



250 & BEYOND Our American Story

Civics classroom engagement and discussion guide

This discussion guide is designed to facilitate robust, thoughtful conversations in the civics classroom, grounded in the essential principles of American democracy, citizenship, and service. 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 with contemporary political realities.

Through a series of engaging questions and practical activities, this guide aims to unify diverse viewpoints and inspire students to recognize service as a fundamental, visible, and valued component of active citizenship.

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

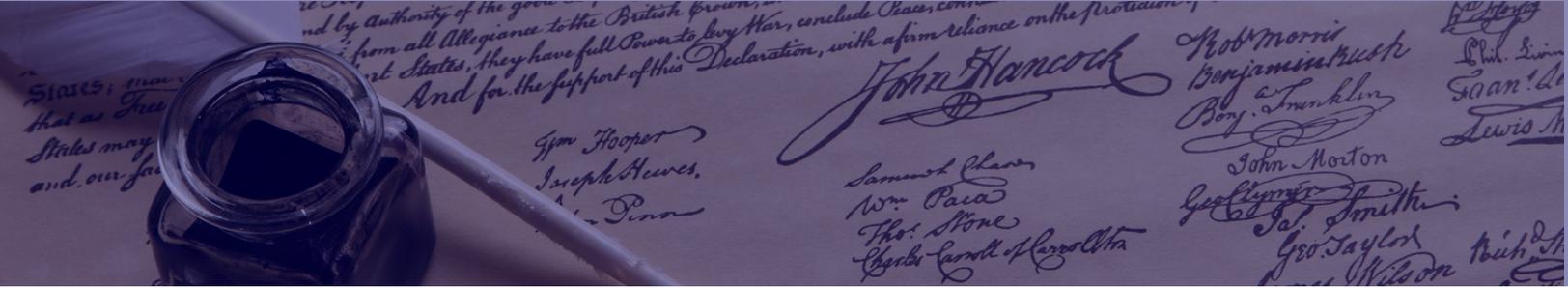


Hon. Bob Inglis (Rep), former representative, South Carolina's 4th district



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

Video available at www.250andbeyond.com/conversation



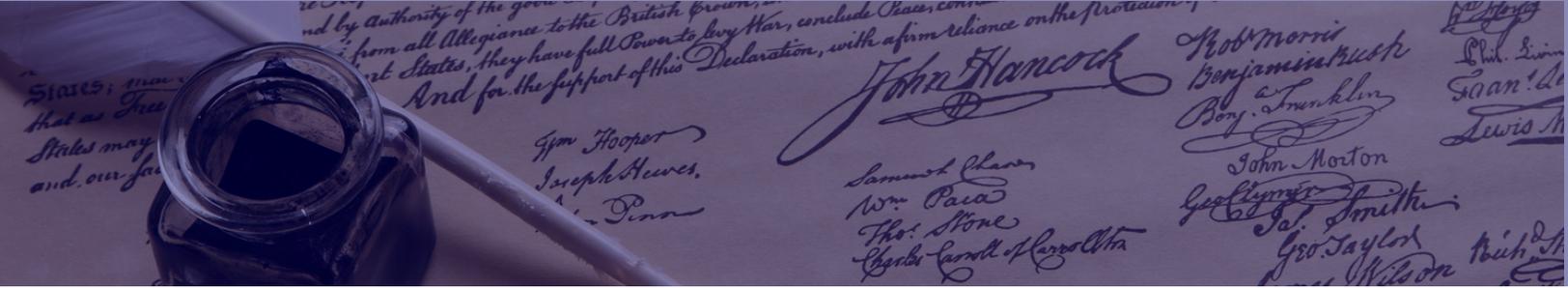
Discussion Questions

The role of Congress and representation

- **The "First Branch" of government:** Sarah Botstein notes that while we focus heavily on the Presidency today, the Founders focused mostly on Congress, listing it first in the Constitution.
 - Question for discussion: Why do you think the Founders placed the legislative branch (Congress) first? How does Sarah Botstein's argument, that Congress is meant to represent the people and check the other branches, compare to how you see Congress functioning today?
- **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)?
- **Balancing self-interest and the common good:** Brian Baird notes that the Constitution relies on people working for the "common good," yet politics often involves "selfish interests". Donna Edwards adds that when leaders serve the common good, it works to everyone's benefit.
 - Question for discussion: Is it possible for a politician to be ambitious and seek power while still serving the "common good"? How can voters tell the difference between a leader serving "selfish interests" versus one serving the community?

Civic duty and citizenship

- **Defining service:** Brian Baird describes service as the "hidden connector" that brings communities together. Donna Edwards defines it as "everybody doing their bit," from volunteering in schools to running for the school board. The National Museum and Center for Service defines service as "people giving of themselves in a spirit of kindness to help others and make the world a better place".
 - Question for discussion: Based on these definitions, does "service" require a formal title or position to be labeled as a service to others? What are examples of "hidden connectors" in your own school or neighborhood that keep the community running?



Civic duty and citizenship continued

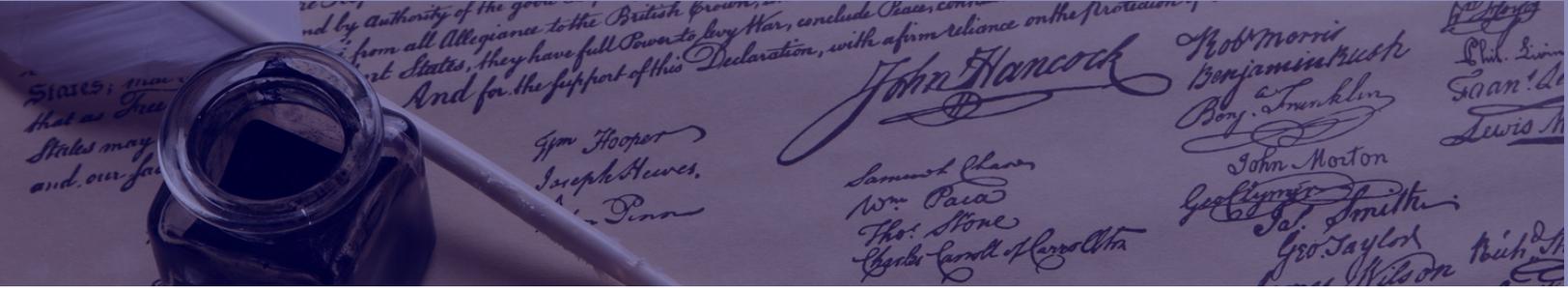
- **Heroism in everyday life:** Bob Inglis tells the story of a 70-year-old neighbor and first responders entering a freezing river to save a young woman named Dakota.
 - Question for discussion: Bob Inglis uses this story to illustrate service. Do you consider this physical bravery to be the same kind of "service" as voting or running for office? How are they similar or different? Is one form of service more valued in our society than the other?
- **The ability to serve:** Ileana Ros-Lehtinen quotes Martin Luther King Jr., stating, "Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve".
 - Question for discussion: Modern politics often involves wealthy donors and high-level degrees. Do you agree that anybody can serve in public office? What barriers might stop an average citizen from running for local office today?

The American founding and history

- **A pledge for a cause:** The group discusses the closing of the Declaration of Independence, where the signers pledged their "lives, fortunes, and sacred honor". Sarah Botstein reminds us that these were wealthy people willing to "give it all away in service of an idea".
 - Question for discussion: What is the modern equivalent of pledging your "fortune" and "sacred honor" for the country? Can you name any modern figures who have risked their careers or wealth for a civic cause?
- **A more perfect union:** Donna Edwards reflects on her military family serving a nation where they historically "didn't even have the right to vote," yet were inspired by the idea of "perfecting the union".
 - Question for discussion: How can citizens be patriotic and committed to service while acknowledging that the country is not yet "perfect"? How does Edwards's family story influence your understanding of patriotism?
- **Humanizing the founders:** Sarah Botstein emphasizes that the Founders were "not a monolith" (they didn't all agree) and were "flawed just like the rest of us".
 - Question for discussion: Does knowing that the Founders had intense disagreements and personal flaws make their achievements more impressive or less impressive? Why? How does this impact your perception of leadership today?

"The founders were mostly focused on the Congress and how the Congress represents the people. And that, to them, was the branch of government that needed to wield its power and check the executive and judicial branch."

— Sarah Botstein

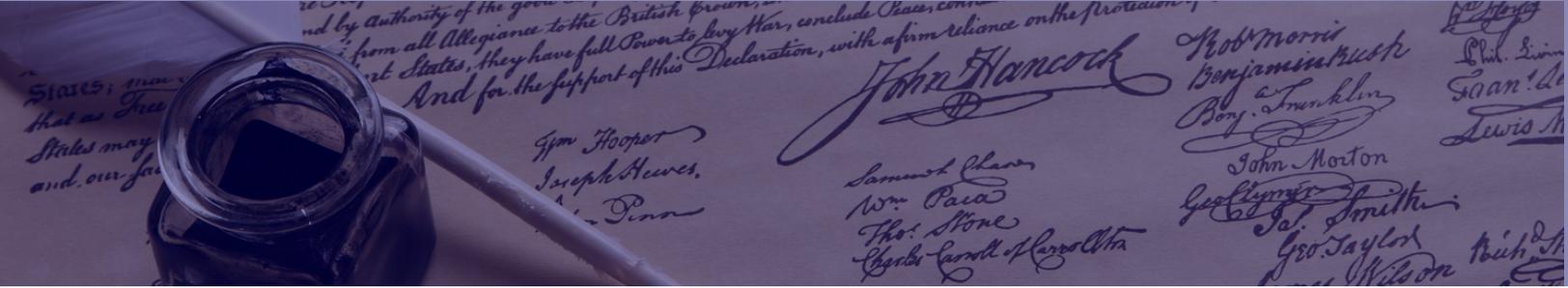


Unity through service

- **Service as a unifier:** Brian Baird states that "service unifies" and brings people together even when they have different political viewpoints. The panel included Democrats and Republicans who are friends and colleagues.
 - Question for discussion: Why does working on a service project (like a beach cleanup or a food bank) often reduce political polarization? Can you think of a local issue where people of opposing political parties might work together?
- **Shared values:** After her RV trip across the country, Donna Edwards concluded that despite geography and politics, Americans have "shared concerns and values" like caring for families and communities.
 - Question for discussion: Do you agree that Americans have more in common than what divides them? Why does the news media or social media often suggest otherwise? How can divisions in political disposition, culture, or beliefs be resolved or put aside to work for the common good?

Inclusion of ALL people

- **Building the "great machine":** Sarah Botstein describes the American government as a "great machine."
 - Question for discussion: If the Constitution and the amendment process are the gears of this machine, what are the specific "levers" that citizens can pull to operate it?
- **Flexibility to change:** Sarah Botstein and others have noted that while the Declaration of Independence was originally written for "white property men," which excluded a large amount of the country at the time, it contained "enough flexibility" for others to claim those rights later.
 - Question for discussion: Do you think the Founders intended for the document to be flexible, or did marginalized groups have to force that flexibility into existence?
- **Waiting for change:** Sarah Botstein mentions that it took "140 years" for women to secure the right to vote.
 - Question for discussion: Based on the discussion about the "common good" versus "selfish interests", why do you think it took so long for the "great machine" to work for these groups? What role did persistence play?



Inclusion of ALL people continued

- **America's founders:** Brian Baird argues that the "American Revolution was not just a war but also the revolutionary idea that... people can govern themselves".
 - Question for discussion: If people who were originally excluded (like women and African Americans) used the "machine" of government to include ALL people throughout history, should those leaders be considered "Founders" of the United States as we know it today, similar to the men who signed the Declaration in 1776?

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.