



Courageous Citizenship: An American Political Tradition

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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

This paper recovers a neglected American democratic tradition: collaborative self-governance grounded in what philosopher William James called "civic courage." Rather than treating democracy primarily as a matter of individual rights or majority competition, the paper traces a parallel tradition of citizens working across differences to build shared power and common goods. It moves through New England town meetings, founders like Adams and Jefferson, Tocqueville's account of voluntary association and his warning against atomistic "individualism," antebellum abolitionism, the Civil War, and the mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights movement. It closes by pointing to contemporary organizations—the Industrial Areas Foundation, Braver Angels, and civics educators—as evidence that courageous, collaborative citizenship persists and can be renewed.

In an [1897 oration](#) honoring Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th Regiment—the first African American regiment to see battle in the American Civil War—the philosopher William James urged his listeners to rediscover and recommit to the venerable American ethos those fallen soldiers embodied: an ethos of “civic courage.” James was not rallying Americans for battle or glorifying the politics of war. Instead, he asked his listeners to focus on the peaceable, constructive politics that Shaw and his comrades fought to promote: a politics in which “the civic genius of the people does the saving day by day, by acts without external picturesqueness; by speaking, writing, voting reasonably; by smiting corruption swiftly; by good temper between parties; by the people knowing true men when they see them, and preferring them as leaders to rabid partisans or empty quacks. Such nations,” James averred, “have no need of wars to save them.”

In James’s story, Shaw and his men were both exemplary citizens and the sort of “true” leaders a free people should prefer. The heroism of Shaw, a white man, and his Black comrades lay not in their martial valor, but rather in their willingness to work together, at great risk, to discover for themselves whether the ancient American ideal of unity amid pluralism could still be realized in their riven and suffering nation. That ideal was no romantic indulgence. It embodied the distinctive meaning and purpose of American democracy: not just rule by majority or protection of rights, but the ongoing, often arduous efforts of diverse citizens working to build a richer commonwealth of freedom.

As organizations like Braver Angels have recognized, we are again in need of the civic courage James described, along with principles, models, and habits of “courageous citizenship” to discipline, sustain, and direct it. As James noted, civic courage is often “lonely courage,” uncelebrated and unreciprocated by those whose power it threatens. Yet it is also attainable by any person, in any class or station, with opportunity to study and practice its exercise. Indeed, civic courage is by necessity a common courage: Thomas Jefferson himself [described the Declaration of Independence](#) not as his own brainchild but as an “expression of the American mind,” whose purpose lay in “harmonizing the sentiments” of liberty-loving persons worldwide while calling on the polyglot populations of British North America to channel those sentiments into concerted action.

Throughout American history, democracy has been shaped by the efforts of citizens—working both through and outside government institutions—to better govern the life they share: collaborating across differences to solve problems, steward common resources, create new public goods, and imagine new collective futures. That tradition is embattled today. But it is not dead. We need a new story of democracy to invigorate and sustain it.

The standard story of American origins centers on rights: the rights of Englishmen claimed against the Crown, the natural rights proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, the constitutional rights codified in the late 1780s. That story is important. But it is incomplete. Alongside—and often prior to—the language of fixed rights in early American conceptions of freedom ran a robust tradition of creative common work.

The New England township offers an early and instructive example. From the founding of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay in the 1620s and 1630s, English settlers organized their communities not only around private property and individual conscience but around collective deliberation and shared labor. The town meeting was the paradigmatic institution of this citizen-centered politics: a forum in which all freeholders—men of diverse stations, skills, and opinions—gathered to debate, direct, and take responsibility for the governance of their community. Roads were built, schools were funded, many poor families were supported, and disputes were adjudicated through processes requiring that citizens listen to one another, reason together, and accept outcomes they had helped shape. This was not a frictionless or egalitarian process; women, servants, enslaved people, and indigenous neighbors were to varying degrees excluded, and frequently resisted. Nevertheless, the town meeting embodied a conception of democratic life as collaborative self-governance rather than mere competition or aggregation of interests.

Several of the founders drew on this collaborative tradition while giving it sophisticated articulation. [John Adams](#) defined the body politic as “a social compact by which the whole people covenants with each citizen and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good.” [Thomas Jefferson](#), meanwhile, held “sacred” the principle that majority rule was legitimate only when the majority acted reasonably and protected minority rights, insisting that to realize that principle required not just “equal laws” but a prevailing culture in which “every man, at the call of the law...would meet invasions of the public order as his own personal concern.”

Despite their well-known differences—Adams more comfortable with centralized authority, Jefferson with its diffusion—both men shared a fundamental understanding of government's highest purpose: to create conditions for citizens to negotiate diverse and conflicting interests with an eye toward common flourishing. And along with many contemporaries, they understood that government cannot create those conditions without the contributions of citizens willing to risk and recover from error: As [Benjamin Franklin](#) reportedly remarked when asked what type of government “we” were to get from the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the answer was “a republic...if you can keep it.”

That Convention was itself a demonstration of courageous, collaborative democratic action. The delegates it convened brought divergent backgrounds, philosophies, interests, and values to the

work of charting their shared political future. All had to work across their differences to produce a framework of governance none of them could have imagined alone. Errors were made. Many voices were excluded. Even some participants felt the tradeoffs involved were too costly. Yet in one sense, those failings make the resulting document all the more remarkable, for it provided means by which citizens of conscience and courage could address them. As James Madison explained, the Constitution's carefully constructed checks and balances were not intended solely to balance factions claiming rights and power, but also to [channel diverse visions](#) of the common good into national deliberations, thereby [generating new ideas](#) for governing, connecting, and invigorating a sprawling and mutually anonymous populace.

When the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the early 1830s, he found the collaborative civic tradition of the colonial and founding eras to be flourishing. In *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840), he described American democracy's distinctive source of strength: the practice of "voluntary association." Where European societies depended on aristocrats or government officials to organize collective action, Americans of every station banded together in associations united by social, political, and practical goals—and proved remarkably effective at achieving them. Tocqueville attributed this organizing ethos to what he called "interest rightly understood": a distinctively American habit of recognizing that one's own long-term interests were inseparable from the wellbeing of one's neighbors and community.

This was not altruism. It was a sophisticated, relational understanding of self-interest that echoed, and in some ways deepened, the founders' vision of a civic life organized around common flourishing rather than mere individual gain. In attending town meetings, serving their religious congregations, and banding together to promote their trades, their values, or even their favored forms of recreation, Americans learned by doing: they developed the habits of deliberation, compromise, accountability, and mutual trust that democratic self-governance required.

Yet Tocqueville was also alarmed by what he saw as democracy's besetting temptation: a conception of freedom that was not relational but atomistic, based on the assumption that society is merely a collection of selves striving for security and advancement despite, rather than through, their coexistence with others. This "individualism," as Tocqueville named it, did not just breed selfishness. It encouraged withdrawal from civic life: a retreat into the small circle of family and friends, leaving the larger public world to manage itself. Tocqueville feared that as Americans focused on achieving material equality with their neighbors to match the political equality they took for granted, the individualist ethos would grow dominant, and the people might, ironically, surrender their prerogatives of self-governance to a paternalistic state in exchange for material comfort and the illusion of freedom.

The antebellum decades bore out both sides of Tocqueville's analysis. Voluntary associations proliferated: temperance societies, missionary societies, reform movements of every description, and above all the abolitionist movement, which at its best exemplified the courageous citizenship James had admired in Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth. White abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips worked with Black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman at great personal risk and amid persistent tensions born of the very racism they sought to combat, to advance a cause larger than any of them. [Douglass gave](#)

[eloquent expression](#) to the civic tradition animating such efforts. Against those who would despair of the American experiment in the face of its deep injustices, he insisted that the Constitution was, rightly interpreted, a “glorious liberty document,” and that the nation could realize its highest principles if enough common citizens committed themselves to the work.

Yet the antebellum decades also witnessed the atomistic, hyper-individualist developments Tocqueville feared. The spread of market capitalism, the ideology of Jacksonian individualism, and above all the insistence of slaveholders that their individual property rights trumped any claims of community or common humanity—all these tendencies drove American democratic culture toward fragmentation. The Civil War was the catastrophic result. Yet even in that catastrophe, a larger vision of democracy persisted. The Black soldiers of the Massachusetts 54th, the white officers who chose to lead them, the abolitionists and Unionists who overcame their mutual suspicions to work toward victory—all demonstrated, many at the cost of their lives, that the democratic ideal of unity amid diversity was not a sentimental fantasy but a practical possibility, achievable by those with the courage to pursue it. In doing so they fulfilled [President Lincoln’s prediction](#) in his First Inaugural, as the nation was ripping apart: “We must not be enemies,” Lincoln insisted then. “Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Of all the manifestations of courageous citizenship that have enriched American democracy, perhaps none is more instructive—or more misunderstood—than the Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century. In popular memory and in most standard school curricula, the movement is remembered primarily as a story of rights: the long struggle of African Americans to claim the constitutional and legal rights they had been denied since emancipation. That story is essential, but incomplete. The Civil Rights movement was also, and perhaps primarily, a story of citizens building power together—across differences of race, class, religion, region, and political philosophy—to create new political possibilities that none of them could have achieved alone.

The organizational genius of the movement lay precisely in its understanding of democracy as collaborative work rather than mere protest or rights-claiming. The [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#) practiced a form of community organizing with deep roots in the [history of Black communities](#) which had built nearly 5000 schools and thousands of Black libraries in the segregated South. Rather than arriving in a community with a predetermined agenda and asking local people to support it, SNCC and organizers from other grassroots oriented civil rights groups organizers like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference -- Black and white, Northern and Southern, student and adult—sought first to understand the knowledge, concerns, and aspirations of the people they worked with, and then to help those people develop their own capacity for collective action. The Freedom Schools established across Mississippi in the summer of 1964 were exemplary institutions of this democratic pedagogy: places where Black Mississippians of all ages learned not only to read and write, but to think

critically about their social world, articulate their interests and values, and imagine new possibilities for their communities.

This approach to democratic organizing drew explicitly on the American tradition of courageous, collaborative citizenship. [SNCC's founding statement](#), drafted by James Lawson, articulated a vision of democracy as a way of life—not merely a set of procedures or a collection of rights, but a habit of working together to realize the common good—that evoked the New England town meetings and the voluntary associations Tocqueville admired. Ella Baker, who had spent decades organizing for the NAACP before helping to found SNCC, insisted on what [she called “group-centered leadership”](#) rather than leader-centered groups: [a model of democratic organization](#) in which power was not concentrated in charismatic individuals but distributed among all participants, enabling communities to sustain themselves long after any particular leader had moved on.

The collaborative character of the Civil Rights movement extended beyond the Black community to encompass difficult, often fraught alliances across lines of race, class, ideology, and identity. The March on Washington in 1963, commonly remembered as the occasion of Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech, was largely organized by Bayard Rustin, a gay Black man whose sexuality had been used to marginalize him within the movement itself. It was almost certainly he who drafted [the philosophical statement](#) in the official brochure of the march, declaring it “more than just a demonstration” but rather “a living petition” of citizens speaking and acting on behalf of all people consenting to government under the Constitution, “on a level respecting the worth of that people and the responsibility of that government.” The legislative coalition that ultimately passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 required the collaboration of liberal Democrats, moderate Republicans, civil rights organizations, labor unions, religious bodies, and civic associations of extraordinary diversity. These coalitions were not comfortable or conflict-free. They required exactly the civic courage James had described: the willingness to work with people one disagreed with, distrusted, or had been wronged by, in the service of a common goal that transcended those differences.

This story of the Civil Rights movement is among the nation’s richest historical legacies. It is not primarily a story of citizens demanding rights from the state, but of citizens building the generative power to reshape the conditions of their common life—a power that grew precisely because it was shared across differences rather than hoarded within a single group or community. This distinction matters enormously for how we understand democracy: not as any particular complex of rights, laws, institutions, and formal procedures but as a way of life, in which citizens develop, through collaborative practice, the capacities for self-governance that no formal government can simply confer or guarantee.

Where is that tradition of courageous, collaborative self-governance today? It has not disappeared, but it has been severely weakened by developments that have narrowed the American understanding of democracy to two impoverished forms: the assertion of individual rights and the competition for majority control.

By roughly the 1980s, as Robert Putnam documented in *Bowling Alone* (2000), the availability of in-home entertainment, the sharper separation between work and home life imposed by

suburbanization and longer commutes, and a generational shift toward materialist standards of success and dignity led Americans to dramatically reduce their participation in the civic associations and neighborhood organizations that had been their forebears' primary schools of democratic self-governance. Meanwhile, both major parties reinforced this privatization of political life—the right celebrating individual freedom from government, the left emphasizing group rights against dominant majorities. Both frames tended to cast democracy as a zero-sum competition over fixed resources rather than a collaborative enterprise for creating common goods. The result was a vicious cycle in which Americans came to treat government as a vending machine—a system into which you insert your preferences and receive, or fail to receive, your desired outcomes—rather than as an arena for deliberative discourse and collaborative problem-solving.

Yet courageous citizenship is not dead, and models for channeling civic courage into constructive politics exist. The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the nation's oldest and largest community organizing network, works in hundreds of poor and working-class communities across deep partisan, racial, and religious divides to build civic capacity and create common goods. Organizations like Braver Angels address the most acute symptom of civic breakdown—polarization—through workshops that teach participants to maintain their principles while genuinely engaging those who hold different ones. And educators across the country are developing civics curricula that move beyond the mere study of American history, institutions, and culture to engage students in the actual practice of collaborative democracy, asking them to develop the habits of curious listening, critical analysis, creative synthesis of views, and generous cooperation with others that a democratic way of life requires.

These and [many other examples](#) testify to the abiding attraction and power of collaborative democracy, and to the courage of the everyday citizens now embracing and engaging in it. For it does take courage for diverse citizens to work together, across genuine differences, to create a common world worthy of all of them. It takes courage to entertain novel ideas, try new ways of doing things, and revise them in light of consequences. It takes courage to face the past—both treasured and painful—squarely, reflecting on our own experience and whatever experience our fellow citizens relate to us, to complicate our view of the present and inform our plans for the future. And it takes courage to treat all fellow citizens, even those who differ from or oppose us, as complex humans and potential friends; to strive not merely to tolerate but to find public value in the experiences, perspectives, ideals, and commitments of others.

One might call these experimental, reflective, and empathic habits of life the cardinal virtues of courageous citizenship. They are not merely personal but emphatically public virtues: they provide the creative and sustaining power that animates a genuinely democratic polity. It is a power relatively unfamiliar to political science but nonetheless at work throughout American history. In contrast to the kind of power that scholars and professional politicians tend to study—the zero-sum power of one actor, or group of actors, to dominate others—the power channeled by the civic virtues is generative: a power that grows when shared, that emerges from collaboration rather than dominance, and that is uniquely capable of creating new political possibilities.

Reviewing the career of such generative power in American history yields a double lesson. The first is sobering: the collaborative democratic tradition is not automatic or self-sustaining. At every turn it has been possible for Americans to retreat from the demanding work of courageous citizenship into the laziness of consumerism or the perverse gratifications of partisan warfare. The tradition must be consciously cultivated and repeatedly renewed.

The second lesson is more hopeful. The tradition has been renewed—repeatedly, in unpromising circumstances, by unlikely people. As individuals, neither the colonists of British North America, the soldiers of the Massachusetts 54th, nor the disenfranchised and frequently terrorized participants in the Civil Rights movement were uniquely or even favorably positioned to shape the course of political history. But all, through action, example, or both, did just that—suggesting that however fragile its institutional flowers, democracy, defined as a people uniting to govern themselves, is a hardy perennial capable of taking root in almost any soil.

What is required today is what has always been required: institutions and organizations that teach and sustain the habits of collaborative democratic work; a civic education that goes beyond rights and procedures; and a political culture that honors generative over dominative power. Above all, we need to recover the understanding of democracy as an ongoing experiment, to be conducted by all of us, together. As James put it in 1897, “Democracy is still upon its trial. The civic genius of the people is its only bulwark.”

Those words ring as true today as 130 years ago, and the political sensibility they express is as sophisticated, sober, and hopeful as that with which 56 signatories [closed the Declaration of Independence](#) 250 years ago:

“We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.... And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

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