



Reframing Courageous Citizenship for a Polarized Age

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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

Across American history, democratic crises have demanded different forms of civic courage. This essay argues that today's polarization demands a relational form: the capacity to remain engaged across deep disagreement. Reframing polarization as relational erosion, it identifies the civic capacities and practices needed to sustain pluralism without requiring consensus.

Introduction: Renewing the Founders' Pledge

In the closing lines of the [Declaration of Independence](#), the signers pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honors to each other. This pledge was more than an act of political defiance. It was a commitment to remain bound to each other in a shared experiment of self-governance. The American project began not only with a set of [political principles](#), but with a promise of [mutual obligation](#), staking the participants' security, reputations, and futures on the survival of a democratic republic.

As the United States approaches the 250th anniversary of the founding moment, the meaning of the pledge invites renewed reflection. In each generation, Americans have faced moments when the [durability of the democratic experiment appeared uncertain](#). In those periods of fracture, courageous citizenship has taken different forms. In 1776, at the founding, courage required [risking life and livelihood](#) for political independence. In the 1860s, during the Civil War, courage meant [preserving the Union amid national rupture](#). In the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, courageous citizenship meant [expanding our understanding of democratic inclusion](#) and who counted in the promise of equality.

Today, the challenge facing American democracy is different, and requires a different type of courage. The nation is not divided by territorial rebellion or secession, but by [rising affective polarization and deepening distrust](#) among citizens. Political disagreement is increasingly seen as a [threat to identity](#). Opponents see each other less as fellow participants in a shared political project, and more as existential dangers to each other's values, communities, or ways of life. Under these conditions, democratic life is eroding through the [breakdown of civic relationships](#).

To understand this shift, it is important to consider how the meaning of courageous citizenship has evolved since earlier moments of democratic fracture. This paper argues that in a polarized democracy, the meaning of courageous citizenship must evolve once again. The central risks facing Americans today are often [psychological and relational rather than physical](#).

Consequently, courageous citizenship now requires the will and the discipline to stay in civic relationship despite deep disagreement. This moment calls for citizens who can regulate conflict without withdrawing legitimacy from each other, tolerate ambiguity without retreating into hostility and contempt, and sustain engagement even when consensus is unlikely or impossible.

Renewing the [Founders' pledge](#) in the twenty-first century therefore depends not only on defending democratic institutions, but on cultivating the skills and inner capacities that allow pluralistic societies to endure. In this era, courage lies in the willingness to remain bound to each other's lives, fortunes, and sacred honor despite profound disagreement about policies and the future of the nation itself.

The Evolution of Courageous Citizenship in American History

To understand why courageous citizenship must evolve to reflect the present moment, it is important to consider how its meaning has shifted during earlier eras. Across history, courage has emerged in response to the particular challenges facing the democratic project. In each era, the form of courage required of citizens has reflected the nature of the threat facing the democratic experiment, shifting from [physical risk](#) to [institutional preservation](#) to [struggles for equality and inclusion](#), to the current challenge of sustaining democratic relationships amid deepening division.

The United States has repeatedly faced periods demanding civic courage, including the periods noted earlier – the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement – moments when the now 250-year-old experiment faced especially grave threat. Whether fighting for independence from a distant crown’s rule, whether a nation “[so conceived](#)” in that independence could survive and “[not perish from the earth](#),” or whether a beacon of liberty could resolve to undertake a long journey toward justice, each period summoned courage from ordinary citizens and leaders alike. In each instance, the civic courage required to fight that oppression was spurred by a [conviction that the promise of inalienable rights was worth fighting for](#).

Our present moment, marked by intense polarization and civic paralysis, poses a different kind of challenge to the American experiment. The best of our citizens and leaders must now find a form of civic courage that does not center on a single, clearly defined source of oppression. Instead, a [downward spiral of polarization threatens democratic life](#) through [diffuse and self-reinforcing dynamics](#) that erode trust, undermine mutual recognition, and weaken the relational foundations of democratic life. These effects are easy to underestimate, and difficult to identify and address directly.

Today’s form of courage requires us to see and step beyond our own roles in giving in to, fostering, or profiting from polarization. The United States has long been a beacon of liberty, but to preserve that character, the nation must find ways to resist its downward trajectory of enmity and polarization. In this context, sustaining democratic life depends not only on institutional resilience but on the capacity of [citizens to remain engaged across lines of difference](#). The hard path of resistance to polarization requires the courage that brought the country this far, but in a different form: less oriented toward confronting visible external threats, and more toward sustaining relationships, tolerating uncertainty, and engaging constructively amid deep disagreement.

Polarization as a Crisis of Democratic Relationship

Today, the United States is confronting neither civil war nor the threat of secession. Instead, a deepening pattern of political polarization has transformed how citizens perceive and relate to one another. Both online and in person, political disagreement now appears less as a contest of ideas, and more as a source of [social distrust and moral suspicion](#). Scholars describe this shift as [affective polarization](#), a condition in which partisan divisions generate not only ideological differences, but also interpersonal hostility and social distance. As political identity becomes a primary lens for self-understanding, opposing views feel like a threat to [belonging](#)

[and moral legitimacy](#). The result is an [erosion of civic relationships](#) and [democratic norms](#) that enable pluralistic societies to sustain disagreement without collapsing into camps of mutual delegitimization.

Affective Polarization

Recent research shows that Americans increasingly view members of the opposing political party with dislike and distrust, and that [large majorities express unfavorable or even hostile attitudes toward partisan outgroups](#). This form of affective polarization reflects a [shift from policy-based disagreement to emotion-driven animosity](#). Contemporary polarization operates at the level of social identity. Citizens do not simply disagree with opposing viewpoints, but often regard those who hold them as fundamentally flawed. This shift is reflected in growing social distance, including [reluctance to form friendships, marry, or work closely with individuals who identify with a different party](#). Political affiliation, once one identity among many, has become a powerful lens through which Americans interpret character, values, and trustworthiness.

As partisan identity intensifies, political conflict takes on an emotional charge that extends beyond the issues themselves. Opposing views are more readily [associated with moral failure or bad intentions](#) rather than alternative interpretations. In this environment, the [possibility of good-faith or civil disagreement](#) narrows. Political conflict becomes less about persuasion, and more about defending oneself and one's group from perceived threat. The result is sharper division and a reconfiguration of political life in which the boundaries of 'us' and 'them' harden, making sustained democratic civic relationships increasingly difficult.

Identity Threat

When affective polarization takes hold, political affiliation is no longer a matter of preference or opinion; it becomes [intertwined with broader social identities](#), including race, culture, religion, and geography. As these alignments deepen, partisan attachment shapes how individuals interpret social and political life. Under such conditions, individuals are more likely to [favor those within their group and view others with suspicion or distrust](#). In some cases, political commitments become so closely tied to personal identity that disagreement is experienced as a [threat to the self](#) and can become [deeply embedded in identity processes](#). As a result, differences in viewpoint are more likely to be interpreted as a challenge to one's sense of belonging and moral standing rather than as competing perspectives.

As these attachments grow more morally and socially charged, polarization can take on a more pernicious form in which opposing groups view each other as [dangerous to the political order](#). This shift heightens the stakes of engagement. Disagreement is no longer about negotiating competing visions of the common good, but about protecting one's group from perceived harm. Under these conditions, openness to alternative views or compromise can feel like betrayal. The result is an environment in which citizens are unwilling to engage across differences because doing so risks undermining their sense of security and belonging. When disagreement is experienced as a threat to identity, the consequences extend beyond individual perception to the structure of civil relationships themselves.

Relational Erosion

As affective polarization intensifies and political identity becomes more central to how individuals understand themselves and others, the consequences extend beyond individual attitudes to the broader fabric of civic life. When citizens begin to view opposing partisans not simply as misguided, but as illegitimate or threatening, the [relationships that sustain democratic society begin to fray](#). Disagreement no longer takes place within a framework of mutual recognition, but across increasingly hardened lines of division in which [trust is diminished and goodwill is scarce](#). In this environment, norms such as toleration and a basic acceptance of political rivals as equal participants in a common project become [more difficult to sustain](#).

As these lines of division harden, opposing groups may come to interpret one another [not simply as competitors](#), but as [threats to their core values and way of life](#). These perceptions are often [reciprocal and self-reinforcing](#), contributing to cycles of escalation in which each side's defensive actions are interpreted by the other as further evidence of hostility. As these dynamics intensify, efforts to secure political advantage can take on a heightened sense of urgency, [distorting the framework of mutual recognition](#), depleting trust, and foreclosing goodwill. In this sense, polarization can operate through a dynamic in which [perceived threat begins to eclipse shared or verifiable conditions](#). When groups come to believe that their adversaries pose an existential danger, they may respond in ways that reinforce those very perceptions, contributing to a cycle in which anticipation of hostility generates further hostility in return.

Beyond shaping perceptions and interactions, these dynamics can also shape how citizens evaluate political outcomes. Under conditions of intense polarization, [even constructive or broadly beneficial actions may be resisted](#) if they are perceived to advantage the opposing side. The more consequential or widely beneficial an action appears, the greater the incentive to oppose it, not on its merits, but because of its potential to strengthen out-group legitimacy or influence. In this way, polarization can function as a [mutually-reinforcing system](#) in which [efforts to reduce division may inadvertently intensify it](#).

These relational dynamics are not merely incidental but [foundational to the functioning of a pluralistic society](#). Democratic institutions rely on trust, shared norms, and civic engagement that connect citizens to each other. As these foundations weaken, the system becomes more fragile, and the capacity to [navigate disagreement without escalation](#) diminishes. Polarization is increasingly associated with a willingness to tolerate or even [support anti-democratic actions](#) when they benefit one's own group. Partisan hostility is also linked to support for [political violence and the erosion of democratic norms](#). Under such conditions, sustaining a shared civic life requires more than institutional safeguards; it depends on citizens who are able to avoid succumbing to out-group antipathy and remain in relationship even in the presence of deep and persistent disagreement.

Courageous Citizenship as a Moral Demand of Democracy

If earlier generations were called to demonstrate civic courage through [physical risk](#) and material sacrifice, the present moment demands a different form of courage. In a polarized society, the central challenge is not only to defend democratic institutions but to [sustain the relationships](#) that make shared political life possible and preserve the [norms that enable](#)

[pluralism](#). Yet polarization erodes the foundations that allow citizens to engage as legitimate participants in a common project. Courageous citizenship, in this context, consists of the willingness to assume forms of psychological and relational risk that preserve those conditions.

This form of courage is less visible, but no less demanding than physical sacrifice. It requires individuals to remain open in the face of disagreement, to tolerate uncertainty without retreating into contempt, and to stay engaged with others despite deep differences and discomfort. Research in [political psychology](#) and [deliberative theory](#) underscores the importance of these capacities for sustaining democratic practice.

Psychological Risk

In a polarized environment, engagement across political difference often entails meaningful psychological exposure. Expressing openness to opposing views or acknowledging complexity can be [perceived as disloyalty](#) and [carry social costs](#). In these circumstances, individuals feel pressure to conform to group expectations and to defend shared positions with certainty. Research in political psychology shows that people tend to process information in ways that [reinforce prior beliefs](#) and [protect identity-consistent narratives](#). These tendencies are further shaped by [identity-protective cognition](#), in which individuals selectively interpret information to maintain alignment with their group ideology. Such dynamics are amplified when political commitments become closely tied to a sense of belonging, making deviation from prescribed viewpoints feel [personally costly](#). These pressures are reinforced by social environments in which [group norms and elite cues](#) shape how individuals interpret evidence and signal affiliation.

Responding to these pressures requires a willingness to remain open without retreating into defensiveness or conformity. Such engagement involves actively seeking out and [grappling with disconfirming information](#), while resisting the tendency to dismiss it when it conflicts with ingroup beliefs. This form of engagement is not passive. It demands active self-regulation, as individuals must manage emotional responses while remaining receptive to alternative perspectives. In this sense, civic courage lies not in certainty, but in the discipline and flexibility required to remain present in the face of discomfort.

Toleration of Ambiguity

A second dimension of civic courage is the [willingness to tolerate ambiguity](#). Polarized discourse often rewards decisiveness and moral conviction while discouraging nuance or uncertainty. Yet complex social and political issues rarely yield simple answers. The ability to hold competing considerations is therefore essential for meaningful civic engagement.

Research suggests that discomfort with uncertainty is associated with greater reliance on [rigid belief systems](#) and stronger adherence to [group-based worldviews](#). Foundational psychological research on [uncertainty avoidance](#) shows that individuals who are less tolerant of ambiguity are more likely to seek cognitive closure by identifying clear boundaries between groups and interpreting disagreement as a threat. In contemporary polarized environments, these tendencies can reinforce simplified narratives and reduce openness to differing views.

Responding to these pressures requires a capacity to accept complexity. It involves recognizing that competing perspectives may reflect [different, but not necessarily invalid, interpretations](#) of shared concerns. This orientation does not eliminate disagreement, but alters how conflict is approached, making it possible to avoid [dismissing or dehumanizing](#) another. Civic courage is reflected here in the willingness to reject simpler, more certain interpretations of complex concepts.

Remaining Engaged Despite Disagreement

The final dimension of civic courage concerns how individuals respond to others when disagreement persists. In polarized contexts, [disengagement can seem to be a rational response](#). However, withdrawal carries broader consequences. When individuals retreat, the networks that sustain [shared democratic life](#) and support [social connection](#) begin to weaken, reducing opportunities for mutual understanding and collective problem solving.

Patterns of [selective exposure](#) further reinforce this dynamic. Individuals increasingly curate their social and informational environments in ways that minimize contact with opposing viewpoints and strengthen ideologically homogeneous networks. This impulse is further amplified by digital platforms whose [algorithms shape the content](#) users encounter and often reinforce existing preferences and patterns of engagement. Over time, this narrowing limits exposure to alternative perspectives and erodes the [habits of engagement](#) and [civic connectedness](#) necessary for navigating healthy disagreement. In this context, disengagement is not merely a personal choice; it contributes to the fragmentation of the relational fabric on which democratic life depends.

At the same time, engagement across differences is not always inherently beneficial. Early work on [intergroup contact](#) suggests that interaction reduces prejudice under certain conditions, particularly when it is sustained, cooperative, and supported by shared norms. Subsequent research [confirmed these effects](#) while also emphasizing their conditional nature and the [challenges of achieving them in contemporary contexts](#). However, more recent work demonstrates that exposure to opposing views in adversarial settings can [intensify polarization](#) rather than diminish it.

These findings suggest that engagement must be understood not only as contact, but as a practice that requires intention and care. When [efforts to reduce polarization fail or produce unintended effects](#), they may contribute to growing skepticism about the value of engagement itself. Under such conditions, both attempts at persuasion and initiatives designed to foster dialogue can inadvertently reinforce the perception that polarization is intractable, thereby increasing withdrawal, disengagement, and pessimism about the possibility of civic repair. Engagement, in this sense, must be understood not only as contact but as a practice that requires careful design, intentionality, and [supportive conditions](#).

Committing to such a practice does not require agreement nor does it assume that conflict can always be resolved. Indeed, [the Founders](#) anticipated disagreement, recognizing factions as an inevitable feature of political life and arguing that a durable republic must be able to manage rather than eliminate such divisions. Therefore, preserving a connection with others in the absence of consensus is itself a condition of democratic life.

Taken together, the capacities outlined here – taking psychological risk, tolerating ambiguity, and remaining connected despite disagreement – suggest that civic courage depends on more than conviction or institutional commitment. It requires the intentional cultivation of dispositions and practices that enable individuals to navigate disagreement without succumbing to mutual alienation. The challenge, then, is how these capacities can be developed and sustained over time.

Civic Practices that Sustain Democratic Courage

What types of civic practices embody the courage necessary to sustain democracy amid deepening polarization, where factions continually challenge one another's legitimacy? The practices we recommend address polarization not by building consensus, but by building connection. Each is grounded in research from [social, family, and political psychology](#). These practices require intellectual humility, cognitive and affective agility, willingness to admit error or concede arguments, and openness to the possibility that [opposing political groups \(tribes\) may be more complex and less morally deficient](#) than polarization suggests. They operate at multiple levels, including interpersonal interaction, cognitive and affective regulation, and broader institutional context.

In highly polarized environments, these dynamics can become [self-reinforcing](#). Actions that might otherwise be viewed as constructive are often [reinterpreted through a lens of suspicion](#), particularly when they appear to strengthen the opposing side's legitimacy or influence. This can create a dynamic in which even valuable contributions are resisted, not on their merits, but because of their potential to build trust in the outgroup. In this sense, polarization can function as a system in which efforts to resolve division may [inadvertently intensify it](#), reinforcing the very patterns they seek to disrupt.

At the interpersonal level, debate, forum, and discourse initiatives – such as those developed by organizations like [Braver Angels](#) and [Living Room Conversations](#), as well as university initiatives like the [Center for Civic Engagement at James Madison University](#) – represent flagship efforts to address polarization. Building on these efforts, a number of valuable practices, either new or already emphasized in those efforts, focus on connection as more attainable and realistic than consensus. One example is the practice of '[steelmanning](#),' in which individuals or groups restate outgroup positions without qualifiers, in terms the outgroup would recognize as accurate. Expressing genuine admiration for out-group policies or individuals is difficult, but practices that encourage it can [help repair hostility](#). Admitting where the outgroup position may be right can [build trust and willingness to collaborate](#) in productive problem-solving.

These practices are most effective when embedded within [structured dialogue environments](#) that establish norms of mutual respect, equal participation, and facilitated engagement. They depend not only on how individuals articulate their own views, but also on their capacity to [listen with sustained attention](#) and [without immediate evaluation](#). Sustaining such engagement also requires intentional exposure to perspectives and relationships that cut across lines of difference, rather than reliance on socially or [algorithmically curated environments that reinforce homogeneity](#) and promote tribal groupthink.

At the level of cognitive and affective processes, these strategies are associated with de-escalating conflict and building connection – measurable shifts in how individuals experience and respond to disagreement. Affective neuroscience, for example, suggests that practices which [promote emotional regulation](#), such as admitting error or acknowledging the strength of an adversary’s argument, can [reduce defensiveness](#) that fuels polarization and moral distancing. Psychologically, such practices [reduce perceived threat](#), with corresponding physiological benefits (e.g., resetting limbic regulation) that support improved situation appraisal and constructive responses to conflict.

These dynamics are also associated with one of the most enduring frameworks in social psychology, [intergroup contact theory](#) (ICT). ICT suggests that direct interaction between individuals from different social groups, in settings with shared goals and expectations of cooperation, improves relations between groups. Such interaction can similarly [diminish perceived threat](#) and support shifts in how individuals interpret and relate to members of other groups (i.e., cognitive appraisal), which in turn can [increase empathy](#).

A related dimension involves resetting how individuals interpret their own reactions to disagreement. [Cognitive-behavioral therapy](#) (CBT), one of the most widely used frameworks in conflict resolution and family psychotherapy, offers a useful model for civic disciplines that rethink how we respond to perceived out-group provocations.

These practices can be understood as forms of civic courage. The path to civic renewal runs through [resetting the conditions of conversation](#). The courage lies in building connections that are, at least initially, uncomfortable — turning away from conquest, delegitimization, and coercion as default strategies for civic advance. Such practices have become countercultural and come at [real and perceived cost](#) to many. Organizations like [Braver Angels](#), in this respect, provide crucial scaffolding for the development of such forms of civic courage.

Finally, at the institutional level, a distinct lane of courageous practice involves resistance to the [incentives that reinforce polarization](#). Polarization has become a [heavily monetized pathway to economic and political power](#), entrenched across media, politics, and civic life. Although this paper does not fully deconstruct or analyze these incentive structures, civic renewal will depend as much on neutralizing institutional rewards for outrage and tribalism as on changing norms of interpersonal discourse described above. Furthermore, while the practices outlined here emphasize interpersonal, cognitive, and institutional dimensions of engagement, related fields – including work on forgiveness and reconciliation, civic education, and other psychological frameworks – may offer additional perspectives that further enrich efforts to sustain democratic life.

Conclusion: Renewing the Democratic Covenant 250 Years Later

The current period of polarization is often framed as a crisis of political disagreement, but it is more accurately a crisis of democratic relationship. As mutual recognition erodes and trust declines, the conditions that sustain shared life are under strain. The central challenge is therefore not institutional, but relational: whether citizens can remain engaged despite deep and persistent differences.

Periods of fracture have historically compelled societies to revisit their underlying commitments. While such periods generate uncertainty, they also create an opportunity for reflection and clarification. The question is not whether disagreement can be resolved, but whether democratic life can be maintained in its presence. Meeting this challenge requires a reframing of civic courage. Where previous eras demanded physical risk or resistance to visible injustice, the present moment calls for the resolve to remain in relationship, tolerate ambiguity, and engage constructively despite polarization. These capacities are not peripheral to democracy; they are its foundation. In this sense, the task facing us today is to re-invoke the Founders' pledge. Their pledge was not only a declaration of independence, but a commitment to remain bound together in a common project. Renewing that commitment in the present moment may be among the most consequential forms of civic courage.

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