



Harnessing Courageous Citizenship to Move from Zero-Sum Thinking to Negotiable Pluralism

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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

We discuss the historical roots of zero-sum thinking in the United States. Zero-sum thinking assumes that if one side gains power, status, or recognition, the other side must necessarily lose. It fuels affective polarization, erodes trust, and converts disagreement over policy issues into perceived existential threats. Practical solutions are presented to move from zero-sum thinking to negotiable pluralism, in which cooperation across differences to solve thorny policy issues allows everyone the opportunity to achieve the American Dream.

One of the most powerful and corrosive features of contemporary American political life is the widespread assumption that politics is a zero-sum contest: if one side gains power, status or recognition, the other must necessarily lose. This assumption bleeds into policy positions, shaping our emotional responses and moral judgments. Most importantly, *zero-sum thinking* fuels affective polarization, erodes trust, and converts disagreement over policy issues into perceived existential threats. Disagreements are turned into contests rather than problems to solve. In contrast to [*negotiable pluralism*](#),ⁱ a process in which competing groups engage in dialogue, negotiation, and compromise to influence public policy, zero-sum thinking converts complex problems into moralized contests with no acceptable compromise.

In this paper, we will describe the historical roots of zero-sum thinking in the United States, and how these roots shape culture in the present day. We will then discuss factors to reduce affective polarization and promote civic development, in which citizens cultivate self-awareness, curiosity and humility as they navigate complexity and a deeper sense of shared belonging. In our experience, when citizens have mastered civic development, they can then cooperate across differences using a negotiable pluralism model to solve thorny policy issues and create a society where everyone has the opportunity to achieve the American Dream.

Section 1. What is Zero-Sum Thinking?

Zero-Sum Thinking emphasizes winners and losers in society. One group's gain is viewed as another's loss, with groups mobilizing to defend or reclaim status rather than negotiate tradeoffs. The group that perceives itself as the loser develops ***status anxiety***—the fear that one's social rank, cultural influence, economic security, or moral authority is slipping. The group mobilizes to defend or reclaim status rather than negotiate tradeoffs. Politics becomes a struggle not over policy details but over survival of our identities. The conflict sustains itself for two key reasons. First, the conflict is often highly emotional, with fear of humiliation and loss of dignity leading to backlash. Outrage and reactivity are triggered. Second, political leaders can translate status anxiety into power by offering clear enemies, simple narratives, and policies promising to restore status. The emphasis shifts from solving policy problems to a “us. vs them” zero-sum battle. Journalist and author Amanda Ripley refers to this as [*“high conflict”*](#) where the conflict takes over, and almost everyone ends up worse off. Political parties become deadlocked and dysfunctional, thus weakening public support for democracy in a downward spiral.

One contemporary example of zero-sum thinking is the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act. This proposed federal law focused on **tightening voter eligibility** rules for

federal elections, requires individuals to provide documentation of US citizenship when registering to vote. Referred to as the “SAVE America Act” by many on the right, this legislation has been viewed as a way of ensuring that only US citizens who are eligible to vote are allowed to vote- critical legislation to combat election fraud. However, many on the left argue that **voting rights** would be compromised for millions of eligible voters due to this increased documentation requirement. [A 2023 national survey by the Brennan Center for Justice](#) found that 21 million people (9% of American citizens of voting age) do not have easy access to documents proving citizenship and that Americans of color were disproportionately affected (11% compared to 8% of white Americans).

How our leaders frame the issue is critical. Rather than being treated as a policy issue that can be addressed through compromise, SAVE has become an example of toxic polarization, pitting Democrats vs. Republicans as exemplified by [these comments](#).

Senate Majority Leader John Thune:

The SAVE America Act is comprised of commonsense measures that the majority of Americans support. The only folks who don't support it appear to be my Democrat colleagues.

Senator minority leader Chuck Schumer:

“If MAGA Republicans want to bog down the Senate over a debate on voter suppression, Democrats are ready.” “The SAVE Act is not a voter ID bill. It is, in every sense, a voter suppression bill. It could purge millions of American citizens from the voter rolls.”

Status anxiety becomes particularly acute when rapid structural change makes boundaries and hierarchies uncertain, and when leaders and institutions fail to cushion the change or actively stoke fear for political advantage, contributing to affective polarization. When did status anxiety and zero-sum thinking begin, and what can we do to move from this visual to one where we all believe we have a shot at the American Dream?

Section 2. What are the historical origins of Zero-Sum Thinking and Status Anxiety in our country?

The American Revolutionary Period.

As early as the 1760's, imperial taxation and trade regulations triggered a marked level of status anxiety among the colonial property owners, artisans, and frontier farmers who feared loss of local autonomy and honor under British measures such as the [Stamp Act](#) and [Sugar Act](#). These Acts were viewed not only as economic burdens but as **assaults on their status** as Englishmen entitled to self-government. Colonists felt they were being subordinated to British subjects, and an infectious distrust of distant authority emerged. When Parliament introduced new revenue measures, Boston merchants and artisans feared not only taxes but public humiliation — **the loss of standing** as “freeborn Englishmen.” At a [Boston town meeting](#) on May 24, 1764, the representatives declared:

“If our Trade may be taxed, why not our Lands? Why not the Produce of our Lands and everything we possess or make use of?”

The Jacksonian Era

In the 1790's, western frontier producers felt taxed and politically marginalized by eastern financial and political interests. This anxiety and distrust carried over and became widespread during the **Jacksonian era**, particularly when all white men gained suffrage and the market revolution (commercialization, banking, canals, and railroads) began to dominate the economic landscape. Status anxieties were two-sided. [Jackson's rhetoric](#) cast established elites (bankers, eastern insiders) as parasites on the “common man,” mobilizing those who felt overlooked and turning their resentment into democratic politics and a personal, zero-sum style of contest over offices and resources; the spoils system reinforced the idea winners take offices, losers are excluded. On the flip side, commercial elites feared that majoritarian rule and populist attacks would strip them of economic influence and institutional protections (e.g., a central bank).

While politics is necessary to resolve differences over policy, when partisanship takes over, differences in policy cannot be negotiated. The Jacksonian era was characterized by deep partisan cleavages rooted in competing visions of who “deserved” power. The political outcome was intense personalization. The American Founders feared [political factions](#) would tear our nation apart.

The Civil War

Perhaps no period in our history better illustrates the impact of zero-sum status fear leading to inflammatory and destructive polarization than the [Civil War](#). The expansion of antislavery politics, the Civil War, Emancipation and the legal enfranchisement of formerly enslaved men triggered a deep and widespread loss of status. White Southerners felt their political and social/racial dominance to be directly threatened. Many Northerners and white Americans also experienced anxiety about shifting national power and social order. Freed Black people felt both the promise of elevated status and continuing threats.

Many white Southerners viewed the freeing of the slaves as an existential threat. For white Southerners, the public humiliation of being defeated and the end of slavery, combined with palpable fear that the economy of the South could collapse represented the **quintessential zero-sum perception** (Black advancement = white loss). That fear translated into violent resistance (paramilitary groups, pogroms) and [Black codes](#) that were restrictive, discriminatory laws passed by Southern states to subjugate formerly enslaved people, control their labor, and maintain white supremacy. In the North and at the federal level, debates over Reconstruction became polarized over whether Black political participation represented rightful inclusion or a destabilizing redistribution of status and power. The result was a brutal, often violent political struggle with long-term institutional backlash that hardened racial politics for generations that exist today.

The Gilded Age

The **Gilded Age**, roughly 1870-1900, was a period of enormous change and tumult. The triggering events were rapid industrialization, mass immigration, formation of large corporations and fortunes, and agrarian distress (railroad rates, falling crop prices). One writer has characterized the age in light of the [challenges of managing politics in a large multi-racial and multi-ethnic nation](#).

Nearly everyone was impacted by these changes and experienced some form of status anxiety. Small farmers feared economic dispossession by railroads and banks, skilled artisans were threatened by mechanization and wage competition, and native-born elites worried about cultural dilution and political influence amid mass immigration. Newly ascendant industrial capitalists feared populist political reprisals though largely gained wealth. Immigrants and urban working classes suffered declining relative status and precarious livelihoods as corporate power expanded.

Farmers and small producers developed a strong zero-sum narrative toward eastern capitalists and bankers (Populist movement). Native-born Protestants often felt their cultural authority eroding with waves of Catholic and Jewish immigrants and reacted with nativist politics; later the Chinese Exclusion Act was explicitly about protecting jobs and cultural dominance. Labor unrest, strikes, and violent clashes (e.g., Haymarket, Homestead) were **expressions of economic and status anxiety**: workers saw industrial capitalists' gains as their losses. Politically, the period produced sharp class cleavages, intense partisan realignment in some regions, and policies that both expanded economic power for capital while provoking enduring social resentments.

Populists like Mary Elizabeth Lease (Figure 1) captured rural despair. Lease was voicing genuine fear that farmers—long the nation's backbone—were being pushed into irrelevance by railroads, banks, and corporate power. Their status anxiety fused economic hardship with cultural insult.

Figure 1. [Mary Elizabeth Lease](#). (not subject to copyright as published before 1931)

At a Kansas rally in 1890 [she declared](#):

“Wall Street owns the country... Money rules.. the parties lie to us and the political speakers mislead us”Industrialists insisted that their success was natural, efficient, and beneficial to society. From this perspective, the real fear was that populist politics would punish initiative and disrupt progress. Capitalists saw themselves as civilizational leaders whose authority underpinned national prosperity.



Andrew Carnegie wrote in the [Gospel of Wealth](#):

“The law of competition... ensures the survival of the fittest in every department.”
(*The Gospel of Wealth*, 1889).

It is important to recognize that Carnegie, in the same essay, wrote “The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced,” with his essay viewed as a foundational document in the field of philanthropy.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression itself caused widespread downward mobility and loss of hope creating status anxiety across classes. While initially it tore apart the lives of millions across the country, it was the New Deal reforms that created heightened status anxiety. Unions were strengthened, business regulated and federal power greatly expanded. Many business leaders interpreted these changes and policies as threats to their liberty, their autonomy and their prestige.

The zero-sum approach to differences between workers and business leaders was the damaging part of the New Deal reforms, with each side framing (presenting) the issues in a way that left little room for compromise.

[Alfred Sloan of General Motors](#) warned (1937): **“General Motors grew up on the principle that a worker’s job and his promotion depend on his own individual ability- not on the say-so of any labor union dictator.”** But for many workers, the New Deal was a long-delayed recognition of their dignity. A worker in the [Flint sit-down strike in 1937](#) proclaimed: **“We are now treated as human beings, and not as part of the machinery.”**

The Sixties and the Vietnam War

Key triggering events of affective polarization in the Sixties included the Civil Rights Movement (legal dismantling of segregation), the Great Society programs, major immigration reforms, rapid cultural change (sexual revolution, counterculture), urban unrest, and the Vietnam War.

Backlash was powerful, widespread, and immediate; many white Americans — especially working- and middle-class whites in cities and suburbs perceived legal gains for Black Americans, federal civil-rights enforcement, and cultural liberalism as **threats to their social standing**, workplace advantages, and cultural authority. Traditional authorities (religious leaders, older generations) also feared moral erosion ‘midst the declining role of organized religion and the widespread sexual revolution.’

These fears fueled a **powerful backlash**: massive resistance in the South, inspired “law and order” politics in response to racial protests and riots, and inspired the political realignment that brought many white Southern voters into conservative Republican coalitions. Politicians like [George Wallace](#) and later [Richard Nixon](#) rhetorically channeled zero-sum anxieties (Black gains = white losses). Cultural polarization intensified as people sorted into different media,

neighborhoods, and institutions, and partisan identities hardened attitudes to race and social change.

In the wake of civil rights legislation, many white Americans—especially in the South—feared the collapse of a racial and cultural order that had long centered them. George Wallace portrayed federal courts, civil rights activists, and urban liberals as **humiliating ordinary whites** and stripping them of moral authority.

The Present Day.

“I’ve worked hard all my life, and I feel like I’m moving backward... and people who just got here are moving forward.”

— Interview quoted in Hochschild, 2016, [*Strangers in Their Own Land*](#).

Other related forces that contributed to affective polarization through American history include contrasting definitions of freedom (freedom from oppression *vs.* freedom from government interference), the role of national *vs.* local government, and disputes over who should vote, hold office, or otherwise participate in our political community.

Twenty-first century America faces numerous challenges, including (but not limited to) affordable health care, education, and housing, artificial intelligence, climate change, free speech, freedom of religion, government overreach, and immigration. Sadly, many of these challenges have been framed by our leaders as existential threats to our way of life, rather than thorny problems to be solved by Americans working together and incorporating tradeoffs (negotiable pluralism). Furthermore, our leaders, along with some mainstream media outlets and social media, have messaged challenges in a way that promotes outrage (and more clicks).

It is important to note that zero-sum thinking is not always mistaken. Some issues demand moral clarity and a refusal to compromise. Historical examples include slavery and authoritarianism. After the Civil War, conflicts over immigration, civil rights, culture and identity led to struggles to distinguish between moral absolutes and negotiable pluralism. Our country came together during World War II to combat global authoritarianism.

We argue that the health of our democracy depends on the collective ability to distinguish between conflicts that require moral firmness and those that demand negotiation, patience, and institutional faith. When that distinction erodes, politics becomes a permanent emergency, and pluralism is experienced as a threat rather than a component of freedom.

Section 3. How do we transform zero-sum thinking to a model of renewal where everyone can participate in the American Dream?

Can we move from zero-sum thinking to a framework that will allow us to tackle complex challenges facing our nation? The real question is not whether we are divided, but how we can transform our divisions into sources of renewal rather than further destruction. MIGHT Americans engage in the hard work of self-government, which includes viewing “the other” not as a threat but as a partner in creating a bigger “pie” of resources for all? Rather than claiming

higher moral ground, we look for ways to work together to solve tough policy issues and create a deeper sense of shared belonging. We can engage in negotiable pluralism, believing that a healthy democracy has space for many voices.

As outlined in the book, [*Beyond the Politics of Contempt: Practical Steps to Build Positive Relationships in Divided Times*](#), a key step in moving from outrage to working together across differences is **awareness** –awareness that we are being taken advantage of by **conflict entrepreneurs** (e.g., media, politicians, foreign powers) who seek to divide us for their own profit and power. As part of this awareness, look at the information you are taking in, on the nightly news, on news websites and podcasts, and on social media. Can you pick out rhetoric? How does it make you feel? Can you pause long enough to see rhetoric-laced news for what it is? Now go to a different source for your news. You may want to look at news media who are working to reduce rhetoric and provide balanced news, such as [Straight Arrow News](#), [All Sides](#), [Tangle](#) and others to get balanced coverage of national events. Ask yourself-- are we really dealing with an existential threat or a complex problem that can be solved by harnessing the best thinking across the political spectrum? On a societal level, we must push for greater media literacy and civic education throughout society so that citizens can identify and reject media content designed to create outrage and revenue. Awareness of the underlying recurring structures of conflict, including zero-sum thinking, that have been highlighted in this paper, can also help Americans recognize that the nature of the intense political and cultural divisions we experience today are not new in American life. This essay focuses on civic development (inner development of citizens, including self-awareness, curiosity, humility, and the capacity to hold tension without immediate reaction). However, awareness of past examples of zero-sum thinking can motivate deliberate actions to overcome the obstacles to renewal. For example, citizens can work on local project to make an impact in their communities.

As we become aware of high conflict, author Amanda [Ripley encourages us](#) to investigate the understory of conflict, digging deeper into what people fear, and complicating the narrative by asking lots of questions about a situation. For example, are US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) events scary to some because of the perception that the bullies are winning? To others who hold a high regard for authority, are protests against ICE unsettling?

Once we have become more aware of high conflict and conflict entrepreneurs, we can **practice humility and curiosity**. This requires interacting with people who are different than us, and going outside our “bubble,” “tribe,” or “in-group.” Author Mónica Guzmán, in [“I Never Thought of It That Way”](#) refers to the tendency to stick close to people who think like us as a call for help in scary and uncertain times- SOS- sorting, othering, and siloing. But staying within our in-group can blind us to each other’s perspectives and make it difficult to see the world around us.

We need to intentionally promote opportunities for **low-stakes, high-contact cross-partisan, class and multi-racial/ethnic interactions** in local, non-political settings (civic groups, volunteer organizations, teams and clubs etc.), reversing the trend documented by Robert Putnam in [Bowling Alone](#). National public service would be a huge step toward reestablishing a **more unified identity** rather than living in separate realities. Local

organizations and actions should be encouraged in every village and town. Civic renewal has a better chance when people step out of their digital silos and back into shared spaces.

After awareness, a next step is to engage in conversations to promote relationships. Many disciplines, including [motivational interviewing](#) and [non-violent communication](#), and non-profit bridge-building organizations such as [Braver Angels](#) have emphasized the importance of active listening, which helps people feel heard by acknowledging their viewpoints (not necessarily agreeing although finding something that you can agree on). For example, during the COVID pandemic, Americans might agree on the importance of prioritizing the health of a community, even if they differed on what community health meant (eradicating most cases of COVID *vs.* keeping schools and businesses open).

You will know you are making progress on this step when you begin to view “the other” in a way that doesn’t provoke outrage but instead curiosity. Even if “they” appear to be “dealing with a different set of facts,” practice enough so that you can hear their viewpoint and identify the underlying tension, the roots of which may lie in zero-sum thinking/status anxiety. While you may shift their viewpoint on a policy issue, also be open to shifting your own viewpoint, or learn from the information your partner provides to strengthen your arguments.

Finally, **take your practice back into your in-group**. While some issues are zero-sum issues and existential threats to our society, most are not. Can you muster the courage to tell your in-group that you understand why people living in coal country are concerned about their job security and disruption to their way of life with a transition to green energy? Or that you understand why American citizens who are not white are fearful of ICE? Can you avoid using terms such as “woke” (in your right in-group) and “environmental racism?” (in your left in-group).

Table 1. Steps and Sources Related to Courageous Citizenship

Step	Source
Awareness of impact of conflict entrepreneurs, practicing humility, development of critical thinking skills.	Beyond the Politics of Contempt High Conflict Varied News Sources (e.g., AllSides, Straight Arrow News, Tangle)
Expanding cross-partisan, class, and multi-racial and ethnic interactions with curiosity.	I Never Thought of It That Way Bowling Alone
Communication across differences	Braver Angels Workshops such as Skills for Disagreeing Better Braver Angels Language Guide
Take practice back to your in-group	Braver Angels Workshops such as Depolarizing Within

Section 4. Summary.

In this paper, we describe zero-sum thinking and how it contributes to affective polarization using history to provide examples. Throughout our nation’s history, there has been ongoing tensions, especially as leaders have grappled with questions about over who should vote, hold office, or otherwise participate in our political community. While major gains have been made

in inclusion of Americans, backlash has occurred throughout our history, and our work as a nation is unfinished.

We then discuss steps focused on civic development at the level of the individual, including awareness of zero-sum thinking and us *vs.* them framing, the importance of interacting with people outside our in-groups, and the development of skills for engaging in conversations to promote relationships and moving beyond outrage into action. Once these steps are mastered, Americans can then engage in public work and deliberative problem solving, using negotiable pluralism to tackle complex challenges and make the American Dream accessible for all.

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ⁱ Institute for Humane Studies. Toleration and Pluralism: Living Together in Freedom. Published May 18, 2025. <https://theihs.org/blog/toleration-and-pluralism-living-together-in-freedom/>