



The Changing Roles of Courage and Citizenship in America Since the Revolutionary Period -- Implications for Braver Angels' Vision and Approaches

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what "courageous citizenship" is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: "I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture."

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Abstract

This paper separately analyzes the words “courageous” and “citizenship,” provides real-life examples of what can be considered courageous citizenship, and gives suggestions for Braver Angels to consider. The word “courageous” has evolved since 1776, as Declaration signers faced real physical risks. Risks today are more psychological. There are positives of using the word, including fortitude to engage, and stepping out of a perceived norm of hostility. However, the word always involves a sense of fear and risk. This can unintentionally de-motivate people. The word “citizenship” has also evolved since 1776. Originally defined as a person’s relationship with the state, this has become increasingly challenging at the national level, often restricted to organized interests. Participation is critical to a healthy republic and seems achievable at the local and community level, but more difficult nationally. After stories of courageous citizenship in the Women's Movement and at recent school board meetings, the paper offers some suggestions for Braver Angels and the broader movement. Regarding “courageous,” Braver Angels can also say that Americans often don't need as much courage as they think they do. “Citizenship” should account for the greater likelihood of success of Citizen-Led Solutions at a more local level, while taking a strategic approach to often more challenging national-level efforts such as the Citizens Commission on Immigration.

Introduction

In 1776, Americans declared their independence and faced the daunting challenge of confronting the most powerful empire on earth. Then in creating the Constitution, our citizens faced the enormous task of creating a new government. In many ways, this period in our history required much more courage and active citizenship than we need today. We have built extensive local, state, and national governments that provide laws, regulations, resources, and services for all aspects of our society. When so many of our needs are addressed by government, citizens find it much harder to know how, or even why, to engage in politics and civic life. However, what has become clear is that our government needs greater participation from its citizens, so that government “for the people and by the people” can once again flourish. And much of this renewed participation will require some amount of courage.

In 2025, after a months-long strategic planning process, Braver Angels adopted and began to communicate its new vision (or “north star”) of *courageous citizenship* reflecting Braver Angels’ expanded focus of helping individuals, communities, and our nation communicate productively across differences and engage more in government and civic life.

How well might “*courageous citizenship*” serve to mobilize citizens to engage at much greater levels in government and civic life? That is the focus of this paper.

The idea of *courageous citizenship* has various strengths, in particular its call for citizens to overcome their fears and engage in collective-problem solving to strengthen the civic fabric of our nation. Despite these strengths, we believe it’s important to highlight potential challenges that arise from some different meanings of “courage” and “citizenship.” In this paper we examine *courageous citizenship* more deeply to gain additional insight into both the strengths

and limitations of the phrase, and to explore the implications for Braver Angels moving forward. Since the paper is written in the context of our nation's 250th Anniversary, we include ways in which the meanings of "courageous" and "citizenship" have evolved since the Revolutionary period.

In our paper, we first discuss [courage](#), which is the "mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty." A key concept surrounding courage is its relationship to risk in taking potential actions. We then discuss citizenship, viewed broadly as a person's relationship with the state, and the individual's fundamental rights and responsibilities in that relationship. A key concept we explore with citizenship is how the expanded scope and nature of government (particularly the federal government) has changed the role of citizens in their relationship to the state. Courageous and citizenship are then brought together to discuss historical and recent examples of *courageous citizenship* practiced by Americans.

In the final section, we explore the implications of our discussion on *courageous citizenship* for Braver Angels.

Courage

According to the [American Psychological Association](#), the amount of courage someone feels is directly related to "how much fear they must overcome," taking actions "they view as having a noble goal but a high level of risk." Being courageous always involves a sense of fear and risk – with clear potential downsides. There are degrees of courage, depending on the level of risk.

The signers of the Declaration of Independence faced real physical risks to their lives and property. Their acts were treasonous from Britain's perspective, [punishable](#) by death. George Mason University history educators [explain](#), "At least some key figures in the rebellion would have been tried and imprisoned if not executed outright." During the war, some signers of the Declaration [lost property or were captured](#).

In contrast, the risk level of most current political engagement is much milder than during the

Revolutionary period, though some physical risks remain. Modern risks include: risks to livelihood (e.g., the professional risk Dr. Jay Bhattacharya and others experienced by openly questioning Covid-19 policy); harmed personal relationships; psychological discomfort (e.g., experiencing hostility or belittling); social rejection/shunning; and relatively rare physical risks (e.g., recent ICE protests in Minneapolis).

The types of behavior considered to be courageous has expanded over time. This expansion is reflected in the idea of [concept creep](#), in which "as society becomes safer, people feel more harmed by less harmful events."

For various reasons, it is beneficial for Braver Angels to highlight courage as a fundamental part of its mission. First, some people will be attracted to a movement whose participants are perceived to be courageous. Second, having fortitude to engage in difficult conversations despite the risks can lead to benefits, including repairing broken relationships and gaining more accurate perspectives on what individuals across the political spectrum actually think. Finally,

courage is required to step out of the perceived norm of division and partisan hostility, and into a norm of humility and collective problem-solving.

However, there are some potential downsides to highlighting courage. In particular, using the term courageous could unintentionally *de*-motivate some people if their perceived risk discourages them from participating.

In many types of situations, actual risk is much lower than perceived. This is referred to as the “Perception Gap.” The robust literature on perception gaps, also known as false polarization, shows that people significantly overestimate the risks of interacting across the political spectrum. The American public across the political spectrum is less ideologically divided than perceived. If people’s perceived differences with others were closer to their actual differences with others (meaning, there is more common ground than believed), generally they would feel a lower risk to relationships and psychological discomfort than they do. (Note: co-author James Coan is CoFounder and Executive Director of More Like US, which focuses on motivating civil discourse on college campuses by correcting perception gaps.)

Braver Angels is familiar with perception gaps. For example, More In Common’s research on perception gaps was presented during the March 2026 Braver Angels All Hands meeting. That presentation also referred to separate More in Common research showing that “intergroup anxiety” is the largest factor discouraging interaction across politics. Perception gaps go well beyond ideology. Americans are much less supportive of hostility in political conversations than perceived, and are actually much more curious about those with different ideological views than expected. Americans overestimate stereotypical demographics, especially of those in the other party. Various threatening attitudes are much less common than perceived, including dehumanization, willingness to break democratic norms, and support for winning at all costs and political violence. (It might be noted that the Braver Angels Convention’s theme of the Revolution could lead some listeners to believe that engaging Braver Angels presents *physical* risks).

There are also misperceptions of those in one’s own political party. These include incorrectly thinking co-partisans are more politically intolerant of out-party members than in reality. Such misperceptions may lead someone to overestimate the discomfort risk of telling someone in their own party something generous about the other party (say a Blue (or Red) telling a fellow Blue (or Red) something generous about Reds (or Blues)).

While Americans should absolutely have the resolve, fortitude, and confidence to engage in conversations and collective problem-solving across politics, the actual risks of doing so are often lower than perceived. Indeed, some Americans very much *enjoy* conversations across politics, seen in data about conversations between strangers among all adults and college students.

Citizenship

There are different ways to define citizenship, and Americans understand citizenship differently depending on their life experiences. However, the classical definition of citizenship refers to the relationship between a person and a polity. Since Aristotle, we have understood that “A citizen

is a *member of a political community who enjoys the rights and assumes the duties of membership.*”

It is relevant to ask how *courageous citizenship relates* to the American Revolution. As [James Kettner](#) explained in his seminal study, “The Development of American Citizenship,” the Revolution marked our “transformation from subjects to citizens”: the founders abandoned their status as citizens based on fidelity to the sovereign authority of the King and adopted a more robust citizenship rooted in popular sovereignty. Echoing Kettner, [Linda Kerber](#) argues that, “...the founding generation...constructed a new and reciprocal relationship between state and citizen.”

This conception of citizenship (with rights and responsibilities) should be understood as a [social contract](#) between citizen and state (e.g., social contract theories of Hobbs, Locke, Rousseau, and others). Interestingly, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship currently listed by the [U.S. Customs and Immigration Service](#) (USCIS) are very consistent with the social contract view of citizenship. As Table 1 suggests, some of these rights and responsibilities are specific and legally enforceable, while others are broad and philosophically aspirational. Taken together, they represent a bargain between the citizen and the government.

Table 1: Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship (USCIS)

	RIGHTS	RESPONSIBILITIES
SPECIFIC & LEGAL	• Trial by Jury • Right to Vote • Right to Apply for Federal Jobs • Right to Run for Elective Office	• Obey All Laws • Pay Taxes Honestly & On Time • Serve on Juries • Defend the Nation if Called
BROAD & PHILOSOPHICAL	• Freedom of Expression • Freedom of Worship • Right to Life-Liberty Pursuit of Happiness	• Support/defend the Constitution • Stay Informed on Issues Affecting One’s Community • Participate in Democratic Processes • Respect Rights, Beliefs & Opinions of Others • Participate in Local Community

The broad and philosophical rights and responsibilities in the table correspond directly with *courageous citizenship*. They highlight our responsibilities to stay informed and to participate. A citizen’s relation to the state is healthier when it is built on respect for others’ personal views and rights.

America’s leaders convened the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia because the nation had not thrived under the Articles of Confederation. The resulting Constitution set the framework for citizens’ relationship (their social contract) with government. Since then, the

social contract has been revisited several times, including during the Civil War, the Progressive Era, the New Deal, the Great Society, and the Reagan Revolution. Each of these periods involved active citizenship that revised the social contract by extending rights and responsibilities to more people and expanding the scope of government (particularly the national government).

We are at a point in our nation's history where we once again need to revisit the social contract, particularly the role of citizens in government. But because of the expansion of rights and the size and scope of government, the modern federal administrative state has grown so complex, with so many stakeholders, that it is exceedingly difficult for ordinary citizens to have an impact on, or know how to participate in, our federal government. However, this is less so with state government, and much less so with local government, where there are much clearer avenues for participation and impact. So, in considering the role of citizenship, we need to be mindful that the kinds of citizen engagement required will be different for national, state, and local governments, with each having its own opportunities and limitations.

Examples of Courageous Citizenship

In this section we provide two very different examples of how citizens have participated in courageous citizenship, to draw out some of the ideas discussed in the sections above on courage and citizenship.

Courageous Citizenship in The Women's Movement

The Women's Movement offers insight into *courageous citizenship* in two respects. First, it illustrates the continuum of courage that citizenship may include. Second, it illuminates how *courageous citizenship* can redefine the relationship between citizen and state, and how, in turn, that redefined relationship can affect citizenship.

The Movement began as a demand for full citizenship, and its accompanying rights and responsibilities. The crusade for suffrage exemplified varying types of courage and models of citizenship. For example, women arrested in 1917 for picketing the White House were imprisoned in the [Occoquan Workhouse](#) where they endured forced feeding during a hunger strike; this indeed required much courage due to physical risks. In other examples, the [Women's Club Movement](#) provided a national network that broke norms to assert women's citizenship rights. In addition, individuals such as [Jennette Rankin](#) elected to Congress from Montana in 1916 and Jane Addams, a leader of 1912 Progressive Party, risked derision, even from other women. These last two examples required courage to overcome the risks of social rejection and ostracization.

As the Women's Movement developed through the 20th century, the Movement's strategy shifted from mass mobilization (with its accompanying risks, including many physical risks) toward professionalized advocacy (with a different set of risks, including the risk of norm defiance). This shift was an illustration of how the citizen-state relationship had evolved since the Constitutional

Convention from the [Bill of Rights](#) (which protected citizens from federal government power), to FDR's [Economic Bill of Rights](#) (which saw the federal government as a protector of citizens' rights). In this new paradigm, organizations such as [NOW](#), rather than demanding universal

rights and responsibilities of citizenship, aim to “enhance the status of women in the United States...”; and the [National Women’s Law Center](#) (NWLC) “fights for gender justice – in courts, in public policy, and in our society.”

An instructive example of this new paradigm was the evolution of Title IX. When Title IX was enacted in the wake of [2nd Wave feminism](#) of the sixties, it linked federal funding to women’s rights. What followed was decades of litigation and administrative measures leading to a contest of executive actions: President Obama’s 2011 “Dear Colleague Letter” supporting victims of sexual assault was countered by President Trump’s rulemaking to guarantee due process rights for the accused, which was then countered by President Biden’s E.O. 13988, expanding the rights that women’s organizations wanted during the Obama Administration. Without passing judgement on the merits of these new laws and agencies, it seems clear that the Women’s Movement now exercises citizenship in ways that are weighted more to an inside game dependent on expertise, technocratic skill, and money than an outside game driven by citizen activism. The *courageous citizenship* of the suffrage movement rewrote the social contract (particularly in relation to the federal government), and in doing so changed the state in ways that presented new challenges to citizenship. It may be that the older version of citizenship based on voluntarism and mobilization still works at the local or even state level, but at the level of national politics *courageous citizenship* requires an important but different approach.

Perceptions of Risk at School Board Meetings

Citizenship at a local level involves the relationship between residents and local government bodies. The degree of actual courage required varies, and often the perceived risks are worse than reality. This is explored via issues surrounding education and school board meetings around the year 2021, when issues such as masking policies, transgender student bathroom usage, and critical race theory were prominent. Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS) in Virginia became a [national example](#) of highly-charged school board meetings.

In one incident, the actions of Kellie Herring (a LCPS parent of a transgender son) risked weakened relationships and psychological discomfort, when she spoke about her son at a school board meeting. A reporter at the meeting [noted](#) that “Ms. Herring was unable to complete her sentence; the crowd broke into jeers and boos, and the meeting went into recess.”

Although we have heard many similar stories in recent years, the reality is that the vast majority of school board meeting attendees will not encounter such uncivil behavior. For example, a [study](#) of ~100,000 board meetings across 1,600 districts from 2010 and 2023 found, “Only 6% of districts in the dataset experienced a high-conflict meeting.” Even during high-conflict 2021, there was an article about a few of Loudoun’s nearby districts which had the [title](#), “School equity debates relatively calm...”

Such articles about disruptive and angry school board meetings (and other local public meetings) inflate perceptions of risk to higher levels than warranted. Due to the journalistic practice of “if it bleeds, it leads,” it can be considerably harder to find stories of the more common experience of someone going to a school board meeting without incident.

While rancorous school board meetings are relatively rare, one author did experience such a school board meeting. The meeting resembled a political rally, complete with bullhorns and “No More Masks” signs. CNN covered the event which included footage of a mask-supporting father being threatened in the parking lot because he spoke out against masking. This father’s act was a display of *courageous citizenship* because of the psychological and physical risks involved. However, *courageous citizenship* can also be less risky -- take the example of one of us reaching out to a woman who did not support masking, but who also condemned the threatening behavior against the father in the parking lot. While this courageous conversation involved some personal risk, it also helped mitigate the traumatic experience of that unpleasant school board event.

Conclusion and Implications for Braver Angels

In this paper, our focus has been to examine the term *courageous citizenship* and the variety of forms it can take. This examination is essential for understanding what *courageous citizenship* entails, and, even more importantly, having a basis for others to implement it in their lives so Braver Angels can achieve its mission of helping people communicate and act together across differences. The common thread of this discussion is that *courageous citizenship* is not a monolith. Instead, *courageous citizenship* falls along a continuum. It’s a concept that Americans see differently, depending on their life experiences, current situation, and level of risk aversion. For *courageous citizenship* to spark a movement, it’s particularly important to recognize the component of risk and that people tolerate risk differently.

Also importantly, the words “courage” and “citizenship” themselves have different meanings and different interpretations. For some people, “courage” might be associated with physical risk, to risks to livelihood or property. For others, “courage” might be associated with the significant awkwardness of having a difficult conversation about politics with a relative.

There are many ways that *courageous citizenship* can be demonstrated, as we have examined in this paper, both from a historical perspective and in the modern day. For the risk-adverse, a one-on-one conversation with someone they disagree with about a specific local or national policy may be a tolerable risk. For others who are less risk averse, pushing back on their in-group when friends or colleagues start denigrating “the other side,” may be considered an acceptable risk. For still others, speaking up on a contentious issue in a public meeting may fit their risk level and desire to express their views.

Appreciation of the perception gap - that having conversations with others may not be as dangerous as you initially thought it would be and can actually be pleasant and meaningful - is critical to encouraging others to engage in courageous citizenship. This perception gap is exemplified by comments of participants taking part in Braver Angels workshops or events focused on finding common ground. We are not as different as the media would lead us to believe, and there is satisfaction in finding solutions together. However, it’s also important to realize that *courageous citizenship* can result in losing a friendship, a job, being attacked on social media, or even (though still rare) political violence. It’s essential to recognize that *courageous citizenship* is not for everyone, and that there is a time and place for engagement. We advocate giving space to those who are not willing to engage in *courageous citizenship*, at

least in this moment but may find their courage over time. Perhaps suggesting they have a conversation with an estranged relative at a holiday get-together, not necessarily about politics, will build confidence over time as they see their relationship involving more trust.

As we discussed in the section on citizenship and the example of the Women's Movement, there is a large difference in how *courageous citizenship* can be practiced on the local, state, and national level. Braver Angels' Immigration Initiative is our first attempt to address a topic at all levels of government, and we are smartly taking fundamentally different approaches on immigration on the local and national levels.

Specific Suggestions for Braver Angels

Our discussion leads us to suggest some relatively simple steps Braver Angels can take to better leverage the phrase *courageous citizenship*, and thus move toward the vision the phrase is designed to achieve.

- Regarding courage and Perception Gaps, Braver Angels may benefit from adding an appendage to its messaging about the differences between perception and reality, and clearly drawing implications of perception gap data that it already uses. While still using the phrase *courageous citizenship*, Braver Angels can also say that sometimes Americans don't *need* as much courage as they think they do. Braver Angels can continue talking about perception gaps, building on the content presented at the March 2026 All Hands meeting (and potentially details in this paper) to say Americans across politics are often not as ideologically extreme as perceived, and usually better conversation partners — and generally better people — than imagined.
- Regarding citizenship, Braver Angels can acknowledge in its messaging that citizenship can be challenging, not only because of the courage that might be needed to engage, but also because of the way government and politics have evolved since the Progressive era. These changes have been most pronounced at the national level, and least pronounced at the local level, but Braver Angels should acknowledge the challenges brought about these changes at all levels of government. And while it might be compelling and motivating to draw similarities between our current time and the period of the American Revolution, the actual challenges (and opportunities) faced by Americans then and now are vastly different in many ways.

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