



Relearning Citizenship in the Age of Information: Holding Truth and Experience Together

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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

How do we make room for both truth and lived experience as meaningful sources of information in conversations across political differences? Drawing on original research about real political conversations, this paper explores what conditions make us more likely to listen with curiosity to another person's perspective, disagree without dismissing their experience, and stay engaged with respect and tolerance when someone sees the world differently.

1. Introduction

Courageous citizenship in the twenty-first century requires a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between shared information and experience. In an era defined by unprecedented exposure to one another's lived realities, traditional norms of civic debate are increasingly strained. Personal experience now circulates publicly, shaping political identity, moral conviction, and collective action. Yet civic discourse has not evolved to account for this shift. As a result, experience is often treated as something to be corrected, countered, or discredited, rather than acknowledged as real for the person who lives it. ([Wike et al., 2022](#); [Bennett & Segerberg, 2014](#))

Many of the norms governing public disagreement emerged under conditions of informational scarcity and greater emotional distance. Personal experience constitutes an inarguable truth for the individual, even as it remains only one part of a larger, shared reality. ([Hosseiniardi et al., 2025](#); [Caruso, 2025](#))

When lived experience is denied or invalidated, it rarely produces more shared clarity; it more often erodes trust and civic standing. At the same time, elevating experience to unquestionable authority risks fragmenting civic conversations into irreconcilable narratives. The civic task, then, is to hold shared information and lived experience together without collapsing one into the other. ([Hosseiniardi et al., 2025](#); [Grasswick, 2018](#); [Lind & Arndt, 2016](#); [Rostbøll, 2023](#))

This paper argues that courageous citizenship is increasingly a matter of how truth is encountered and held in public life. It argues that democratic renewal depends in part on the cultivation of practical civic capacities that allow people to remain in relationship amid disagreement, especially when lived experience is present, visible, and consequential. More specifically, it is an exploratory study of the skills and capabilities that may help people stay in relationship and sustain healthy civic dialogue while working toward a shared democratic life.

In the sections that follow, the paper focuses on respect, curiosity, and tolerance not as abstract virtues, but as practical civic skills that can reduce erasure, make room for shared information and experience, and sustain democratic responsibility amid disagreement.

To explore these ideas, this paper draws on original survey data about recent political conversations in which the respondent and another person disagreed. The survey was designed to explore how individuals experienced those conversations and to bring ordinary civic encounters into clearer view. If courageous citizenship is a lived civic practice, it must be visible not only in theory or institutional design, but in the actual conversations where people experience difference, strain, uncertainty, and the possibility of remaining engaged anyway.

2. Background and Conceptual Framing

In the past, when people had less access to shared information, fewer avenues for public engagement, and far less immediate exposure to the lives of people beyond one's own circles, disagreement could more easily be treated as a contest of ideas detached from the intimate realities of the people holding them. That is no longer the world democratic citizens inhabit. ([Caruso, 2025](#))

Today, people encounter not only arguments, but also the lived experience of others through social media, personal storytelling, and other forms of public expression. They see real accounts of loss, exclusion, fear, dignity, displacement, injustice, hope, and belonging not as occasional illustrations, but as constant features of public discourse. As a result, political disagreement is increasingly shaped not only by shared information and ideology, but by biography, emotion, memory, and lived experience. ([Wike et al., 2022](#); [Park, 2025](#))

In contemporary public life, personal narrative often functions as political communication, shaping identity and moral conviction as much as formal argument does. ([Boswell, 2013](#); [Polletta & Lee, 2006](#)) This helps explain why disagreements that might once have stayed at the level of policy now more often land at the level of dignity, belonging, and civic standing.

This shift does not eliminate the need for shared information or democratic deliberation. But it does change the civic challenge. The question is no longer only how to determine what is true amid competing public claims. It is also how to stay in relationship when people encounter truth through both shared information and lived experience. Under those conditions, dismissal can feel not just like disagreement, but like erasure.

That changed context helps explain why contemporary polarization cannot be understood only as a breakdown of values or a failure of information. It also reflects a gap in civic skill. Many people have not been taught how to engage another person's experience without either collapsing into agreement or moving immediately into correction. They have not been prepared to stay curious when another person's perspective feels threatening, to remain respectful when disagreement carries moral weight, or to tolerate the discomfort of unresolved difference without resorting to domination, contempt, or withdrawal.

This paper builds on the idea that polarization is experienced not only as disagreement about issues, but as a breakdown of trust and cross-group legitimacy: the capacity to see people across difference as rightful participants in shared civic life. ([Rostbøll, 2023](#); [Lind & Arndt, 2016](#)). In that context, the felt presence or absence of reciprocity becomes central to whether people experience the other person as curious, respectful, and willing to remain present.

One of the key challenges is the ability to hold and handle truth that is not one's own—integrating new information with what one already knows—without treating the other person's experience as either unchallengeable authority or something to be erased. ([Grasswick, 2018](#); [Rostbøll, 2023](#)) This paper approaches respect, curiosity, and tolerance as practical capacities suited to these conditions. Curiosity creates room to ask where beliefs come from (including information sources and lived experience), while respect and tolerance keep that inquiry relational, so that people can remain in dialogue long enough to build understanding together.

In this study, these capacities are operationalized through questions about interest in hearing the other person, openness to the possibility of missing something, perceived respect and tolerance from the other person, and the hope respondents felt afterward about finding a way forward together. Taken together, these capacities help make democratic life possible under present conditions by allowing people to hold difference without surrendering the possibility of shared civic work, creating space for disagreement without dehumanization, and offering a more constructive path forward than either nostalgic appeals to prior norms or endless efforts to determine whose experience is most valid.

In this sense, courageous citizenship is not only the courage to speak. It is also the courage to remain in relationship when certainty is limited, agreement is unlikely, and shared civic life still depends on our willingness to stay engaged with one another.

3. Research Question and Methodology

This paper asks a central question: What civic capacities help people stay engaged in political conversations across disagreement in ways that can hold shared information and lived experience together, without collapsing into either dismissal or relativism? The study is exploratory and descriptive; it is intended to surface patterns in how people report experiencing disagreement and working toward shared understanding in conversation, not to make causal claims.

To explore this question, the paper draws on original survey data collected over a seven-week period. The survey was distributed through LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, text message, and email. Some invitations were sent directly to Braver Angels members, while others were shared through open social channels and personal networks. Recipients were also invited to share the survey link with others, allowing participation to extend beyond the researcher's immediate contacts. The resulting sample is best understood as a convenience and snowball sample rather than a representative one.

The survey asked respondents to reflect on a real and recent political conversation with someone they disagreed with. Rather than asking for general views about polarization, civic discourse, or democratic decline, the survey asked respondents to anchor their answers in a specific interaction. This approach was intended to keep the data grounded in lived civic experience rather than abstract opinion.

The survey included both structured and open-ended questions. Respondents were asked to provide basic demographic and contextual information, including age, gender, political affiliation, state of residence, frequency of political conversations across disagreement, and whether they were connected to Braver Angels. They were also asked to identify the relationship involved in the focal conversation, such as family member, friend, coworker, acquaintance, or another personal connection.

The survey then invited respondents to reflect on how they experienced the conversation itself. Questions addressed themes such as interest in hearing the other person, curiosity about the experiences and information sources shaping the other person's view, willingness to consider whether they themselves might be missing something, the extent to which they asked questions,

how respected they felt, how able they were to stay present, whether they felt the urge to withdraw or control the interaction, and how hopeful they felt afterward about the possibility of finding a way forward together.

Although curiosity, respect, and tolerance were defined in advance for the purposes of this study, those definitions were used primarily to shape the wording of the survey questions and to keep the measures internally consistent. For internal survey consistency, I defined these as follows: curiosity (openness to understanding), respect (granting worth and consideration), and tolerance (staying present without forcing or folding). The definitions themselves were not shown directly to participants. This choice was intended to reduce priming and to preserve respondents' natural, experience-based interpretations of the specific questions as they reflected on a real conversation.

This approach fits the paper's broader argument. If courageous citizenship is increasingly a matter of how people encounter and hold truth in public life, then ordinary conversations across disagreement are an important site of inquiry. They offer a practical window into whether the civic capacities often named as necessary for democratic renewal are actually present in lived interaction, and how people experience those capacities when political difference becomes personal.

Analytic approach: The analysis is exploratory. I summarize descriptive patterns in the sample (means and distributions) and examine associations between variables using Pearson correlations. I also use independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA to explore differences across key subgroups (e.g., Braver Angels membership, relationship type, talk frequency, and age group). Given the number of comparisons, statistically significant results ($p < .05$) should be interpreted as signals of patterns in this dataset rather than definitive estimates for the broader population.

The limitations of the method should be acknowledged plainly. Because the survey relied on voluntary participation and network-based distribution, the respondent pool is self-selected and likely includes individuals who are more reflective, more civically engaged, or more willing than average to participate in a survey about political disagreement. The data is also based on self-report, which means it reflects respondents' interpretations of the conversation rather than a neutral record of the exchange itself. For these reasons, the survey is not intended to provide a definitive account of public life at large. Rather, it serves as an exploratory source of insight into how people are experiencing political disagreement and what civic capacities may help them remain engaged within it.

4. Results

The following section reports descriptive patterns and correlations from the survey responses. Because the sample is not representative, the results are presented as exploratory findings intended to illuminate what helps people remain engaged across disagreement while holding shared information and lived experience together in conversation. The results highlight the main patterns in the data, including the reciprocity gap, what most predicts hope afterward, how relationship context shapes the experience, and what differences appear among Braver Angels members and across political affiliation. For statistical tests referenced in this section, results

are treated as statistically significant at $p < .05$. Because a large number of correlations were tested, this section includes the relationships most relevant to the research question.

4.1 The reciprocity gap

On average, respondents reported moderate-to-high civic capacities in themselves (about 3.4–3.6 on a 5-point scale), but rated the other person much lower – especially for curiosity and tolerance. The overall average self-vs-other gap is 0.93 points, suggesting many people leave these conversations feeling they are “doing the work” without experiencing it in return. When reciprocity is missing, conversations are less likely to function as collective inquiry – making it harder to test claims, interpret experiences, and keep working toward shared understanding.

Civic capacity	Avg. self-rating	Avg. rating of the other	Gap (self – other)
Curiosity	3.62	2.28	+1.34
Respect	3.45	3.04	+0.42
Tolerance	3.47	2.43	+1.04

4.2 Predictors of hope

Hopefulness about “finding a way forward together” is most strongly associated with feeling respected and continuing to view the other person as worth listening to. Perceived engagement from the other person (composite $r = 0.58$) predicts hope more strongly than the self-reported capacities examined here, including openness to the possibility that they might be missing something important ($r = 0.31$) and interest in hearing the other person ($r = 0.27$). Put more simply: when people experience the other person as showing up with respect, curiosity, and tolerance, they are more likely to leave the conversation believing progress is possible. In an environment where shared information and lived experience can feel like competing “truths,” these results suggest that reciprocity—being experienced as curious, respectful, and tolerant—is a key condition for handling truth beyond one’s own and sustaining healthy civic dialogue across disagreement.

What predicted hope after the conversation	Correlation (r)
Other person still worth listening to (after)	0.61
Felt respected by the other person	0.55
Other person seemed tolerant	0.53
Other person seemed curious about you	0.47
Open to the possibility you were missing something important	0.31
Interest in hearing the other person	0.27

4.3 Respect and tolerance are tightly linked

The strongest relationship in the dataset links feeling respected to perceiving the other person as tolerant ($r = 0.77$). In other words, when someone can remain present to disagreement without dismissing you, it tends to be experienced as respect. This tight linkage suggests that, in practice, respect and tolerance often register as part of the same lived experience – and that preserving relationship and dialogue may depend on both being present, especially when agreement is unlikely.

Relationship	Correlation (r)
Other's curiosity → felt respect	0.65
Taking their view seriously → still worth listening to	0.63
Openness to missing something → making room for their view	0.62

4.4 Relationship context

While friends and family make up most conversations, family conversations show the lowest average scores on multiple measures – especially feeling respected and perceiving curiosity from the other person. Coworker conversations show the highest scores, suggesting professional norms may buffer disagreement.

Measure (1–5 scale)	Family	Friend	Coworker	Acquaintance
Felt respected	2.61	3.09	3.83	3.57
Able to stay engaged	3.22	3.53	4.33	3.57
Other person was curious about you	1.98	2.23	2.83	2.79
Other person seemed tolerant	2.20	2.23	3.42	2.79

4.5 Braver Angels membership

About 40% of the sample identified as Braver Angels members. In this dataset, Braver Angels membership is associated with higher average scores on several measures, including hope for a way forward, interest in hearing the other person, feeling respected, and staying engaged. This is a meaningful pattern and is consistent with the possibility that Braver Angels–adjacent norms, practice, or training exposure supports healthier conversations. At the same time, these results do not establish causality: membership may also reflect self-selection (people already motivated to depolarize may be more likely to join), differences in who members choose to have these conversations with, or variation in the amount and type of training individual members have received. For these reasons, the Braver Angels comparison is best read as an important association that points to a plausible pathway, rather than a definitive test of training effects.

Measure (1–5 scale)	BA members	Non-members	Difference
Hope for a way forward	3.30	2.55	+0.75
Interest in hearing the other person	4.09	3.44	+0.65
Felt respected	3.43	2.78	+0.65
Able to stay engaged	3.89	3.24	+0.64
Gave the other person real consideration	3.81	3.21	+0.61
Took the other person's view seriously	3.76	3.26	+0.50
Possibly missing something important	3.78	3.35	+0.42

4.6 Talk frequency

Respondents who talk politics across disagreement more often tend to report more openness and perceived reciprocity in these conversations. The comparison below groups respondents by how often they have these conversations (frequent, sometimes, rarely) and highlights the specific measures where the groups differed in this sample. To keep the focus on the clearest

patterns, the table reports only measures that differed by talk frequency at conventional statistical significance ($p < .05$).

Measure (1–5 scale)	Frequent	Sometimes	Rarely
Interest in hearing the other person	4.10	3.71	3.47
Other person seemed curious about you	2.62	2.40	1.98

4.7 Age group

Respondents in different age groups show modest differences in how they describe cross-disagreement conversations. The comparison below groups respondents by age (under 45, 45–64, 65+) and highlights the specific measures where the groups differed in this sample. To keep the focus on the clearest patterns, the table reports only measures that differed by age group at conventional statistical significance ($p < .05$).

Measure (1–5 scale)	Under 45	45–64	65+
Interest in hearing the other person	3.58	3.52	3.98
Other person still worth listening to (after)	2.81	3.46	3.49

4.8 Subgroups with no significant differences

Demographics, on their own, were not a strong differentiator in this dataset. In the subgroup analysis, gender showed no statistically significant differences on any of the eight measures tested (0/8), and political party affiliation likewise showed no statistically significant differences on any of the eight measures tested (0/8). It is also worth noting that “non-significant” results are not limited to those two subgroup categories: even in subgroup categories where some measures were significant overall (e.g., Braver Angels membership, relationship type, talk frequency (4.6), and age group (4.7)), several individual measures still did not differ significantly by subgroup (for example, “curiosity about the other person’s personal experiences” in the Braver Angels comparison).

5. Discussion and Implications

Several implications follow from these findings. The discussion below mirrors the structure of the Results section (4.1–4.7), moving from the reciprocity gap to predictors of hope, relationship context, and subgroup patterns. First, the “reciprocity gap” suggests that many people experience cross-political conversation less as mutual inquiry and more as asymmetrical effort. When respondents perceive themselves as curious and tolerant but perceive little curiosity or tolerance in return, the interaction can feel extractive or unsafe, even if no one intends harm. This pattern helps explain why calls for more dialogue often fall flat in practice: the issue is not simply whether people are willing to talk, but whether they believe the effort will be mutual.

Second, hope appears to be less a reward for one’s own effort than a response to the other person’s engagement. Feeling respected, experiencing the other person as tolerant, and continuing to view the other person as worth listening to are the strongest predictors of leaving a conversation with a sense that a way forward is possible. This reinforces the conceptual claim that respect and tolerance function as practical civic conditions: they do not eliminate disagreement, but they keep disagreement from becoming relational collapse. In that sense, they

support courageous citizenship by sustaining relationship and dialogue across difference – so people can stay present long enough to integrate what they hear with what they know.

Third, the differences across relationship types suggest that context shapes capacity. Family conversations may be harder not because family members care less, but because they often carry unresolved history, identity threat, and a higher emotional cost of being misunderstood. By contrast, coworker conversations may benefit from institutional norms, like turn-taking, politeness, and role-based boundaries, that can buffer disagreement from personal escalation. This implies that strengthening civic life may require not only individual skills, but also settings and norms that make reciprocal engagement more likely.

Finally, the higher scores among Braver Angels members point to a notable association between membership and several capacities linked to healthier conversation outcomes. This pattern is consistent with the idea that civic capacities can be strengthened through practice, norms, and community context. At the same time, self-selection likely shapes who joins such groups, and member status does not indicate the same level or type of training for every respondent. The practical implication for courageous citizenship is that skill-building approaches are worth taking seriously, even as future research would be needed to disentangle training effects from selection and context.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that shape how the findings should be interpreted. The sample is a convenience and snowball sample, distributed through personal networks and social platforms, and therefore cannot be treated as representative. The survey relies on retrospective self-report about a single focal conversation, which means responses reflect memory, interpretation, and attribution rather than an independent record of what was said or how each participant experienced the exchange.

Future research could strengthen the evidence base in several ways. One approach would pair reports from both participants in the same conversation to test whether reciprocity gaps reflect true asymmetry, differing perceptions, or both. Another would use observational or experimental designs to examine which specific behaviors (for example, reflective listening, asking about lived experience, or acknowledging uncertainty) most reliably increase perceived respect and hope. Finally, a more diverse and representative sample would help assess whether these patterns vary by demographic factors, media environment, or local civic context.

7. Conclusion

Civic life in the age of information is increasingly shaped by the public visibility of lived experience. The challenge is not to abandon shared information in favor of experience, nor to weaponize shared information against experience, but to develop the capacity to hold both forms of truth together. The survey findings in this paper suggest that hope for a way forward depends heavily on whether people experience reciprocity – especially respect and tolerance – from those with whom they disagree. If courageous citizenship is a practice, then it is practiced in ordinary conversations, where curiosity is tested, respect is either perceived as granted or withheld, and tolerance determines whether the relationship can survive difference.

Strengthening democratic life therefore requires more than better arguments; it requires cultivating the relational skills and norms that allow disagreement to remain human, mutual, and durable.

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Appendix A – Survey Questionnaire

This appendix lists the survey questions and response options used to collect data for this research paper.

Survey Introduction (as shown to respondents):

This survey is meant to help us better understand what it's like to talk about politics when people don't agree. Your participation will help inform efforts to support healthier, more constructive civic dialogue.

Instructions (as shown to respondents):

Think of one recent political conversation you had with someone you disagreed with, and answer the questions with that one conversation in mind. There are no right or wrong answers. Please respond as honestly as you can based on your actual experience in that conversation.

1. **Age**
 - **18-24**
 - **25-34**
 - **35-44**
 - **45-54**
 - **55-64**
 - **65-74**
 - **75+**
2. **Gender**
 - **Woman**
 - **Man**
 - **Prefer not to say**
3. **State of residence**
 - **Dropdown list of all states**
4. **Political affiliation**
 - **Democrat**
 - **Republican**
 - **Independent**
 - **Libertarian**
 - **No political affiliation**
 - **Another political affiliation**
 - **Prefer not to say**
5. How often do you talk politics with people you disagree with?
 - **Not at all**
 - **A little**
 - **Sometimes**
 - **Quite a bit**
 - **Very often**
6. Are you a member of Braver Angels?
 - **Yes**
 - **No**
7. Are you ready to start the survey?
 - **Yes**
8. What is your relationship to the other person in the conversation?

- **Family Member**
 - **Friend**
 - **Coworker**
 - **Acquaintance**
 - **Neighbor**
 - **Partner**
 - **Stranger**
 - **Other (open response)**
9. How interested were you in hearing what the other person had to say?
- **Not interested**
 - **A little interested**
 - **Somewhat interested**
 - **Quite interested**
 - **Very interested**
10. How curious were you about what personal experiences shaped the other persons view?
- **Not curious**
 - **A little curious**
 - **Somewhat curious**
 - **Quite curious**
 - **Very curious**
11. How curious were you about where the other person was getting their information?
- **Not curious**
 - **A little curious**
 - **Somewhat curious**
 - **Quite curious**
 - **Very curious**
12. How open were you to the possibility that there was something important you were not seeing?
- **Not open**
 - **A little open**
 - **Somewhat open**
 - **Quite open**
 - **Very open**
13. How much did you ask questions to better understand the other persons view?

- **Not at all**
 - **A little**
 - **Somewhat**
 - **Quite a bit**
 - **Very much**
14. How curious did you feel the other person was about hearing your perspective?
- **Not curious**
 - **A little curious**
 - **Somewhat curious**
 - **Quite a bit**
 - **Very much**
15. Before the conversation, how much did you see this person as thoughtful and worth listening to?
- **Not at all**
 - **A little**
 - **Somewhat**
 - **Quite a bit**
 - **Very much**
16. How much did you give this persons perspective real consideration during the conversation?
- **Not at all**
 - **A little**
 - **Somewhat**
 - **Quite a bit**
 - **Very much**
17. How seriously did you take the other persons point of view, even when you disagreed with it?
- **Not seriously**
 - **A little seriously**
 - **Somewhat seriously**
 - **Quite seriously**
 - **Very seriously**
 - **Very seriously (or Very seriously / Very seriously as displayed)**
18. How important did it feel to make room for this persons perspective in the larger civic conversation?
- **Not important**
 - **A little important**
 - **Somewhat important**
 - **Quite important**
 - **Very important**
19. After this conversation, how much did this person still seem worth listening to?

- **Not at all**
 - **A little**
 - **Somewhat**
 - **Quite a bit**
 - **Very much**
20. How respected did you feel by the other person during the conversation?
- **Not respected**
 - **A little respected**
 - **Somewhat respected**
 - **Quite respected**
 - **Very respected**
21. How able were you to stay present when the conversation became uncomfortable?
- **Not able**
 - **A little able**
 - **Somewhat able**
 - **Quite able**
 - **Very able**
22. How strong was your urge to control or overpower the conversation when the other person saw things differently?
- **Not strong**
 - **A little strong**
 - **Somewhat strong**
 - **Quite strong**
 - **Very strong**
23. How much did you shut down when the other person expressed views you strongly disagreed with?
- **Not at all**
 - **A little**
 - **Somewhat**
 - **Quite a bit**
 - **Very much**
24. How able were you to stay open to the other persons perspective without giving up your own?
- **Not able**
 - **A little able**
 - **Somewhat able**
 - **Quite able**
 - **Very able**
25. How able were you to stay engaged when disagreement remained unresolved?

- **Not able**
 - **A little able**
 - **Somewhat able**
 - **Quite able**
 - **Very able**
26. How tolerant did the other person seem when your perspective differed from theirs?
- **Not tolerant**
 - **A little tolerant**
 - **Somewhat tolerant**
 - **Quite tolerant**
 - **Very tolerant**
27. After this conversation, how hopeful did you feel about the possibility of people like you and this person finding a way forward together?
- **Not hopeful**
 - **A little hopeful**
 - **Somewhat hopeful**
 - **Quite hopeful**
 - **Very hopeful**
28. Is there anything else you would like to share about this conversation or your experience?
- **Open text response**

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