

What Citizens Think They *Should* and *Can* Do in Democracies**Project Description****Peter Luca Versteegen****May 20, 2025****Table of Contents**

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State of the Current Research and Its Relation to the Present Project

The objectives of this project are to a.) conceptualize how ordinary citizens¹ understand their role in democracy and b.) examine the predictors and consequences of this understanding. Two lines of literature motivate these objectives, and recent societal developments highlight the urgency and limitations of this work.

A prevailing sentiment in Western democracies states that the world is *in crisis* (e.g., [Aggeler, 2023](#); [Lawrence et al., 2024](#)). Recently, societies faced a sequence of societal challenges, including climate change, a pandemic, wars, migration, and economic inequality. Simultaneously, the capacity to *address* these issues is also seen to be in crisis. Large shares of citizens in Western democracies are worried ([WHO, 2021](#)), feel that politicians cannot fix the issues they care about ([Foa et al., 2020](#)), or distrust institutions and politicians altogether ([Valgarðsson et al., 2025](#)). While the debated *crisis of democracy* ([Claassen, 2020](#)) likely has many facets (e.g., [Mair, 2009](#)), the nature of issues to be fixed may contribute to it. Representative democracies task politicians to represent, solve, or at least address the issues citizens care most about ([Pitkin, 1967](#)), but doing so seems—amid the extent, complexity, and sequential nature of issues—extremely difficult. But if politicians' capacities to respond are limited, who else helps address the many and complex issues citizens care about?

In this proposal, I aim to conceptualize and explain the extent to which *citizens* put themselves into this role. Two lines of literature motivate this aim. The first states normative expectations from political theory (e.g., [Rousseau, 1893](#)) and citizens' ideals of what a “good citizen” is like (e.g., [Goodman, 2022, 2025](#)). The second documents that citizens—often busy, disinterested, or emotionally biased—rarely meet these expectations (e.g., [Achen & Bartels, 2017](#); [Campbell et al., 1960](#); [Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996](#); [Frimer et al., 2017](#); [Lupia, 2015](#)). Both lines provide vital knowledge about citizens' role in democracy. Together, however, they raise a tension between what citizens *should* do (i.e., inform themselves, discuss, participate, e.g., [Markell, 2006](#); [Rousseau, 1893](#); [Teorell, 2006](#)) and what they often *can(not)* do (e.g., [Achen & Bartels, 2017](#); [Almond & Verba, 1963](#); [Campbell et al., 1960](#); [Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996](#); [Frimer et al., 2017](#); [Lupia, 2015](#)). To bridge this tension, I aim to conceptualize what citizens themselves consider *constructive citizenship behavior*; that is, their understanding of what they and other citizens *should* do in response to the issues they care about, relative to their experience of what they *can(not)* do: Do citizens consider it sufficient to elect representatives to address issues? Do they assign additional responsibility to themselves, such as by wearing masks, recycling, or protesting? Do they expect citizens to be as informed as political theorists desire? How, if at all, does their everyday life hinder them from living up to their standards? And can they understand if other citizens similarly run behind their expectations?

¹ I use the term *citizen* to refer to people with citizenship *and* non-citizen residents. While I may explore differences between the two groups later, this project is primarily interested in how laypeople see their role in democracy.

I expect *constructive citizenship behavior* to reflect citizens' compromise between their ideals and their knowledge that, in practice, their time, capacities, and interest is limited. Through a bottom-up procedure, I aim to qualitatively describe citizens' expectations and how they think of fulfilling their expectations in everyday life. I will then develop a quantitative measure of this tension. By combining qualitative description and quantitative mapping, I provide an assessment of what citizens think they *should* and *can* do to address the issues they care about. In a final step, I aim to quantitatively assess the predictors and consequences of this concept: what predicts whether an individual engages in what citizens understand as *constructive citizenship behavior*, and what are the repercussions of this understanding? Previous research amassed abundant knowledge about the normative ideals of "good citizens" and why citizens often struggle to meet these expectations. The merit of this project is that it describes this tension between *should* and *can(not)* from a citizen's perspective.

In so doing, I seek to make three main contributions. First, I will provide future research with an empirically derived concept of how citizens understand their role and constraints in democracy. Current research uses various concepts to explain how citizens think of democracy (e.g., satisfaction with democracy, norms) and how they see their own role in it (e.g., political efficacy, populist views). *Constructive citizenship behavior* combines both sides in one concept. Thus, this concept integrates vast scholarship from various disciplines and subfields to advance long-lasting conceptual and theoretical debates. Second, this project will help understand how crises might be addressed. While it always matters how citizens perceive their role in democracy, the crises Western democracies face and the (perceived) crisis in their capacity to address them make this question particularly urgent: *Why* do citizens respond to crises the way they do? Parallel to rising radical right sentiment and political distrust (Valgarðsson et al., 2025), interest in participatory models of democracy is growing (Pilet et al., 2020; Wike et al., 2017), and political engagement (Gallard et al., 2024) and prosocial acts to address crises are common (van Bavel et al., 2022). *Constructive citizenship behavior* systematizes citizens' many responses by inquiring *why* citizens act the way they do. Third, the project will contribute knowledge on the causes of this concept. I aim to map the variation of this concept across countries, groups, and relevant political attitudes. Moreover, as I will explain later, I will develop theoretical arguments for how people's emotions and social identities—influential factors in various political behaviors (Versteegen, 2023a, 2024b, 2024c)—may shape their understanding of *constructive citizenship behavior*, and how interventions may possibly promote it.

In the remainder of this section, I introduce the two lines of literature motivating this project. As I can only provide brief overviews of both in this proposal, I stress that there is nuance within both bodies of work. Moreover, I do not aim to play off these lines of scholarship against each other but to highlight the rift between the democratic ideal and citizens' everyday behavior.

Literature 1: Theoretical Expectations of Citizens in Democracy

The first guiding body of literature examines what citizens are *expected* to do in a democracy. The idea of representative democracy (which is the most common democratic model) is that citizens elect politicians to acquire information, negotiate, and decide on their behalf (Pitkin, 1967). Besides, voters are expected to pay taxes to ensure that governments can provide services, and many states have compulsory conscription, expecting citizens to defend the country in extreme cases. Besides, political theorists raise normative expectations of what citizens should do for a democracy to work *better*. To vote “correctly”, for example, citizens are expected to be informed and understand basic policies (Lau & Redlawsk, 1997). Ideally, citizens should follow the news and debate political issues with as many people as possible (Teorell, 2006). Besides electoral participation, theories indicate that democracy functions better if citizens engage in other forms of participation. They may, for example, protest, sign petitions, or contact their representatives to shape public opinion (Verba & Nie, 1972). Deliberative or more participatory models of democracy aim for even higher degrees of citizen engagement (Teorell, 2006). Laypeople’s ideals of what “good citizens” should do and be like widely align with these ideas (e.g., Dalton, 2008; Goodman, 2025), even if different welfare regimes and cultural differences shape how much issue-solving responsibility is assigned to politicians vs. citizens (e.g., Zakaras, 2022).

Citizens’ contributions seem even more expected in times of crisis. Citizens’ individual actions were vital, for example, when governments asked citizens to isolate, wear masks, and be prosocial to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Lin et al., 2021). Similarly, the Russian war in Ukraine sparked political discussions about drawing more citizens into the military (Besch & Westgaard, 2024). Analogous debates revolve around requesting longer working hours to overcome economic stagnation and demographic change (Ardagna et al., 2023). Scandinavian countries even circulate brochures on “crisis preparedness” to inform citizens of what they can do during crises.

Literature 2: Empirical Evidence on Citizens’ Behaviors in Democracy

The first line of literature shows that experts and citizens envision ordinary people as interested, engaged, and problem-oriented, and that expectations rise in challenging times. However, research extensively demonstrates that citizens are generally not as informed and engaged as desired (Achen & Bartels, 2017; Campbell et al., 1960; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Frimer et al., 2017; Lupia, 2015). The reasons for this are well-studied, including time and resource constraints (Brady et al., 1995), efficacy beliefs (Finkel, 1985), interest (Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022), and structural disparities creating unequal democratic participation between groups (e.g., Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010).

Beyond these general constraints, and crucial for this proposal, people’s emotions and social identities further dissuade them from being the “good citizen” envisioned. By now, political science has described various ways in which citizens’ emotions (e.g., Lodge & Taber, 2013; Marcus et al., 2000) and social identities (Huddy, 2013; Campbell et al., 1960) shape information-processing and political behavior. This is particularly true during crises, where conflicts, threats, or limited resources

become salient (Versteegen, 2024c). Importantly, that emotions and identities shape perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors is not necessarily problematic and may, in fact, even facilitate information-processing (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000) and political actions (e.g., Pfattheicher et al., 2020). However, emotion and identity-driven citizens do not intuitively align with ideals of “good citizens” as informed and deliberate.

The many ways citizens respond to our crisis-ridden times reflect the various factors constraining (and facilitating) their behaviors. On the one hand, anti-democratic sentiment (e.g., Golder, 2016), polarization (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012), political disengagement (e.g., Aron & Superti, 2024), and distrust (e.g., Albertson & Gadarian, 2015) are often understood as reactions to crises or to politicians’ attempts to address them. On the other hand, many citizens are generous and active despite (or maybe because of) the challenges at hand. They widely think, for example, that people should be more trusting (Rainie et al., 2019) and want to be politically active and prosocial (Zaki, 2024). In fact, many take massive personal costs to address crises, such as when isolating to protect vulnerable members of society during the COVID-19 pandemic (Coroiu et al., 2020). Likewise, citizens host refugees in need (Allensbach Institute, 2017) and constrain their consumption, holidays, and even family planning to tackle climate change (Minkin et al., 2024). More generally, the interest in more participatory models of democracy is growing (Rattanasevee et al., 2024).

This brief review demonstrates two vital learnings. First, citizens have many reasons—such as limited resources, little interest, emotions and identities—to deviate from the ideal of a “good citizen.” Second, citizens may show many different responses to societal crises—such as radical right voting, polarization, prosocial acts, and participation. While it would require strong normative assumptions to classify which of these responses align with “good citizenship,” it seems more fruitful to clarify how citizens envision and evaluate their role themselves. By observing how citizens negotiate expectations of themselves and others on the one hand with their actual behavior on the other, we can approximate the tension between *should* and *can(not)*. This time, however, the tension is a first-person description from the same source. I aim to conceptualize and measure this tension to provide a realistic assessment of what citizens consider *desirable* yet *feasible* behavior in democracy during crises. I then aim to study the predictors and consequences of this understanding.

Aims and Research Questions

This proposal has two primary research questions:

1. What do ordinary citizens think they and other citizens *should* and *can(not)* do in a democracy?
2. What are the predictors and consequences of this understanding of *constructive citizenship behavior*?

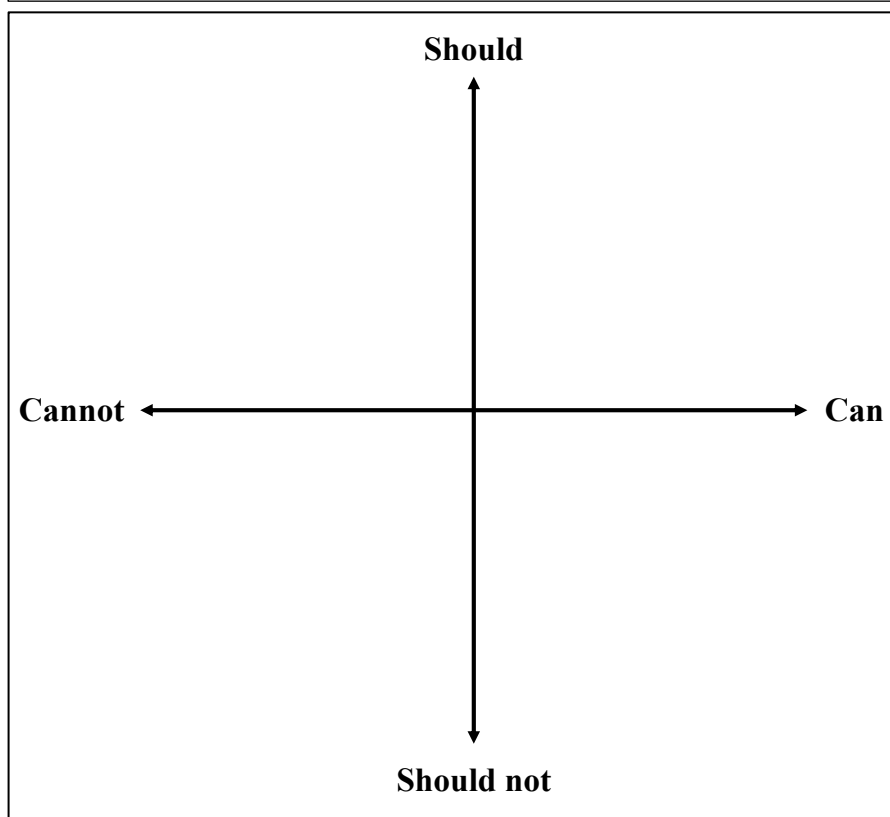
I ask these questions to achieve two aims.

Aim 1: Conceptualizing *Constructive Citizenship Behavior*

The first aim is to conceptualize what laypeople think citizens *should* and *can(not)* do in a democracy. As discussed above, there are many expectations about what citizens *should* do, but often, citizens cannot meet these expectations. Simultaneously, they are often prosocial, active, and informed despite their resource and time constraints. By conceptualizing how citizens negotiate their ideals with their experiences of everyday life, I aim to provide a first-hand, measurable understanding of this tension. People often develop lay theories of how things (should) work (e.g., [Borwein et al., 2024](#)), and learning about these theories provides new perspectives on widely studied but possibly conflicting knowledge. The aim is not to *replace* expert knowledge with lay beliefs but to *extend* it by the views of those affected. While this knowledge is insightful for the functioning of democracy in general, it is particularly relevant when democracies face large and sequential crises that complicate effective institutional responses.

[Figure 1](#) shows the envisioned model: The *should-should not* dimension represents citizens' beliefs of what they themselves and their fellow citizens ideally should or should not do in democracy: What is their duty, and what do they consider not helpful? The *can-cannot* dimension represents citizens' beliefs of what their many constraints actually allow them and other citizens to accomplish. The figure invites various theoretical questions—such as on the relationships between the two dimensions or to adjacent concepts (e.g., political efficacy)—that I will develop as part of this conceptualization. Besides, there may be a conceptual difference between what citizens think they *should* and *can* do themselves vs. what *other citizens* should and can do. A rational choice perspective, for example, would suggest that citizens may try to free ride and use “citizen resources” while saving their own. The project's empirical approach is well-suited to explore such theoretical angles, which I would then incorporate into the concept.

Empirically, the first aim requires describing and mapping how citizens understand the concept. I will do this in three stages. First, I will conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with citizens, exploring the expectations they put on themselves and others, as well as the limitations and concerns they experience. The interview guide will be inspired by how political theorists (e.g., [Teorell, 2006](#)) and citizens (e.g., [Goodman, 2022, 2025](#); [Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002](#)) see “good citizens,” as well as what political behavior evidence suggests makes citizens deviate from those ideals (e.g., [Achen & Bartels, 2017](#)). I will gradually add prompts based on the interviewees' input. As I will elaborate on in the methods section, I intend to conduct the interviews on as diverse samples as possible, preferably in at least two countries. This diversity is vital, given that the understanding of *constructive citizenship behavior* likely varies by context (e.g., different welfare regimes may create different expectations of citizen responsibility; [Esping-Andersen, 1990](#)) but also personal factors like ideology (e.g., certain vote choices or individual behaviors may appear constructive to some citizens but not to others, respectively).

FIGURE 1. Two Dimensions of *Constructive Citizenship Behavior*.

The second stage will translate the qualitative insights into a quantitative measure. The measure will likely entail two subscales (i.e., *should-should not* and *can-cannot*) to reflect the two-dimensional framework (see Figure 1). As detailed in the methods section, I will use common techniques of scale development to generate items, identify the best model, and evaluate the measure's quality (i.e., reliability and validity). Importantly, *constructive citizenship behavior* has elements from established concepts (e.g., democratic norms for the first and political efficacy for the second dimension). In this step, it will thus be crucial to ensure that a *joint* measure adds to our understanding of citizens' role in democracy. To examine the generalizability of the results, this stage will be conducted in representative (or at least quota-sampled) surveys across five countries.

The third stage will descriptively map *constructive citizenship behavior*. As this is a novel concept, it is insightful to describe, for example, what citizens consider their duties and what they perceive as the largest hurdles in meeting them. While the literature provides many reasons for why citizens may be less informed and active than sometimes desired (e.g., Achen & Bartels, 2017; Campbell et al., 1960; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Frimer et al., 2017; Lupia, 2015), my description complements this knowledge from a first-person perspective. Hence, this stage will describe the concept's key properties (e.g., means, variation, cross-country differences). It will also describe correlations with key demographics, allowing me to reveal, for example, ideological, gender, or educational

differences. To save resources, I will use the data from the second stage for these analyses as far as possible and will only supplement the data if the second stage data is considered insufficient.

Importantly, the concept will likely provide heterogeneous understandings of what citizens think they and their fellow citizens *should* and *can* do in a democracy, especially during crises. What Citizen A, for instance, considers constructive in response to the issue they find most important may appear destructive or unfeasible to Citizen B, even if the latter agrees on the issue at hand. Moreover, these understandings may not necessarily align with experts' assumptions. However, the goal of this aim is not to find *agreement* among citizens or between experts and citizens. Instead, I aim to find patterns of how citizens understand their responsibilities and constraints, preferably across issues, ideologies, and countries.

Aim 2: Studying the Predictors and Consequences of *Constructive Citizenship Behavior*

The second aim is to explain the predictors and consequences of citizens' understanding of *constructive citizenship behavior*. Regarding the predictors, many factors may explain why a citizen holds a certain view of their responsibilities and capacities in democracy. These include factors on the macro-level (e.g., a country's quality of government, welfare state, and culture) and the micro-level (e.g., a person's socialization, efficacy beliefs, experiences with politics, and ideology). Moreover, the type of issue (e.g., climate change, inequality) and the perceived governmental response likely matter. I will measure these aspects in the above-mentioned cross-sectional, comparative surveys used for scale development, aiming to provide an encompassing assessment of the concept's possible predictors.

Likewise, I will measure the concept's possible consequences. Possible consequences primarily entail citizens' behavior in and views on democracy. For example, I will assess batteries of institutional political behaviors (e.g., turnout, vote choice, contacting politicians), non-institutional forms of participation (e.g., protesting, activism, social media behavior), deliberate acts (e.g., informing oneself, discussing politics), and prosocial behaviors (e.g., various forms of helping others, volunteering, community work). Besides, I will also assess citizens' views of their relationship to political representatives. For instance, does *constructive citizenship behavior* correlate with perceived failure of political representation, is it correlated with strong institutional trust, or both? Likewise, does a person's understanding of the concept relate to what they demand from politicians? It is generally important to remember, though, that the concept should reflect a combination of people's ideals and their experienced constraints. Thus, it is not per se a "positive" concept that would predict positive effects. That is, while political efficacy or trust may spark more participation or less populist attitudes, *constructive citizenship behavior* also entails the awareness that ideals may not be reached. Hence, more likely consequences of this concept are *tolerance* for other citizens' attempts to engage or interest in *less costly forms of engagement*. The cross-sectional, comparative surveys will assess the relevant outcomes, including those inspired by the interviews.

Table 1. *Examples of Theoretical Expectations for Aim 2.*

Example		Emotion 1	Emotion 2	Identity 1	Identity 2
Predictors	Citizen experiences... What citizens <i>should</i> do:	...hope We should protest to stress the issue's importance (Leuschner & Versteegen, 2023)	...anxiety Let's all consider the evidence first (Marcus et al., 2000)	...strong <i>national</i> identity We should take a citizen-driven approach (van Bavel et al., 2022)	...strong <i>class</i> identity We need party politics to represent the different groups' interests (Bornschieer et al., 2021)
Predicted Relationship to Constructive Citizenship Behavior	What citizens <i>can(not)</i> do:	I have abundant resources and can use them (Rand, 2018)	I can't do my part in this (Christensen et al., 2019)	I see unity in the country, so let's do this together (van Bavel et al., 2022)	I think cross-partisan chats will likely just create conflict (Frimer et al., 2017)

Besides this descriptive approach, I aim for theoretical and causal explanations of *constructive citizenship behavior*. Specifically, I aim to test whether a person's emotions and social identities shape their understanding of the concept. I intend to focus on these two predictors because they, as discussed above, generally shape how citizens process information and behave in crises. Hence, citizens' sense of *should-should not* and *can-cannot* likely also depends on how they feel and to whom they feel connected. While this is not to downplay the relevance of the other factors mentioned above, the particular appeal of emotions and identities is that they are, by definition, quite fluid (Versteegen, 2024c). That is, the macro-level conditions during a crisis are hard to change, and so are people's socialization or efficacy beliefs. However, the emotions an individual feels or the groups that are salient to them vary constantly. This implies that *constructive citizenship behavior* may, if desirable, be facilitated by promoting certain emotions or social identities. To illustrate the potential of the two factors, Table 1 shows examples of two emotions and identities that may be felt during crises, respectively, and how I would predict them to relate to the two dimensions of *constructive citizenship behavior*. The table gives stylized examples of how citizens may phrase their thoughts based on previous evidence. When anxious, for example, people process information more carefully (Marcus et al., 2000), but they may also feel more inadequate to act (Christensen et al., 2019).

Based on these considerations, I am considering testing the causal effects of emotions and identities in survey experiments. That said, the abductive conceptualization of *constructive citizenship behavior* and the descriptive analyses of possible predictors imply that I will remain open to other predictors that may turn out to be more relevant for causal testing.

Anticipated Originality and Scientific Innovation

This project is original in that it is the first to conceptualize how *laypeople* understand citizens' role in democracy. We know what experts and citizens themselves think citizens *should* do in a democracy, and we know what they often *can(not)* do. What is missing, however, is to integrate these two sides into one larger concept that describes how citizens negotiate *should* and *can(not)*. Doing so helps

understand citizens' role in democracy generally, but it is particularly relevant for understanding citizens' many different responses to our current societal crises and the debated democratic crisis in addressing them. The project is explicitly multi-disciplinary, connecting different disciplines (e.g., political science, social psychology) and subfields (e.g., political theory, political behavior) to develop this new concept theoretically and empirically. With this project, I hope to advance systematic and practically useful knowledge of how society's largest group—citizens—see their role in democracy, especially in times of crisis. By examining various explanations to this understanding (i.e., Aim 2), this project may eventually help facilitate constructive responses to societal crises.

The project is innovative in at least three regards. First, this project is conceptually innovative by contributing a new concept relevant to various established lines of research. Hence, the novel concept can facilitate follow-up projects in several disciplines. How much, for instance, do social norms guide understandings of *constructive citizenship behavior*? How do people see “constructive citizens,” and what would “*unconstructive citizenship behavior*” look like? And can *constructive citizenship behavior* be experimentally manipulated, thus potentially suggesting ways to improve societies' responses to crises?

Second, the project is theoretically innovative by moving the explanatory agency from researchers to laypeople. Right now, scientists either theorize about citizens' role or ask them about their citizenship ideals, and they observe the extent to which citizens meet these ideals. In contrast, I describe (Aim 1) and explain (Aim 2) how citizens make this theorizing and observing themselves. Studying *should* and *can(not)* in the same source, particularly among those affected, requires fewer theoretical assumptions and provides a more pragmatic understanding. This first-person perspective facilitates the discovery of theoretical angles hidden from researchers who observe the two dimensions “from the outside” only.

Third, this project is methodologically innovative in several regards. While the project contributes to a recent trend to use more mixed-methods approaches, a particular innovation will be to develop open science practices (e.g., pre-registrations, accountability mechanisms, and data accessibility) across the different methods. Open science practices are established in quantitative methods and increasingly developed in qualitative research (e.g., [Haven & van Grootel, 2019](#)). While I aim to develop and extend these practices in the qualitative paper (see Paper 1), I seek to particularly advance the integration of open science tools *across* different methods. Specifically, current research often argues that qualitative work informs quantitative measures, but it often remains unclear how this happens. I argue that we, as researchers, can make this more transparent. I aim to develop data visualization tools from the interviews, which document how, for example, single codes were translated into survey items. Likewise, I aim to extend the quantitative survey with open-response questions to help readers evaluate the extent to which my quantitative items capture the complexity of thoughts expressed in the qualitative interviews.

Methods

To achieve the project's two aims, I plan to produce four empirical papers. As they address different aims and employ various methods, I organize this section around these papers. I intend to hire a doctoral student to prepare these papers with me, and I will seek to recruit candidates interested in contributing and learning necessary skills relevant to this project (e.g., knowledge of democratic theory, qualitative interviewing, scale development). However, the task assignment will be tailored to the student's expertise and interest (see "Work Plan and Timeline" for these practical considerations).

Paper 1: Conceptualizing *Constructive Citizenship Behavior* with Qualitative Interviews

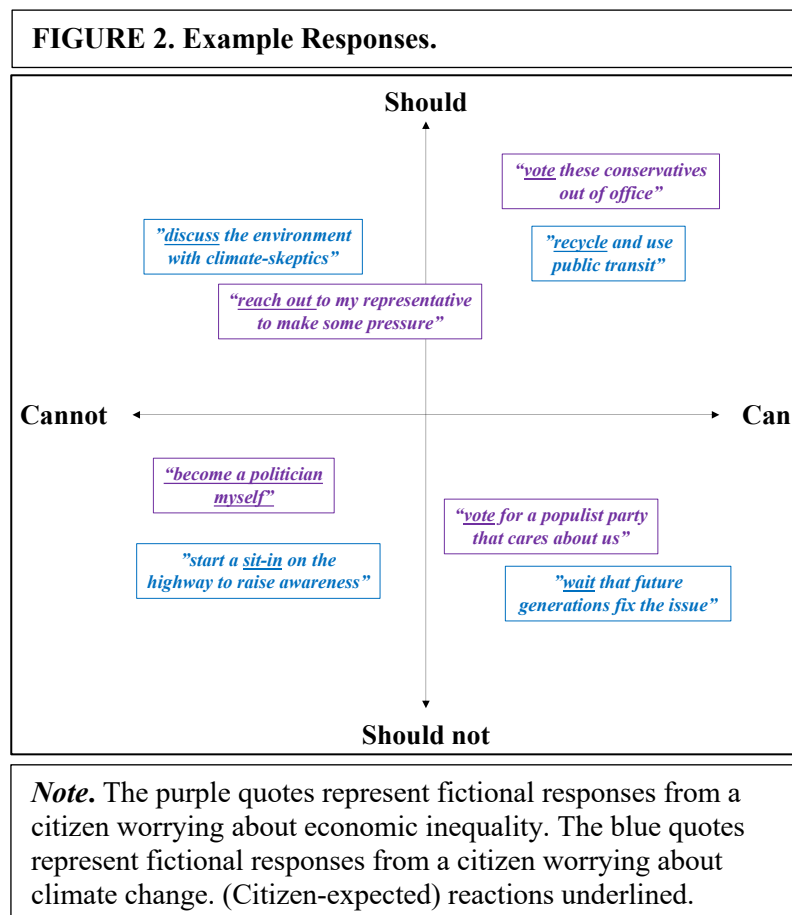
The first paper will use semi-structured qualitative interviews² to inductively conceptualize *constructive citizenship behavior* based on citizens' in-depth reasoning. I will develop an initial interview guide based on the academic literature, attempting to capture all possible views on how citizens think they *should* and *can(not)* respond to societal crises. All interviews will start by letting respondents identify the societal issue they care most. Arguably, many of these issues may not be crisis issues (e.g., climate change, war) but "regular" ones (e.g., school closures, minimum wage). While I may need to prompt crisis issues more explicitly, it may be interesting to understand citizens' reasoning for any type of issue. Hence, I will initially probe their expectations and experiences on the issue they care most about. The interview guide will also entail exploratory questions, which ensure that the respondents can share ideals or experiences that might remain uncovered by the literature. I expect interviews to take about 30 minutes each.

The sample will be obtained based on four considerations. First, I will determine the required sample size based on the information power criterion (Malterud et al., 2016), which specifies how many interviewees are needed to cover the complexity of a topic. With presumably heterogeneous understandings and different experiences, *constructive citizenship behavior* is a relatively complex concept. Thus, I will likely require a sample that is comparably large by qualitative standards (i.e., 100 interviewees). Second, I aim for a diverse sample, including various ideological, gender, age, racial, class, and other social backgrounds. While qualitative interviews do not aim for representative data, I aim to capture citizens' ideals and experiences as broadly as possible. This requires a larger sample size, independently of the information power criterion. Third, ideally, I hope to conduct the interviews in at least two countries. While only the quantitative measure will allow for systematic comparisons, a qualitative analysis on two countries may highlight contextual differences early on, which may then guide item development in Paper 2. I plan to conduct the interviews in Austria (where my institution and I are based) and the US. I chose the latter as it provides a *most different* case in

² It may be informative to conduct some of these conversations with focus groups rather than individual interviews to explore group reasoning. However, as I am not trained in focus groups, I do not plan for this type of data collection at this stage.

terms of party system, risk culture (e.g., Zakaras, 2022), and possibly on the crisis most salient. Fourth, a practical implication of my case selection is that I will conduct some of the interviews online. I learned that online interviews facilitate diverse sampling and efficient recruitment (Versteegen 2023b, 2024a), and this format allows for interviewing respondents from the US without the need to organize longer visits. However, as online interviews may exclude citizens with fewer resources or digital proficiency, they only complement in-person interviews. I will recruit interviewees via social media platforms, invitations in online surveys, and through snowball sampling.

I envision three types of analyses. First, I will conduct qualitative content analyses, which aim to assess the frequency and intensity of, in this case, specific ideals and experiences (Schreier, 2012). Second, I aim to conduct thematic analysis to explore and describe the tension between the expected *should* and *can* (Boyatzis, 1998). While qualitative content analyses aim for description, thematic analysis is more interpretative, showing, for example, how an individual negotiates their wish for more direct participation with the fact that their kids keep them from attending the respective meetings. Third, I aim to use Large Language Models (LLMs) to triangulate the first two methods. Using them allows me to, for example, compare my interpretative conclusions with those of the model, which could reveal any biases I (or the model) had during the analysis. Moreover, these models can help identify the combination of specific ideals and constraints or conduct sentiment analyses to quantify the distress experienced amid the tension between *should* and *can*. Here, I do not aim to quantify the qualitative data but to deepen the description. Figure 2 provides one example of how data from the interviews might be organized based on two fictional interviewees' reports.



As mentioned above, one element of methodological innovation in the larger project will be to develop how open science practices can be used across qualitative and quantitative methods. For this paper, I aim to pre-register the recruitment strategy, procedure, and analysis rules and to make my analysis documentation publicly available, similar to how analysis code is shared in quantitative research. To more transparently bridge how qualitative analyses can guide quantitative measures, I will additionally share my data (as far as ethical considerations allow) and, crucially, develop data exploration tools (for examples, see [Versteegen 2023b, 2024a](#)) to help readers understand how qualitative findings were turned into specific quantitative items.

Paper 2: Measuring and Mapping *Constructive Citizenship Behavior* in Quantitative Surveys

The remaining papers will be solely quantitative. Quantitative items will, of course, rarely be able to reflect the depth and diversity of individuals' experiences. This is why I approach the project's first aim—to conceptualize *constructive citizenship behavior*—in two *separate* papers, where Paper 1 provides in-depth insights into citizens' experience and Paper 2 yields a quantifiable, generalizable measure. I will apply widely established tools of scale development provided by psychological (e.g., [Jansen et al., 2014](#)) and political science (e.g., [Wuttke et al., 2020](#)) research. Typically, these procedures develop an initial item pool, which, in this project, will be informed by the findings from Paper 1. In an iterative procedure, the researchers assess the understandability, factorial structure, reliability, and various forms of validity (convergent, discriminant, and criterion) to identify the necessary and sufficient items to measure the construct. Given the tension between *should* and *can*, I expect that a two-factorial structure (i.e., two subscales) may measure the construct best. However, I will abductively identify the best solution. Examples of concepts to establish convergent and discriminant validity are democratic norms ([Broockman et al., 2022](#)) and political efficacy ([Finkel, 1985](#)). For instance, citizens' views of what they *should* do are presumably positively correlated with their endorsement of democratic norms, but negatively with what they think they *can* do. Regarding criterion validity, I argued that *constructive citizenship behavior* is likely related to citizens' behavior in and views on democracy. Hence, these would be essential criteria to assess.

I plan to conduct the early and iterative stages of scale development in two countries. This allows me to attain some comparability while saving resources. As for the interviews, I aim to analyze data from Austria and the US. Again, these countries allow for a *most different* design, such that they provide, amongst others, different party systems (i.e., multi-party vs. two-party) and welfare regimes (conservative vs. liberal). Once I have a well-performing measure, I will extend the procedure to three other Western Democracies (i.e., Germany, Sweden, and the UK). I choose these countries as they add additional variation in, amongst others, welfare regimes and political stability. This variation allows me to assess the concept's generalizability and evaluate reliability and validity in various settings. I plan to recruit nationally representative (or at least quota) samples for these five countries.

Following the scale development, I will use these data to realize the mapping aspect of Aim 1. That is, this paper will systematically describe the means and variation of *constructive citizenship behavior* on the aggregate and across countries and demographic subgroups. These analyses will also explore variation around single aspects of the concept, such as diverging understandings of the *should* and *can* dimensions (or even more granular aspects of it, if this turns out to be necessary). Both the scale development and the mapping part will be pre-registered.

Together, the first two papers will achieve the project's first aim—conceptualizing *constructive citizenship behavior*—where Paper 1 will do this qualitatively and Paper 2 quantitatively. Paper 2 extends this conceptualization by mapping the concept across countries and social backgrounds. Furthermore, Paper 2 will provide descriptive results to the second aim—that is, to examine the predictors and consequences of the concept. Specifically, the surveys will measure the above-mentioned possible micro-level predictors (e.g., socialization, efficacy beliefs) and consequences (e.g., political behavior, prosocial behavior, relationships to political representatives). Given the comparative design, this data can also be used to explore the relevance of the macro-level predictors mentioned above (e.g., quality of government, welfare state). Hence, Paper 2 will also provide a general description of the predictors and consequences of *constructive citizenship behavior* as envisioned in Aim 2. However, these analyses will be limited to cross-sectional evidence. In Papers 3 and 4, I aim for causal and theoretically guided tests of more specific predictors: people's emotions and social identities.

Paper 3: Testing how Emotions Shape Understandings of *Constructive Citizenship Behavior*

Papers 3 and 4 aim to test the causal relevance of specific, theoretically relevant predictors of *constructive citizenship behavior*. To explain how I will do this empirically, it is important to note that I will operationalize the concept on different levels of measurement, depending on the respective aim and question. Specifically, the conceptualization stage (Aim 1) requires scrutinizing the concept's single items, for example, to describe the relevance of specific forms of *should* and *can*, or how single items correlate with different demographic backgrounds. To efficiently describe how possible predictors and consequences relate to the concept (Aim 2), I need to move to a higher level of measurement, such as the expected two dimensions. This would allow me, for example, to identify a specific predictor that correlates with the (expected) *should* dimension, even if it is unrelated to the (expected) *can* dimension. However, to capture the tension between *should* and *can* (i.e., *constructive citizenship behavior*), I will need to analyze the *interaction* of these two subdimensions. While I will refine the analytical approach based on the results from the first aim, this brief discussion shows that different levels of measurement are necessary, interesting, and feasible.

In Paper 3, I aim to conduct survey experiments to test how emotions predict citizens' understanding of *constructive citizenship behavior*. As explained above, the appeal of testing emotions (and social identities) as predictors specifically is that they shape political attitudes and

behavior generally and that they are, by definition, relatively short-lived (e.g., [Versteegen, 2024c](#)). The latter implies that they can be experimentally treated and may possibly change how people understand *constructive citizenship behavior*.

The findings from especially the qualitative interviews (Paper 1) will motivate which emotions' causal effects I will test. However, my theoretical priors are that the emotions shaping citizens' understanding of *constructive citizenship behavior* align with four emotional dimensions that widely shape information-processing (i.e., aversion, anxiety, disgust, and enthusiasm; [Marcus et al., 2000](#)). To operationalize this framework, I would use recent evidence to predict, for example, that the experience of aversion increases the expectation that citizens *should* confront a crisis through radical right voting ([Vasilopoulos et al., 2019](#)), that anxiety and disgust makes citizens stress the need for information-seeking ([Clifford & Jerit, 2018](#); [Marcus et al., 2000](#)), and that enthusiasm promotes participatory norms ([Phillips & Plutzer, 2023](#)). Simultaneously, I would predict anxiety to evoke more pessimistic views of what citizens *can* do ([Christensen et al., 2019](#)), whereas enthusiasm may result in a neglect of one's personal constraints ([Vogelaar et al., 2024](#)).

I envision survey experiments where respondents will be asked what citizens *should* and *can* do in response to a specific crisis issue (e.g., climate change). I will measure *constructive citizenship behavior* as developed in Paper 2 and the possible consequences of this concept. To test the predictions above, for example, respondents would be randomly assigned to experimental treatments inducing these emotions (and a control condition). In a working paper ([Versteegen & Sohlberg, under review](#)), I used validated videos eliciting emotions to prime these dimensions ([Cowen & Keltner, 2017](#)). The advantage of these videos is that they display content from everyday life, thus providing externally valid treatments of emotions. I will pre-register these analyses, which will use statistical tests common in experimental designs.

Paper 4: Testing how Identities Shape Understandings of *Constructive Citizenship Behavior*

With the operationalization considerations from Paper 3 in mind, Paper 4 will test how social identities predict *constructive citizenship behavior*.

As in Paper 3, I will use the qualitative findings from Paper 1 to target the most relevant social identities. Based on theory, a relevant prediction to test would be that citizens identifying with their social class believe that traditional party representation is needed to address a crisis ([Bornschier et al., 2021](#)). In contrast, I would expect that respondents consider citizens more responsible and capable if a shared identity (e.g., “we are all Austrians”) is salient for them ([Van Bavel et al., 2022](#)). I conducted experimental treatments of social identities before ([Versteegen & Syropoulos, forthcoming](#)) and, in an experimental design, would increase the salience of the specific identity to be tested (vs. control). The outcomes would again be the measure of *constructive citizenship behavior* developed in Paper 2, as well as democratic attitudes and behaviors. Importantly, as I will assess the link between the new

concept and democratic attitudes and behaviors in Papers 2, 3, and 4, the project will also allow me to evaluate the robustness of this correlation across different designs.

Work Plan and Timeline

[Table 2](#) provides an indicative time plan, primarily organized around the proposed four papers. At the start of the project period, I will hire a doctoral student, who will be employed by my host institution, the Department of Government at the University of Vienna. My department will provide administrative support in the hiring process. The doctoral student will be employed for a 75% position following FWF guidelines (see [here](#)). As a postdoctoral fellow, I am allowed to employ doctoral students but can only act as a *co*-supervisor in their PhD education based on Austrian and University of Vienna regulations (see details [here](#)). My department's professors, Laurenz Ennser-Jedenastik (see information [here](#)) and Markus Wagner (see information [here](#)), kindly agreed to act as main supervisors for the doctoral student and as mentors for me (also see the section on research-related qualifications). This means that I can fund and substantially advise a doctoral student, developing leadership and teaching skills, while relying on two senior colleagues' expertise. As it is essential for the doctoral student to learn in this project, we will assign the project's tasks based on their skills and interests. The successful defense of the student's doctoral degree will be an additional goal besides the project's substantive goals. Besides, I will hire student research assistants to support the project with logistical tasks in recruiting interviewees, qualitative coding, and preparation of the quantitative materials. As research assistants usually do not stay in these positions for four years (as they pursue other career steps), I will hire one research assistant for the first two years (qualitatively-focused) and one research assistant for the latter two years (quantitatively-focused). The students may use the data for their Master's theses if they wish.

Simultaneous to the hiring and training process, I will develop the theoretical and practical considerations for Paper 1. As the collection of qualitative data requires more effort and time than the three survey-based papers, I granted more time to this part. While it is not *necessary*³ for the later papers that Paper 1 is completed, high-quality qualitative data and a careful analysis can provide important guidance in the later papers. Once a respective paper is written, I plan to gather feedback from the department's research seminars, external workshops, and conferences (e.g., APSA, EPSA, ECPR, ISPP) and by sending it to knowledgeable colleagues. After thorough revisions, I aim to submit each paper to the highest-ranked journals I consider appropriate (e.g., APSR, AJPS, JOP, BJPOLS, CPS, POPS, EJPR, POBE).

³ This means that the later parts of the project can be conducted and fruitful even if Paper 1 turns out unfeasible (e.g., if a pandemic complicates data collection or due to delays in hiring processes).

Table 2. *Indicative Time Plan.*

Year Quarter		1				2				3				4				
		1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	
Task	Administration	Hire + train DS + RA 1				Hire + train RA 2								Project report + book options				
	Co-Supervision	Co-supervise DS				Co-supervise DS				Co-supervise DS				Co-supervise DS (Defense of their PhD)				
	Paper 1	Prepare*		Data collection		Analysis + writing		Peer Feedback** + revisions		Submission***								
	Paper 2	Prepare				Iterative data collection + analysis		Writing		Peer Feedback + revisions		Submission						
	Paper 3					Prepare		Data collection		Analysis + writing		Peer Feedback + revisions		Submission				
	Paper 4									Prepare		Data collection		Analysis + writing		Peer Feedback + revisions		Submission

Note. DS = Doctoral Student. RA = Research Assistant.

* All preparation stages entail theoretical and literature work and data collection practicalities (e.g., ethics).

** Peer feedback will be collected from colleagues and presentations at academic conferences and workshops, depending on the available options.

*** “Submission” indicates the expected time of the first submission to a peer-reviewed journal. As I cannot predict how long the publication process will take (especially as I will aim for the highest-ranked journals possible), I provide the submission time only.

Besides, I consider three additional means of dissemination not shown in [Table 2](#). First, I aim to communicate my findings to lay audiences through journalistic outlets, blog posts, or social media. While this is always valuable, it may be particularly interesting in this project, where I explicitly try to work with layperson theories. Second, I hope to share my findings with civil society organizations (e.g., NGOs). As these organizations are interested in how specific crises can be addressed, my findings may provide valuable knowledge for them. Third, I believe that my question, the mixed-methods methodology, and the findings would allow for an interesting book (such as the Springer Briefs series). As I want to ensure that this project is feasible within four years, I do not plan to include this book as a fixed part of the project. However, if I realize that the project is going smoothly and that I (and possibly the doctoral student) find ways to prepare this book, it would provide an additional useful output and, for me, as an early-career scholar, an additional learning opportunity.

As requested by the FWF, I will also produce a project report in the last two quarters of the project's fourth year.

Associated Research Partners

There are no associated research partners in this project.

Cooperation Partners

There are neither national nor international research partners in this project.

Research-Related Qualifications of the Researchers Involved

This is an ambitious project: It will connect different and large lines of literature and use different and complex methodologies, of which especially the qualitative study will take time. Its data-driven parts promise innovative discoveries but risk becoming more tricky than deductive hypothesis testing. Besides, it will take time and effort to develop the open science contributions. Finally, I am an early-career scholar who has only started to lead larger projects and advise students.

That said, the following reasons make it highly feasible for me and my project members (i.e., the doctoral student and the two student research assistants) to complete the project within four years.

First, I have deep theoretical and conceptual knowledge about citizens' political behaviors, emotions, and identities. While this project requires connecting different disciplines, I have proven this ability when I started my PhD in a political science department with a Master's degree in psychology. I know how to carefully and efficiently acquire and connect knowledge from different disciplines.

Second, I have the relevant methodological training and experience to use the various qualitative and quantitative methods I proposed. Moreover, my previous research required me to learn new methods, meaning that I am able to self-teach these or find adequate teaching if necessary. This point includes ethical considerations, such as how to treat my respondents, handle data, and disseminate

results. Relatedly, I know how to use open science tools, which I substantially developed in my previous work ([Versteegen, 2023b, 2024a](#)). Finally, I also gathered expertise in comparative research, such as how to do justice to intercultural and language aspects.

Third, despite my young career age, I consider myself an independent researcher. I published four single-authored papers of similar ambition during my PhD, making me confident that I (especially with a doctoral student) can accomplish what I proposed. That I led smaller projects with scholars in the Netherlands (Byron Adams), Sweden (Jacob Sohlberg), and the US (Lillian Mason, Stylianos Syropoulos) will help me lead this larger project in Austria and conduct and disseminate this project internationally. The funding I acquired for my PhD research (~ 31,000€) is limited but relatively much for a doctoral student, and I learned to use my funding responsibly and efficiently. My previous education also trained me to communicate science to a larger audience. This will help me with the planned interviews and public dissemination activities (see timeline section).

Fourth, I emphasize that I will be supported by highly experienced colleagues. This includes the doctoral student's supervision and mentorship by professors Laurenz Ennser-Jedenastik and Markus Wagner. It also entails administrative support from our department and communication facilities from the university. Finally, this includes a highly supportive and inspiring departmental culture—where some colleagues conduct similar projects to study citizens' understanding of voting (e.g., Carolina Plescia, see details [here](#))—and colleagues abroad, who will help me ensure this project's success.

Ethical, Safety-Related, and Regulatory Aspects

By now, I have taken classes on the ethical aspects of research during my Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD education. Thus, I have a good sense of the regulations, what I need to consider, and where I can search for guidance if I need to problematize an issue. There are three sets of ethical considerations I need to make: data storage and handling, data dissemination, and the studies themselves.

The first aspect is the most straightforward, as I will store and handle all data in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Each of these acts has essential details to consider, but the regulations are very clear and comparatively simple. The possibly most challenging part is organizing data storage and handling across borders, given that I will conduct my research in several countries. However, I have conducted such international data collections before and am confident that I can get the necessary approvals.

The second aspect is data dissemination. For open science reasons, I aim to make as much data publicly available as possible. However, this risks breaching anonymity in the qualitative data. As I aim to develop open science tools for these data, I will collaborate with the university's ethics officers, the institutional review board, and qualitative researchers using open science methods to balance this trade-off between transparency and anonymity. I stress this data-sharing aim because I believe that transparency makes research more ethical. In case of doubt, however, I will always prioritize the study respondents' integrity.

The third aspect concerns ethical conditions while conducting the studies. Each paper will obtain ethics approval from my Institutional Review Board (see [here](#)) and include an ethics section. Generally, the project's focus on societal crises and individual responsibilities, attitudes, and behaviors includes various sensitive topics. For all proposed papers, however, I have no reason to expect the psychological burden (i.e., emotionality, cognitive effort) to exceed what people may encounter in everyday life. There are no physical risks in any of the studies. All studies will compensate participants according to common practice (see Annex 2).

Gender-Related Aspects

There are three gender-related aspects relevant in this project. First, the project has a *substantial* gender component in that women and non-binary people are often more affected by societal crises (e.g., [Blanton et al., 2019](#)). Moreover, they tend to remain less represented by institutional politics ([Persson et al., 2024](#)) and less likely to engage in at least some forms of political participation ([Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010](#)). As this project aims to investigate how citizens understand and experience their role and constraints in democracy, it could extend knowledge on these inequalities and identify opportunities for overcoming them through other forms of political behavior.

Second, this project has a *methodological* gender component. If women and non-binary people are less likely to feel politically efficacious ([Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010](#)), semi-structured interviews may give them an opportunity to make their views heard. Quantitative surveys are good at assessing the extent and generalizability of a phenomenon, but they force all respondents to constrain their complex thoughts and experiences to Likert-type responses. Of course, my qualitative interviews will and should not replace democratic representation and the option to be heard institutionally. However, they can provide especially marginalized groups with an option to share their perspectives.

Third, this project has a *practical* gender component. Given equal qualifications, I will prefer applicants with a female or non-binary gender identity to take the position as a doctoral student in the project. As female scholars are underrepresented in my field (i.e., political psychology; [Lönnqvist, 2022](#)), I aim to contribute toward reducing this disparity with the one position I hope to offer. Moreover, I will encourage the doctoral student and myself to consider gender perspectives throughout the project.

These considerations similarly apply to other marginalized identities, such as certain races, religions, classes, or geographic backgrounds (e.g., [Pichardo et al., 2022](#)).

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