

Civic Education and Engagement Resource Kit

Introduction

As the public history community prepares to commemorate the 250th anniversary of American Independence in 2026, the theme of civics has been brought to the forefront of planning conversations. The Semiquincentennial presents an unequalled opportunity for renewing civic education and engagement by interrogating the history and legacy of the United States' founding, from the successes and failures to the evolution of democracy and citizenship. Inspired by the possibilities the 250th holds to revive civic dialogue, this Civic Education and Engagement Resource Kit includes AASLH conference sessions, *History News* articles, a technical leaflet, books, guides, award winners, and 250th anniversary materials, as well as outside organizations and readings, to inform current public history practices, planning for the Semiquincentennial, and beyond. Resources in this kit address topics such as the role history plays in reinforcing civic education, how public history institutions can support educators and a public eager to learn, and the value of partnerships between museums and civic organizations.

Conference Sessions

2021 Online Conference - [*Doing History; Doing Justice; Doing Democracy*](#)*

Adapted annotation: As history organizations are becoming more relevant in the current political climate, fostering effective civic engagement in our communities is essential. As we do this work more deliberately, it makes sense to understand the landscape of civic dialogue and collaborate with organizations dedicated to supporting the democratic project in our own country and abroad. This session highlights the work of Citizen University, the National Conference on Citizenship, the Better Arguments Project, Made By Us, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, and the USCIS Office of Citizenship and how history organizations can partner with these and other similar organizations doing groundbreaking civics work to strengthen civic life, restore faith in democracy, and provide communities resources for becoming informed and active citizens.

*A 'Doing Democracy' resource list and 'Organizations Bridging Divides' handout are included with this session recording

2021 Online Conference - [The Dream of a Common Language: What is our Role in Civic Teaching and Learning?](#)*

Adapted annotation: In the last year, cascading crises have highlighted the importance of engaging all learners in powerful civic dialogue that incorporates the history of a shared, diverse nation to develop a common language and understanding of how to cultivate active citizenship. This session, which builds off of the conversation that began in *Doing History; Doing Justice; Doing Democracy*, focuses on how history reinforces civics education for K-12 learners and the ways history organizations can establish partnerships with K-12 civic learning initiatives and educators. Through meaningful collaborations, museums can provide resources that allow young learners to see themselves reflected in the annals of American history to foster civic engagement.

*A 'Civic Teaching and Learning Resources' handout is included with this session recording

2020 Annual Meeting - [Getting Real: Using Civics as a Forum for Debating Our Constitution](#)

Adapted annotation: The Civics Renewal Network hosts a discussion on the tools, programs, and collective experience of bringing civics back to the forefront of education to strengthen civic dialogue, increase the understanding of our history and our founding documents, and encourage informed participation in American democracy. Our students and visitors have the right and the desire to engage in issues that matter. This session explores the ways organizations can use tools of democracy to empower and engage students and visitors in civic issues. Methods for doing so discussed in the session include hosting professional development for teachers and museum professionals, using primary sources to do inclusive history, and providing resources and space for visitors to exercise their agency as citizens through conversation and debate.

2020 Annual Meeting - [American Views on History](#)

Adapted annotation: In a discussion of research projects and national and local surveys conducted by the Driving Force Institute, AASLH, the American Historical Association, and the Vermont Historical Society, this session provides insight into the question: How do Americans think about history, and what role do they think it plays in their lives? Panelists share the initial results of their organization's efforts to learn the most effective way to communicate history to the public, how well the public understands history, if the public thinks history is relevant, how interested and engaged the public is in history, and how and why certain demographics (income, gender, age, ethnicity, etc.) affect a person's attitude towards history. This session also addresses the importance of history in promoting civic activities and a correlation between interest in history and civic engagement.

History News

Wickens, K. Allison. "[Public History and Civics Education.](#)" *History News* 76, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 14–19.*

Annotation: This article demonstrates the important role history can play in civics education and shows how the public history field can help teachers incorporate historical context and thinking skills in civics lessons to prepare students for informed participation in government. Wickens first establishes the historical importance of civics education to the survival of American democracy and the value of history in our present-day civics classrooms and then addresses how historians can provide for teachers and learners, from highlighting how local communities engage in governance to developing interactive games.

*For an in-depth case study of how historians can support teachers, see Caroline Gibbons, "[Hungry for History: Bringing Social Studies Back to Alabama,](#)" *History News* 73, no. 1 (Winter 2018), 22–26. This article overviews the professional development workshops and curriculum development project hosted by the Alabama Bicentennial Commission beginning in 2017 for elementary school teachers.

Burns, Norman. "[And the Survey Says: History is the Foundation for a Stronger Future.](#)" *History News* 75, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 8–13.

Annotation: This article overviews the findings of Conner Prairie’s commissioned national survey to discover Americans’ views on the relevance of history and the role of museums in society today. Statistics included in the article address the value and relevance of history in building a better future; the ways Americans want to engage with history at museums; museums as a forum for civics education; the importance of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access; generational views on history; and words Americans used to describe museums. This article closes with conclusions drawn from the survey and how museums can use the results to engage our communities and enact positive change.

Technical Leaflets

#292 - "[Museums as Polling Sites: How Your Organization Can Serve Voters](#)" (2020)

Adapted annotation: In a case study of the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site, this leaflet explains how sites can become polling places in their local communities to encourage civic participation through engagement and audience outreach. Museums and historic sites are highly trusted and accessible organizations that can provide a valuable resource to their communities by expanding voting access while remaining politically neutral within the bounds of their 501(c)3 status.

*Note: This leaflet is included in *History News* 75, no. 4 (Autumn 2020).

Books and Guides

Select entries in [*The Inclusive Historian's Handbook*](#)

[Civic Engagement](#) (2019)

Concluding paragraph: As these examples suggest, civic engagement is a means by which historians can challenge exclusive pasts and promote a more just and inclusive future. By valuing responsiveness and connection, by working to treat different ways of knowing and analyzing events as equally relevant for problem solving, and by privileging inclusiveness over authority, public history can play a role in expanding democracy and craft a strong foundation from which average citizens can become stronger advocates and agitators for social justice causes.

[Civics Education](#) (2021)

Concluding paragraph: Civics is sometimes the first class students take in school where they learn that their opinions matter and they have a voice that will contribute to the world we all live in. The unique skills and talents that historical thinking develops play a critical role in sharpening students' respect for others' perspectives and the ability to articulate their own. By providing sources, contextualization, and viewpoints from a wide array of actors in history, historians contribute to a more inclusive civics classroom education. When history and civics are intertwined, students are better prepared for participation in government and have the skills to contribute.

[U.S. Presidents](#) (2019)

Concluding paragraph: Historians have important work to do. Franklin Roosevelt, a keen student of history, knew this when he wrote that a "Nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future." If Americans—all Americans—hope to learn from the past, they need to find better ways to learn it together. For historians, certainly, working with the public to develop a more inclusive history of the presidency is an essential way to strengthen the nation's democracy and make it work for the diverse, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic society we are today.

Award Winners

2022

Award of Excellence: Senator John Heinz History Center for the exhibit [American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith](#)

About the exhibition from the Heinz History Center: The History Center examines the bold experiment to create a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” in its new exhibition, *American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith*, open now at the Smithsonian’s home in Pittsburgh.

Developed in partnership with the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), this timely exhibit provides much-needed historical context following a year that included heated elections, civil unrest, and challenges to our democracy.

With rare artifacts, engaging interactives, and immersive exhibit design, the American Democracy exhibit showcases the history of how we’ve voted, protested, and engaged with our politics, from the nation’s formation to today.

2020

Award of Excellence: Alabama Department of Archives and History for the project [We the People: Alabama’s Defining Documents](#)

About the project from the Huntsville Museum of Art (where the exhibition was on view): *We the People: Alabama’s Defining Documents* will feature all six of Alabama’s constitutions along with the 1861 ordinance of secession, which declared Alabama’s separation from the Union on the eve of the Civil War.

For two centuries, Alabamians have been engaged in a civics conversation. Whose voice matters? What do we value? What is the role of state government? Who can vote? The people of Alabama have debated these issues through political conventions, referendums, and in the courts. At crucial moments in history, these fundamental questions have been answered in the state’s principal governing documents: its constitutions. This exhibition will explore how these documents, some of the most important in state history, reflect their framers’ values, hopes and fears.

Award of Excellence: Museum of the American Revolution for the exhibit [Hamilton Was Here: Rising Up in Revolutionary Philadelphia](#)

About the exhibit from the Museum of the American Revolution: Visitors journeyed through Hamilton’s Philadelphia in *Hamilton Was Here: Rising Up in Revolutionary Philadelphia* from October 27, 2018, to March 17, 2019. The interactive playscape revealed connections between our own city and Alexander Hamilton’s extraordinary contributions to the nation’s founding. Through playful interactives, scenic environments, and facilitated games, visitors actively engaged in the challenges of founding and maintaining a country and were inspired to carry these lessons forward as they face the challenges of citizenship today. The experience also served thousands of school groups with a facilitated program.

2019

History in Progress Award & Award of Excellence: New-York Historical Society for [The Citizenship Project](#)

About the project from AASLH: This project leverages the New-York Historical Society's considerable archival and museum collections to provide free civics and American history workshops to prepare green card holders to succeed on the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services naturalization interview. The program offers new immigrants a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the nation's history to become more engaged citizens.

History News Award Winner Spotlight: Henson, Lenora M. "[Collections, Civics, and Citizenship.](#)" *History News* 74, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 36-37.

Award of Excellence: Arkansas Declaration of Learning for the project [Arkansas Declaration of Learning – Year Three and Four](#)

About the project from AASLH: This cross-curricular statewide partnership has trained hundreds of grade 4-12 educators in incorporating historic objects, art, and primary sources into their classrooms and school libraries and demonstrating history's relevance through civic engagement projects. Through mentoring and resource sharing, this program empowers educators to use primary sources to build inquiry skills with students, and to draw connections between past and present and national and state history.

Award of Excellence: Freedom's Way Heritage Association for the public program [Declaring Independence: Then & Now](#)

About the project from AASLH: Through scholarship, performance, readings, and community conversations, this collaborative program engaged the public in the local historical drama of declaring independence in the spring and summer of 1776. By creating a format that could be customized with each town's records and utilized citizen historians, Declaring Independence provided an accessible model for local history programming that directly involves visitors and community resources.

2016

Award of Merit: Indiana Historical Society for the project *Indiana History for the Secondary Classroom*

About the project from AASLH: In Indiana, as in many states, the public school curriculum mandates state history just once — in fourth grade. The Indiana Historical Society (IHS) viewed the state's Bicentennial in 2016 as the perfect chance to encourage a sense of place, civic literacy, and civil dialogue — especially among older students, as they approach voting age and prepare to share the job of stewarding our state. But how could it do so effectively in a curriculum without room for non-mandatory course material? This three-part project —

Hoosiers and the American Story, the Bicentennial Teacher Workshops, and the website [Destination Indiana](#) — is IHS’s answer. These new tools integrate state history into 8th and 11th grade U.S. History. They give teachers the content knowledge needed to help young Hoosiers see American history all around them—to position Indiana’s history within the context of American History.

Award of Merit: State Historical Museum of Iowa for the exhibit [First in the Nation: Shaping Presidential Politics Since 1972](#)

About the exhibit from AASLH: The exhibit *First in the Nation: Shaping Presidential Politics since 1972* at the State Historical Museum of Iowa explains the history of the Iowa caucuses and how Iowa gained its first in the nation status in 1972. The exhibit uses a variety of artifacts and photographs to explore the meaningful role Iowans play in selecting presidential candidates. The exhibit also explores the continuity and change in the interactions between Iowans and candidates. The primary goals of the project included educating museum guests on the history of the Iowa caucuses and to inspire Iowans to support candidates and participate in the caucus process.

In addition to the exhibit, the project includes an educator curriculum guide and on-site programming, speaker panels, candidate and issue forums, and a traveling display. Diverse audiences include students, Iowans of voting age and local, national, and international media seeking accessible background on the caucuses. The programming served educators across Iowa and positioned the museum as a convener of civil political discourse.

Civics and the 250th

[Making History at 250: The Field Guide for the Semiquincentennial \(2021\)](#)

Annotation from AASLH: In this guide, you’ll find several themes to encourage inclusive, relevant histories and provide cohesiveness to a multi-faceted, grassroots commemoration. Developed with direction from a diverse panel of more than twenty-five historians and museum professionals from across the United States, each of these guiding themes can be used to explore our nation’s founding and the legacy of the Revolution, helping us confront hard truths about the shortcomings of our experiment in liberty and equality, while celebrating the vital principles of participatory government and constitutional rights. What is more, the themes can encourage a deep engagement with the entirety of our past, one full of moments that both inspire and challenge us. Any one of these themes can spark exhibits, community conversations, films, lesson plans, books, podcasts, and a wide range of other programs and events. We hope the themes will help create a more widely-shared story about our nation’s history, one that acknowledges its many tensions and ambiguities and that informs our present and future.

Blog Post - [“Civics Now Through 2026”](#) by John Dichtl, AASLH President and CEO

Annotation: In this blog post, AASLH president and CEO John Dichtl offers ideas for refreshing your organization's civic messaging and provides a descriptive list of civic and history efforts to help “link the work you do for history to the labor of promoting and supporting civic values and knowledge” in the lead-up to the Semiquincentennial to support our communities and country as a whole.

Webinar - [Black Lives Matter and \(the American\) Revolution](#) (2020)

Adapted annotation: The wave of anti-racist protests since the killing of George Floyd has propelled issues of discrimination, police violence, and social justice into the national spotlight. Demands for the removal of monuments commemorating people and events rooted in the repugnant ideology of white supremacy are on the rise, and many history institutions are engaged in the painful but essential process of reckoning with the role racism played in their own individual histories.

These developments have prompted compelling questions as preparations for marking the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution continue. How will this renewed social justice movement impact the way history organizations commemorate this anniversary? What are the opportunities for transformative engagement with audiences who seem eager to understand the past in more inclusive ways? How can traditional history organizations reshape themselves to meet the interests and needs of audiences now, in 2026, and beyond? And what will the legacy of the Semiquincentennial be?

A series of two webinars will consider practical strategies for developing programs and initiatives that move history organizations and their audiences into an understanding of the past that will better prepare us for the future. In this first webinar, Michelle Lanier, Noelle Trent, and Steve Murray will consider the big issues of inclusive history and the Semiquincentennial, including the revival of civics education.

Outside Resources

Organizations

National Archives, [We Rule: Civics for All of US](#) Education Initiative: Washington, D.C.

About the initiative from the National Archives: *We Rule: Civics for All of US* is a new education initiative from the National Archives that promotes civic literacy and engagement.

Our civics programs empower young people to make a positive difference and improve the world they are inheriting. These programs draw upon the vast archival holdings of the National Archives housed in our nation’s capital, the Presidential Libraries, and at National Archives facilities nationwide to promote the knowledge and skills students need for civic engagement in the 21st century.

Using the varied historical documents and government records preserved by the National Archives, the *We Rule* national civics education initiative delivers thought-provoking educational programs and powerful educational resources to the public. These programs are facilitated by National Archives educators across the country, both onsite and through distance learning, engaging diverse communities regardless of their proximity to National Archives facilities.

Civics Education: The National Archives offers

1. [Educator Resources](#)
2. [DocsTeach: Our Online Tool for Teaching with Documents](#)
3. [Working with Primary Sources](#)
4. [Student Visits](#)
5. [Professional Development](#)
6. [Distance Learning Programs](#)
7. [eBooks, Online Tours, Videos & More](#)
8. [National History Day Resources](#)
9. [Education Programs at Presidential Libraries](#)
10. [Events & Public Programs](#)

National Constitution Center: Philadelphia, PA

About the Constitution Center: The National Constitution Center in Philadelphia brings together people of all ages and perspectives, across America and around the world, to learn about, debate, and celebrate the greatest vision of human freedom in history, the U.S. Constitution. A private, nonprofit organization, we serve as America's leading platform for constitutional education and debate, fulfilling our congressional charter "to disseminate information about the United States Constitution on a non-partisan basis in order to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people."

Civics Education: The National Constitution Center provides

1. An [Interactive Constitution](#)
2. [Educational Resources](#)
3. [Professional Development](#)
4. [On-site](#) and [virtual](#) learning experiences

Facing History and Ourselves: Global Headquarters in Brookline, MA

About Facing History and Ourselves: Facing our collective history and how it informs our attitudes and behaviors allows us to choose a world of equity and justice. Facing History's resources address racism, antisemitism, and prejudice at pivotal moments in history; we help students connect choices made in the past to those they will confront in their own lives. Through our partnership with educators around the world, Facing History and Ourselves reaches millions of students in thousands of classrooms every year.

Together we are creating the next generation of leaders who will build a world based on knowledge and compassion, the foundation for more democratic, equitable, and just societies.

Civics Education: Facing History & Ourselves provides:

1. An [approach](#) to civics education
2. A [Toolkit](#) and [Collection of Resources](#)
3. Regional Civics Initiatives
4. [Professional Development](#)
5. [Democracy & Civic Engagement](#) Resources

Made by Us

About Made By Us: Our national motto, e pluribus unum—out of many, one—is also the ethos of this group. We are history and civics organizations collaborating across the country to better serve the public and join the ongoing conversation about the future of our country. With an innovative team, pioneering leadership and nationwide institutional network, we have come together in an unprecedented way, modeling a new path forward for the ways in which history serves the people.

Vision: Our vision for the United States of America at 250 is a vibrant country shaped by passionate guardians of our founding ideals—younger generations whose participation in molding our country’s future is powered by rich historical perspective. That’s why we created Made By Us, an unprecedented effort by stewards of our national memory to present history in relevant, provocative, and surprising ways for anyone who wants to participate in shaping the future of our country. Over the next few years, we’ll listen, learn, and share tools and initiatives to address real issues in real-time. With the nation’s 250th anniversary on the horizon, there’s no better moment to harness the power of our collective imagination and write the next 250 years—together.

Civics Education: Made By Us provides a whole host of resources under the [Latest & Greatest tab](#) on their website

Books

Nokes, Jeffery D. [*Teaching History, Learning Citizenship: Tools for Civic Engagement*](#). New York: Teachers College Press, 2019.

Annotation from Teachers College Press: Learn how to design history lessons that foster students’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions for civic engagement. Each section of this practical resource introduces a key element of civic engagement, such as defending the rights of others, advocating for change, taking action when problems are observed, compromising to promote reform, and working with others to achieve common goals. Primary and secondary sources are provided for lessons on diverse topics such as Alice Paul and the Silent Sentinels, Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor, Harriet Tubman, Reagan and Gorbachev’s

unlikely friendship, and Lincoln’s plan for reconstructing the Union. With *Teaching History, Learning Citizenship*, teachers can show students how to apply historical thinking skills to real-world problems and to act on civic dispositions to make positive changes in their communities.

Pennay, Anthony. [*The Civic Mission of Museums*](#). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020.

Annotation from Rowman and Littlefield: Museums have long sought to maintain relevance in the daily lives of their communities. Over the past several decades, museums have shifted, as a field, from a focus on collections to a focus on connecting with audiences. More recently, museums must confront political polarization and a decreasing sense of trust in nearly every public institution. As a result, few institutions are better positioned to serve the country than museums. In fact, polls show that museums rank among the most trusted institutions in the country, regardless of political belief. During tumultuous times, this trust means that museums have a unique and important responsibility to fulfill their civic mission.

A century ago, John Cotton Dana argued that the most important thing a museum can do is “produce a public benefit.” *The Civic Mission of Museums* argues that museums play an essential role in the cultivation of engaged and informed citizens. The book outlines a spectrum of civic learning that includes: civic knowledge, civic mindset, civic skillset, and civic action. It offers concrete examples of impactful civic programming, exhibits, and public engagement from a diverse set of museums. It ends with a practical toolkit, gleaned from across the country, from museum professionals.

Wineburg, Sam. [*Why Learn History \(When It’s Already on Your Phone\)*](#). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Annotation from University of Chicago Press: With the internet always at our fingertips, what’s a teacher of history to do? Sam Wineburg has answers, beginning with this: We definitely can’t stick to the same old read-the-chapter-answer-the-questions-at-the-back snoozefest we’ve subjected students to for decades. If we want to educate citizens who can sift through the mass of information around them and separate fact from fake, we have to explicitly work to give them the necessary critical thinking tools. Historical thinking, Wineburg shows us in *Why Learn History (When It’s Already on Your Phone)*, has nothing to do with test prep–style ability to memorize facts. Instead, it’s an orientation to the world that we can cultivate, one that encourages reasoned skepticism, discourages haste, and counters our tendency to confirm our biases. Wineburg draws on surprising discoveries from an array of research and experiments—including surveys of students, recent attempts to update history curricula, and analyses of how historians, students, and even fact checkers approach online sources—to paint a picture of a dangerously mine-filled landscape, but one that, with care, attention, and awareness, we can all learn to navigate.