



How Americans Learned to Volunteer

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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

The United States has long been called a nation of joiners, but we often forget that volunteering was new for most Americans. After American independence, ordinary men and women learned to organize and join voluntary associations. The emergence of the United States's vibrant civic culture depended on both the spread of new knowledge and ample opportunities to put that knowledge into practice. By understanding the conditions that encouraged voluntarism in the past, we can generate ideas to rebuild a culture of citizenship today.

Since the nineteenth century, visitors to the United States have been fascinated by Americans' willingness to join clubs and associations to get things done together. Of course, Americans had long joined churches, but by the 1830s they were also joining thousands of different kinds of groups for everything from singing to supporting female suffrage. "Wherever there is a new undertaking, at the head of which you would expect to see in France the government and in England some great lord, in the United States you are sure to find an association," wrote the French visitor [Alexis de Tocqueville](#).

These observers recognized that they were seeing something distinctive and new about how Americans built their democracy. *And it was new.* People at the time knew it. Celebrating the spread of missionary societies into "almost every town in New England," [the officers](#) of the Auxiliary Foreign Missionary Society of Boston understood that it would take time for all the new members and officers of local clubs to be "familiar with the routine of their duties, and acquiring a facility in their discharge."

Everywhere one turned one could find commentary about Americans' newfound interest in volunteering. An [evangelical publication](#) in the late 1820s published a "dialogue between a little girl and her mother" in which the girl exclaims, "Mother there are so many societies!... I longed for you this afternoon when I came home from school, and they told me you were gone to the Maternal Society." Suddenly, Americans had a lot of civic commitments that took them out of their home.

Voluntarism is one of the central ways Americans became co-producers of their democracy, what Harry Boyte calls *public work*. Public work, according to [Boyte](#), is the "sustained, uncoerced effort by a mix of people who create things of lasting civic or public significance." The work is public because it is done in the open, and thus observable and accessible. Because it is "undertaken by a mix of diverse people," it also forges a public. And third, the work "is filled with public purpose," and thus people know that they are acting for a larger good. Through public work, Boyte writes, citizens become "*co-creators, builders of the common world, not simply voters and volunteers who fit into that world or protestors who oppose it. Democracy itself is a way of life, not simply elections, and it is built through civic labors in a myriad of settings.*"

By volunteering, Americans learned to see themselves as part of a larger civic community. And that matters because, according to political theorist [Danielle Allen](#), by participating in shared institutions, we Americans "have the chance to shape our collective world together."

Yet too often we take voluntarism for granted. We naturalize it. And we worry when we think it is disappearing, as did [Robert Putnam](#) in his famous argument that that more and more Americans were bowling but fewer were participating in leagues. Understanding how Americans became a nation of joiners, however, allows us to see that sustaining America's civic culture requires constant care and depends on certain conditions. First, there must be a *supply of opportunities* for people. Second, people need to develop *new civic skills* so that they can participate in civil society. And, third, as more people take advantage of those opportunities, participation must be a cultural norm, producing what sociologists have called a *civic culture*.

By the 1830s, for many Americans, volunteering *had become* an expected part of how they lived their lives; it had become routine. Zelona Eaton, a Baptist minister in Troy, Ohio, was active in the antislavery and temperance movements. He also participated in a debate at the local lyceum over slavery in DC. In 1844, [his diary](#) notes, "Spoke at Anti Slavery Meeting Mond. Night & temperance meeting last night." The next week, the antislavery association met again on Monday, and Tuesday and Wednesday were filled with "Temperance Lectures by Mr. Fairchild of Sandusky City." At each of these meetings, he engaged with other citizens. For some Americans, life became very busy, but also fulfilling.

I discovered the importance of thinking about the formation of America's civic culture historically when I visited Kazakhstan in 2000, not long after the fall of the Soviet Union. I visited a local school. The educators there told me that they were trying to encourage parents to become more involved, much like parents are in the United States. But there was no culture of voluntarism. Under the Soviet regime, parents were not encouraged to get too involved or ask too many questions. But as what was then called an emerging democracy, educators wanted to encourage democratic habits. Developing those habits is not easy.

The United States might be seen as one of the world's first emerging democracies. Yet before Americans could become a nation of joiners, they had to learn how to join and what to do once they did. Ministers were among America's most important civic teachers. Once they discovered the power of association, they sought to encourage their congregants to form and join associations. The knowledge of association spread from church to church, neighbor to neighbor, until it became part of America's culture, part of what Americans did to participate in public life.

As more and more Americans learned to join, associations spread across the country and expanded their reach to a broader swath of Americans. In town after town, ministers encouraged congregants to provide charity, to distribute Bibles, and to fight such vices as intemperance. Forming an association required drafting a constitution, electing officers, soliciting members and dues, and then acting locally. Although these seem like small things, as more and more Americans learned to do them, they [transformed the country's civic landscape](#).

Americans applied their newly acquired civic skills to bring forward causes that politicians would have preferred to keep out of politics—especially antislavery. After the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin and other elite members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society had petitioned Congress to end slavery, and their appeals were received politely by their peers. By the 1830s, however, ordinary Americans, Black and white, would make their voices heard from the grassroots as ordinary people got involved.

Black Americans ensured that antislavery remained on the public agenda. Through churches, fraternal associations, and charities, they developed a network of associations that spoke among and for themselves. These networks enabled organizers to circulate petitions calling for the end of slavery and discrimination. By the 1820s, African Americans had formed antislavery societies, hosted conventions, and published pamphlets and newspapers publicizing slavery's evils and calling for its abolition. These networks provided not just the ideas but the money for white editor William Lloyd Garrison to start his newspaper, *The Liberator*, which would become the nation's most prominent abolitionist publication. In its first year of publication, 450 of its 500 subscribers were Black.

It was in civil society that some of the issues that matter most to Americans today entered our public conversations. This is not to deny or diminish the role of political elites or political parties. My point is that by organizing themselves, ordinary people discovered a way to be part of American politics. By getting together in associations and reaching out to their fellow citizens, Americans learned that they could shape their shared world together. They did not just consume public opinion; they helped produce it.

Today, Americans today continue to volunteer. They join their local school PTA. They bring snacks to their children's soccer games. They volunteer for charities and through their churches. They serve on committees. They join causes. In all these ways they care for each other and for their communities. Yet there are signs that the number of Americans volunteering is declining as growing numbers of Americans retreat into their private lives and spend more time alone and online. Adding to the problem is that [fewer Americans](#) gather these days [in church](#), historically one of the most important institutions for making connections and engaging with the community.

The United States became a nation of joiners when local civic leaders encouraged people to join and provided meaningful opportunities to do so. Americans not only learned to organize themselves but discovered the joy of working together to shape their common world. By cultivating these conditions once again, we can hopefully start the hard work of rebuilding our civic culture.

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