

250 & Beyond

Our American Story

History classroom engagement and discussion guide

This discussion guide is designed to facilitate robust, thoughtful conversations in the history classroom, grounded in the essential principles of American democracy, the evolution of citizenship, and the "revolutionary idea" of self-governance. Drawing on insights from the video 250 & Beyond: Our American Story produced by the National Museum and Center for Service and WETA, the flagship public media station serving our Nation's Capital, the guide is structured around critical themes that challenge students to connect historical context—from the Founders' "sacred honor" to the "unfinished revolution" of the Civil Rights era—with contemporary political realities.

Through a series of engaging questions and practical activities, this guide aims to understand diverse viewpoints and inspire students to recognize service as a fundamental, visible, and valued component of active citizenship. Students will evaluate the intended role of the Legislative Branch as the "First Branch" of government and trace how marginalized groups used the "great machine" of American history to make the promise of equality real.

This discussion guide was developed to accompany a one hour video conversation featuring:



Sarah Botstein, Co-Director & Producer, PBS's The American Revolution



Hon. Brian Baird (Dem), former representative, Washington 3rd district



Hon. Donna Edwards (Dem), former representative, Maryland's 4th district

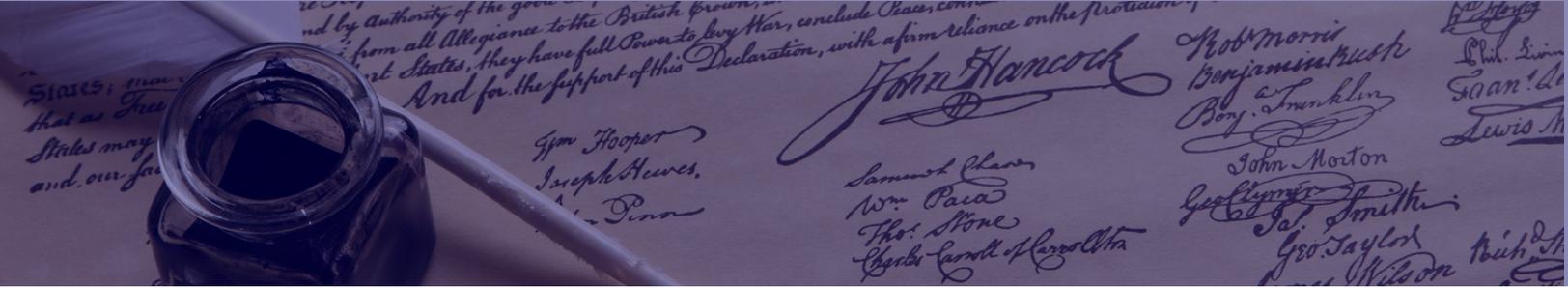


Hon. Bob Inglis (Rep), former representative, South Carolina's 4th district



Hon. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (Rep), former representative, Florida's 27th district

Video available at www.250andbeyond.com/conversation



Discussion Questions

The revolutionary idea

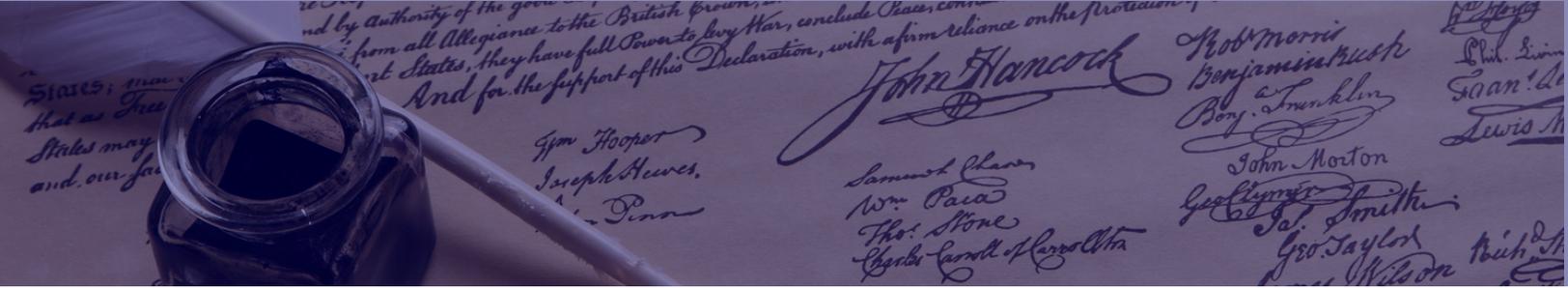
Objective: Students will analyze the motivations of the Founders and the inherent tensions between self-interest and the "common good" established in the Declaration of Independence.

Context: In the video, Sarah Botstein (filmmaker, *The American Revolution*) and Brian Baird, Founder of the National Museum and Center for Service discuss the "revolutionary idea" that people can govern themselves. However, this required a specific type of character.

- **Defining "sacred Honor":** Brian Baird highlights the closing of the Declaration of Independence, where the signers pledged "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor". Sarah Botstein notes that these were wealthy individuals willing to "give it all away in service of an idea".
 - Questions for discussion: How does the concept of "sacred honor" differ from modern political motivations?
 - What risks did the Founders face that modern politicians generally do not?
- **The paradox of self-interest:** Brian Baird asks a central question of the American experiment: "If all you're interested in is self-interest, how do you work together for the common good?".
 - Questions for discussion: Can a democratic republic survive if citizens prioritize personal enrichment over the community?
 - How did the Founders attempt to solve this "conundrum"?
 - What examples can you think of throughout our history that demonstrate this?
- **"The Great Machine":** Sarah Botstein states, "The people who were left out at the beginning used the great machine of America and American history and American government to make those things real".
 - Questions for discussion: What does Botstein mean by the "great machine"? Is the Constitution a static set of rules, or a tool for change?

"The founders did not know they were gonna be the founders... they were a spunky, fierce bunch of great, fierce debaters and philosophers and lawyers trying to wrestle some big things to the ground."

— Sarah Botstein



The role of Congress

Objective: Students will evaluate the intended role of the Legislative Branch compared to its current perception.

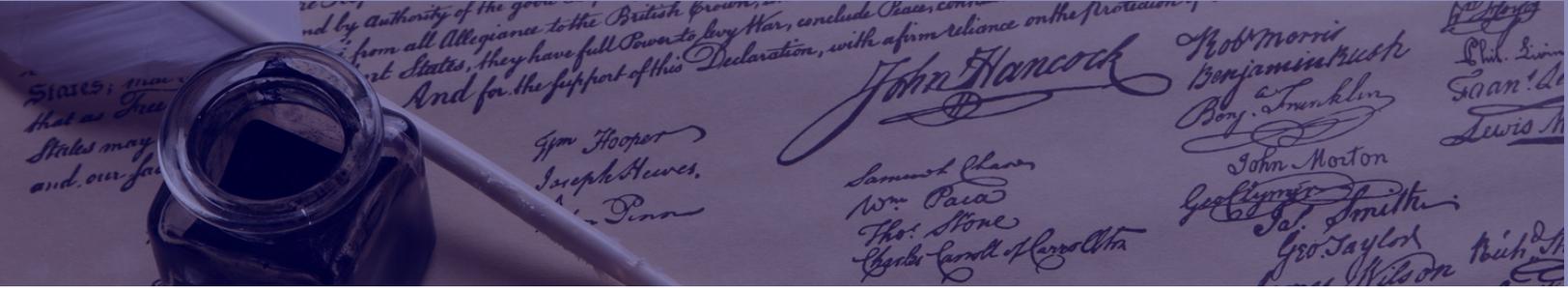
Context: The panel discusses how the focus of American politics has shifted. Sarah Botstein argues that we have "focused our attention collectively on the presidency," whereas the Founders were "mostly focused on the Congress"

- **The First Branch:** Sarah Botstein emphasizes that Congress is the "first branch" listed in the Constitution because it is meant to represent the people and "check the executive branch".
 - Questions for discussion: Why do you think modern media and citizens focus so much on the President rather than Congress? Does this shift affect how well represented local communities feel?
- **The delegate vs. trustee model:** Bob Inglis argues that to deserve a seat in Congress, "you have to be willing to lose the seat" to take a courageous stance. He states, "The worst thing that can happen to you is not losing an election, it's losing your soul".
 - Question for discussion: Should an elected official always vote exactly how their constituents want them to (the Delegate model), or should they vote based on their own judgment and conscience, even if it risks losing the next election (the Trustee model)?

"The American Revolution was not just a war but also the revolutionary idea that... People can govern themselves. But it's a conundrum because if all you're interested in is self-interest, how do you work together for the common good?"

— Brian Baird





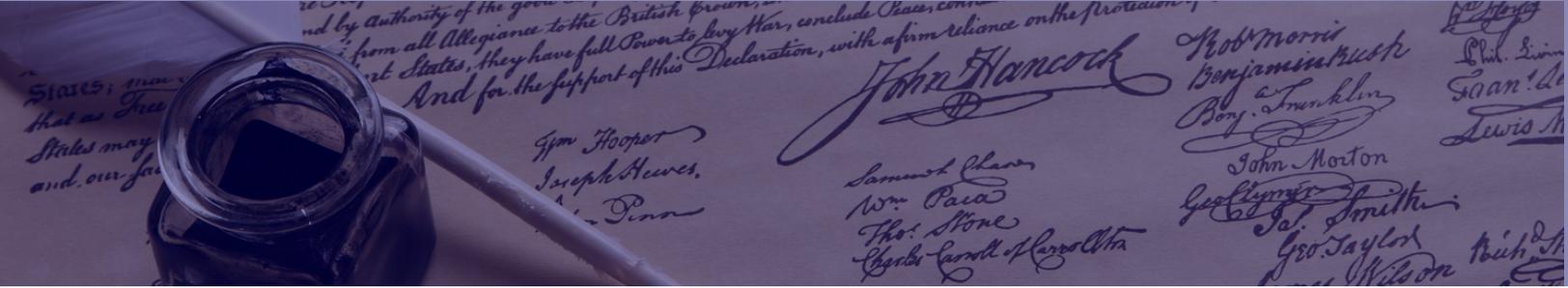
Expanding the "We"

Objective: Students will trace how marginalized groups used service to expand the definition of citizenship, linking the Civil War and Civil Rights eras.

Context: Donna Edwards shares that her ancestors served in the military for a nation where "they didn't even have the right to vote," yet were inspired by the idea of "perfecting the union".

- **Service without rights:** African Americans served their country, in vital roles throughout history, when they themselves did not have the right to participate in democracy.
 - Question for discussion: Why would African Americans fight for the Union (or in later battles such as WWI) before they had full equality. How is military service a claim to citizenship?
- **The "unfinished revolution":** Sarah Botstein mentions that it took "140 years" for women to secure the right to vote.
 - Question for discussion: How does the theme of "perfecting the union" relate to the "Second Reconstruction" of the Civil Rights movement? Did the "great machine" of government work too slowly, or did it work exactly as designed by requiring sustained civic pressure?





Classroom and community activities

Activity: Community interviews

Using the "Community Interviews" resource, assign students to interview a "hidden connector" in their school or neighborhood—someone who serves without a formal title (e.g., a custodian, a food bank volunteer, a neighbor who cleans up the park).

Download the [community interview placemats](http://www.nmcfs.org/resources/community-interviews) at www.nmcfs.org/resources/community-interviews or www.ouramericanstory.org/toolkit/the-spirit-of-service-civic-engagement.

Activity: "Visible and Valued"

Task: Brian Baird mentions an initiative to make service "visible and valued" in schools and communities.

Classroom Activity: Identify one person in your school or local community who is a "hidden connector"—someone who serves without seeking attention (e.g., a custodian, a volunteer coach, a poll worker). Write a short paragraph and create a poster explaining how their service contributes to the "common good." Partner with a public community organization or find a prominent space on your school's campus to display these posters for others to learn about what service looks like in your community.

Expansion: Turn this classroom activity into a school legacy project, establishing a Campus Museum of Service. Learn how other schools have done this at www.nmcfs.org/resources.

For more activities and resources visit www.nmcfs.org/resources and www.OurAmericanStory.org