

Citizenship as a relational field: interests and identities across cleavages and seams

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an ontological reconstruction of citizenship grounded in a relational architecture composed of two fundamental axes: the vertical relationship between citizens and political authority, and the horizontal relationship among citizens themselves. Moving beyond epistemological approaches that focus on how citizenship is recognised or classified, the paper identifies the relational dynamics through which citizenship is experienced, negotiated, and contested. Drawing on genealogical insights from ancient Greece and Rome, the framework distinguishes between vertical representation and responsiveness on the one hand, and, on the other, horizontal recognition and mutual sharing among citizens themselves, showing how interests and identities operate as essential forces that shape seams along both axes. By combining these axes, the paper develops a bi-dimensional field composed of four ideal-types – subjectship, democratic, liberal-clientelist, and full citizenship – each reflecting distinctive configurations of relational citizenship. The analysis emphasises that interests and identities are not obstacles to citizenship but its constitutive ingredients, determining the strength, or otherwise weakness, of relational seams.

KEYWORDS

relational citizenship; vertical networks; horizontal relations; interests; identities

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INTRODUCTION

At the heart of the idea of citizenship lies a tension that has marked human communities from their earliest institutional forms to the most complex contemporary democracies. This tension concerns the ways in which individuals are linked to one another and to the authority that binds them, and it resurfaces with renewed urgency whenever established mechanisms of community integration fail or citizens express

dissatisfaction with how their voices are translated into public decisions. It would be tempting to imagine that these tensions are the product of recent transformations, for example highlighting the illness of globalisation, digital communication, or the weakening of traditional channels of political integration such as party systems. Yet, a longer view reveals that the dilemmas of citizenship have always emerged from the interplay between two complementary axes: the political relationships that articulate how decisions are made on behalf of the overall community, and the civic relationships that sustain the social fabric that enables those decisions to be legitimate and meaningful.

Rather than considering citizenship as a set of categories, for example, in terms of rights, membership and participation in the work of Bellamy (2008), we may thus benefit from approaching it as a relational space in which political and social vectors intersect in different ways depending on historical configurations, institutional settlements, and collective imaginaries. In particular, two vectors have accompanied the development of citizenship from its earliest developments. The Greek polis confronted the question of how citizens could influence the decisions that governed their common life, introducing a vertical logic of representation, accountability, and potential contestation. By contrast, the Roman *civitas* elaborated a horizontal understanding of citizenship as a shared civic status, grounded in the reciprocal recognition of equal rights and duties among individuals who were otherwise differentiated by ethnic origin, social rank, or local territories. These two axes, vertical and horizontal respectively, could thus provide the coordinates through which citizenship could be structured and reinvented across many centuries.

At the same time, the social and political dynamics that animate these axes could be shaped by the dual fundamental forces of interests and identities. Citizens mobilise their interests to protect material advantages, negotiate collective goods, or resist policies that threaten their position. At the same time, identities, whether national, ethnic, religious, professional, or territorial, inform how individuals perceive one another, draw boundaries, and formulate expectations about mutual inclusion and exclusion.

Both interests and identities operate simultaneously across the vertical and horizontal dimensions: they influence how citizens relate vertically to institutions and how they relate horizontally to one another, often reinforcing or undermining the seams that sustain political and social reciprocity. Yet, we have witnessed in recent years the erosion of both types of seams. Declining trust in representative institutions, polarisation along deep identitarian cleavages, the weakening of intermediary organisations, as well as the growing reliance on judicial rather than political arenas to settle conflicts (Cinalli & Jacobson, 2020; Jacobson & Cinalli, 2025), all point toward a disturbance in terms of relational citizenship. These phenomena are frequently analysed in isolation, but they become more intelligible when viewed through the double lens of vertical-horizontal structuring and the crisscrossing logics of interests and identities. In this sense, reconstructing citizenship as a relational field offers not only a conceptual clarification but also a way of interpreting current transformations in democratic life without reducing them to exceptional disruptions, or to yet another “crisis”.

The goal of this introductory paper is therefore to sketch the broad contours of this relational understanding of citizenship by returning to its genealogical roots and linking them to contemporary sociopolitical dynamics. In the sections that follow, I reinterpret the Greek and Roman inheritances as foundational axes of citizenship, ex-

amine how interests and identities permeate each dimension, and show how different combinations of these factors give rise to distinct configurations of political and social integration. Without yet entering the terrain of empirical measurement, I aim to provide a conceptual map that can guide future inquiry into the challenges and possibilities of citizenship in complex democracies.

VERTICAL GREECE VS HORIZONTAL ROME

Any attempt to reconstruct citizenship as a relational configuration must begin by confronting a longstanding ambiguity that shapes both scholarly debates and the everyday citizens' experience of their own citizenship. In fact, much of the contemporary literature approaches citizenship epistemologically. Here, the analytical starting point is to determine how we recognise who is a citizen and what counts as a citizenship, drawing upon criteria such as legal status, birthright, descent, territorial belonging, ethnic membership, or the various categories through which the insiders of a community are distinguished from the outsiders. This epistemological orientation has played a major role in structuring influential lines of work, from Marshall's tripartite model of civil, political, and social rights (1950), to the boundary-making perspective developed by Brubaker (1989), or the civic-national vision articulated by Renan and later Schnapper (1996). Similar tendencies are common amongst so many other scholars who treat citizenship as an attribute or a status that can be identified, classified, and applied (or not) to individual citizens.

A parallel epistemological logic also governs how ordinary citizens themselves recognise one another. In daily life, many people rely on rigid markers such language, religion, customs, descent, territorial attachment, to decide who "really" belongs to their own community of citizens. The distinction between citizen and non-citizen, insider and outsider, majority and minority, is therefore not only an analytical operation performed by scholars; it is a cognitive operation performed by individuals as they navigate all sort of boundaries, thereby attributing legitimacy or suspicion to other fellows they interact with. While this epistemological approach is crucial, it captures however only one layer of citizenship, and not the most fundamental one.

By contrast, an ontological conception of citizenship focuses not on how citizenship is recognised (either by scholars or citizens themselves), but on the relational field that makes it substantiated in the first place. Citizenship is not primarily a label or a set of attributes; it is the space of vertical and horizontal relationships within which individuals transform their preferences into policy-making, express expectations and emotions vis-à-vis to each other, and possibly develop deep sense of solidarities with other citizens or with the rulers. From this ontological perspective, rights, membership, and participatory practices are consequences of relational configurations, not their foundations. An ontological approach thus shifts emphasis from classifying citizens to understanding how ties, seams, and interactions constitute political membership and sustain (or destabilise) democratic life.

It is under this approach that the genealogies of ancient Greece and Rome acquire analytical significance. They are not normative exemplars to imitate, nor historical curiosities, but the first crystallisations of the vertical and horizontal logics through which citizenship became possible. The Greek polis articulated a distinctly vertical

conception of citizenship. Membership was inseparable from participation in collective decision-making, and the agora symbolised a political vector running between governed and governors. Authority was legitimate only insofar as it remained permeable to citizens. This dynamic anticipated later republican reflections – whether Machiavelli's emphasis on contestation, or Rousseau's debate on general will. The vertical axis thus concerns the continuous circulation between citizens and political authority, the conditions under which decisions are recognised as binding, the processes that allow individuals to influence the exercise of political power, and policy-makers to be attentive to political preferences from below.

Rome, by contrast, elaborated a horizontal dimension of citizenship. While some forms of bottom-up participation existed, the enduring legacy of the Roman *civitas* laid in its capacity to articulate a form of civic equality grounded in rights, legal protections, and shared rituals and festivities to enforce a shared sense of community. In this context, citizenship became a social relationship among individuals who recognised one another as part of a same whole, irrespective of local loyalties, ethnocultural markers, or status differences. Horizontal citizenship is thus valuable to capture the bonds of reciprocity, mutual recognition, and commonality that allow citizens to cooperate, trust one another, and sustain commitments to collective life.

Of course, looking at these historical developments with contemporary lenses, these two traditions of ancient Greece and Rome are not opposed models but complementary ontological logics. The vertical axis addresses the political dynamics of how citizens relate to the rulers and how the rulers remain accountable. The horizontal axis addresses the social dynamics of how citizens recognise one another as part of a shared community. What emerges from this genealogy, and successive developments throughout history and different geographical experiences is that citizenship is always configured at the intersection of these two axes (Jacobson & Cinalli, 2023), in line with well-known scholarly treatment of institutions and state formation (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), community building through contentious politics (Tilly, 1975), or civic engagement (Putnam, 2000).

Understanding citizenship ontologically through these axes also clarifies why contemporary debates often appear fragmented. Epistemological approaches examine rights, legal statuses, national boundaries of different kind, participation, identity, welfare, cohesion, and so forth: each captures an important piece of the puzzle but struggles to reveal the underlying relational architecture. By referencing to the Greek and Roman experiences, we can appreciate better how contemporary crises, often grounded on declining trust, polarisation, disaffection, and inequalities of all kinds, are not isolated phenomena; but they consist of disturbances in the vertical and horizontal seams that sustain the ontological field of citizenship. This overall framework provides the coordinates for analysing distinct configurations of modern citizenship. When the vertical axis is weakened, legitimacy and representation deteriorate; when the horizontal axis is weakened, solidarity and mutual acknowledgement decline.

THE TWO AXES OF VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL CITIZENSHIP

If we take seriously the idea that citizenship must be understood ontologically (as the relational field that structures how individuals connect horizontally with one another

and vertically with the political authority) then the two axes emerging from the Greek and Roman genealogies become more than historical references. They become the conceptual coordinates through which contemporary forms of citizenship can be analysed. Too often, debates on, say, political belonging and democratic practices move directly to the level of empirical indicators or legal classifications, as though citizenship could be reconstructed from discrete attributes or administrative statuses. But if we begin instead from the relational architecture that sustains political communities, we see that citizenship takes shape through the interplay of two fundamental vectors: the vertical, which organises the political relationship between citizens and ruling institutions, and the horizontal, which structures the civic relationship among citizens themselves.

The vertical axis concerns the ways in which political authority is constituted, legitimised, and made accountable. It is the vector that enables individuals to recognise themselves in the decisions taken on their behalf and to perceive governing institutions as responsive, fair, and accessible. This dimension draws together a wide set of questions that are often treated separately in the literature: the role of representation, the functioning of parties and intermediaries, the quality of political responsiveness, the mechanisms of participation, and the institutional arrangements through which public decisions are contested or upheld. Studies of political culture, investigations into the legitimacy of public authority, or analyses of political trust converge here, even when they are not explicitly framed in relational terms. The vertical dimension is not reducible to specific institutional forms; it is an ongoing process through which citizens interpret the intentions, actions, and accountability of those who govern them.

In democratic contexts, this vertical relationship is meant to be reciprocal, both flowing from the bottom to the top and viceversa. Citizens are expected to articulate preferences, express demands, and evaluate the performance of governments. Rulers in turn are expected to justify their actions, respond to public concerns, and ensure that the channels of influence remain open. When these expectations break down (for example, when citizens perceive that their voices no longer matter, or when institutions become insulated from public contestation), the vertical axis weakens. This weakening is not simply a loss of trust; it is a rupture in the ontological fabric of citizenship, a disturbance in the relational logic that links individuals to the public decisions that shape their lives.

The horizontal axis, by contrast, concerns the relationships through which citizens recognise one another as members of a shared community. This dimension encompasses the social expectations, solidarities, and emotional dispositions that enable cooperation and sustain a sense of belonging. It is here that long-term scholarly debates on social cohesion (since Durkheim), the community (since Ferdinand Tönnies), the nation (since Ernest Renan), or indeed “citizenship” (since Thomas Humphrey Marshall) find their ontological grounding. In this dimension, citizenship is not primarily about influencing decisions but about sustaining the social bonds that make citizenship possible. Citizens must not only feel connected to institutions; they must also see one another as part of the same civic project.

The horizontal axis therefore includes the interpersonal dispositions (for example trust, reciprocity, empathy, social recognition) that make cooperation possible within

complex societies. Research on social capital (Putnam, 2000), studies of collective mobilisation (Tilly, 1978), and analyses of intergroup relations, including in deeply divided societies (Cinalli, 2002) converge here, illuminating how shared identities, symbolic boundaries, and social narratives shape the capacity of individuals to collaborate or to isolate, to include or exclude the others, to support redistribution or to oppose it. When horizontal bonds weaken, everyday interactions can become coloured by suspicion, resentment, or indifference. What erodes is not only social trust but the sense that one's fellow citizens are partners in a same political community.

Importantly, the vertical and horizontal axes are not symmetrical, nor do they operate in parallel. They intersect in every concrete instance of citizenship. A political system may maintain a functioning vertical axis, with regular elections, stable institutions, and procedural accountability; but it may at the same time experience profound horizontal fragmentation, as we observe in settings where ethnic, religious, or economic divides structure social life more strongly than national belonging. Conversely, horizontal bonds may remain relatively stable while the vertical axis weakens, as when citizens continue to engage with each other but distrusts the rulers and no longer perceive them as legitimate or responsive.

These configurations remind us that citizenship cannot be reduced to rights, nor to participation, nor to identity alone. Its ontological reality depends on the simultaneous organisation of political authority and social belonging. This insight also clarifies why contemporary democracies often struggle to diagnose their own challenges. Declining trust in institutions is frequently analysed separately from the rise of identity polarisation, or from debates around welfare retrenchment, immigration, or inequality. Yet these phenomena make sense only when viewed as disturbances in one or both relational axes. A political system may attempt to strengthen the vertical dimension through transparency initiatives, but without addressing horizontal distrust, such reforms remain insufficient. Similarly, efforts to promote solidarity or civic cohesion may fail when citizens feel that political decisions are made without meaningful input or accountability.

The theoretical framework proposed here is therefore useful for assessing the diverse and often contradictory developments that shape contemporary citizenship. It invites us to see citizenship not as a legal artefact, as a social category or as a normative ideal, but as a relational field requiring continuous negotiation and renewal. Let's now move to explore how interests and identities interact with both vertical and horizontal citizenship to generate different relational patterns.

INTEREST VS IDENTITY: RELATIONAL FORCES ACROSS THE TWO AXES

If the vertical and horizontal axes allow us to reconstruct the relational architecture of citizenship, the following question then must engage with interests and identities respectively, as the two main forces that shape citizenship. Interests and identities are central to understanding how cleavages (or otherwise seams) emerge, solidify, erode, or shift across both axes. These forces can be considered beyond the traditional sense of attributes linked to individuals or groups, as modes of relationality that shape how citizens orient themselves toward one another and toward governing institutions. Without interests, citizens would lack the motivation to engage and

articulate preferences across the public and the policy domain. Without identities, citizens would lack recognition, belonging, and the symbolic resources that sustain civic life. The challenge is therefore not to eliminate interests or identities but to understand how they operate across vertical and horizontal citizenship, whether as forces that strengthen seams or forces that weaken them.

The emphasis on interests resonates with a longstanding tradition that ranges from early moral philosophy to political economy. Thinkers in the Scottish Enlightenment, for example, saw the meeting of interests as a crucial mechanism for social coordination, whether through market exchanges (since Adam Smith) or the stabilising effect of reciprocal expectations (since John Hume). Their view was not limited to economic interactions. It extended to a broader understanding of how individuals, motivated by needs, preferences, and concrete stakes, recognise that their cooperation with others is indispensable. When this logic unfolds horizontally, citizens link their lives to those of their peers through shared objectives, mutual advantage, and everyday reciprocity. When it unfolds vertically, interests connect the governed and the governors through channels of representation, responsiveness, and policy influence.

Identities, however, bring a different but equally powerful relational dynamic. They operate not through calculation or mutual benefit, but through shared belonging, symbolic boundaries, and emotional attachment. Classical sociological thought, from Durkheim's reflections on "moral community" to Weber's analyses of "status groups", has recognised how identities produce cohesion within groups while also defining who is perceived as "insider" or "outsider" (Merton, 1972). In a horizontal sense, identities shape whether citizens recognise one another as partners in a shared civic project. In a vertical sense, identities influence whether citizens interpret public authority as legitimate, inclusive, or biased, and whether authorities themselves perceive certain groups as "proper" members of the national community.

Accordingly, interests and identities cut across vertical and horizontal citizenship simultaneously. They are not subsets of either dimension but permeate the relational field in ways that can reinforce or undermine both political and social exchanges.

Thus, four ideal-typical configurations can be distinguished:

1. Horizontal interests: where the pursuit of mutual advantage, reciprocity, and cooperative bargaining shapes ties among citizens. This is visible, for example, in neighbourhood networks or civic practices, for example in terms of alliances campaigning over ad hoc goals.
2. Vertical interests: where policy preferences, representation, and access to institutions ensure that citizens perceive governing actors as responsive to their preferences, for example in terms of openings of 'political opportunity structures' (Kriesi et al., 1995).
3. Horizontal identities: where shared belonging and recognition structure civic community. This logic has deep roots, from republican universalism (Schnapper, 2000) to later work on boundary formation (Brubaker, 1989).
4. Vertical identities: where the identity of the state, the legitimacy of public institutions, and the symbolic status of various groups shape intimately the relationship between governors and governed. This includes classic debates on national models and citizenship regimes (Weil, 2008) and more recent analyses of how minorities are perceived by political elites (Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2009).

By explicitly distinguishing these four relational logics, it becomes possible to explain why citizenship takes divergent forms even within the same institutional context. A polity may display strong horizontal interests but fractured horizontal identities, or it may succeed in representing vertical interests while failing to establish vertical identities, and so forth. Each pattern is therefore expected to produce different experiences, expectations, and orientations among citizens.

This is possibly the crucial point that distinguishes this approach to relational citizenship from other more traditional epistemological accounts that focus on criteria to classify individuals (whether by descent, *ius soli*, ethnic markers, legal status, and so forth) and therefore tend to reproduce usual debates on models of membership. By contrast, relational citizenship demands to examine how interests and identities animate the overall field, shaping the dynamics through which actors across the public and the policy domains (whether they are institutions, political parties, civil society organisations or simple citizens) trust, contest, cooperate, or otherwise withdraw (Ambrosini et al., 2020).

This dual emphasis also helps illuminate many apparent paradoxes in contemporary democracies. For instance, horizontal interests may align, as in the case of shared economic insecurity across different groups, but horizontal identities may still remain sharply divided, preventing solidarity. Conversely, vertical identities may be broadly inclusive, as in the case of civic-national models, but vertical interests may be poorly represented. These tensions are not incidental but are tied to the interplay of interests and identities across vertical and horizontal citizenship.

Interests and identities function as relational forces that substantiate vertical and horizontal citizenship. They make visible both cleavages and seams that connect and divide, opening space for the identification of relational combinations of high or low cleavages/seams across the two axes. Accordingly, a bi-dimensional space of citizenship is valuable to identify four main distinct configurations that may characterise, at least in theory, the relational field of citizenship. Let's move to evaluate how these four distinct relational logics combine into a coherent analytical field.

THE RELATIONAL FIELD: COMBINING THE TWO AXES IN THE BIDIMENSIONAL SPACE

If interests and identities operate as relational forces across the vertical and horizontal axes, the next step is to examine how these forces combine to structure the overall field of citizenship. This section therefore moves from a discussion of individual logics to a more systematic reconstruction of the bi-dimensional space that results from their intersection. The aim is not to construct a classification for its own sake but to show how citizenship takes shape through variable combinations of political and civic relationality (Cinalli, 2017). These combinations allow us to recognise how different contexts may generate distinct expectations, dispositions, and practices among citizens.

The value of mapping citizenship in a bi-dimensional space lies in the capacity to show variation, movement, and tension across settings, rather than focusing on an unsubstantiated dichotomy between citizens and non-citizens. In fact, both vertical and horizontal citizenship can display, in their simplest operationalisation, strong or weak seams. When combined, vertical and horizontal citizenship can thus produce

four broad configurations that capture relational tendencies that can tighten or loosen over time.

The first configuration appears when seams are weak along both the horizontal and the vertical dimension. Citizens neither engage with one another through strong civic ties nor consider governing institutions as responsive or open. This ideal-typical combination can be named “subjectship” (Cinalli, 2017). It may be characterised by a prevalence of conflict, distrust, and frustration across both vertical and horizontal citizenship, with interests and identities operating as divisive forces. Thus, interests may take the form of ad hoc grievances rather than coordinated expectations, and identities may tend to harden along antagonistic lines. This configuration produces an exclusionary dynamic that is not simply oppositional in the short term but rooted in structural lack of vertical and horizontal exchanges. With strong cleavages along both axes, citizens oscillate between withdrawal and confrontation, politics become the realm of conflict between ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ across the public and the policy domains, and the rulers struggle to maintain legitimacy and representation.

A second configuration emerges when horizontal seams are strong but vertical cleavages also remain strong. In such settings, citizens forge extensive horizontal exchanges, such as for example interpersonal trust, associational life, shared norms, but they remain vertically detached from the rulers. This second configuration can be named “democratic citizenship”, not because it represents a fully realised democratic order, but because its logic resonates with scholarship arguing that strong relations across civil society may support political inclusion over time (Putnam, 2000). However, without vertical seams, the horizontal stretching of the relational field cannot transmit preferences and orientations of citizens into the political agenda. Representation may be perceived as incomplete, responsiveness as limited, and access to institutional arenas as uneven. In this case, the normative assumption is that civic vitality might, over time, support political inclusion, but in fact this trajectory is neither automatic nor guaranteed.

The third configuration arises when vertical seams are strong but horizontal cleavages are also strong. In this case, citizens (or their groups) have channels of representation, visibility, and negotiation with public authorities, but they experience limited engagement with each other horizontally. This ideal-type can be named “liberal-clientelist citizenship”. Its logic is one of institutional inclusion without broader cohesion across civil society. Policies may provide access, often with the aim to pre-empt bottom-up claims (Cinalli, 2016) yet overall recognition remains partial or contested with groups (such as ethnic and religious minorities) acquiring political rights or targeted policy benefits while still experiencing exclusion in broader civic life. In this configuration, identities often function as boundaries rather than resources, and interests are negotiated competitively rather than under larger collective coordination.

The fourth configuration represents the ideal-type whereby extensive networks are built both horizontally and vertically, with strong seams characterising the overall relational field. Horizontal reciprocity, together with vertical exchanges between the ruled and the rulers, reinforce one another, creating conditions for “full citizenship”. In this case, citizens experience both meaningful ties across civil society, for example in terms of trust, reciprocity, and shared norms, while at the same time having political institutions as accessible, fair, and responsive. Vertical exchanges and horizontal

exchanges reinforce each other, creating a relational environment in which citizens recognise themselves as part of a shared community and as active participants in public decisions. Interests are channelled into meaningful relationships, and identities function as sources of recognition rather than exclusion. This is not a utopian model but a potentially empirical orientation toward the most integrated relational configuration potentially available within democratic systems.

Overall, the relational field shows well how citizenship is sensitive to variation, complexity, and diachronic change. It shows why similar legal frameworks can be matched by different relational patterns, accounting for trajectories that may not be linear. For example, a vibrant associational life may forge extensive vertical networks with policy-makers and institutions, but it may also deepen segmentation when confined to homogeneous groups (Sunstein, 2002). At the same time, institutional inclusion may encourage broader recognition, but it may also produce competition for visibility or funding, weakening horizontal exchange among citizens and their groups, as well as pre-empting claims that are the expression of broader civil society. Likewise, horizontal cohesion may become fragmented if economic insecurity or political polarisation alters the logic of recognition. So shifts are possible from subjectship to democratic citizenship as horizontal ties expand, or from liberal-clientelist back to subjectship if vertical channels erode.

The bi-dimensional field thus provides a dynamic representation of citizenship as a relational process. Citizens do not simply hold rights, a static membership, or fixed attitudes and behaviours; but they rather navigate a large and complex field, experiencing shifts in seams and cleavages in terms of both interests and identities. Citizenship is a relational field shaped by tensions, adjustments, and potential movement across configurations. These movements are not merely institutional, but they reflect how citizens themselves interpret, negotiate, and inhabit their positions within the relational field.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper has been to reconstruct citizenship not as a status, an attribute, or a legal condition, but as a relational architecture grounded in two axes of vertical and horizontal citizenship respectively. By moving beyond epistemological approaches that focus on how citizenship is recognised, classified, or attributed, I have argued that a more fruitful perspective emerges when we examine how citizens (as individuals and groups) relate to political authority and to each other. The genealogies of ancient Greece and Rome have provided the conceptual foundations for this approach. Overall, four main relational configurations (subjectship, democratic, liberal-clientelist, and full citizenship) have been identified so as to represent distinctive combinations of cleavages and seams along the vertical and horizontal axes respectively. These ideal-types are not fixed categories but analytical constructs that reveal the underlying relational dynamics of citizenship, showing also that movement across configurations is neither linear nor predetermined.

Within this relational architecture, interests and identities function as the two central forces that animate both axes. They are not external or secondary to citizenship; they are its constitutive ingredients. When interests and identities operate in cooper-

ative and inclusive forms, they strengthen relational seams. When they take the form of antagonism, exclusion, or manipulation, they weaken them. In turn, these dynamics open space for further investigation on how contemporary democratic polities increasingly contend with exclusionary interests (for example those shaped by economic insecurity, market pressures, and digital manipulation) and exclusionary identities (for example, those shaped by boundary-marking narratives and populist frames). These dynamics illuminate the movement of polities across the bi-dimensional field, often with backward and restrictive movements across the horizontal and the vertical dimensions.

Whether citizenship moves toward democratic, liberal-clientelist, or full citizenship, depends not only on institutional design or socioeconomic conditions but also on the capacity of public actors and civic communities to foster inclusive interests and inclusive identities. This requires long-term investment in institutions, policies, civic infrastructures, recognising that citizenship is not a static condition but a relational and never-ending enterprise, continuously shaped by the forces that structure how citizens and their groups interact among themselves and how they relate to political authority.

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