



Courageous Citizenship--Reclaiming the Civic “We”

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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

Courageous citizenship entails reaffirming who we are as citizens in the United States today. It requires the humility of acknowledging our limits, the agency of acting with others, and the solidarity of crafting a shared vision. Rather than doubling down on our tribal loyalties, we must intentionally seek out the views of others, distribute the work of solving our shared problems, and build connections across differences. I offer the Braver Angels Citizens Commission on Immigration as a compelling example of how some Americans are doing so.

On some evenings, a mini form of democracy plays out at my kitchen table as my family members unpack the news of the day. During my adult life, I have moved across the political spectrum from Republican to Democrat. I am married to a Libertarian, most of my extended family remains conservative, and my teenager is sorting out where he falls on the political spectrum. We are committed to each other despite our political differences. Over our kitchen table, we take up a host of issues facing our country and ask: *What can we do together about this?* It is a question whose spirit resonates with the democratic tradition of public work, where citizens engage together to solve shared problems and to build an improved world together.

Across the years, I've noticed that the "we" in this question is both precious and precarious. It entails how we understand ourselves as Americans. Polarization increasingly pushes us to draw tighter boundaries around who counts in that "we," pushing out those we distrust and circling the wagons around those we see as likeminded. Recently, the "we" has become even more contentious, as debates around immigration further delimit who is included and who is excluded in our country. In this paper, I argue that courageous citizenship entails the public work of building and rebuilding a "we" through civic humility, agency, and solidarity.

If the "we" is indeed valuable and fragile, courageous citizenship is how we keep it alive. It requires the humility of acknowledging our limits, the agency of acting with others, and the solidarity of crafting a shared vision. Our polarized context makes us quick to assert our certainty, often by staking out positions that signal our alignment with our political tribe. It takes courage to do the hard thing of choosing otherwise. Rather than doubling down on our tribal loyalties, we must intentionally seek out the views of others, distribute the work of solving our shared problems, and build connections across differences. Rather than merely scoring points for our political team, we must take up the more difficult effort of crafting solutions that serve us all. As I engage in the slow, relational work of kitchen-table democracy, I've had to practice each of these three aspects of courageous citizenship. Here, I offer the Braver Angels Citizens Commission on Immigration as a compelling example of how others are doing so.

Civil vs Civic Citizenship

When we talk about citizenship, we often refer to its *civil* elements, emphasizing one's legal status and the rights one holds in a nation-state. This understanding of citizenship is fundamental. To suggest otherwise is to degrade the efforts of native born citizens who have worked proudly to preserve their nation-state, as well as to belittle the pledges of allegiance and renunciation of those who go through the naturalization process. But, drawing on the work of political theorist [James Tully](#), there is another dimension that is worthy of attention: the *civic*

element of citizenship, what we actually *do* together to shoulder the responsibilities of our republic. In our polarized era, we must develop our civic muscle as citizens, rather than rely only on legal architecture. Statues and documents may grant rights, but our practices determine whether we hold together. Some Americans may worry that emphasizing civic participation demotes the hard-won meaning of civil citizenship. I share that concern, which is why I am suggesting that a civic model of citizenship should supplement, not supplant, the civil one. Doing so may help us better clarify and solidify our “we.” Emphasizing civic action may carry us through some of the challenges we currently face in our democracy. Finally, doing so foregrounds citizenship as an endeavor of public work.

In battles over immigration, much of our focus is on one’s civil status—whether one has the required history and documentation needed to receive rights and the protections of law. This is indispensable architecture for determining who has the full standing to vote, work, draw welfare benefits, receive due process, and more. While this framework may scaffold our democratic society, it’s the civic component of citizenship that does the work of democracy, including taking responsibility for shared problems and figuring out how to flourish together. Civic citizenship compels us to volunteer in our communities, to attend public meetings to inform ourselves about issues, to testify at hearings, to take to the streets in protest, and to undertake work of many kinds, paid and unpaid, with public impact. Civic citizenship is open to anyone willing to expend the effort.

Civil citizenship guarantees equal protection and full political participation, but it does not do the work of creating trust and building relationships. Statutes can grant access, but they cannot deliberate on how to keep the democratic experiment going. Citizens must sustain themselves in ways that take civic effort. If we focus only on civil status, we overlook who shows up to do the work, including those who may lack legal status or may care deeply for others who do. The civil “we” depends on constitutional and statutory definitions, but the civic “we” is created and recreated through practice. The civic “we” forms a working coalition.

Courageous citizenship values civil citizenship, but emphasizes and enacts civic citizenship. While we must affirm or revise rules governing civil citizenship as part of our debates over immigration, together coalitions can rebuild immigration policies that are fair and humane. The Braver Angels Citizens Commission on Immigration has been doing just this sort of work. It doesn’t adjudicate legal status, but it does bring people together to *act as citizens*.

Courageous Citizenship in Action

To demonstrate courageous citizenship, let’s look more closely at the Braver Angels Citizens Commission on Immigration. Rather than turning over public problems to think tanks who draft white paper solutions in isolation or handing public problems off to political pundits who shout each other down on cable news, the Commission takes seriously the process of reconsidering and reaffirming the “we.” The Commission invites ordinary Americans who are struggling to figure out what should be done about immigrants, to discuss their differing views, and to work toward identifying emerging points of agreement that can guide leaders and policymakers. It’s a public version of kitchen-table democracy.

The Commission grew out of the 2024 Braver Angels National Convention, where delegates identified immigration as the issue most worthy of public attention. The Commission brings together a balanced Red/Blue audience in a transparent and replicable structured deliberation to ask, “What should we do about immigration?” Citizens share their experiences, values, and desires, identify points of agreement, and fashion them into immigration policy proposals. Organizers intend for those conversations to take place at local [workshops](#) in all 50 states, each aimed at carving out common ground. Some groups speak directly with members of Congress. One of these [conversations](#) recently took place in my home area of Southwest Ohio with my Congressman, Greg Landsman, a member of the Problem Solvers Caucus. Like at my kitchen table, workshop groups are small and conversations are prolonged and often quite personal. They begin with sharing stories, then move toward identifying the beliefs, concerns, and policies on which they can agree. Ideas that emerge from those conversations as well as from immigration experts are compiled to identify patterns of convergence. Those are then further explored and tested at immigration policy roundtables to determine if they are feasible solutions. Notably, in the next step of the process, members of the roundtable will refine what citizens produce, building new policies upward and outward, rather than pushing them downward from a handful of experts. Ultimately, a Report to the Nation will synthesize the suggestions and findings to provide policy guidance. This deliberation creates policy, but it also builds and realigns public values and practices, making participants into active co-creators of a world where immigrants and immigration are treated differently.

The Commission demonstrates three key components of courageous citizenship:

- Civic humility: acknowledging that we do not know all there is to know about immigration and that we can learn from the testimony of others, especially those whose personal experiences with immigration may differ from our own.
- Civic agency: recognizing and accepting that responsibility for addressing shared problems like immigration should be widely distributed rather than limited only to policymakers or experts.
- Civic solidarity: establishing a fair and just “we” that requires reimagining an American community, including its norms of membership and participation, and committing to stewarding it.

Civic Humility

Commission participants embody courageous citizenship. Using humility, they acknowledge their own partial knowledge and seek fuller and more accurate understanding together. Whereas polarization is quick to assert certainty, employing the Braver Angels way, humility commits us to listening carefully to those with whom we disagree, seeking to understand before reaching a conclusion or making a judgment. It starts with narratives, not theses, thereby grounding proposals in lived experience and expressions of values. Rather than being defensive, humility pushes us to question and challenge our own views as well as those of others, including looking to see if our views hold up to the evidence presented by others. It’s a willingness to learn publicly *from* and *with* others. Courageous citizenship of this sort sets aside a desire to win or be right and recenters learning and collective decision-making.

The Commission supports these endeavors by providing a structure that encourages both speaking and listening, both naming differences and seeking agreements. The Commission extends humility to experts and elected officials, urging them to check their assumptions in light of the stated experiences, values, and preferences of their constituents. Finally, some participants are surprised at what they discover when they set aside defensiveness and foreground listening with humility. [One Democrat](#) at the southwest Ohio workshop shared: “I poured out my most deeply held values around this issue and the red-leaning guy I was with said, ‘There’s not one thing you said that I disagree with.’”

Civic Agency

Flexing their civic agency, Commission participants move beyond merely voicing personal views to working together to build viable solutions. Humility and listening clear the ground for civic agency because, when people feel heard and valued, they are more willing to act alongside those with whom they disagree. Civic agency recognizes that power is distributed amongst participants and does not merely reside with experts or elected officials. That includes illegal aliens/undocumented residents who can shape and enact solutions with others.ⁱ Deliberations entail sharing and uncovering insights, which is part of the work of doing democracy, but they are also driven by producing outputs that extend beyond the conversation. For the Commission, that entails identifying shared values when it comes to matters of immigration and building approaches for moving forward based on those values. [One participant](#) at the southwest Ohio workshop summarized steps that build agency and move into solidarity by saying, “I think that workshops like this and groups like this, every one of us is going to go home and talk to his family. And then it’s going to get passed on from one person to the other, to a friend, to a neighbor. And this is how you start change.”

Civic Solidarity

Finally, participants build civic solidarity as they treat each other as partners aligned around a common mission, rather than as political enemies. Solidarity is not, however, unanimity that erases our differences. It seeks to stabilize collaboration with a durable pluralism. Humility and civic agency help us see our previous opponents as co-authors of solutions. We become more willing to constructively imagine what could be together. When enacting their agency alongside each other, participants develop trust. Partnership may then become not just tactical for developing a particular solution to one problem, but worthy of commitment to carry out the proposed solution together, facing ongoing disagreement, and accepting shared responsibility as new issues arise.

Civic solidarity binds citizens in shared fate as well as the public work needed to secure a better future. One [Republican participant in Arizona](#) anticipated a butting of heads during the Commission event, but walked away surprised at the sense of solidarity he experienced. He noted, “We are all in the same boat—that boat being the United States—and we all want similar things, even if there are different objectives to get to where we want to be.” Civic solidarity is an achievement that requires ongoing effort to sustain it. Even as relationships may become strained or frayed by persistent disagreement, solidarity and civility call citizens back to ongoing dialogue, urging them not to abandon the shared project, but rather to choose cooperation and make revisions as needed. These choices and commitments are hard; they require courage.

Conclusion

Citizenship is not only a status we possess, but is also something that we practice. Whether at our kitchen table or in structured deliberations, courageous citizenship is bolstered by civic humility, agency, and solidarity. Civic humility enables citizens to learn from and with each other. Civic agency empowers them to act together. Civic solidarity positions them to matter together—to not only influence public policies or practices, but also to experience life together as a “we.”

Courageous citizenship is not mere politeness, simple agreement, or avoiding conflict. It is taking up the difficult challenge of doing democracy even when disagreement is deep and persistent. Models like the Commission facilitate courageous citizenship that can be emulated in an array of other settings, taking up other topics. They show us that Americans can repair democratic life even when formal institutions are failing or stalled. They offer alternatives to partisan divides and media algorithms that reward outrage. They affirm that “we” can redefine ourselves, solve significant problems, and build a new world together.

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ⁱ I use here the language of both “sides,” reflecting struggles within the Commission to identify shared terminology in the immigration debate.