



Civic Populism, Courageous Citizenship and Democratic Renewal as America Turns 250

Will Friedman* – May 2026

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 examines civic populist movements and their role as incubators of courageous citizenship that enriches civic life and fights for a fairer economy and more deeply democratic political system. It offers a brief history of such movements in America and examines their relevance to our democratic challenges today.

The democracy scholar and activist Harry Boyte tells this story of his early years in the Civil Rights Movement:

Working for...the Southern Christian Leadership Conference I escaped an unpleasant fate when caught by KKK members in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1964. They accused me of being a communist and a Yankee. I replied that I was a southerner and a populist. We then had a conversation about whether it would be possible for poor whites and blacks to ever make common cause. Afterwards, [Martin Luther King, Jr], hearing the story, told me he was also a populist and proposed that I organize in poor white communities. ([Boyte, 2022](#))

Those few sentences say a great deal about courageous citizenship and why it matters in our fraught political moment. It also illuminates my essay's argument that populist movements need not be the destroyers of democracy that many pundits make them out to be. They can, in fact, be vital sources of democratic renewal, serving as incubators of courageous citizenship that works to heal divisions, strengthen communities and build power for needed change, especially during destabilizing "populist moments." Moreover, such citizenship is at the heart of more deeply democratic "everyday politics" ([Boyte 2004](#)) that, if widely enough practiced, can help us avoid the kind of crisis in which we now find ourselves.ⁱ

Our Dangerous Populist Moment

The populist mistrust and discontent roiling our politics has been building for many years. In focus groups I conducted a decade ago ([Friedman and Rinehart, 2017](#)) it sounded like this:

A lot of people are swinging the hammer and working hard, and they may vote, but really, votes don't matter and the money and the interests of big business are making the decisions.

Washington, DC-area resident, Independent

Our government is more worried about their pockets than they are worried about helping the people. *San Diego-area resident, Republican*

Our democratic process is in shambles, it's so bad. I think that is why there is extreme poverty, because everyone's not on a fair playing ground. *Cincinnati-area resident, Democrat*

These sentiments have, if anything, been growing stronger, as 68% say government "mainly works to benefit powerful elites" rather than regular people ([Cohn 2022](#)), about two-thirds say politics is too divisive and exhausting ([More in Common, 2022](#)); and trust in government continues to plummet ([PEW 2025](#)).

Such conditions are ripe for the demagoguery and democratic backsliding we're facing today. And yet, the civic spirit of ordinary Americans remains a potent source of renewal, as those same focus groups suggested once the conversation turned toward solutions:

Underneath the freeway [where I live] there's so many families with newborn babies that can't afford rent. The community came together, one of the local churches got involved, and then people just started donating all these supplies. *San Francisco-area resident, Democrat*

That's a fantastic idea. *San Francisco-area resident, Republican*

Such civic spirit has helped America find its way through dangerous populist moments past, especially when integrated into populist *movements* that create a culture of courageous citizenship and build collective power to reform and revitalize democracy.

This notion, though, cuts across the grain of the many contemporary pundits who frame our crisis as the poisoning of liberal democracy by populism, full stop. They describe an illiberal politics of trumped up outrage and divisiveness, in which disadvantaged scapegoats are vilified, the demagogic leader claims to be the one true people's one true tribune, and democratic institutions and norms are gleefully bulldozed for the supposed return of a lost golden age (e.g., [Muller, 2016](#); [Naim, 2017](#), [Mounk, 2018](#); [Galston, 2018](#)).

These analysts are right, of course, to decry the kind of politics they describe, but err in substituting a particular *form* populism can take – the illiberal, authoritarian-leaning populism of, say, the white supremacist George Wallace of the 1960s or Turkey's Recep Erdogan today – for *all* forms of populism. But, as activist John Russel explains, “Populism that insists we are too different to get along is just divide and conquer by a different name...There's another sort of populism...” ([Russell 2024](#)). Let's call that other sort “civic” or “democratic” populism.ⁱⁱ

Both authoritarian and civic populist movements speak to the widespread political frustration and mistrust of our populist moment, but their solutions lead down profoundly different paths. Where the former embraces a politics of resentment and strongman rule, the latter champions a politics of renewal and strong citizenship.

Populism can become a lens and animating force for such contrasting political projects because, “It is not an ideology, but a political logic—a way of thinking about politics” (Judis 2016: 14). It is a logic that operates in the tensions between struggling ordinary people and advantaged elites, a kind of fundamental framework for grappling with problems of extreme political and economic inequality that Kazin elegantly describes as “the interests of the many against the privileges of a few” ([2017: 145](#)).

But it is also more than that – it is *a political logic with a political culture*, and different political cultures undergird different populisms pursuing different ways of life and politics.

Authoritarian populism has an authoritarian culture (the strong leader, a pure and innocent people against impure and pernicious ‘others’...). *Civic populism* has a democratic culture, which Boyte describes in these terms:

[I]n democratic populism, as people defend their ways of life they develop in democratic ways. They become more conscious of other groups' interests, more inclusive in their understandings of "the people," more expansive in their visions of future possibilities, and more aware of the richness of popular histories of struggle in the past. ([Boyte 2011: 23](#))

Moreover, while authoritarian populism fuels "a know-nothing culture that disparages not only expert knowledge, but also deliberative processes of public judgment" ([Grattan 2016: 34](#)), *democratic* populism "...is civically educative, developing people's public identities, imaginations, and skills" ([Boyte 2011: 17](#)). As such, it features a commitment to what I call *deliberativeness*, i.e., to curiosity, learning, lively debate, independent thought and problem solving.

Finally, as Goodwyn illustrates, "Individual self-respect and collective self-confidence are the building blocks of democratic [populist] movement culture" ([1978: xix](#)). This is the foundation for the courageous citizenship that civic populism develops and which expresses itself in three political "directions": *Vertically*, it challenges concentrated and exploitative power and complicit institutions. *Horizontally*, it challenges ancient or newly manipulated divisions among people that undermine solidarity and coalition building. And *imaginatively*, it envisions what a meaningful and just democracy can look like and how to achieve it. We can see these forms of courageous citizenship at work in rising populist movements working to renew democracy during unstable populist moments in America's past.

Civic Populism's American Past

The Original Populists

The roots of democratic, or civic, populism extend to the moment the nation declared its independence in a document listing 27 grievances against King George amidst ongoing public debate about the collective future people wished to pursue. As a formal political movement *within* American politics, it began with the Farmer's Alliance of the late 19th Century in the shadow of the Gilded Age.

The grinding sand catalyzing the pearl of populism were massive monopolies that crushed the prospects of family farmers in post-Civil War America. Company towns and exploitative loans were among the tools keeping farmers in poverty while funneling profits to corporate titans. Gradually, farmers began imagining ways to cooperate to gain leverage against the system and attract members to their Alliance. "We are emerging from a period of intense individualism, supreme selfishness, and ungodly greed," a member proclaimed, "to a period of cooperative effort" ([Goodwyn 1978: 95](#)).

The Alliance connected the dots between economic fairness and strong democracy, eventually forming the People's Party, nicknamed Populists, as a vehicle to transform the system itself, imagining "a new plateau of democratic possibility" ([Goodwyn 1978: 157](#)). In addition to the everyday politics of creative and cooperative mutual aid among farmers and urban industrial workers, these original Populists stood up for women's suffrage, the direct election of senators, the adoption of the secret ballot, and various economic reforms. And they pursued what Goodwyn termed "...the most radical dream of all – a farmer-labor coalition of the 'plain people'

that was interracial” ([Goodwyn 1978: 118](#); also, [Pollack 1967: 359](#); [Boyte 2011](#); [Grattan 2016](#)). This included a groundbreaking alliance of black and white southern farmers that, while ultimately defeated, earned the admiration of W. E. B. Dubois ([Frank 2021: 43](#)).

Nor were those original populists the anti-knowledge, paranoid rubes they are sometimes made out to be ([Hofstadter, 1965](#)). For the People’s Party,

Education was the first order of business, and the movement conceived of itself as a sort of “national university,” employing an army of traveling lecturers. Chapters of the movement ran lending libraries; radical rural newspapers (of which there were many) sold cheap books about agriculture and political reform. ([Frank 2020: 21](#); also, [Grattan 2016: 53](#)).

The movement’s deliberative spirit was on display in a pamphlet of the era that concludes, “[I]f the facts and arguments we present can be refuted we neither ask nor expect your support” ([Frank 2020: 26](#)), and in “enormous encampments where five, ten, and twenty thousand men and women listened intently to the plans of their Alliance and talked among themselves about those plans” ([Goodwyn, 1978: 34](#)).

New Deal Populism

While the People’s Party faded (as American third parties tend to do) some of what they helped inject into the nation’s democratic imagination was accomplished during the Progressive Era that followed, including women’s suffrage (19th Amendment) and the creation of the Federal Trade Commission to rein in corporate abuses. More was then accomplished in America’s next surge of civic populism in the New Deal.

Justice Louis Brandeis captured the era’s populist ethos in remarking: “We may have democracy or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can’t have both.” FDR did the same in recognizing “the forgotten man,” in his willingness to take on powerful corporations, about whom he said, “...I welcome their hatred;” and in his economic-populist policies.

But such elite rhetoric and leadership would have amounted to little if not for the civic-populist energy, organizing and cultural evolution at the grassroots:

In the New Deal, ethnic neighborhoods, unions, congregations, lodges, a local press, neighborhood schools, or the YMCA were mediating institutions, places that brought people together for shared purposes. In these, people developed the political skills of dealing with people of diverse opinions. Such local political settings...developed the civic energy, attitudes, habits, and implicit understandings of politics as productive, activity of citizens themselves...([Boyte 2004: 27](#)).

Add to this a tremendous wave of union organizing, which led a local Steel Workers leader to conclude, “It’s worth twelve dollars a year [in union dues] to be able to walk down the main street of Aliquippa, talk to anyone you want about anything you like, and feel that you are a citizen.” ([Kazin 2017: 135](#)). There’s that self-respect and confidence Goodwyn saw in the original Populists.

The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was key, as much a people's movement as a workplace organization, as CIO president John L. Lewis explained,

The millions of organized workers banded together in the CIO are the main driving force of the progressive movement of workers, farmers, professional and small business people...They are also the backbone of the resistance to all the forces that threaten our democratic institutions and the liberty and security that Americans hold dear. ([Kazin, 2017: 135](#))

Like the Farmers Alliance, the CIO struggled against prevailing prejudices to build solidarity across racial lines, advocating for "...giving blacks equal access to jobs and unions – and ending the larger injustices of Jim Crow." For Lewis, "the problems of the Negro people are the problems of all American wage earners" ([Kazin 2017: 146,147](#)).

There was, as well, that civic-populist surge of civic learning and dialogue across the nation. Calling it "the last time democracy almost died," historian Jill Lepore ([2020](#)) recounts how the New Deal was brimming with ambitious initiatives that anticipated today's deliberative-democratic innovations. These engaged millions of Americans in public-spirited discussion on the meaning of democracy and how the nation could best secure it, which Lepore views as a key to the nation's ability to persevere through the crisis. There were special newspaper and periodical features, and "a nationally-broadcast radio program, America's Town Meeting on the Air,"

...a debate, usually among three or four panelists, on a controversial subject (Does the U.S. have a truly free press? Should schools teach politics?), before opening the discussion up to questions from an audience of more than a thousand people. The debates were...broadcast to listeners gathered in public libraries all over the country, so that they could hold their own debates once the show ended. ([Lepore 2020](#))

There was also a five-year, federally funded community-forum initiative convening regular citizens to discuss questions of democracy, fascism, New Deal policies, capitalism, and more. "The program...came to include almost five hundred forums in forty-three states and involved two and a half million Americans...'It seems to me the only method by which we are going to achieve democracy in the United States,' Du Bois wrote..." ([Lepore, 2020](#)).

"New Dealers were trying to save the economy; they ended up saving democracy," Lepore concludes. "They built a new America; they told a new American story...Americans gained a sense of their shared suffering, and shared ideals: they listened to one another's voices."

Civil Rights Populism

Lepore is right that Americans listened to one another like never before, but it must also be said that this hearing was incomplete. Even as the CIO grappled seriously with questions of racial justice and equality, the New Deal's public policies largely sidestepped them. It is significant, then, that we see democratic populism rise again in the Civil Rights movement.

For King, democracy was always at the heart of the Movement, whose members he saw as, "...standing up for the best in the American dream and carrying the whole nation back to those

great wells of democracy...” ([King, 1968](#)). Especially by the time of the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968, when King had concluded, “What good is having the right to sit at a lunch counter if you can’t afford to buy a hamburger?” the civic populism of the movement was plainly evident.

Like earlier civic populist movements, the Poor People’s Campaign worked toward multi-racial coalitions, this time instigated by black leadership, as in one planning meeting that included, “Native American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and white communities, representing 53 organizations. ‘It has been one of my dreams that we would come together,’ King told the gathering” ([Dellinger 2018](#)). As in populist movements past, it was about living an inclusive, citizen-centered vision of democracy that builds power to build flourishing communities – and to change the system so that vision becomes more possible for more people.

Civic education and “deliberativeness” were again central to the work. This was perhaps most obvious in its “Citizenship Schools,” through which tens of thousands of black Southerners studied the political system and nonviolent means of change. Boyte traces this culture of civic learning to the Rosenwald Schools early in the 20th century, with “more than 5,00 schools and 10,000 libraries in Black communities across the American South during Jim Crow segregation...” ([2024: 18](#)). The schools also served as deliberative spaces and “centers of public action. School rooms were designed so that classroom partitions could be rolled back after school, creating space for the community to meet” ([Boyte 2024: 18-19](#)).

The Civil Rights Movement was as much a cultural movement as a political one shaping public policy. Indeed, the two were intimately intertwined. Along with sit ins, boycotts, and negotiations with politicians, the Movement was having a fateful cultural conversation with the broader American public through a kind of call and response of nonviolent action and American public opinion. This undergirded much of the legislative success it ultimately achieved on civil and voting rights (e.g., [Wasow 2020](#)), and opened the American imagination to the possibility of multi-racial democracy and the political and spiritual power of nonviolence.

Democratic Populism Today and the Days to Come

[John Judis \(2016\)](#) documents the surge of populist movements and parties after the 2008 Great Recession. That trauma was received not by flourishing and resilient democracies but ones weakened by a host of challenges: wage stagnation and mounting insecurity amid towering inequality; the decline of social capital, intermediary organizations and real relationships through which people learn to be good neighbors and citizens; a public discourse short-circuited by knee-jerk polarization, a deteriorating news media and the democracy-be-damned algorithms of social media; a popular culture of celebrity, spectacle and endless consumption; a political culture that divides, exhausts and isolates.

As a result, illiberal populist movements have gained great traction and power, but that is starting to change. Alongside today’s democratic backsliding, strands of democratic populism and its courageous citizenship are coming into focus. Collectively, they echo civic populism’s vertical challenges to concentrated power, its horizontal solidarity across divides, and the imaginative vision of what democracy can be.

First, civic populism's cooperative spirit is alive towns and cities across America that have stopped waiting for someone to save them and are setting aside culture wars the better to work together on shared problems, from improving schools to creating good jobs and working through old injustices. James and Deborah Fallows are among those documenting this unsung civic work ([2018](#); www.ourtownsfoundation.org).

Second, fresh efforts are underway to create meaningful dialogue across lines of partisanship, race and geography, supported by thousands of organizations and initiatives emerging in recent years – Braver Angels prominent among them, with many others gathered at the [Listen First Coalition](#).

Third, democracy reforms and innovations are again gaining traction, from ranked choice voting (to lessen incentives to vilify opponents in elections), to the steady spread of democratic innovations that enable citizens to co-create public policies. These include [citizens assemblies](#) (random samples of residents learning about and deliberating on solutions to public problems); [participatory budgeting](#) (communities working together to decide how to invest a portion of public spending); and [next-generation online platforms](#) (that support public dialogue and decision-making).

These are proving more productive and satisfying to citizens than traditional approaches to public engagement (e.g., [People Powered, 2026](#)). At times, they have also been transformative: Ireland's citizens assemblies catalyzed needed constitutional updates ([Farrell and Suiter 2019](#)); Taiwan's AI-assisted online engagement helped increase trust in government from 9% in 2014 to a startling 70% in 2020 ([Boyle 2025](#)); and Brazil's participatory budgeting was associated with an almost 40% reduction in infant mortality ([Goncalves 2014](#)).

Finally, a great deal of grassroots organizing is happening – sometimes in protest (the massive No Kings rallies, the Tesla boycotts), and also to create a better economic future for working people (a resurgent union movement, the many successful state-based "fight for fifteen" campaigns). Much of this reflects a surge of *economic* populism, which is gaining strength in electoral politics as well as in grassroots organizing, especially among a new generation of Democratic politicians. Examples include Senate candidate James Talarico of Texas ("The culture wars are a smoke screen. The biggest divide is not left vs. right; it's top vs. bottom"), and mayors and governors like Zohran Mamdani, Mikie Sherrill, and Abigail Spanberger, who won in 2025 with a laser focus on affordability and a rambunctious readiness to take on powerful interests. But it is also the theme for some younger Republican politicians, like Missouri Senator Josh Hawley, who collaborated with Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren on the 2026 Break Up Big Medicine Act, and rising conservative thinkers like economist Oren Cass fighting for pro-worker policies ([Cass, 2018](#); [2024](#)).

This offers an opportunity: Past civic populist movements have tended to begin with economic grievances before blossoming into big-tent people's movements working for a flourishing democracy alongside a fairer economy. This evolution is possible today.

From Economic Populism to Democratic Populism

Grassroots organizing for good jobs and a fair economy does something that purely electoral politics does not: it builds durable relationships across racial, ethnic, and geographic lines around shared material interests. Union drives in diverse workplaces, living-wage campaigns in multiracial cities, cooperative enterprises in struggling rural towns – these create the horizontal solidarity and civic muscle that civic populism requires.

People who have learned to trust one another across difference and who have flexed collective power over their material lives want to use that strength in new arenas, and one of those arenas can be the shaping of public policies that citizens assemblies and other deliberative-democratic innovations facilitate. But the reverse is also true: citizens assemblies, participatory budgeting, and the like build their own kind of muscle, developing civic confidence and capacity that sends people back into their communities with greater ambition for collective action. Together they can rebuild the civic confidence and democratic trust that ordinary people need to become – and know themselves as – citizens.

This is why a promising path forward lies in the strengthening and interplay of grassroots organizing – especially around “affordability,” the economic-populist theme of the day – and participatory/deliberative democratic innovations through which regular people gain greater voice in policymaking. As Rahman and Gilman point out: “building a truly inclusive democracy will require deep investments in building bottom-up, membership-driven civil society organizations, and radically more participatory and democratic policymaking institutions that these organizations can engage and influence” (2019: 3). Boyte also discusses the possibility of “deliberative public work” (2014), a politics that combines local organizing and public deliberation to create “...civic agency by putting citizens at the center of democracy” (2011: 4). These two strands are currently running on separate tracks, each with its own momentum. The task now is to braid them together.

Of course, none of this happens automatically, and we should be clear-eyed about the powerful anti-democratic forces we face and the distance between today's promising strands of civic populism and the populist movements that helped turn the tide toward deeper democracy in America's past. But that's why it's called *courageous* citizenship. When Harry Boyte talked his way out of a KKK confrontation by calling himself a populist and opening a conversation about whether poor whites and blacks can make common cause, he was reaching for something that demagogues fear: a politics that views people as fellow citizens who can, despite their differences, join forces to live democratic lives and build democratic power.

As the nation turns 250, the question is not whether courageous citizenship is possible – it is stirring as we speak – but whether enough of us will work together to exercise it to meet our perilous moment.

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ⁱ In this essay I use “citizen” and “citizenship” not in its technical-legal sense, but to refer to all contributing or potentially contributing members of a community.

ⁱⁱ I use “civic” and “democratic” interchangeably as qualifiers of the kind of democracy-enhancing populism I’m concerned with here. Others have used “aspirational” ([Grattan 2016](#)) and “inclusive” ([Rahman and Gilman, 2019](#)) for similar purposes. For *anti*-democratic forms of populism, I’ll use either “illiberal” or “authoritarian.” Some scholars distinguish these two qualifiers in fine-grained ways, but for my purposes they both serve.