



A Proposed Model for Citizen Maturity

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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

A Proposed Model for Citizen Maturity. For citizens to rise to the call of courageous citizenship, they must not only have knowledge and mechanisms for civic engagement; they must also have a character that embraces responsibility for others and the common good. This essay argues for a citizen maturity model to facilitate that character development.

The need for a maturity model

Before describing the details of a proposed citizen maturity model, it seems appropriate to make a case for why it is needed.

The first reason is that the idea of citizen maturity seems to be missing from most conversations about how to make progress on rebuilding civic vitality and a vision for a better future. As a result, it has been hard for even those committed to goodwill across differences to come to agreement as to where we are headed, because “pro-democracy” can quickly get conflated with ideological beliefs or policies that are not shared across different groups. Without a goal of citizen maturity and a model to provide some concreteness to the vision, we will struggle to have the unity we need to make progress. Citizen maturity – the desire to contribute and the ability to deal with increasing levels of complexity – seems foundational for courageous citizenship. Another aspect of citizen maturity that is rarely discussed is the inseparability of citizen maturity from connection within the community. Maturity and courage are not individual attributes; they are developed and sustained by interactions with other community members.

Second, the shift that we all seem to be yearning for somehow seems to be at a deeper level than correct ideas, policy, political structures, or technical solutions. It is about fundamental attitudes towards each other as citizens, towards our institutions, towards the value of our common bonds. Incentives are worth paying attention to; structures matter; good solutions help. But without maturity, there will never be the willingness to work through all the details, all the messiness, misunderstandings, and do the necessary experiments to come up with good solutions. It’s not that ideas, policy, political structures, and technical solutions don’t matter, but without a citizenry that is committed to and capable of humility, care, and collaboration, there is little hope of effectively discovering and implementation solutions to the complex problems that face us.

This is a somewhat different challenge than others we have faced as a country. It is a crisis concerning the fundamental nature of citizenship. The government can not solve it for us. There is no landmark legislation that will shift people from being dependent or consumer citizens to citizen contributors or other higher levels of maturity. In fact, one of the tragedies of the civil rights movement is that once the landmark civic rights legislation of the mid-1960s was passed, [“the life went out of the movement”](#), and a rich, decades-long history of black agency and citizenship began to decay.

Third, a concrete model of citizen maturity can be helpful in measuring progress. A fundamental reality of rebuilding the social capital and thriving of our country is that it is a long-term project. The time scale is decades, certainly not months or even years. How, therefore, do

we measure progress on a shorter time scale to know that we are on track, and to stay encouraged? While overall social norms will take decades to change, an individual can significantly mature in a few months or years. A change in community maturity will take longer, perhaps a few years, but still in a much shorter interval than change in broad social norms.

The citizen maturity model

The model is in two parts. The first part is maturity stages through which an individual may progress. The second part is a set of attributes of citizen maturity which can be present to a lesser or greater degree throughout the different stages but will have greater richness and strength in the higher maturity stages.

Maturity stages

Maturity stage	Individual tasks	Community tasks
Dependent citizen	- I am looking for someone to take care of me and tell me what to think. - I want someone to provide me with safety, income, services, protect me from the people I disagree with, protect me from discomfort and doing hard things.	- Provide me with short-term relief in times of crisis. - Help me get connected with other citizens who can provide community and individualized support, and model contribution and interdependence. - Refrain from creating long-term dependency, either on the part of the recipient or the helper.
Consumer citizen	- I want someone to provide me with an environment so that I can live the life I want to live. - I know what I want and am concerned with my own needs and unconcerned with the needs of others and my impact on others. - I am convinced that what I think is complete and true, and that the main	- Invite me to interact with others with different stories and beliefs. - Help me become aware of my impact on others and my responsibility to live in an interdependent way. - Model how to live in an interdependent way and contribute to the common good.

	problem is that others don't see things my way.	
Citizen contributor	• I am aware of and can articulate my own needs. • I can appropriately balance taking care of myself, receiving help from others, and giving help to others. • I simultaneously consider the needs of others and am willing to educate myself about the needs and views of others. • My goal is to consider and seek a balance between my needs and my point of view and the needs and the points of view of others that can result in mutually satisfying and beneficial relationships and solutions. • I take responsibility for building relationships and working out solutions.	• Create spaces where citizen contributors can collaborate with one another, encourage one another, work through differences, supported by civic builders and community stewards. • Provide them with technical resources and funding as needed. • Celebrate and publicize the successes of citizens acting together as contributors.
Civic builder	• In addition to being a citizen contributor, I am also investing in helping others grow in their maturity as citizens. • I am able to work with others who do not yet have a citizen contributor mindset when working on problems.	• Create spaces where civic builders can collaborate with one another, encourage one another, work through differences, supported by community stewards. • Create opportunities to interact with citizens of all maturity levels

	• Provide coaching and guidance in especially complex problems.	- in order to increase others' maturity. • Celebrate and honor civic builders for their contribution.
Community steward	• In addition to being a citizen contributor and civic builder, I work with other community stewards to watch over the community as a whole: its culture, its standards. • I remind the community “who we are and what it is like us to do”. • I work with those on the margin to become citizen contributors.	• Recognize and celebrate the role of community steward and the wisdom and history they bring a community. • Value and support them in maintaining community standards and working with those who are struggling. • Create spaces where community stewards can be part of collaboration and encouragement.

A major shift occurs between the consumer citizen and citizen contributor stages. Both the dependent citizen and consumer citizen stages are primarily focused on “self”, without any significant regard to others except as a means of getting what I want. The citizen contributor is the first stage where “self and others” becomes important, as well as a sense of agency in challenging situations.

In this model, an individual can be a citizen contributor without being a legal citizen and also without necessarily attaining the legal voting age. About the time of puberty, a person becomes capable of forming group identity and genuinely caring about others. Therefore, high school students can aspire to become citizen contributors, and this can be a powerful time to engage them in the journey of becoming citizens.

These maturity stages were adapted from the maturity stages in the [Life Model](#), a neuroscience-based model of emotional maturity developed by the neurotheologian Jim Wilder. The major adaptations were

- **the use of civic rather than theological language**
 - the assumption that a citizen is capable of the adult behavior of forming group identity, whereas in the full range of human development, dependency and self-focus are normal during infant and child stages

Citizen maturity attributes

Humility, curiosity, and openness to learning

These are essential attributes to move from a culture of fear to greater trust. Current social norms often exalt an individual's point of view to the position of self-evident truth, with the accompanying arrogance of dismissing any other point of view as having any value or being worthy of discussion. To mature, we have some sense of the limitations of our own view, curious about other views, and open to learning and being influenced.

- **Approaching conflict, disagreement, or misunderstanding with curiosity**
- **Being able to say “I don't know”**
 - Willingness to admit weaknesses, gaps, flaws, and past failures of your current position
- **Willingness to acknowledge the strengths in others' positions**
 - Openness to engage with others who have different views, to have your ideas challenged, to be influenced, and potentially to update your views
- **Seeing those who are different as potential resources rather than enemies**

Stability under pressure

It is one thing to have skills and values about proper behavior. It's another thing to employ those skills and live out those values in emotionally intense and complex situations. These attributes relate to having the emotional capacity to be stable in challenging times.

- Practicing civility, honesty, and seeking the common good in complex and emotionally charged situations
- **Holding the continuation of relationship as something valuable**
 - Recognizing the humanity and gifts of others and standing resolute to honor that humanity and those gifts
 - Standing firm on your own views and being willing to state them even when others are advocating for different views
- **Being able to persuade your “in group” to consider new ideas**
 - Consistency in confronting bad behavior without respect to who the perpetrator is or which “side” they are from
 - The ability to hold discomfort and uncertainty and work through it in a productive fashion
- **Patience to build when the road to change is long, complex, and uncertain**

Investment in building

The willingness and patience to build are critical to help develop widespread citizen maturity. These are challenging times, and as mentioned above, the timescale of change for the culture as a whole is long.

- **Willingness to extend enough trust and invest the time to work with others**

- Investing in relationships when it is uncertain that others are acting in good faith or how they will respond
- Willingness to do [collaborative experiments](#), honestly judge the outcomes, and work together to refine solutions as necessary

- **Working through conflicts rather than breaking off relationships**

- Investing in others and being gracious with their weaknesses as they are developing greater maturity
- Having patience when the path is messy, hard, and slow, fully of uncertainty, and there are setbacks
- Seeing the messiness of working with others not as “inefficiency”, but as experiences necessary for the development of citizens

- **Being patient with developing the structures for collaboration**

The really hard part – growing maturity in citizens

If we want to pursue the goal of citizen maturity, the question that immediately arises is: how do we do it?

Challenges to growing citizen maturity

Institutional challenges

- It requires that citizens confront and embrace their agency and responsibility, their power and freedom to affect the prevailing culture. This is far beyond signing a petition, voting, or organizing a [protest](#). It requires engaging with other citizens to address issues and opportunities within our communities, rather than leaving it to the government or experts to solve. If we try to create structural solutions, pass laws, or somehow automate away our need to work with other people, citizen maturity will atrophy.
- Many politicians, government structures, and non-profits are firmly entrenched in a “service provider” mindset, with citizens as consumers, and success defined as the delivery of more services, and expansion of their size, visibility, influence, and spending. Shifting institutions to act more as facilitators and conveners, with an “experts on tap, not on top” mindset can be a status challenge to these institutions and their pursuit of institutional self-interest and expansion at the expense of the common good.
- Many of the most powerful current business models are based on attention and engagement, with speed, scale, and convenience being the driving forces. This further reinforces a mindset of the quick and easy fix, the pursuit of convenience, amusement, and individualism, which takes us away from pursuit of the common good and the messy, slow, and inconvenient processes of developing human relationships and working together. Businesses are usually not incented to build deep connection and collaboration between people as part of their success.
- Current media and social media tend to relentlessly focus on national politics as if it were the major determinant of our well-being. Yes, what happens at the federal level matters.

But an over-focus on the federal government undermines the idea of individual agency, local action, and the power of citizens to solve problems. The complexity of changing the federal government seems overwhelming for most citizens, causing many to disengage with politics completely.

Cultural challenges

- Our age is an age of [hyperindividualism](#). Individualism is a good thing, but when individualism becomes so extreme that individual attitudes and opinions always trump working together for the common good, growing maturity suffers. If there are no village elders worthy of respect, it becomes very hard to maintain a village, to have a sense of who we are a people. We often struggle with the concept of “community values” or “elders that remind the community of its values”, yet this is a necessary ingredient for a community to cohere and provide an environment for growing maturity.
- There is a widespread notion that an individual can define his or her identity in a way disconnected from the past or a surrounding community. This contradicts the neuroscience of the brain. The identity center of the brain is always asking “What is it like me and my people to do?” Without a “people”, the human brain struggles to maintain a stable identity.
- Robert Putnam has documented [the general decline of connection](#) between people in the US. Feeling isolated and alone inevitably increases anxiety and overwhelm, often leading to depression and disengagement or anger and violence. When a person feels isolated, their brain shifts into survival mode, and away from connection and community.

Developmental challenges

- People can be educated quicker than they can grow maturity, because growing maturity requires character formation, and those processes reside in the right brain, and are by their nature slower and more indirect than intellectual development.
- Developing secure attachment with a group of people takes time. Yet the brain is most strongly and positively influenced by a small group where secure attachment exists, where there is a sense of “my people”, and a mutual love between “my people” and me.
- Maturity for the most part can only be passed on by those who have it, ideally in face-to-face situations, modeling in real life. Given the widespread lack of maturity, we are lacking enough people to model what we want to spread.

The point of listing these challenges is to emphasize the difficulty and character of the task. If we think somehow that there is a quick and easy technical fix, we will get frustrated and discouraged.

How then might we proceed?

The question of citizen maturity is really a question of a new identity as citizens – that of active contribution and responsibility.

Given all the challenges above, the approach that seems most likely to succeed is helping people who care about this issue form small groups to work on it. It’s not a mass program or a viral internet post. Forging a new identity will require a small identity group where strong bonds of

friendship and love can form, where people can be seen, heard, and understood as they strive together to live out the values of growing maturity in themselves and others. With a small “people” with whom we can learn, experiment, encourage one another, say what we truly think and feel without fear of rejection, and hold each other accountable, we can build our strength and maturity.

The concept of a civic hub is that of forming a local group to help local citizens work together on local problems. Certainly, these activities could help in forming maturity, but only if they consciously focus on building citizen maturity and not just on facilitating work on the issues at hand. A characteristic of activist groups is that they can be fear-bonded: they are held together by what they’re against or afraid of or by strict adherence to an ideology or point of view. Deviation from “the party line” leads to punishment or expulsion from the group. Positive identity formation needs to go hand-in-hand with problem solving.

Braver Angels alliances could play a major role, with their historical emphasis on developing friendships across differences. Part of what it will require is shifting from an outputs mentality – How many workshops did we run? What was the attendance at an event? – to an outcome mentality – What change are we seeing in the individual character of those in our group and in the culture of the group? How are the citizens in our community being empowered and transformed?

Braver Network, through its network of organizations, can also play a role, through the wide variety of organizations, each of which is a larger community that can encourage the formation of small groups that can help to transform identity while also doing issues-focused work.

Areas for further development

This proposed citizen maturity model is a first draft. While I believe the overall structure is sound, more definition and refinement are needed.

Beyond the model itself, individual self-assessment tools would be helpful, as well as ways for the individuals in a small group to both self-assess themselves and assess their functioning as a group.

Ultimately, we need to develop ways to assess and evaluate the larger community in which these committed groups exist. Where are the opportunities to grow maturity? What are possible strategies? How do we help a local community come to grips with its values and build the trust and cohesion necessary to work towards common goals? How do local communities eventually influence the larger institutions of state and federal government, media, education, the non-profit sector, and business?

In conclusion

A thriving country will be composed of thriving communities, and those communities will possess a critical mass of citizens who have committed to and achieved the maturity that enables them to be robust contributors and help their fellow citizens continue to grow in maturity. By explicitly naming the goal of citizen maturity and working towards it, we can move towards that reality.

References

Harry C. Boyte, who was a field secretary for Martin Luther King, Jr., private conversations.

Life Model Maturity Indicators chart:

<http://cornerstone.ag/pdf/PDFElijahHouse/lifemodel2.pdf>

Escaping Enemy Mode: How Our Brains Unite or Divide Us by Jim Wilder & Ray Woolridge

Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust by Adam Kahane

The Distinctions for the Conversation for Dissent

From *Community: The Structure of Belonging* by Peter Block, 3rd edition, p. 136-137

There is a vital distinction between authentic dissent and inauthentic dissent, which we can call false refusal. Inauthentic forms of dissent are denial, rebellion, and resignation.

...

Rebellion is more complex. It lives in reaction to the world. On the surface, rebellion claims to be against monarchy, dominion, or oppression. Too often it turns out to be a vote *for* monarchy, dominion, or patriarchy, just ours. Rebellion is most often not a call for transformation or a new context but simply a complaint that others control the monarchy and not us. That is why most revolutions fail—because nothing changes, only the name of top management.

The community form of rebellion is protest. It is noble and tradition but often keeps us in perpetual reaction to the stances of others. Any time we are in reaction, even to evil, we are giving power to what we are reacting to.

I have heard John McKnight say that advisory groups speak quietly to power, protesters scream at power, and neither chooses to reclaim or produce power. The real problem with the rebellion is that it avoids taking responsibility, operates on the high ground, is fueled by righteousness, gives legitimacy to blame, and is a delightful escape from the unbearable burden of being accountable.

“Hyper-individualism, the reigning ethos of our day, is a system of morals, feelings, ideas, and practices based on the idea that the journey through life is an individual journey, that the goals of life are individual happiness, authenticity, self-actualization, and self-sufficiency. Hyper-individualism puts the same question on everybody’s lips: What can I do to make myself happy?”

— David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*

Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community by Robert D. Putnam

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