

When Politics Appears Bleak:
Revisiting Civic Hope During Democratic Backsliding

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Abstract

Civic hope among ordinary citizens has yet to attract much attention in political science despite its relevance to democratic resilience. Civic hope requires work; the belief/action component must overcome psychological detachment, polarization, distrust, and bystander. Framing the discussion this way anticipates boundaries of the concept during democratic backsliding. The present paper explores whether civic hope as evident in letters to the editor is productive in reimagining politics and peoplehood in crisis times. We investigate how civic hope manifests in letters in a western Colorado community from 2012-2024, a period when many questioned whether politics offers reason for hope. A qualitative analysis focuses on two components of public argument: “national touchstones” and “oppositional literacy.” Our interpretation is that these features potentially undermine civic hope through exclusion of minoritized groups and belittling of opponents. We conclude with a discussion of the practices of argument that might contribute to the slowing of backsliding, if not democratic renewal.

Keywords: bystander, civic hope, democratic backsliding, extremism, letters to the editor

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Democratic backsliding theory originally emphasized elite-led, institutional decay (Haggard and Kaufman 2021), although the acquiescence of ordinary citizens has drawn more attention recently (Jacob 2024). The “demand side of democratic backsliding” (Wunsch et al. 2025) takes forms such as endorsement of authoritarian tactics and indifference to violations of civil liberties. Our concern is the acquiescence that manifests in the dismissal of politics as unpleasant, worthless, or unbecoming. While people who write newspaper letters to the editor are sometimes characterized as reactive and ill-tempered (when not sentimental), they are not bystanders (Perrin and Vaisey, 2008). Echoing the 2025 APSA conference theme, we explore whether civic hope as evident in letters to the editor (LTE) is productive in reimagining politics and peoplehood in crisis times.

This present paper investigates how civic hope manifests in LTE in a western Colorado community from 2012-2024, a period when many questioned whether politics offers reason for hope. We adapt a subset of the content categories Roderick Hart used in *Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive* (2018). He analyzed 10,000 LTC from 1948 to 2012 in 12 medium-sized cities and concluded that ordinary Americans sustained a culture of argument across the Cold War, the expansion of civil rights, and the partisan politics of recent decades. Hart insisted that resoluteness of letter writers is a constant, yet he documented decline in frequency of civic hope components such as civic forecasting, actors viewed as agents of hope, and favorable perceptions of the citizenry. Compared with letters dating back to 1948, those published in the “Partisan Politics Era” of 1996-2012 became “coarser and meaner” (196).

Letter writers deserve scrutiny during backsliding, although not because they are representative. They are more frequently male, older, white, and civically engaged than others in their communities (Perrin 2016). Letters and newspapers have been replaced for many by social

media as venues for public argument. Letter writers nevertheless stand out in the willingness to subject their opinions to a forum where principles of journalistic gatekeeping apply. In communities where newspapers still circulate, letter writers and their readers live in proximity with each other. Most importantly, letter writers show up for debate.¹

The current study begins where Hart ends, with the 2012 election. We chose *The Daily Sentinel* (Grand Junction, Colorado) as a forum for letters because Grand Junction has been the site of several challenges to democracy, described below. We present a preliminary analysis of *Sentinel* letters from 2012 to 2024 to evaluate whether civic hope is as resilient as Hart contends. A qualitative analysis focuses on two dimensions of civic hope: writers' references to "national touchstones" as historically sanctioned traditions, and their "oppositional literacy"—the willingness and ability to articulate opponents' views. In what follows, we sketch a profile of Grand Junction to identify developments that likely motivated people to write letters during the study period. We then review the literature on letters to the editor to inform our expectations for the quality and inclusiveness of argument. A subsequent section discusses the theoretical development of hope. The concept of civic hope has yet to attract much attention in political science despite its relevance to democratic resilience (Holloway and Manwaring 2023) and connection to political hope (Lamb 2018). Hart emphasized that civic hope requires work. We discuss how the belief/action component must overcome psychological detachment, polarization, distrust, and bystanding. Framing the discussion this way anticipates boundaries of the concept in normative and empirical terms.

Will civic hope rise to the occasion of backsliding? If civic hope is more elusive today, we expect a more likely appearance in letters that address local issues in which possibilities for cooperation and compromise are salient. Unfortunately, the present paper cannot test the

hypothesis in a quantitative content analysis. We were unable to replicate Hart with respect to inter-coder reliability for our subset of content categories. The disappointing alpha coefficients are partially explained by our smaller sample of letters ($N = 400$). Regardless, the pattern helped us to identify limitations of content categories. These concerns extend beyond measurement to core assumptions in Hart's theory of civic hope. He conceptualized the concept to illustrate the premise that a grassroots culture of argument is necessary for democracy to flourish. Of course, argument at the grassroots and elsewhere is not lacking during backsliding. We conduct a qualitative analysis of how two of Harts' categories appear in our letters: national touchstones and oppositional literacy. Diverging from Hart, our interpretation is that these features of argument potentially undermine civic hope. The paper concludes with a discussion of the practices of argument among ordinary citizens that might contribute to the slowing of backsliding, if not democratic renewal.

Extremism on the Western Slope

The *Sentinel* has described Grand Junction (population 69,414) as “deeply conservative,” but warns against extremism. The city is in Mesa County, part of Colorado's stretch of the Continental Divide, a region known as the Western Slope. Tourism, skiing, hiking, camping, hunting, and fishing contribute to an economy that has historically relied on mining and oil and gas extraction. The *Sentinel* is the highest-circulation paper on the Western Slope (approximately 30,000 subscribers). The newspaper produced daily print and e-editions through October 16, 2024; near the end of our analysis, the paper moved to daily e-editions and bi-weekly print editions. Party registration in Mesa County includes 42,000 Republicans and 15,000 Democrats, but also 57,000 unaffiliated voters.

Grand Junction has been at the center of several controversies around extremism and the security of elections. In 2019, Lauren Boebert announced that she would run against incumbent Scott Tipton in the Republican primary for the third congressional district. Boebert became well-known in Colorado as co-owner of the restaurant “Shooters,” which featured waitstaff wearing firearms. She opened the restaurant for in-person service in defiance of state health regulations during the Covid crisis in 2020. She won the 2020 election, but by a narrower margin than Tipton had won the district in each election since 2010. Narrowly re-elected in 2022, she has since moved and now represents Colorado’s fourth congressional district on the other side of the Rocky Mountains. Another relative political newcomer, Mesa County Clerk Tina Peters, allowed unauthorized access to the county’s voting machines and electronic voting files to individuals associated with conspiracy theories surrounding the outcome of the 2020 election. Peters was convicted in 2024 and sentenced to nine years in prison. Just after her conviction, she appeared on Steve Bannon’s show *The War Room*, alleging that Dominion voting systems engineers in Serbia had the ability to change votes in the U.S. 2020 election.

These events in Mesa County, among others, inspired the initiative “Restore the Balance.” The group’s webpage identifies members as “Democrats, Republicans, and Independents working together for the purpose of building an alternative to political extremism.” They implore citizens to “stand up, speak out, reject political extremism” (Restore the Balance, 2025). The group announced its presence in January 2022 through an op-ed column and a full-page advertisement signed by many in the community. Restore the Balance remains active in the area and members continue to contribute opinion pieces to *The Daily Sentinel*. The group recognized in LTE a long-standing venue where citizens remind each other of their differences

but in ways that periodically enlist collective resources that sustain democratic commitments (Hart 2018).

Letters to the Editor

Folk ideals of letters to the editor—a debating society that never ends²—are celebrated in Hart’s contention that average Americans keep democracy alive. Yet contemporary literature on LTE documents non-representativeness of those who regularly contribute and poor quality of argument (e.g., Cooper and Pease 2009; Maydell et al. 2022; Perrin 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). (Even Hart devotes an entire chapter to “Why Letters are Irritating”). Editorial page editors as well as scholars have described the letters section as less of a deliberative forum than a place where people talk past each other. Wahl-Jorgensen’s ethnography of a San Francisco newsroom documented an “idiom of insanity” in how editors characterize “an uncivil discourse that does not want or expect an answer” (2002, 196).

Hart advises that we not care too much about the quality of opinion. What matters is that at least some citizens are willing to struggle publicly with politics. The premise begs the question, though, about whether the tone and styles of argument could erode expectations for deliberative exchanges. Hart, a rhetorician, understandably valorizes argument, but we read the same studies on LTE that he cites. The struggle and gumption he perceives is interpreted by other scholars as an emotionally charged negativity (Hayek et al. 2020; Perrin 2016). Because letter sections are subject to gatekeeping in the mainstream press, an erosion of norms would represent a significant contribution to the demand side of backsliding. Wahl-Jorgensen concluded that for too many letter writers,

truth is not something we arrive at through intersubjective discussion of the issues at hand. Instead, finding it is an epistemological problem of arriving at the absolute and unchangeable answer and weeding out the incorrect ones. (2002, 196)

Wahl-Jorgensen foreshadowed what we find here in the forthcoming analysis of oppositional literacy.

Letters are unidirectional and asynchronous; reception is delayed, and writers cannot expect immediate feedback (Perrin and Vaisey 2008). Technological mediation release writers from obligations to listen and to reconcile their views others. On the other hand, the low interactivity of LTC platforms encourages a more deliberative composition of argument compared with many social media forums.

Several studies on LTE document how writers appeal to democracy in an exclusionary sense. In a study of letters in Utah newspapers in response to the cancellation of a film that addressed homophobia, Cooper and Pease (2009, 142) concluded that writers cited each other but in ways “marked by mutual incomprehension, name calling, and attempted silencing.” More recent studies, conducted in the wake of the global rise of democratic illiberalism, describe how letters enable media populism with authoritarian overtones. Hovden and Mjelde (2022) reported that threats toward immigrants were more frequent in letters than in columns or news articles in six Scandinavian newspapers. Maydell et al. (2022) documented how the populist rhetoric of “community” and “togetherness” in a New Zealand newspaper was expressed to justify exclusion of Māori from representation in local government. These studies motivated us to explore whether national touchstones—which Hart conceptualizes as a dimension of civic hope during contentious debate—might operate instead to reinforce a hegemonic view of citizenship.

Perrin and Vaisey (2008) offer an optimistic view for LTC, at least at the local level. The authors analyzed all letters received by the *Greensboro News and Record* in North Carolina during a three-month period ($N = 1,113$). Local issues evoked more conciliatory and reasoned letters compared with letters that addressed state and national topics. This interpretation is consistent with Hart. Local writers “speak directly to their fellow citizens, confront alternative viewpoints, and draw on community resources” (239).

Hart published *Civic Hope* two years after Donald Trump’s first election. He speculated on the viability of the concept’s relevance given hyper-partisanship. More recently, constructs such as backsliding, de-consolidation, and de-democratization have been routinely applied to the (dis)investment of U.S. citizens in participatory politics. The next section navigates the theoretical development of hope to identify the concept’s value in understanding the role of ordinary citizens in sustaining democracy.

Perspectives on Hope

Hope, “the ultimate prospective emotion,” is increasingly theorized holistically to recognize its foundations across philosophy, psychology, political theory, and other disciplines (van den Heuvel 2020, ix). More than a decade before the 2016 election, Hage (2003) argued that the capacity of the nation-state to inculcate hope was fading due to the disruption of global capitalism. If the grounds for receptivity to hope have eroded, the need to identify promising fora for renewal becomes more compelling. Still, there are dangers to investing in hope, according to some strands of philosophy. For Arendt (1951), hope is dehumanizing; it enables totalitarianism by excusing citizens from acting courageously. Arendt’s call for action is, however, compatible with contemporary perspectives on hope. Stockdale (2017) argues that bitterness is a fitting response to injustice and a resource for mobilization.

At the individual level, much of the work on understanding hope has been conducted in “positive psychology,” in contexts such as life satisfaction and coping with trauma (Snyder 2020). While efficacy refers to the perception that a person *can* perform well in a particular situation, in hope theory a person’s motivation depends on the self-referential belief that she *will* pursue goal-directed actions. Civic hope requires that individual belief is part of a collective capacity to imagine pathways that serve democratic ends. Hart’s contribution to the largely critical literature on LTC is the recognition that this space invites ordinary citizens to invoke memories, traditions, evidence of coordination, and other reasons for hope.

Civic hope departs from mere optimism in the recognition that prudent governance is reinforced in constant struggle. The concept overlaps with democratic resilience as an adaptive orientation. Civic hope is distinguished from resilience, though, as not simply a person’s willingness to bounce back from shocks (Holloway and Manwaring 2023). Civic hope takes a longer view. Its rhetorical features invoke democratic traditions, memories, and principles that assist the writer in evaluating a current landscape. Its empirical expression, however, must stand up to psychological detachment, polarization, distrust, and bystanding.

Overcoming Obstacles

Hart highlighted these four obstacles (14-17) following the 2016 election, and in this section, we expand on their theoretical relationships with civic hope. He distinguished psychological detachment from alienation; after all, we cannot be alienated if we have never connected in the first place. Anderson (2010) finds that those with a sense of community are more likely to possess high levels of political efficacy and political trust, arguing that these dispositions are affected by social forces underappreciated in individual-level modeling of behavior. Local LTE might consequently channel civic hope in ways not readily captured by surveys. Both internal

and external political efficacy are higher in people living in a context of community attachment. Beaumont (2011) finds that sociopolitical learning often happens through community interactions, and that participation in thoughtful political discussions can close gaps in internal efficacy tied to socioeconomic background. Perrin and Vaisey (2008) concluded that LTE writers are less likely to convey an angry tone. They posited “parallel public spheres”: the imagined reader in national politics is anonymous and hostile, whereas local readers are imagined through a neighborhood prism.

While political polarization among U.S. elites is well-studied, the literature is less clear about implications for the public. Both theoretically and empirically, there is support for the idea that by increasing the contrast between the two parties, and by raising the stakes of one’s preferred candidates winning or losing, elite polarization increases participation (Lee 2013; Levendusky 2010). Alternately, Rogowski (2014) reports that polarization of candidates reduces voter turnout. Similarly, evidence on mass polarization and media selection is mixed. Some studies find that selective exposure solidifies polarized views (Levendusky 2013); others conclude that people are just tuning out of political news (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013), and still others find minimal evidence of polarized selective exposure, with the only significant effects among those highly interested in politics (Davis and Dunaway 2016). But if we think of polarization in the context of Hart’s contention that socio-political divisions undermine the ability to sustain multi-sided arguments, all these studies are consistent with his interpretation.

Hart also cites declining social and political trust as an obstacle to sustaining a culture of argument among ordinary citizens. Both political trust and personal trust are at all-time lows (Levi and Stoker 2000), although a decline in trust in government might not be an affective development so much as a recognition of backsliding. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) found

30 years ago that people were concerned about the erosion of procedures and democratic norms in governance. This concern has only grown. Freedom House (2025) documented “rising political polarization and extremism, partisan pressure on the electoral process, mistreatment and dysfunction in the criminal justice and immigration systems, and growing disparities in wealth, economic opportunity, and political influence.” Distrust is a threat to civic hope, but we are reminded of Hart’s insistence that letter writers’ participation in argument stems from observations of the same kinds of threats cited by Freedom House.

Hart’s final threat to civic hope is bystanding. He defines bystanders as people who avoid politics because they see it as conflictual, avoid news because they find it upsetting, participate only in national politics, and feel that their actions have no effect on politics (17-18). Lachapelle (2022) finds that bystanders can benefit from government actions that harm perceived enemies but avoid blame if they stay out of politics. Disapproving of policies while also benefiting from them may also lead people to sit out of politics (Booth 2012). Although expressing civic hope in grassroots debate is certainly not the only way to participate, those who write LTE are not bystanders.

Dimensions of Civic Hope

Hart proposes that civic hope is a new concept, and that for that reason, including many indicators of each dimension is important. His indicators are not highly correlated, a pattern consistent with the interpretation that each captures a distinct nuance of civic hope. He explains, “When developing the coding scheme, I made the assumption that civic hope involves (1) the pursuit of specific goals (2) by identifiable actors who (3) make political attributions within (4) a polity beset by tensions” (60). He then breaks down each of these dimensions into multiple indicators (60-67).

The first column in Table 1 lists the Hart indicators we used for the current study, arranged under the four dimensions. Adjacent columns provide, respectively, a concise statement on conceptualization for each indicator, a content category example, and our interpretation of limitations. Hart's set of indicators is more comprehensive than those used here.³ We chose indicators that we believe are key to assessing how letters articulate reasons for civic hope, if only indirectly. Yet our selection was also motivated to illustrate limitations not recognized by Hart. We believe these concerns about conceptualization and the coding scheme must be addressed for civic hope to demonstrate its value during democratic backsliding.

- - Table 1 here - -

Under the first category, Political Goals, national touchstones refer to historically sanctioned traditions and institutions, such as law and order and capitalistic system. Touchstones potentially embody hegemonic understandings of a flourishing democracy. For instances, this would occur if law and order privileged a writer's need for security over civil disobedience in recognizing injustice. Hart acknowledges the possibility of emergent touchstones, but we struggled with what the rules for coding should be for that subcategory. Political memory, the other Political Goal we selected, is conceptualized as evaluative references to the non-immediate past. The validity of memory in evoking civic hope inheres in its collective appeal and transcendence beyond topical disputes. On the other hand, political memory is vulnerable to "myth loading." Scioli (2020, 155) explains, "Possibly, there is something unique about hope ... which encourages its appropriation as a cultural transporter and perpetual guardian of a mystical future." We decided to not include Hart's third indicator for Political Goals, civic forecasting, because he reported that it was the most common indicator in letters. We sought a higher threshold for civic hope.

The second category, Identifiable Actors, includes agents of hope/helpful groups and agents of decline/unhelpful groups.⁴ Indicators in conceptual terms refer to those who impact a community positively or negatively. Actors that appear frequently in letters include government officials, candidates, citizens of Grand Junction, and other letter writers. Letters essentially attribute hope or despair to specific actors and groups. That said, letters frequently reference agents of hope/helpful groups and agents of decline/unhelpful group together. There is nothing surprising about binaries reified in political discourse, but ideally an argument would achieve a dialectic resulting in a higher level of understanding. Instead, our impression is that hope and decline cancel each other. What, then, is the incremental pick up for a culture of argument?

Political Attributions include positive or negative leaders and the writer's self-disclosure of partisan identity. Hart conceptualizes leadership attributions as why a particular politician promotes the public good or has failed in practical or moral respects. Examples include a politician who demonstrates a deep understanding of issues or is controlled by special interests. We interpret as a limitation the frequency with which a writer's partisan lens appears determinative of the evaluations. Affective polarization is hardly hopeful when considering that the inclination helps to explain tolerance of backsliding (Gessler and Wunsch, 2025). Partisan allegiance of the writer herself is the other indicator for Political Attributions. While partisan identity is often clear from the argument, most writers do not self-disclose. Partisans in social media are often motivated to connect with like-minded people. Reluctance to self-disclose in LTE is a problem for coding purposes, but the behavior is plausibly interpreted as a signal that the writer wants to convey a less adversarial identity in a community setting.

The final category is Recognition of Tensions. Evidence of disunity is conceptualized as linkages that adversely affect the community. Evidence of coordination is more difficult to code

in that the coordination could be depicted as beneficial or injurious. A writer's contention that terrorists are motivated to attract media attention would fall under coordination. Beyond coding, our concern is that coordination and disunity are often not observed by writers with democratic ends in mind. Oppositional literacy is another acknowledgement of tension. The writer must demonstrate an understanding of the view of opponents. We were struck, though, by how frequently oppositional literacy takes the form of parody and mocking.

Methods

To facilitate a comparison to Hart (2018), we followed his sampling procedure for creating a data set. He focused on presidential years because they summon the most contentious political issues. We selected 100 letters from *The Daily Sentinel* from four presidential election years (2012, 2016, 2020, and 2024). Fifteen were selected from the presidential primaries and the remaining from May to election day. Eighty letters dealt with presidential politics (65 about the campaign and 25 about public policy). Twenty letters focused on city and state affairs. Because we were interested in the potential of local issues to engender distinct forms of political discourse, we oversampled 50 letters from a year adjacent to the election (2013, 2017, 2021, 2023), all addressing local issues.

We coded for the letter instead of sentence fragment since we are interested in patterns across time, not density of concepts within individual letters. We did, however, mark specific clauses, sentences, and paragraphs for national touchstones and oppositional literacy. That protocol facilitated the subsequent qualitative analysis of how these dimensions appear in *Sentinel* letters. Two of the authors of this paper along with two doctoral students conducted the original coding following extensive training and revisions to the codebook. An independent coder—not involved in the theoretical development of the paper or writing of the codebook—

coded a random sample of approximately 15% of the 400 letters across. We chose Krippendorff's alpha binary to calculate inter-coder reliability coefficients because all coding decisions were based on the presence or absence of a content category. The mean for coefficients was disappointing (.62). Revised coding rules and further training of coders could improve inter-coder reliability, but for the present paper we shifted to qualitative analysis.

Hart included national touchstones as one of the indicators for Political Goals. If a person takes time to articulate why traditions or institutions are vital to preserving democracy, the reaching out to others embodies civic hope. However, when we dug down to identify national touchstones in letters, we encountered both conceptual and measurement issues. National touchstones listed by Hart are capitalistic system, mass education, scientific progress, right to bear arms, the popular vote, law and order, family structures, religious traditions, civic volunteerism, constitutional freedoms, equal rights for all, and humanitarian aid. We conducted a qualitative analysis of letters that included a conceptually solid touchstone: the popular vote. We then proceeded with an analysis of letters that referenced a more conceptually difficult touchstone: scientific progress.

Opposition literacy is an indicator of a polity beset by tensions. Opposition literacy occurs when the "author demonstrates a knowledge of those with whom he or she disagrees" (286). Writers reference opposition, whether through quotation that engages a previous letter, opinion column, or news article, or gloss of an argument to facilitate refutation. In latter case, oppositional literacy undermines itself as an expression of goodwill and thus civic hope. The complexity of oppositional literacy—along with its importance to a democratic culture sustained in argument—motivated us to conduct a qualitative analysis of the forms it takes in letters.

Results

National Touchstones

The popular vote is the most frequently invoked national touchstone in Hart's 10,000 letters. He conceptualizes the popular vote as a complicated icon and provides examples of letters asserting voting as identity, as a relationship among people that outlasts hurt feelings, and as an opportunity (198-199). We focus on the 52 letters from 2024 that we coded as containing touchstones and that contain the words "vote," "voting" or "election." The subsample involves writers (1) making arguments about whom to vote for, (2) which issues to consider, (3) the importance of a reliable voting system, and (4) the need to be vigilant about threats to the system. The letters in the first two categories are similar to those readers would have encountered throughout the period of Hart's analysis (1948 to 2012). However, most of the 17 letters in 2024 that address perceived threats to the voting system highlight threats not referenced during most of Hart's extended period of study. Four of the 17 portray the January 6, 2021, insurrection and/or "the big lie" (that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump) as threats to the election process.⁵ Two additional letters were more generally directed at dangers of misinformation,⁶ including beliefs that President Barack Obama was born in Kenya or that Trump won the popular vote in 2016. One focuses on a concern that Democratic vice-presidential candidate Tim Walz expressed an interest in eliminating the Electoral College, which the writer argues is inconsistent with the principles of the Founding.⁷ Another contends that Democratic House candidate Adam Frisch had been bought by corporate interests.⁸ Yet another advises caution about a ballot initiative for ranked-choice voting.⁹ All of these involve sincere opinions supported by factual conditions. The letters are conceptually consistent with calling on national touchstones to articulate democratic goals as expressions of civic hope.

However, two letters, written by the same person, circulate blatantly false information. In one, the author suggests that the Colorado election system is unreliable due to mail-in voting and machine-signature scanning, without evidence and despite evidence to the contrary.¹⁰ Another suggests that Democrats have “padded” their majority in Colorado by allowing undocumented immigrants to vote, again without evidence and despite evidence to the contrary.¹¹ We find letters like these to be a minority, but too common to ignore as a conceptual problem with measuring civic hope. If a person uses damaging falsehoods to support arguments, is this an expression of civic hope? Does it matter if their belief in false information is sincere? We believe the answer to both is no, and that both the concept of the popular vote as a national touchstone and its measurement need to be refined.

Turning to scientific advancement, we interpret the indicator to be problematic as a shared national touchstone. Only eight letters identified as containing national touchstones include “science” or “scientific.” Four address climate change. They urge readers to accept the reality of human-caused climate change or advocate that people vote based on the issue.¹² One 2012 letter supported the designation of Chimney Rock as a national monument,¹³ another (2017) supported an inclusive environment on the Colorado Mesa University campus,¹⁴ and another expressed bewilderment that her sign containing the phrase “science is real” was “defaced” with a “women for Trump” sticker.¹⁵ The rareness of writers invoking scientific advancement could be an artifact of coders not sure what counts as progress, but most of references fall on one side of political debates about science, suggesting that scientific progress may not be sufficiently shared to be a national touchstone. The pattern contrasts with the findings above. While writers clearly differed in calling out or propagating misinformation, the popular vote is a shared value.

We reported in a related study, on political science pedagogy, that college students also observe variance in the extent to which Hart's touchstones are shared. Capitalism, the right to bear arms, family structure, and religious traditions did not resonate with some students as national touchstones (Donavan, Sprain and McDevitt 2025).

In sum, we find that national touchstones fit conceptually under Political Goals as a dimension of civic hope. However, we see a need to revisit measurement in content analysis. Solid evidence exists that voting is a national touchstone, less so for scientific progress and some other touchstones.

Oppositional Literacy

At times, authors are generous in their opposition literacy; they acknowledge the validity of counterarguments and supply reasonable justifications for another's action or views despite disagreement. Yet not all opposition literacy comes in forms that recognize both political tensions and a compensating, vibrant argument culture than underlies civic hope. Opposition literacy can manifest in scare quotes around an opponent's view—a signaling of illegitimacy just through style of presentation. Opponents' positions are sometimes presented only within a context that undermines their stance.

Hart does not address whether a letter writer simply—or primarily—distorting an opponent's view still counts as opposition literacy. We coded the following as opposition literacy: “But the current secular religion also labels those who dare to think outside their tribal confession, branding their departure from the faith as ‘fascism,’ or ‘Nazism,’ or ‘racism.’” We question whether any opposition would recognize themselves in this kind of characterization. More to the point about coding, oppositional literacy is a complex concept that involves—among other components—knowledge, clarity of expression, and presumably some degree of sincerity.

All of these—knowledge, clarity, sincerity—vary by degree across letters. At least in our coding experiences, we struggled to reconcile construct validity with inter-coder reliability. Adopting a low bar for knowledge might improve reliability but then concerns arise about the integrity of oppositional literacy as an expression of civic hope conveyed in argument.

Hart, then, does not attend to whether opposition literacy must be deployed in a reasonable manner. This raises the question about a minimum standard. At issue are styles of opposition literacy that fuel polarization rather than a democratic culture sustained through argument. Interrogating the possibility of a writer contribution to polarization sometimes requires looking at the letter holistically, and here is an example from the *Sentinel*.

My wife and I find it incredulous that Ms. Hassell in her letter to the editor published on Wednesday has seen fit to blame virtually all the shortcomings of behavior in this country on President Trump. I assume that she and most of her liberal friends draw upon CNN and other anti-Trump media outlets for her erroneous views of the source of problems this nation is facing.

Riots and demonstrations caused by Trump? You have to be kidding. The cause of the COVID-19 epidemic the fault of Trump? What type of fantasy world do liberals live in, where all things bad are the fault of President Trump? He has been one of the best presidents and has worked hard to fulfill his campaign promises, being largely successful, despite the constant complaining, blaming and other harassment perpetuated by the liberals and the Democrat legislators who have only one goal as their purpose, and that is control.

Opposition literacy in this letter comes in the form of rhetorical questions that voice a gloss of the claims made by the opposition so that their assertions can be dismissed as fantasy. Calling

out “Ms. Hassell” and her “liberal friends” for using “anti-Trump media,” the author bemoans the “constant complaining, blaming, and other harassment perpetuated by the liberals.” This writing reflects the us vs. them mentality inherent in affective polarization. Our question is whether writing a letter from a polarized position is necessarily a sign of civic hope, particularly when opponents’ views are not so much engaged as distorted. This dynamic recalls Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2012) conclusion that for many LTE writers, truth is not an outcome of deliberation but pronouncement of an absolute and unchangeable answer.

Discussion

Bystanding is arguably tolerable in some conceptions of representative and republican democracy. Nevertheless, retreat of ordinary citizens from debate is pernicious when an authoritarian climate takes hold. Impatience with argument helps to justify authoritarian notions of stealth democracy that reinforce populist disregard for compromise (Muhlberger 2018). Retreat from political discourse implies a disregard if not disrespect for the views of others. Bystanding might be a passive withdrawal or a calculated refusal; in both respects the outcome is a smaller world held in common. U.S. citizens increasingly distrust not just political institutions but each other. Under these conditions, the fact that *some* people participate in civil forums, as much as the substance of their ideas, supports a culture of argument. Lamb (2018, 1037) argues that “civic peace” is still achievable as “a common object of hope.” Civic peace directs attention to a commonwealth in which hope persists beyond election outcomes and formal governance.

Attention to vestiges of civic hope in the way citizens address each other in the same community, in an edited forum, is consequently a promising approach to gauging the health of civil society during democratic backsliding. Letters to the editor in this respect should not be dismissed as anachronistic. While some of the technological affordances and limitations of a

letters section are unique to news media, elements such as editing oversight, news-driven issue salience, anonymity not an option, and proximity to readers are replicable to newly imagined civic spaces.

Apart from its venue for expression, civic hope appears to possess normative value within the orbit of socio-political dispositions that contribute to the legitimacy of democracy. Unlike democratic resilience, it has been theorized as a set of explicit communication practices that bridge psychological dispositions with behavior (Hart 2018). Civic hope connects with political efficacy in the empowerment someone feels to express opinions on contentious topics. This agency extends beyond individual efficacy, however. Civic hope aligns with the collective belief that democracy results in outcomes worthy of a just society, but only when the system's deficits and contradictions are recognized. One of the intriguing findings from Hart's work is that letter writers in his surveys, compared with non-writers, score *lower* on internal political efficacy in terms of a felt capacity to effect change. They nevertheless need to be heard.

Hart's dimensions of civic hope—Political Goals, Identifiable Actors, Political Attributions, and Recognition of Tensions—provide a suitable framework for empirical documentation of how a culture of argument varies across time and region. However, political theory should demand more of citizens when democracy is under threat. As one of the reviewers of *Civic Hope* writes (Martin, 2020, 264),

Hart suggests that even when letter writers get things wrong their contribution is still additive because they keep people thinking and conversing. However, as Yochai Benkler and Robert Faris recently wrote in *Network Propaganda* (2018), 'as a public we have lost our capacity to agree on shared modes of validation as to what is going on and what is just

plain whacky’ (p. 6). Hart suggests that we can survive such wackiness so long as people keep writing.

Hart is willing to accept as oppositional literacy articulations of the positions of others that are oversimplified, even insulting. This style of argument might be relatively benign when democracy is strong because readers are likely to understand that the author is mischaracterizing the opposition for rhetorical gain. In the current atmosphere of heightened polarization and diminishing support for democracy itself, readers may take mocking at face value; indeed, the writers themselves may sincerely believe they are accurate in capturing misguided views of opponents.

Regarding national touchstones, we agree with Hart that drawing on shared values and experiences is an important expression of civic hope. Yet as Hart himself suggests, the number of touchstones and their cultural resonance could be in decline. We find that conceptually, voting continues to be a valid national touchstone, but that others such as scientific progress or religious traditions may not be. Unfortunately, in an era when politics appears bleak, when civic hope is most needed, its restorative power could be diminished. Yet conceptually and empirically, scholars must raise the bar for what counts as civic hope.

We also have concerns about measurement. After substantial work in developing and refining our codebook,¹⁶ we were unable to replicate Hart’s inter-coder reliability. We struggled with a tension between measurement consistency and construct validity. We do believe work on these measures is important for the field of political communication. Or perhaps entirely different measures and methods are warranted.

The complexity of civic hope apparently led Hart to conclude that creation of an additive index to score letters is not appropriate. If, for example, a letter appears hopeful with the author

identifying clear pathways to address a community problem but fails to recognize opposition, it would fail to capture the struggle inherent in civic hope. Civic hope is something inferred by someone stepping back from any given letter and seeing pattern across time, or by comparing a collective of letters from one region of the country to another. Regular readers of newspapers might perceive a climate of hope from reading letters, and this scenario does reflect the collective nature of the sentiment, but the need for inference poses challenges of measurement and interpretation for why LTE might be consequential. The need to make connections across letters likewise makes civic hope vulnerable to ecological fallacy, the logical error in which attributes or relationships at the group level apply to an individual case. Conversely, researchers should keep in mind the temptation of atomistic fallacy. A letter held up as a paradigm of civic hope is not necessarily emblematic of a culture of argument.

Stepping back from the intricacies of measurement, we endorse research on the culture of argument among ordinary citizens. They can speak up against authoritarian incursions in civil society in ways that elites affiliated with institutions are unable or unwilling. The ordinary citizen thereby possesses a unique role in political discourse. While university administrators and faculty scrub websites for words that might offend, speaking out in letters to the editor brings less risk.

Notes

1. The civic hope is the antithesis of what Garrison Keillor wrote in *The Washington Post* the day after Trump's election in 2016. The former host of "A Prairie Home Companion" assured liberal voters that they were not responsible and should feel content to retire from politics until the next election.
2. Discourse publics arise through the circulation of text when otherwise indefinite strangers acquire a sociability by recognizing common interests. Letter writers in this respect contributed to the development of a public sphere in Europe in the 18th century (Raymond 2013).
3. For more information on Hart's (2018) coding system, see his footnote 64 (71) and coding appendix (275-289).
4. Hart coded agents of hope as distinct from helpful groups and agents of decline distinct from unhelpful groups. We collapsed these into hope/helpful and decline/unhelpful. While hope/decline are thematic and groups more concrete, most letters used themes and groups in the same arguments.
5. Ken Orlin, November 2, 2024; Blane Colton, November 3, 2024; Kyle Hunke, October 17, 2024; Cynthia Zaites, September 13, 2024.
6. Ed Colby, October 26, 2024; Ken Neubecker, October 17, 2024.
7. M. Todd Miskhel November 3, 2024.
8. David A. Kearsely, October 26, 2024.
9. Arlo Miller, October 18, 2024.
10. Gene H. Dreher, November 1, 2024.
11. Gene H. Dreher, September 4, 2024.

12. B.J. Smith, October 17, 2024; Tom Heffernan, October 24, 2024; Chip Comens November 6, 2016; Glen Scissors November 9, 2024.
13. Chris Miller, September 28, 2012.
14. Dr. Johnny Snyder, April 5, 2017.
15. Lisa Eckert, August 21, 2020.
16. Our codebook is available upon request.

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Table 1: Conceptualization, Content Categories, and Limitations of Civic Hope Indicators

	Conceptualization	Category Example	Limitations
Political Goals			
National touchstones	Historically sanctioned traditions and institutions	Law and order	Hegemonic (e.g., capitalistic system). Emergent touchstones problematic for coding.
Political memory	Evaluative references to non-immediate past	It was a time of honor	Myth loading (e.g., “honor” in a period of inequality).
Identifiable Actors			
Agents of hope/ helpful groups	Those who positively/ negatively affect community	Federal official	Co-occurrence frequent. Unclear whether hope or despair is dominant.
Agents of decline/ unhelpful groups			
Political Attributions			
Positive leadership/ Negative leadership	Why politician promotes social good; why politician has failed	Affable personality; likes to manipulate others	Both occur frequently in same letter. Writer’s partisan lens often determinative of evaluation.
Writer identification	Partisan allegiance	Republican	Writers typically withhold self-identification.
Recognition of Tensions			
Evidence of coordination/ evidence of disunity	Coordination depicted/ linkages adversely affect community	Between leader and a group	Coordination and disunity often not evaluated toward democratic ends.
Oppositional literacy	Understand views of opponents	Policy priorities explained	Often manifest as parody, mocking, reductive.