The Case of Germany
Civil Society and Civic Activism in the Pandemic

Susann Worschech

Abstract
Has the pandemic weakened civil society and hindered activism and volunteering due to long-lasting restrictions and bans on meetings, protests, and the like? Or have civil society actors been able to respond to these fundamental changes? This is explored here in the case of Germany. Neither weakness nor strength can be deemed a clear outcome of the pandemic for civil society, but different levels of resilience mark opportunities for civil society to overcome the pandemic. Resilience also affects democracy; therefore, the development of civil society during and after the pandemic is investigated in terms of how it has influenced democracy in Germany. This article is based on findings on civic activism resulting from long-term surveys and volunteering conducted prior to the pandemic, together with present and preliminary observations.

Keywords: civil society, democracy, Germany, pandemic, resilience, social quality, volunteering

In 2016, when the Journal of Democracy published a text by Ivan Krastev (2016) titled “The Specter Haunting Europe,” in which the Bulgarian intellectual warned of a break with the liberal order and an unstoppable rise of populism in Europe, the erosion of democratic values and structures was imaginable but not yet tangible. Five years later and in the midst of a pandemic that has challenged and transformed institutions, political processes, and social cohesion worldwide, Europe may be facing democratic regression (Schäfer and Zürn 2021). In particular, trust in institutions and democratic processes has declined significantly in the face of the need for political action amid enormous uncertainty, the strengthening of executive power, and problematic communication, which can be seen as the basis of sociopolitical alienation. At the same time, pandemic-related physical distancing, restrictions on personal liberties, and economic shutdowns have radically altered interpersonal and institutional trust, and thereby the basis of democracy. For civil society, citizen activism, and a vibrant civic sphere, these measures mark a serious problem, as they intervene in processes that are fundamental to civil society: both organized and spontaneous meetings have become more difficult or even completely curtailed for a certain time as demonstrations, networking activities, and even traveling have at least been limited. However, a vibrant civil society
constitutes a necessary precondition for any democracy and strengthens democratic processes (Putnam et al. 1993). Civil society can be understood as a “sphere of social interaction between economy and state, . . . created through forms of self-constitution and self-mobilization” (Cohen and Arato 1992: ix). A strong civil society is “characterized by a social infrastructure of dense networks of face-to-face relationships that cross-cut existing social cleavages” (Edwards et al. 2001: 17). Therefore, the following question must be asked: in what way has the pandemic influenced or even weakened civil society and civic activism, and, consequently, democracy?

This ambivalent state of civil society and civic activism as a basis for democracy in many Western countries such as Germany during the pandemic and the multifold effects that this crisis has had on political participation and the stability of citizen engagement are at the core of what this article seeks to explore. After providing an overview on the COVID-19 situation and the government’s management of the crisis in Germany, I will discuss the conceptual perspectives on civil society, crisis, and democracy within a framework comprising resilience theory, with a focus on possible transformation paths of citizen engagement in this extraordinary situation. In analyzing empirical patterns of civic-political relations before and during the pandemic, I will provide findings and hypotheses of how civil society has tackled the fallout from the pandemic and will draw conclusions on the complex sociopolitical consultation processes that have been subject to restructuring during the pandemic.

The basic hypothesis of this research is that during the COVID-19 pandemic trust in authorities and the quality of democracy have decreased but that civil society activists have simultaneously found new ways of interacting and integrating with political actors in particular at the local level, thereby establishing new forms of local political commitment and broadening participation. Hence, the research question is founded on whether civil society has been weakened, strengthened, or transformed during the pandemic, and whether new forms of participation may contribute to democratic resilience after the COVID crisis.

The COVID-19 Situation in Germany

In Germany, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a less severe course compared to other countries from a health-related perspective; however, societal polarization, distrust of the government and the executive, and alienation from democratic values and processes have all increased during the pandemic. Until September 2021, the pandemic spread in three waves in Germany with about 4.13 million cases of infection and about 92,850 deaths in total (Robert Koch Institute 2021a). In relation to the total population of Germany, this represents an infection rate of 5 percent and a death rate of 2.24 percent (Figure 1).\(^1\) Compared to other European countries (the infection rate was about 7.4 percent across the European Union [EU]) and also worldwide, the average infection rate in Germany remained low, while the mortality rate remained...
low as well with 1,100 deaths per 1,000,000 persons in Germany compared to 1,656 across the other EU member states (Figure 2).²

Only at the beginning of the pandemic did Germany experience a somewhat high death rate compared to other EU countries, due to the rather reluctant and late implementation of lockdown measures in relation to the pandemic situation beyond its borders (Gerli et al. 2020). Implementing an effective national lockdown before the outbreak of the first wave, while observing the increase of cases in other countries, would have saved lives; however, high uncertainty at this time would probably not have allowed for excessively harsh measures. While the first wave of the pandemic in March and April 2020 did not put the health system under severe pressure, cases of both infections and deaths increased in October 2020 until the end of December 2020, with a peak of nearly 30,000 new infections per day in mid-December. This second wave decreased in the first weeks of 2021 to about 5,000 infections per day in early February, while the third wave emerged in the course of February 2021, reaching a peak of about 12,000 new infections per day on 21 April 2021.³ Vaccinating began slowly in the first three months of 2021 in Germany, but vaccination became more available as of May 2021 onward, resulting in increasing vaccination coverage (see Figure 3 for vaccination rate). Therefore, the number of new infections decreased rapidly from the end of April to less than 500 cases per day by the beginning of July 2021. Numbers are now increasing, however, due to the new Delta variant, which became the dominant subtype of the coronavirus in Germany in July 2021.

Governance measures to contain the pandemic were a delicate balancing act between responsibility at national level and region-based institutions and the implementation of regulations at the regional level. The government’s approach of containment

---

² Figure 1. COVID Cases per Population (Source: Robert Koch Institute 2021b)
was problematic, both from a practical perspective and with regard to democratic theory. With Germany being a federal state, regulations and orders can only be implemented at the federal state level (Bundesländer). The national executive is not responsible for the enactment, implementation, checking, and sanctioning of regulatory measures of order and citizen affairs; federal state authorities are tasked with the responsibility for them. Consequently, only police authorities at the Bundesland (regional) level and communal public order offices are entitled to enforce and check for compliance with the regulations.

The legal design for the implementation of coronavirus containment measures had to follow this logic of focusing on the executive power of the German states. Therefore, the political negotiation format “chancellor plus state prime ministers” became a relevant, albeit not undisputed, decision-making body. The problematic aspect of this board was that it was, of course, not a constitutional body, and therefore lacked clear constitution-based legitimacy to make decisions with national validity and coherence.

In fact, the agreements of this body aimed at establishing consistent and uniform regulations nationwide. However, this was preceded by a parliamentary decision at the national level to grant special rights to the executive branch. In a two-step process, the

---

**Figure 2.** Total Deaths per Week in Germany (Source: Robert Koch Institute 2021c)
national executive, and in particular the Ministry of Health, was empowered when the Bundestag first determined an epidemic situation of national significance on 25 March 2020. This determination was the necessary precondition for the second step, namely the passing of the Law for the Protection of the Population in the Event of an Epidemic Situation of National Significance on 27 March 2020. This law authorized the Federal Ministry of Health to issue orders with nationwide validity relating to the containment of the pandemic without the official consent of the states in the Federal Council (Bundesrat), which would otherwise have been a mandatory step. A significant point here was the reorganization of the coordination of measures between the federal government and the states—since 28 March 2020, the federal Minister of Health has had considerably greater authority to make recommendations to the states to enable a coordinated approach to pandemic control. The federal states, for their part, became the actual sites of the “moment of the executive,” as their leaders—prime ministers and ministers—were now able to issue ordinances that have since restricted public life to a hitherto unknown extent.

Prior to September 2021, Germany saw two lockdown periods, the first implemented in spring 2020 and the second implemented in November 2020; the second lockdown order was only repealed in May 2021. While the first lockdown was enforced almost overnight in mid-March 2020, the second lockdown was at first called “lockdown-light,” beginning with rather cautious yet ineffective measures in November, measures that lasted until mid-December 2020. In both phases, and in particular from mid-December 2020, contact restrictions allowed meetings with only one single person who did not belong to the same household; there were also travel restrictions within the country and restrictions on individual mobility to a maximum area of fifteen kilometers around one’s city or town of residence. Furthermore, schools were closed in March and April 2020, but for much longer in the second phase—from mid-

![Vaccinations in Germany, Jan - Aug 2021](image)

**Figure 3.** Vaccinations in Germany, January–August 2021 (Source: Robert Koch Institute 2021d)
December 2020 until the end of February or even April 2021, depending on single state regulations. Bans on tourist accommodation remained in force until mid-May 2021 in some places, and to the end of May 2021 in others.

The whole process of implementing new or tightening up existing measures, discussed and determined in the “chancellor plus state prime ministers” body, was accompanied by intense public attention. The processes of making agreements that would be implemented in each state, of negotiating particular aspects and perspectives of the Länder, were interpreted as a new way for the states to assert themselves over and against the national executive. At the same time, the broad omission of Parliament, in particular at the national level, from the outset of the making of pandemic-related policy, was increasingly criticized. The weak role of Parliament was accompanied by the ambivalent development of civil society, which is described below.

Theoretical Foundations

Democracy, Social Quality, and Quality of Democracy

The COVID-19 crisis and its management have stress-tested the relationship between democracy, societies, political trust, and civil society worldwide. Most notably, relationships between individuals and between citizens, institutions, and the state have come under particular strain. From a relational perspective, democratic formations and institutions and civil society formations (and institutions) are both based on interactions, mutual understanding, and connectivity. As Charles Tilly noted, democracy consists of political relations between the state and its citizens that feature broad, equal, protected, and binding mutual consultations (Tilly 2007: 13). From this perspective, civil society and civic activism are basic societal configurations that contribute to maintaining and broadening these relations, and consequently to intensifying democracy and political inclusivity. They form a site where “solidarity bonds are enacted and performed” (Eder 2009: 24), which can be understood as the basic relational infrastructure of a democratic society. From that viewpoint, however, it is obvious that political measures to contain the pandemic may have an influence on the structure and quality of these broad, equal, protected, and binding mutual consultations.

This understanding of democracy as networked participation can be linked to another approach of analyzing societal structures and developments: social quality theory (SQT) and the social quality approach (SQA) (Beck et al. 2001). Since the 2000s, this theory and approach has been developed in Europe, including Russia, in Southeast Asia, and Australia as explained on the website of the International Association on Social Quality. Social quality as an analytical approach, and equally as a political objective, is defined as “the extent to which people are able to participate in social relationships under conditions which enhance their well-being, capacity and
individual potential” (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012: 68). Combining these two relational approaches to society and politics, democracy—understood as consultative relationships among citizens and between citizens and the state—should be expected to foster well-being, capacities, and individual potential as well. The core of both democracy and the SQA is participation, which is, in terms of this theory, based on three sets of factors (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012): first, the constitutional factors that include subjective aspects of individuals such as personal (human) security, social recognition, social responsiveness, and personal capacities; second, conditional factors as opportunities and contingencies concerning the objective aspects of daily circumstances such as socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment; and third, normative factors as a basis to judge the interplay of the first and second sets—such as social justice, solidarity, equal value, and human dignity.

With a focus on the question of how measures to contain the pandemic infringed on participation within these sets of factors, one can hypothesize that, in terms of profiles and human constitutional factors, personal health security, social responsiveness, recognition, and capacities such as education, experience, and professional development are most likely to be affected by health management and containment policies. Focusing on conditional factors that define opportunities and contingencies, one can expect that the social cohesion, inclusion, empowerment, and socioeconomic security aspects might be negatively affected by the crisis. In particular, lacking opportunities for interpersonal debate and exchange, socioeconomic and health-related insecurity, and inequalities becoming more obvious and pressing than prior to the pandemic may instead all foster distrust rather than build confidence. With respect to the consent to or rejection of political initiatives and regulations on COVID-19, polarization has increased markedly, as right-wing extremist groups, conspiracy theorists, esoteric figures, and other government-skeptical groups have joined forces to fundamentally question COVID-related policies, even though they are based on medical science, such as the dangerousness of the disease for individuals and society. Therefore, normative judgment criteria for societal prosperity such as social justice, solidarity, and human dignity might equally have come under pressure during the pandemic.

As a consequence, the possible “democratic decline” within the pandemic could be analyzed and understood as a process of disentanglement of formerly inclusive citizen–state relationships. Tilly’s conception of democracy as broad, equal, protected, and binding mutual consultations refers mainly to the set of conditional factors in the social quality concept that emphasizes inclusion and empowerment—and since conditional factors may have turned into constraints, this could therefore have hindered participation and democratic quality. Therefore, a first question is whether political inclusiveness based on opportunities and contingencies for participation would be negatively influenced by the containment of the pandemic. However, the proper aspect of participation needs to be investigated in more detail. Therefore, civic activism, civil society, and the “civic contribution” to sustainable democracy require closer examination.
Civic Activism and Civil Society

In the most common conception following Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, civil society is understood as a sphere between the economy and the state (Cohen and Arato 1992: ix). It comprises the spheres of associations, social movements, forms of public communication, and even the intimate sphere, including the family. When contrasted with the etiological argumentation of the social quality concept, this broad idea of a civil society sphere comes close to what social quality scholars critically refer to as “the social.” It is conceived as the outcome of the productive and reproductive relationships based on the dialectic between processes of human self-realization and processes of the formation of collective identities (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012: 48), and concerns four essential dimensions of societal life: the sociopolitical and legal, the socioeconomic and financial, the sociocultural and welfare, and the socioenvironmental and ecological dimensions (IASQ 2019). Social quality scholars have made the criticism that in theoretical discourses usually the adjective “social” lacks any theoretical depth. The same holds true in sustainability discourses, when one refers to the “social dimension” as one of its pillars: “The ‘social dimension’ has more or less fulfilled the role of a reservoir for all things not strictly economical or environmental. [It is] an unstructured, internally incoherent and inconsistent black box” (IASQ 2012: 28). “Civil society” is equally used with regularity as a reservoir for all things not strictly economic or political. If we open the “civil society black box,” we find that Jeffrey Alexander argues that civil society provides the particular “solidarity bonds that extend beyond political arrangements” (Alexander 2006: 37) and that produce a “feeling of connectedness to “every member” of [a] community, that transcends particular commitments, narrow loyalties, and sectional interests” (2006: 43). Alexander’s solidarity sphere sheds light on the functional logic of civil society within a democratic system that not only operates as a form of government, but a certain style of community life and shared communicative experience, as the American philosopher John Dewey proposed. Continuing this line of thought, modern democratic conceptions underline the high relevance of participation and broad commitment to democratic governance, which are reflected in high levels of information, communication, advocacy, and interest representation, as well as in deliberative discourses and models (Dahl 1997; Dryzek 2010; Fishkin 2009). Consequently, an active society (Etzioni 1968) is a prerequisite of democracy—understood as politically inclusive state–citizen consultations and as an aspect of all four conditional factors that foster social quality.

During the pandemic, shrinking opportunities for meeting and for engaging in direct discussion and joint action due to physical distancing, and the sudden shift of political issues, urgent tasks, and cooperation opportunities left civil society in an uncertain state. The question to address here is therefore whether civic activism declined, changed, or even flourished in the long-term during the pandemic. Bringing both questions together, the preliminary research question develops as follows: how did the pandemic influence opportunities and contingencies for participation and civic
activism? As both opportunities / contingencies and participation / civic activism are dynamic and multidimensional concepts, it is useful to integrate a third concept that focuses these dynamics and possible contradictions. I argue that the idea of resilience provides a promising conceptual angle that is capable of analyzing transformation processes and changing aspects of activism in a crisis while sticking to a certain core of constancy.

Resilience of Activism, Resilience of Democracy

In sociology and related scientific fields, resilience refers to the ability of societal units to cope with external stress or change and thereby to respond to crises while maintaining core or relevant functions (Lorenz 2013: 10). The persistence of the system itself or at least of a system’s core characteristics, even if some aspects or internal structures might be modified as parts of crisis reaction, marks the conceptual difference between resilience and transformation. The latter emphasizes large-scale changes in every aspect of a system. With its origins in physics, engineering science, and, in particular, material science, the resilience concept has gained broader attention first in ecology and second (albeit only recently) in the social sciences. In the concept’s advancement from material to social science, the idea that resilience not only implies a return to the original form after a heavy disruption, but also includes (or even requires) partial change has become more relevant. Metaphorically speaking, in the social sciences the concept of resilience therefore means more than the dynamic of a ball that changes its shape for a short time due to an effect of pressure when it is hit by a player but then finds its way back to its basic form. The hitherto most prominent concept of ecological resilience, the adaptive cycle, established by Lance Gunderson and C. S. Holling (2002), emphasized the ongoing adaptive processes and iterative system–environment adaption based on reciprocal influence processes. Therefore, as Daniel Lorenz notes, resilience is a genuinely relational concept because it marks a “balanced relation between a system and its environment, as well as their seminal adjustment with regard to the system's persistence in the future” (2013: 10).

Resilience is inherently linked to any kind of disturbance, shock, or threat. Societal entities are usually vulnerable to disruptions of basic settings, functions, and structures at varying degrees. Vulnerability is not the same as danger or engagement, but it does address the “exposure, susceptibility and also reaction capacities of a system or object with regard to dealing with dangers” (Christmann and Ibert 2012: 261). Consequently, and parallel to resilience, vulnerability is a relational concept that depends on individual and collective interpretative processes of a particular danger, disturbance, or crisis. Based on Niklas Luhmann's system theory, we even find that any “dangerous” situation in a crisis, danger, or threat can be socially “priced in” and turned into risk, which is a contingent result of deliberate decision—including nondecision (Luhmann 2003). For the concept of resilience, patterns and elements can therefore be changed and adjusted deliberately in consideration of a (potential) risk following a certain
decision, or these patterns and elements can be changed and adjusted in an iterative process with the disturbing event. Both aspects—a rather preventive and a clearly reactive version of resilience—are similar in that that they are processes of change triggered either by anticipated or acute disturbances, and in that both can occur in three modes with different scopes of changes (Lorenz 2013: 13–14).

The first mode of resilience is adaption. It marks the “ability of a system to establish new structure relationships […] that subserve the persistence of the system in the case of major environmental change or incompatible system structures” (Lorenz 2013: 13–14). From this perspective, resilience is a short-term reaction to changes threatening the system’s persistence, but the reaction might be short-term without implying long-term changes. For political inclusion based on participation, this would mean that a (temporal) disorder of opportunities and contingencies for civic activism—socioeconomic security, cohesion, inclusion, and empowerment—would lead to a suppression of civil society’s core features—meeting, discussing, negotiating, protesting, and building a public sphere. This suppression could be tempered by a short change of core strategies or accepting a pause, but after the disturbing event civic activism would continue more or less in the form that it had had before the respective event: in our case, the event is the pandemic.

The second mode of resilience is that of coping, which can be understood as a “short-term adaptive response [and] is understood to be a way of dealing with the failure of expectations in terms of meaning” (Lorenz 2013: 15). In contrast to adaption, coping is a mere interpretation-based, discursive strategy of resilience, as the disaster is included in the horizon of expectation of future developments. Coping also means interpreting the disturbance in terms of a necessary or at least relevant aspect of its own development, and therefore constructing a narrative of continuation that includes the disturbance (for example, as a point of inflection for a certain strategy or characteristic). With respect to civil society, civic organizations and initiatives would therefore promote the narrative of having deliberately changed, intensified, scaled back, or refocused their activities due to the pandemic.

The third mode concerns resilience as long-term changes and transformation capacities, which Lorenz describes as “participative capacity” (2013: 17), a unique property of human systems. Resilience as participative capacity underlines the ability of societal units to implement iterative changes in reaction to the reorganization of environments and the anticipation of possible changes, and thereby to self-organize their structures and relations. This form of resilience is certainly the most sustainable yet equally the most demanding mode, as permanent change and relational reflection of other changes are crucial. For civil society, this perspective appears promising, particularly with respect to new upcoming issues as well as to recent and future challenges in both organizational and issue-related terms.

Of course, each element of a societal unit does not have to change, adjust, and progress, whether in the adaptive and coping or the participative mode of resilience. The degree of adjustments in relation to the crisis event can be operationalized as “the
ability of a system $S$ to absorb some disturbance $D$ whilst maintaining property $I$” (Thorén and Olsson 2017). Following this operational definition of resilience, a precise analysis of the changing elements of the system must be accompanied by a clear carving out of the property $I$ that will not be changed, and that therefore marks the core structure of the system, its identity.

Resulting from this conceptual discussion of democracy, social quality, civil society, crisis, and resilience, a final refinement of the research question can be made. In an analysis of how the pandemic and the measures to contain it have influenced democracy (understood as political inclusivity), I will ask how these measures impinged on the conditional factors (socioeconomic security, cohesion, inclusion, and empowerment) for participation and civic activism. The influence will be operationalized with the help of the resilience concept; I will therefore investigate whether elements of civic activism (relational aspects of meeting, organizing etc.; motivational aspects for engagement; issues of engagement) show patterns of vulnerability and resilience vis-à-vis the pandemic-related restrictions and, if so, whether these resilience patterns follow the logic of adaption, coping, or participative resilience. Based on the concept outlined by Henrik Thorén and Lennart Olsson, the analysis will focus on persistence or changes in the elements of civil society as a result of pandemic-based disturbances.

Methodological Approach

The research question will be approached in a two-step analysis. Following the resilience concept, I will extract the most potentially vulnerable elements of civic activism in the pandemic and highlight which of these elements of civil society (understood as $S$) would be affected by the containment measures (disturbance = $D$). For this status analysis of the “system” that is civil society in Germany, I will explicate the previous structure of civil society in terms of its elements: (1) the most relevant issues; (2) the motivation for civic activism; and (3) organizational structures and aspects. The data of this status quo analysis is based on the German Survey on Volunteering that is conducted and published on a five-year basis by the German Centre for Gerontology on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth.

In a second step, I will determine the particular vulnerability of these three elements and derive hypotheses on the level of resilience of the system (“civil society”) and its elements vis-à-vis the measures of pandemic containment. Since data on pandemic-related changes of civic activism is not yet available, an analysis of the status quo on a long-term basis will provide a proper foundation for a more detailed hypothesis on pandemic-related changes in civil society, and consequently on participation and political inclusiveness.

In a third step, I will illustrate the aforementioned hypotheses with observations of civic activism in a district of Berlin, and highlight possible tendencies in civil so-
Society transformation processes. Based on the hypotheses, empirical observations, and tendencies, as well as on the theoretical concept combining civil society theory, resilience, and democracy, I will present my findings with a perspective on the resilience of democracy in times of crisis while formulating a number of ideas for further research on social quality and democracy.

**Civil Society in the Pandemic: Weakened, Strengthened, Resilient?**

*Civil Activism and Volunteering in Germany before the Pandemic: Facts and Findings*

Society in Germany can be called an “active society” (Etzioni 1968). According to the *German Survey on Volunteering*, an increasing number of citizens in Germany are engaged in public interest activities on a voluntary, unpaid, collaborative, and public basis. The latest report of this survey, published in March 2021 yet conducted in 2019 (before the pandemic) stated that 39.7 percent of people in Germany aged 14 or older are active in at least one volunteer activity; this figure increased from 1999 to 2014 to about 30 percent and even more to almost 40 percent by 2019 (Simonson et al. 2020: 11).

**Topics and Areas of Engagement**

By far the most important realm where people in Germany were engaged before the pandemic was the area of sports. Some 13.5 percent of the population in Germany aged 14 or older actively volunteered in sports clubs and associations in 2019, where they volunteered as instructors in exercise and training sessions, while the coordination and organization of events and tasks within club life were also typical volunteering activities. Intriguingly, it should be mentioned that, on average, volunteers in sports clubs are rather young, with a large percentage of active volunteers in the age groups under 30 years of age and between 30 and 49 years of age (Simonson et al. 2021: 89ff.).

Arts, culture, and music form the second key realm of volunteering with an overall quota of 8.6 percent of the population volunteering in these areas. Tasks of volunteering in this realm include the organization and management of cultural associations such as chairing a choir or an amateur orchestra; management tasks in associations that support cultural bodies, galleries, and so on; and the teaching of certain cultural activities such as dance or music. The organization of cultural events, public performances, and exchange or concert trips are further relevant volunteering tasks in this realm.

A third important and broad realm in German society is volunteer engagement in the welfare sphere. Since 1999, an increasing share of the population in Germany has volunteered in charity or welfare organizations, relief organizations, and neighborhood
assistance or self-help groups, starting from only 3.4 percent in 1999 and increasing to 8.3 percent in 2019. Typical activities in this realm of volunteering include providing assistance to poor people in food banks or homeless shelters; voluntary teaching, specifically offering language courses for migrants; and coaching and consultation activities for children, the unemployed, migrants, and other vulnerable groups. However, organizational and management tasks such as working as an unpaid treasurer or a board member for organizations also forms part of the volunteer activities in this realm as they are part of the others already mentioned above.

A fourth realm of volunteering, which is nearly as represented as the welfare realm, is based in the school and education sector. About 8.2 percent of the population is engaged in parent representation groups, pupil representation groups, or sponsorship associations related to schools or kindergartens. Volunteering numbers in this realm increased from 5 percent in 1999 to 8.1 and 8.2 percent in 2014 and 2019, respectively. While the participation of parent representation groups is established in the German states’ respective school acts and is therefore mandatory in every public school, volunteering as an instructor of afternoon lessons; private tutoring; organizational tasks such as the preparation of school festivals and class trips; and being a member of a board of a sponsoring club are not.

About 6.8 percent of the German population is active as volunteers in the context of religious associations—in contrast to the trend of secularization, volunteer numbers in this realm increased from 4.5 percent in 1999 to 6.8 percent in 2019. Typical activities range from organizational tasks on church councils and administrative activities to charity activities in a religious context to tasks with a direct reference to religion such as serving as a lector or cantor.

Volunteer activism is equally strong in Germany in different realms of associative life. Volunteering in allotment garden associations, village clubs, hobby clubs, carnival clubs, and beekeeper associations continues to be popular in Germany and can be seen as a societal foundation, as these clubs and associations especially strike at the heart of what Alexis de Tocqueville called “schools of democracy” when he visited nineteenth-century America with its flourishing clubs and associations in every village: these associations provide the ground for building social cohesion and trust, and for learning how to cooperate and negotiate in otherwise fragmented societal contexts.

On the contrary, direct political citizen engagement is rather low, with only 2.9 percent of the population being active in political parties, initiatives, solidarity projects, or city council initiatives, which are also included as volunteer work in Germany. Although numbers increased from 2.1 percent in 1999 to around 3 percent in both 2014 and 2019, political engagement and volunteer political lobbying remain at a rather low level.

Motivational Patterns for Engagement

What were the core motivations for people in Germany to volunteer? The authors of the German Survey on Volunteering distinguish between three categories of motiva-
tional factors, albeit emphasizing that volunteering is usually based on a complex mix of motivations (Simonson et al. 2021: 114). First, the altruistic aspect of contributing to a common good, of helping others, “doing community work,” and giving something back to society ranges high in volunteer motivation. Second, socializing aspects play a role, as people aim to enjoy taking part in something together with others, meeting people, and integrating themselves into a community. Third, a set of aspects based on self-interest can also be detected, as volunteering may raise one’s reputation and, to a small degree, provide small-scale financial rewards while possibly helping people to acquire further qualifications and “look good” on a resume.

In 2019, nearly 90 percent of the volunteers mentioned that they wanted to help others and do something for the common good; about 63 percent of the volunteers claimed that their aspiration was to contribute to society’s development (“doing community”) and to “give something back to society” (Simonson et al. 2021: 120ff.). However, simply enjoying volunteer work ranks highest with about 94 percent of volunteer responses. Particular aspects of socializing such as meeting others remain an important aspect for more than two-thirds of volunteers (72 percent). Rather “egoistic” aspects rank lower on the list but are not unimportant, as about 54 percent of the volunteers mentioned gaining additional skills, and about a quarter (26 percent) appreciated the prestige and influence connected with their volunteer work. However, receiving an additional income was only a relevant motivation for about 6 per cent of all volunteers.

Organizational Structures of Engagement

Concerning the structures of volunteering, being a member of an association or a club is the most typical basis for citizen engagement, with about 20 percent of Germany’s population combining volunteer work with association membership. On the basis of an overall share of about 39 percent of the population aged 14 or older being engaged in the civil sphere, this shows that half of civic engagement in Germany takes place within organized club structures. Being active in informal initiatives and self-organized groups, however, has become increasingly relevant, with continuously growing numbers from about 3 percent of the population volunteering in informal structures in 1999 to nearly 7 percent in 2019. This equally implies that informal initiatives represent the second largest realm of volunteering; they are more important than religious organizations, which account for 5 percent of the population, and other entities such as local institutions (Simonson et al. 2021: 164ff.).

Lastly, the German Survey on Volunteering also asked whether the internet is used in the context of citizen engagement (Simonson et al. 2021: 194ff.). Data collection on this question only began in 2004, but after a certain increase during the 2000s the amount of internet usage stagnated. Only recently has there been an upturn. Respondents were asked questions on a wide range of issues, linking the internet to civic activism and volunteer work; participation in social media and digital networks, editorial work on blogs, newsletter writing, and maintaining the web page of
an organization, association, or initiative connected to the volunteer work were also investigated, as were fundraising, networking, and offering courses via the internet. It is astonishing that even in 2004 nearly 40 percent of people who did volunteer work actively used the internet for their work. Yet it is equally astonishing that this number only increased to 56 and 57 percent in 2009 and 2019, respectively, as no increase in integrating internet use into one's own volunteer work took place within these ten years. The general increase between 2004 and 2009 can be attributed to the fact that in the course of time volunteers in the 65 years of age and older category showed a serious increase in internet usage, from only 12.8 percent in 2004 to 48 percent in 2009. Yet general internet use for volunteering was still surprisingly low in 2019, which represented a problematic starting point for citizen engagement during the pandemic.

Overall, the German Survey on Volunteering shows that civic engagement and volunteer work in Germany were largely characterized as being primarily centered on sports, arts and culture, social work, and engagement in the education system. Most volunteer activities were implemented within organized structures such as associations and clubs. The most important motivational reason for volunteering was simply the enjoyment of volunteer work, closely followed by altruistic motives. However, socializing and meeting people continues to play a major role in volunteering. The active use of the internet within the context of doing volunteer work remained rather low, at about 57 percent before the outbreak of the pandemic. These elements of pre-pandemic civic engagement in Germany reflect varying levels of vulnerability vis-à-vis the disturbance (D)—analytically understood here as the political measures of pandemic containment: all activities or elements (I) whose topics and motivations are connected to physical presence and/or closeness are more vulnerable because this very foundation is limited by the containment measures. With regard to organizational aspects, it could be argued that a higher level of formalization of civil activism and/or stable networks provides a basis for less vulnerable patterns of activism than informal structures and loosely connected networks. In relational terms, Mark Granovetter’s (1973) strength of weak ties might be somewhat undermined in this case, while strong and multiplex relations may be more resilient. Lastly, shifting political priorities during the pandemic might have targeted particular realms of civic activism as well; therefore, a certain content orientation might also signify vulnerability.

In the next step, I will formulate a number of hypotheses on the development of vulnerability and resilience of civil society with respect to pandemic containment measures.
Discussion

**Civil Society during and after the Pandemic: Observations and Hypotheses**

As the status quo analysis reveals, civil society as the system \( S \) consists of three core characteristics \( I \): (a) the topics that volunteer work is focused on; (b) the motivation for volunteering; and (c) the structural context in which it takes place and, as a particular feature, internet usage that supports volunteer work or functions as a direct task of volunteer work (i.e., being responsible for maintaining the homepage of a sponsorship club or engaging in writing articles, blogs, or wikis). The discussion on if and how these aspects might be affected by the pandemic is followed by a second perspective on the dimension of potential changes as adaptive, coping, or participative/transformative changes.

Regarding (a), the above-mentioned topics of citizen engagement in Germany, it is clear that the four main realms of citizen engagement—sports, art and culture, charity, and education—are built on direct contact and communication, and that they all require meeting people in person. Coaching a soccer team, directing a choir, reading aloud in schools, and distributing meals at a food bank are not possible under the requirement of physical distancing, and most of these activities, in particular sports and culture, were simply not allowed for several months, especially as training venues and cultural venues were closed. Some sports clubs, trainers, and music instructors tried to move their activities online. However, when it comes to certain activities, such as team sports and art exhibitions, digital equivalents reach their natural limits quite quickly. As these four realms marked the core area of engagement and volunteering in Germany, a large part of volunteer work was heavily interrupted by the pandemic. Despite individual attempts to transfer engagement into the digital space, physical distancing and the ban on leisure activities in groups of people resulted in the suspension of these activities and thereby in an interruption of a key branch of Germany’s volunteering landscape. Activities that were able to withstand the pandemic containment measures more successfully were those related to management and maintenance tasks, as well as editorial work and similar online responsibilities—in other words, activities that included communication and information but not necessarily physical proximity. With regard to the core issues of volunteering before the pandemic, this applies in particular to volunteering on boards of associations, to larger parts of activities within the realm of education such as committee work as foreseen in the school laws at the state level, and to other organization-related tasks.

The same problematic disturbance also applies to volunteer work in associations and religious organizations that mainly rely on physical meetings and joint experiences. All in all, the most prominent and most relevant fields of civic engagement in Germany experienced a dramatic halt in their activities with little possibility of transferring their core activities into a digital or at least individualized field: playing in and
leading a soccer team simply cannot function as an individual sport. Consequently, the adaptive capacities of volunteer work in these fields were low, while coping or transformation strategies did not play a role in the most important realms of civic activism.

The large realm of welfare issues developed somewhat differently. Typically, charity work, like sports and the arts, depends on social contexts, meeting people, and cooperating; however, this field was affected by the pandemic in a more ambivalent way. Of course, many charity activities require direct cooperation and physical proximity as well, and volunteer work that focused on these forms of cooperation had to be stopped. Organizations claimed that they would not be able to continue their charity activities for homeless people, refugees, and other vulnerable groups without volunteer work. At the same time, however, the need for welfare support in small-scale contexts became more evident; for example, self-organized neighborhood assistance increased rapidly, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic. It can be argued that a certain shift from well-organized, structured activism in welfare associations toward small-scale assistance and more individualized charity work could be observed. Major charity organizations also launched volunteer platforms to bring needs and capacities together. This indicates a certain adaptability in the welfare sector and among volunteers engaged in charity which appears to give this field greater resilience with regard to existential crises. Interestingly, this observation contradicts the hypothesis that weak ties are more vulnerable. Further observation is required as to whether the adaptive measures will translate into newer and more sustainable forms of civic activism in the welfare field.

In addition to the societal sphere, the area of political engagement also appears to be less affected by the pandemic. A certain “depoliticization” was noted at the outset of the pandemic as classical formats of political negotiation and contention such as demonstrations could not be implemented as usual. After a short enforced break, however, it became clear that the majority of the activities involving political negotiations with civil society in an active mode were to be translated into digital formats with no major complications. Meetings and discussion events in organizations, initiatives, committees, and so on were replaced by video conferences, while the use of digital tools for communication and information dissemination grew rapidly. Furthermore, based on social media use (to a considerable degree) local networking and the establishment of new citizen initiatives even intensified in many cities. For many people active in the political realm, it in fact became far easier to participate in several meetings, conferences, and debates at the same time due to the lack of travel and the reduction in transition times. Digital multitasking became a facilitator of multifaceted political engagement during the course of the pandemic.

The hypothesis concerned with this topic is founded on the assertion that political and societal engagement can be deemed more resilient than sport-related and cultural engagement. The first set of activities shows adaptive and eventually coping but also transformative-participative capacities in dealing with the changing determinants of volunteer engagement. For the latter, civil society engagement with a thematic focus
on activities that require physical presence is less flexible and adaptive by its very nature, and therefore less resilient to deep-rooted changes in its environment.

Regarding the motivational aspects of civic activism (b), the most prominent reason for volunteering before the pandemic was “enjoying the work” followed by altruistic motives and, lastly, social motives. Evidently, the aspect of socializing and the desire of more than two-thirds of the volunteers to engage in activities with others and meet other people could not be fulfilled, particularly during the lockdown periods. Yet, for many volunteers who continued their charity work in neighborhood initiatives, for example, the altruistic idea clearly remained stable, although the focus of work may have shifted. The same can be expected for political activism and management tasks. The motivation-related hypothesis is that motivational structures can either be replaced or at least adjusted so that the reasons for inner drive and expected rewards meet the changed activities as well. Equally, a second hypothesis is that, in the end, motivational structures are simply less relevant for volunteering, and consequently less relevant for the question of civic activism resilience.

The structural context (c) of engagement is another relevant aspect of civil society’s resilience, although it is difficult to assess its particular significance for changing patterns of volunteering. Solid structures of civic activism give rise to the advantage of providing a certain infrastructure for communication, as well as for organizing events and agreements, among other things. Equally, a formal structure might help to bridge difficult phases for any civic organization. At the same time, the number and relevance of small initiatives and informal groups has grown, particularly in urban districts. The structure-related hypothesis is that while formal organizational structures might enable further coping capacities, informal networks appear to be more flexible and support the transformative capacities of civil society. Although informal initiatives carry a greater risk of collapsing or at least declining, they are capable of adjusting their working structures swiftly to new demands and circumstances. Therefore, although big organizations may be capable of withstanding a crisis without major changes, their resilience can be assumed to be smaller than that of informal initiatives, which may adapt to new demands, eventually integrate the crisis narrative into their own story, and equally participate in changing or transforming processes themselves.

Lastly, I would like to look at the promises of digitalization. The low level of integration of digital tools, of course consisting in large part of the lack of internet usage in voluntary work, has affected civil society in Germany badly. Although the technical equipment of organizations and individuals can be deemed by and large to be of a decent standard in Germany, volunteering has not yet included digital tools as a whole and on a broad spectrum. However, the learning curve has probably proven to be steeper than elsewhere, while exclusionary mechanisms of digitalization in civil volunteering could have a lasting negative impact. The digitalization-related hypothesis is that most organizations and initiatives quickly built up adaptive resilience, but long-term transformative resilience remains in question. Consequently, in future volunteer contexts a certain digital literacy will be expected that could hinder
the participation of people who do not have adequate access to digital tools, know-how, and hardware.

Going Back to the Community Level: Civic Resilience through Local Participation?

The hypotheses on civil society resilience in the pandemic underline that societal and political activities appear to be more resilient than other kinds of activities; that formal organizational structures might help to withstand a crisis but informal networks show greater adaptability; that motivational aspects might play a minor role and/or could be more flexible and allow for resilience; and that the digital resilience of civil society may stop at a certain level or become more exclusive. Generated from theoretical reflections and broader observations, these hypotheses can be further illustrated by examples of increased citizen participation in local political structures.

First, examples of new or resilient civic activism in the pandemic and increased participation in political processes could be observed in several fields of local political engagement in urban areas. Civil society actors at the local level are often connected to each other through multiple relations and usually meet outside the specific consultation context. This facilitates the maintenance of close ties even in times of crisis by communicating access to the political space more directly and informally. For example, during the pandemic people tried to avoid traveling on public transport and used their bikes instead, which in turn drew more attention to cycling infrastructure and the initiatives trying to improve urban cycling conditions. Together with existing initiatives, citizens enjoyed easier access to local political processes. These developments have been observed in several major German cities. In Berlin and its districts, informal initiatives, associations, and bicycle activist groups such as Changing Cities, Netzwerk Lebenswerte Stadt, and other local networks have been campaigning for bicycle-friendly transport infrastructure for several years. In 2017, the demands of an incipient referendum for improved cycling infrastructure were included in the coalition agreement by Berlin’s new state government (consisting of Social Democrats, Socialists, and Greens), but the implementation of the planned measures proved to be extremely challenging. In the course of the pandemic, however, broadened networks of activists, administrative actors, district politicians, thematically varied bodies, and more citizens than ever before have emerged based on the urgent need for better infrastructure planning. These informal networks have grown on the basis of existing relations and previous cooperation—also in adjacent policy areas—that have significantly increased the pressure on politics and the administration. The complete digitalization of council meetings and committees in Berlin’s districts opened up these meetings to a broader public, not only bringing together local politicians and interest groups, but also citizens and neighborhood groups. For example, in spring 2020, more than sixty guests took part in a video conference meeting of the transport committee of the district parliament in Neukölln—something that would have been impossible in
a normal meeting in person due to low seating capacity. In addition to the relevant initiatives, residents, representatives of local elementary schools, tradespeople, and many more joined in. Invitations to participate were sent through numerous informal channels, including social media, circles of friends, and neighborhood word of mouth. Direct contact with both district councilors and the local mayor was used for lively, intensive, and progressive discussions, which were subsequently continued in very different formats and bodies, such as in neighborhoods, schools, and associations, which established a sustainable and deepening network. Similar meetings with high public attendance figures followed, and a few months later entire plenary sessions were held online. The number of visitors increased, and a strengthened network of cycling and environmental activists, neighborhood groups, and individuals interested in ecological traffic issues was one result of the process—and probably an example of resilient civil society.

Conclusion

The article began with a rather pessimistic quote on the decline of democracy, increasing polarization, and the possible weakness of civil society resulting from the pandemic. In Germany, as in many other countries worldwide, weeks and months of stagnation and lockdown have hindered exchange, cooperation, and activism—features of both civil society and a vibrant democracy alike. However, as democracy is a multidimensional relational pattern based on mutual binding consultations between citizens and the state, as well as political inclusiveness, the question of democracy’s decline or resilience during the pandemic has had to be scaled down to those elements of civil society and civic activism that would be particularly vulnerable to the measures of pandemic containment—physical distancing, the closure of public facilities, the instability of personal health and welfare, and so on.

In this research, I have demonstrated that core characteristics of volunteer work and civil society or civic activism depend on modes of interaction that require formats that have neither been possible nor permitted during the pandemic. Therefore, the assumption that the pandemic has caused a serious dent in civic engagement appears to be accurate, at least superficially. Many realms of volunteering have been put on hold, and it is not yet clear whether this suspension will be overcome and whether organizations will find their way back to their old formats. However, a closer look at the issues, organizational structures, motivations, and the opportunities provided by digitalization for civic activism reveals a more differentiated pattern; civil society can be expected to be more resilient from a transformative perspective if the issues of volunteering are political and societal, if the organizational structure is more flexible—namely more informal—and if socializing aspects play a minor role as motivational factors for volunteering. Access to digital tools and the transferability of activities into the digital space will make a positive contribution to the resilience of civil society.
However, while in many respects adaptive resilience appears to be a first step that can be implemented without issue, transformative resilience already requires a broader confluence of favorable factors.

In the theoretical section, I argued that the “democratic decline” during the pandemic implies the disentanglement of inclusive citizen–state relationships. Participation and democratic quality would be hindered if conditional factors, taken from social quality theory, turned into constraints as a consequence of the pandemic. And for social quality as a result of patterns of productive and reproductive relations, it can be hypothesized that in particular the sociopolitical and the sociocultural dimensions might thus be affected negatively. Therefore, the impact of the pandemic on social quality and the role of civic activism from this perspective remain unclear and requires further research. In the theoretical as well as in the empirical section, I was able to show that both social quality and democracy rely on similar conditional patterns, but the broad picture of social quality development under pandemic conditions cannot be investigated adequately within this study’s scope. Therefore, these findings constitute a starting point for further empirical and conceptual work on the nexus between social quality, democracy, civil society, and resilience.

However, if we focus on the “sublevel” of particular elements of these broad theories, the resilience concept allows us to connect theoretical aspects of social quality, democracy, civil society, and the empirical results. Civil society’s main mode of resilience—adaptive resilience—helps to overcome sudden crises. But does this form of resilience contribute to the deepening of democracy? From democracy theory, we know that political inclusivity is a long-term concept that requires stable, multidimensional relational patterns. These patterns can be strengthened by the same set of conditions that foster social quality: socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusiveness, and social empowerment. Adaptive resilience might in fact fail to lead to stable and multiplex relational patterns, which are needed to support these conditions in the long term. Therefore, the link between democracy, social quality, and resilience lies in the mode of transformation that broadens the conditional factors for participation. In other words, multidimensional civic activism patterns deepen political inclusivity, and therefore democracy, while they are more likely to imply transformative resilience that allows for and further benefits from positive conditions for social quality.

Consequently, a resilient civil society may also contribute to democracy’s resilience by forcing politics to become more inclusive and participatory, which could improve the conditions under which future large-scale societal issues can be tackled.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Tom Alterman for his careful and thorough language editing, and to the Viadrina Institute for European Studies (IFES) for its support of this article.
Susann Worschech is a Post-Doc researcher at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany and works on political sociology in Europe, with a particular emphasis on post-socialist societies. She is author of numerous publications on civil society, democratization and Europeanization. Her dissertation on external democracy promotion in Ukraine was awarded with the Klaus Mehnert Prize 2016 by the German Association for East European Studies. In 2019, she was awarded with both the Brandenburg State Award for Excellent Academic Teaching and the Brandenburg Postdoc Award for outstanding research in the area of the humanities and social sciences. Email: worschech@europa-uni.de

Notes

1. See https://www.corona-in-zahlen.de/weltweit/deutschland/ (accessed 30 September 2021), which is updated on a daily basis.
4. The IASQ’s website is www.socialquality.org.
6. All data in the following paragraphs, if not marked otherwise, is based on Simonson et al. (2021).
7. I collected the above-mentioned examples in civic activism and participatory formats in Berlin; however, these observations are not based on systematic case selection and operationalization. Therefore, the examples are only to illustrate the hypothesis and may inspire further research.
8. I participated in several of these meetings, councils, and residents’ events in Berlin between April and October 2020. Further information on single meetings and general debates can be obtained from me.

References


Robert Koch Institute. 2021b. “7-Tage-Inzidenzen nach Bundesländern und Kreisen (fixierte Werte) sowie Gesamtübersicht der pro Tag ans RKI übermittelten Fälle und Todesfälle” [Daily incidences by federal state and district (fixed values) as well as overall overview of cases and deaths transmitted to the RKI per day]. *Robert Koch Institut*, 17 November. https://www.rki.de/DE/Content/InfAZ/N/Neuartiges_Coronavirus/Daten/Fallzahlen_Kum_Tab.html.


