker).

Participation as Community Building

In the Norwegian context, participation in democracy is a central expectation that is taught through collective volunteering, organizational work, in class rooms and in the family. The norms of democratic participation that are passed on focus as much on taking part in one's local surroundings, as on claiming rights and fulfilling obligations within the national political community. As a government White paper on integration argues:

Participation concerns how residents in society use their formal rights in practice and how they contribute to building democracy. Participation in the neighborhood/local community, in leisure- and cultural activities, in voluntary organizations and the media, can be defined as 'the small democracy'. 'Democracy at large' concerns political life – participation in political organizations and elections (NOU 2011: 14).

Ideas of community and concerns about social cohesion and societal trust play a crucial role for norms of good citizenship. In the same White paper on integration, we see this concern reflected:

Participation in local public arenas contributes to prevent and reduce mistrust between majority and minority populations. To build trust, it is important to create local meeting places and activities, where minority and majority populations can interact. This can impact participation in other societal arenas such as elections and participation in education and employment (NOU 2011: 14).

Whilst both minority and majority populations are called upon to build trust, and to interact, it is the increased participation of minority populations in these other mentioned areas that is a subsidiary aim. In debates on migration and integration in particular, societal trust and cohesion are seen as being at risk due to a lack of participation on the part of minority populations. In this context, participation refers to participation in sites which are public and thus visible to the majority population.

Challenges to Being a 'Good Citizen'

Across the very different backgrounds and biographies of interviewees and focus group participants, we find that many prevailing norms on the good citizen are deeply engrained in everyday perceptions of the good citizen. Our research participants assert many of these norms when they discuss *samfunnsengasjement* [societal engagement] in terms of volunteering, making a difference, and the responsibility of the individual to contribute to the collective – on the local level, but also through activities like voting, keeping oneself updated on current affairs or paying taxes.

At the same time, these norms do not always match everyday realities. Our data shows that many individuals compare themselves with the collective norms and conclude that they fall short. To be a 'good citizen', several preconditions need to be in place. The norm assumes a certain type of citizen, who is healthy, has a job and who has the time and energy to engage in a range of activities.

While most of our research participants engage in activities that contribute to the collective good in a range of ways, civic participation is not a given for everyone, always. First, depending on the phase of the life cycle one is in, one may or may not have the resources to contribute to society. As Sigrid Johaug remarks:

When the children are small it is most important to establish oneself, to be a family and to have a place to live. So all this stuff with volunteering is often just a luxury. When you have resources, free capacity, time, then you can start to engage in something (Sigrid Johaug, pensioner, Vestre Aker).

Second, there are many life events that may occur that prevent people from being able to participate in the larger community at all. Our research participants talk about personal illness or disability; illness, disability and death of family members; struggles with addictions; trauma from having experienced war or abuse; and a whole range of other events or circumstances that may occur during one's lifetime and prevent an individual from participating in society, for a period, or permanently.

Rethinking Where 'Good Citizens' Act

Many disagreements with public discourse and norms on civic virtue center around where civic participation takes place: where does the 'good citizen' act? Relatedly, disagreements center around specific notions of community underlying this question.

One type of contestation relates to the commonly made distinction between formal, public spaces and informal, private ones. Many of the research participants actively challenge this dichotomy, and the consequent assumption that civic participation happens in formal, public spaces only. The idea of the 'volunteer specialist' Sigrid Johaug describes, is challenged in everyday participation:

Here in Tøyen there is another type of volunteerism. [...] I feel that one can do things in one's own way here still and that one does not need an organizational number and board meetings and annual meetings and voting and such. That we can just do things (Helene Rybak, Gamle Oslo).

'Just *doing* things' together, outside formal structures, is highlighted by many research participants as important. Part of the reason for this may be that the spaces linked to formal activities and organizations do not always appeal to or accommodate all. Sometimes instead of such formal spaces, and sometimes in parallel, acts of good citizenship are performed in alternative spaces.

In these alternative spaces, interacting with one another as human beings is described as a central aspect of civic participation. This can be about recognizing the other as a fellow human being, informally teaching others new skills, or addressing stereotypes by simply being oneself. Several Muslim women argue this latter point.

Hamda, for example, explains how her job at a hospital in Oslo enables her to meet with Norwegians from other parts of the country who may have never seen someone from Somalia, but who have shaped an opinion about Somali-Norwegians from following Norwegian media:

And if they leave there with positive thoughts and ideas, then it is as if... I feel I play a certain role in society. [...] It is civic engagement to have to

represent a whole nation in a good way, and women in a good way and Islam in a good way. (Hamda Farah, nurse, Gamle Oslo)

Professional contributions

Our research participants thus describe a range of individual and collective activities that for them are crucial contributions to society, but which they interpret as not fitting prevailing norms of the 'good citizen'. Many describe their professional contribution in terms of civic participation. Those with professions in teaching, the medical sector, policing and various services to children and youth, may specifically talk about their professional engagement as a form of civic participation.

Hilde describes her work in a library in Gamle Oslo in terms of the societal contribution she makes. While she is doing her job, she is teaching students to search for knowledge in a critical way, which she describes as 'the essence of democracy, in the larger context'. She stresses how important it is for her to be herself and to give guidance to these young people.

One can feel that one does something very valuable that contributes to society, even if one maybe works in a very ordinary job and is very 'normal'... not necessarily so civically engaged. By creating values that are important in a larger societal context. (Hilde Østby, librarian, Gamle Oslo)

Alima similarly illustrates how she understands her professional contribution as civic participation when she describes her aim to help contribute to a good and safe upbringing for the children in her kindergarten:

I often think about our role and agenda. We often say that the children

of Søndre Nordstrand are future leaders and mediators. (Alima Husseini, kindergarten manager, Søndre Nordstrand)

Hilde, Alima and other research participants challenge the norm of civic engagement as taking place in the voluntary sector.

Rethinking 'the Common Good'

A second type of contestation relates to the question of who benefits from one's participation and what exactly is the common good. One question that is often raised here is a variant of: 'why is waffle baking at the local sports club civic participation, whereas waffle baking for the local church or mosque may not be?' Behind many of these reflections lies an idea of the common good as apolitical, non-partisan and areligious.

Our research shows that civic participation takes place within the family, work and volunteering, and our research participants understand it in quite broad terms. They describe how raising one's child and supporting members of one's own ethnic minority to be 'good citizens' is civic participation. As Jalal argues:

Then you contribute to the fact that that individual, this person becomes part of society. Because the society consists of me, you, doesn't it? (Jalal Zana, local politician, Gamle Oslo)

Jalal and others suggest that it is possible to contribute to the common good by contributing to those close to you. Understandings of public and private – where religion and ethnic minority communities are assumed to be in the private sphere, whereas the local football club is in the public sphere – are challenged as too rigid or arbitrary, in the face of everyday experience of participation and belonging in the city.

Conclusion

In Norway, the public discourse on civic virtue and participation is strong. We find that people want to live up to these norms, yet many of our research participants, across the three boroughs and from a range of backgrounds, feel as if they are not fulfilling the norm of what it means to be a 'good citizen'. There are a number of reasons why individuals, during parts or all of their lives, may not be in a position to participate in accordance with these expectations.

Those who can and do fulfil many of the expectations of volunteering and contributing to society raise very important questions about what it really means to be a good citizen. First, they challenge common understandings of where civic participation can take place. Second, they challenge taken-for-granted ideas of 'community' and the 'common good', not least in relation to the types of political community good citizenship is associated with. Everyday practice in Oslo takes place within, but also below and beyond the nation-state scale.

When listening to the kind of 'good citizen' that emerges from our data, we find that our research participants stress the importance of everyday interactions, informal conversations, being a role model for others and teaching young people important democratic skills. They also argue for the importance of recognizing contributions to individuals and groups within society as contributions to the common good. Such acts might not take place in the supposedly neutral public sphere, but they both directly and indirectly contribute to a sense of belonging in society, and through this also to the common good. As such, everyday practices of civic participation and belonging in Oslo today require us to rethink public discourse on the 'good citizen'. ■

Note

All names of our research participants have been replaced with pseudonyms.

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THE PROJECT

The project 'Active Citizenship in Culturally and Religiously Diverse Societies' (ACT) studies citizenship norms and practices in Oslo and Copenhagen. ACT is a collaboration between researchers at PRIO, the Aarhus University and the Arctic University of Norway. The project is funded by the Research Council of Norway.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.