



Civic Power

Objectives

- Students will **identify** and analyze the concept of civic power through historical examples.
- Students will **brainstorm** actions they can take to engage in action civics.
- Students will **create** a model representing valuable civic actions and attributes.

Overview

In this lesson, middle school students will explore what it means to be civically engaged and how civic action is tied to American identity. They will brainstorm their own ideas about civic action, investigate misconceptions, and analyze historical examples of civic action from the past to present. Through discussions, station activities, and personal reflection, students will discover the power of civic action and identify ways they can make contributions or improvements to their community. Finally, students will use their new understanding to submit an entry to the America's Field Trip contest sponsored by America250—the nonpartisan initiative established by Congress to orchestrate a commemoration of the nation's 250th anniversary in 2026, also known as the Semiquincentennial.

America's Field Trip Contest Overview

America250 is inviting elementary, middle, and high school students to share their perspectives on America 250 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Students can submit artwork, poems, essays, and more articulating what America means to them. First-place award recipients will be able to participate in a once-in-a-lifetime “field trip” experience at one of the nation's most iconic cultural landmarks and institutions, and second-place awardees will receive a cash award. First-place awardees and their designated chaperone will receive travel and lodging accommodations for their selected trip. For more information about America's Field Trip, contest rules, and field trip experiences for awardees, please visit america250.org/FieldTrip.

Time

60–90 minutes

Timing of the activities may vary by classroom. Consider how this activity and submission to the contest could be split into multiple days or used in collaboration with other educators across your school.

Materials

- Paper and Pencil
- Notecards/Sticky Notes for Students
- Poster Board (for each group)
- America's Field Trip Contest Submission Information
- Civic Action Through American History One-Pagers (PDF)
 - Civic Action Through American History One-Pagers ([Google Slides](#))
- Civic Power Directions (for display)

Teacher Preparation

Content: Read through the activity and handouts beforehand to consider adaptations necessary for your students' needs.

These may take the form of additional scaffolds for reading or civic examples relevant to your community and student interests.

Procedure

ASK

- Ask students to consider an answer to the following question, “What does it mean to be civically active in the United States?” Provide students with time to list their ideas on an individual notecard in preparation for a debrief discussion about civics—these can be quick bullet points or sentences. Students can also work in small groups to share their ideas. As students share, capture the common themes and examples on the board to reference throughout the lesson.
- For added support, you can share the following definition. An active citizen could mean

helping make their community and country a better place. It can mean caring about what happens around them, sharing their thoughts, listening to others, celebrating their community or national heroes, and even joining the military when they're old enough.

- Next, lead a brief class discussion about the different roles and responsibilities of civic action and what these may mean to the lives of middle school students. Questions might include:
 - *What might civic action mean?*
 - *What does it mean to be active (or engaged) in your community and country?*
 - *How has civic action meant different things to different people and groups over time?*
- Finally, share with students that they will use what they have learned at the end of the lesson to submit an entry into the America's Field Trip contest.

Teacher Note:

For this activity, civic engagement addresses being a contributing member of your community, not citizenship status.

ANALYZE

- Next, explore opportunities for students to be engaged in their community by asking students to evaluate three common misconceptions about civic action. Write or display each misconception below on the board for students to see:
 - *Civic action only applies to adults.*
 - *Civic action only matters at big moments.*
 - *Civic action always means solving a problem or issue.*
- Ask students to consider why these misconceptions might exist and how these misconceptions might reveal opportunities for civic actions they can take in their lives.
- Emphasize small actions students might be able to take that help uplift their school, community, or region. Questions might include:
 - *How can I be civically active in my daily life?*
 - *How would my civic action benefit my own community today?*
 - *How can my civic action benefit others in the future?*
- Next, set up a station activity using the **Civic Action Through American History One-Pagers**. Here students will explore selected moments from American history that illustrate how different people and groups exemplified civic action. These stations include:
 - Organization of the Sons of Liberty

- The Freedmen's Bureau
 - Passage of the 19th Amendment
 - Greensboro Sit-Ins
 - Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act
 - Historical Markers
- Organize students into groups of six, each having their own one-pager. Explain that they will use the guiding questions on the **Civic Action Through American History One-Pagers** to identify specific characteristics of civic action in the example (courage, perseverance, respect, critical thinking, collaboration, etc.).
 - **Teacher Note:** *Depending on time and student background knowledge, you may choose to provide a single example for each group and then have groups share their answers to the questions as a class.*

APPLY

- When students have finished, have them reflect on the station activity by leading a brief whole-class discussion about the themes and lessons learned from the historical case studies. Using the guiding questions from the **Civic Action Through American History One-Pagers**, help students make connections to their lives today.
- Provide each student with five sticky notes. Encourage them to brainstorm ways to demonstrate civic action in their daily lives and record their ideas on their sticky notes.
 - *Encourage students to generate ideas of specific actions they can take, either small or large, to contribute positively to their school, community, and country; even encouraging students to reflect on examples they may have seen on the news, current events, or other local events.*
- Provide various spaces around the room—on the board, walls, classroom door, etc.—where students can post their sticky notes with their civic action ideas and easily see their peers' ideas.
- As students post sticky notes around the room, encourage them to read through the ideas of their peers and identify at least one specific action from those ideas that they can take to benefit their school, community, and country. Encourage them to write down this identified action step in their journal or notebook and return to their seat to prepare for the final activity.

ACT

- Conclude class by having students reflect on the many interpretations of civic action they learned from their stations and sticky notes activity.
- Organize students into small groups, provide each group with a large piece of chart paper or poster board, and display the **Civic Power Handout**. Read the directions with students and help answer any clarifying questions.

- As class concludes, have student groups share their posters and big ideas. If possible, have students display their work in the hall or on a bulletin board for other students, visitors, and educators to see.

SUBMIT

- As a final step, students can submit an entry into the America's Field Trip contest. The contest asks middle school-aged students (6–8) to submit an entry that responds to the prompt "What does America mean to me?" Like the way students explored the many interpretations of what civic action means to different people, they can also explore the connection between civic action and what America means to themselves. Here are the ways to submit an entry:
 - **First:** Students may create artwork, including physical artwork, that is submitted on a high resolution photo or digital drawing.
 - **Second:** Students may submit a video. Video file attachments should not exceed two (2) minutes in length and must be in one of the following formats: MOV, AVI, MP4, MPEG/MPG, M4V, or WMV. Total file size must be no larger than 500MB. Video resolution must be no lower than 400x300px.
 - For more information on the contest and the link to submit entries, please use the **Contest Submission Information Handout**.

Frameworks and Standards

Educating for American Democracy

- Civic Participation 6–8: Analyze leadership through past and present examples of change-makers.
- Civic Participation 6–8: Analyze strategies and examples of civic participation, including instances of participation by those without full political rights.
- We the People 6–8: Cultivate understanding of personal values, principles, commitments, and community responsibilities.
- We the People 6–8: Evaluate the extent to which marginalized groups have won incorporation into “the people” and advanced the shared values and principles of the United States.

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

- D2.Civ.10.6-8. Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.
- D2.Civ.7.6-8. Apply civic virtues and democratic principles in school and community settings.
- D2.Civ.14.6-8. Compare historical and contemporary means of changing societies and promoting the common good.

ELA Standards

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.E: Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

Organization of the Sons of Liberty

Summary: In the 1760s, American colonists were living under British rule. These colonists felt they weren't being treated fairly by the British government, with new taxes and laws being passed without their consent significantly impacting their daily lives. In response to these challenges, colonists like Samuel Adams and Benjamin Edes formed an organization called the Sons of Liberty.

The Sons of Liberty were a group of colonists who banded together to organize boycotts and protests like the famous Boston Tea Party to stand up for their rights against the British government's rule.

The Sons of Liberty represent an example of how everyday people can take action to make a change, reminding us that fighting for what is right, even when it is difficult, is a powerful form of civic action.

Source: [Sons of Liberty](#)

Video: [Who were the Sons of Liberty?](#)



[Stark, James Henry. Bostonians Reading the Stamp Act. 1882. From "Stranger's Illustrated Guide to Boston and Its Suburbs"](#)

Guiding Questions: As you learn more about this event, develop responses to the following questions:

- What did civic action mean to the individuals involved in this historical event?
- Why was civic action needed from these individuals or groups during this time period?
- What are the specific characteristics of civic action revealed in this historical example?
- How have the civic actions displayed in these examples impacted the lives of future generations, including my life today?

The Freedmen's Bureau

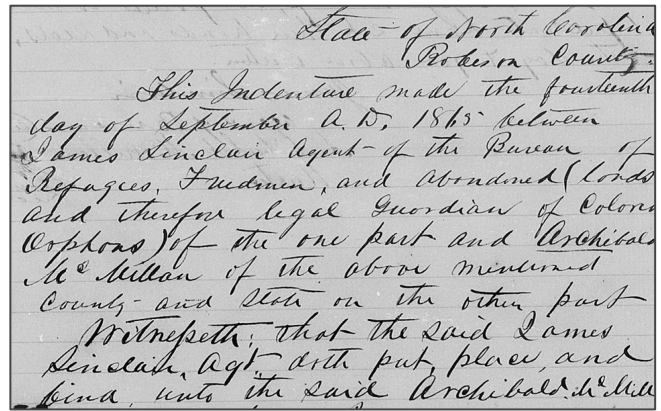
Summary: In the wake of the American Civil War, millions of formerly enslaved people faced an uncertain future. They were free, but still did not have equal opportunity or access to land, education, or legal protections. Recognizing this need, Congress established the Freedmen's Bureau, a government agency designed to provide food, shelter, education, and legal support to formerly enslaved people.

As a formerly enslaved person, Harriet Smith worked as a teacher at a school for emancipated children, eventually earning an appointment to become the Principal of a Freedmen's Bureau school in Bryan, Texas.

Although facing resistance and limited funding, Harriet's work, and the work of other community members like Harriet were critical, empowering formerly enslaved people to claim their freedom and build new lives. The efforts of Harriet and countless others working to educate, support, and uplift their communities after emancipation is a powerful example of civic action, showing how community groups and individuals can come together to strive for lasting change.

Source: [Harriet Smith: American Women in the Freedmen's Bureau Records](#)

Video: [Freedmen's Bureau](#) from NBC News Learn



The Freedmen's Bureau Records

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The Suffragettes

Summary: In the 1800s and early 1900s, women in the United States could not vote in federal elections, and only a few states had passed laws allowing women to vote in local elections. Frustrated by the inability to vote and voice their political opinions, brave women like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott spent decades fighting for change.

These women and others, called suffragists, organized marches, lobbied politicians, and were sometimes even arrested for their cause. During this time, Black women were prevented from marching and attending conventions with white suffragists. Even so, women like Ida B. Wells founded the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago and Charlotte Grimke helped found the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) which advocated for Black women. After years of effort and support from others, they finally achieved victory in 1920 with the passage of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which guaranteed women the right to vote in United States elections.

This historic victory demonstrates the power of individuals who organize to advocate for a more just and equal society, just like these women did for future generations.

Source: [19th Amendment](#)

Video: [The 19th Amendment](#)



Image: [The torch bearer](#)

Guiding Questions: As you learn more about this event, develop responses to the following questions:

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Greensboro Sit-Ins

Summary: In the 1960s, racial segregation divided the United States. From public transportation to restaurants, everything was divided. It was unjust, especially for young Black students like Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil. Together they decided to take a stand against segregationist policies.

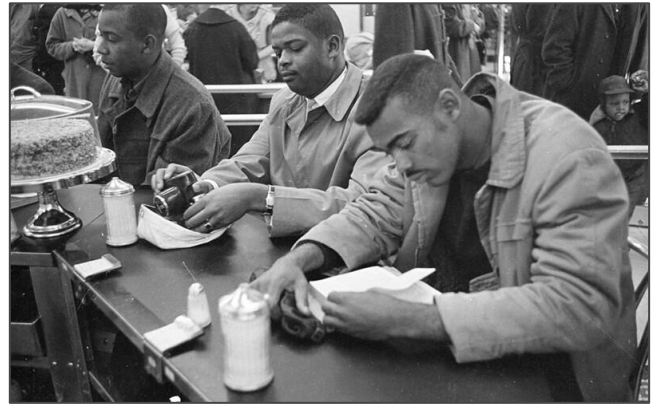
In 1960, women from Bennett College and other students from North Carolina A&T State University began planning a sit-in to protest racial segregation. Inspired by other examples of nonviolent protest, these students decided to sit peacefully at a “whites-only” lunch counter at a Woolworth’s department store in Greensboro, North Carolina. Here the young students refused to leave, even when they were denied service. Their courageous action sparked a wave of other sit-in movements across the South, challenging segregation and making national headlines.

Facing arrests, taunts, and even violence, they persisted, showing the power of civic action. These sit-ins pushed society toward change, eventually leading to the desegregation of public spaces across the nation. These actions are a reminder that ordinary people, through peaceful action and organization, can challenge injustice and create a better future for everyone.

Source: [Greensboro Sit-In](#)

Video: [February 2nd, 1960: Greensboro Sit-In](#)

Several participants of the February 1st sit-in talk about the impact of their actions.



[Civil Rights protesters and Woolworth's Sit-In](#)

Guiding Questions: As you learn more about this event, develop responses to the following questions:

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Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act

Summary: For decades, many everyday places were inaccessible to people with disabilities. Life was a constant struggle of navigating narrow doorways, staircases without ramps, and even inaccessible bathrooms. Determined to remove these barriers, people with disabilities, led by activists like Justin Dart, began a long journey for equal rights for those with disabilities. They organized protests, lobbied Congress, and shared their stories to highlight the discrimination and challenges they faced.

In 1990, their efforts successfully achieved the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA outlawed discrimination against people with disabilities in the workplace, transportation, and in public spaces; requiring ramps, accessible bathrooms, and other changes to create a more inclusive society.

The passage of the ADA is a powerful example of how everyday examples of civic action, like organizing with others and working toward a common goal, can create lasting change and make the world a fairer and more accessible place for everyone.

Source: [The History of the Americans with Disabilities Act](#)

Video: [History of the Americans with Disabilities Act](#)



[Jesse Jackson shaking hands with disability advocate Justin Dart Jr.](#)

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Historical Markers

Summary: Historical markers are plaques, often with distinctive lettering, that highlight significant buildings, places, structures, groups, or objects, and can be found everywhere across the United States.

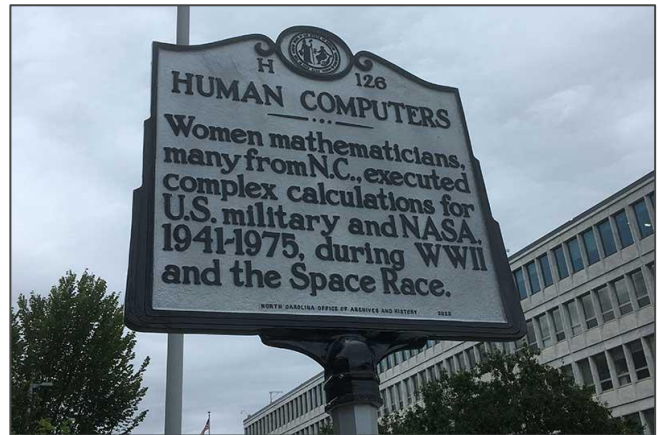
A recent example of a new historical marker in Raleigh, North Carolina, is due to the hard work of a group of students at Meredith College. The students sought to commemorate the often-overlooked women who worked as “human computers” for the U.S. space program and military during World War II and the Cold War. Meredith College alumni were among the women they wanted to recognize.

Students in a public history course researched records to identify Meredith College graduates and other North Carolinians who worked in these specific industries. Then, they submitted their proposal to the state for approval and funding for the new historical marker.

Thanks to their efforts, in September of 2023, a new marker was unveiled. Over 1 million visitors to the area each year will now have an introduction to this history and draw inspiration from the women who helped the United States when it was needed most. This is a powerful example of individuals taking action to bring attention to the people and events that were too often left out of our national and local memory.

Source: [Meredith College Participates in Historical Marker Unveiling](#)

Video: [New historical marker in honor of “human computers” unveiled in Downtown Raleigh](#)



[Image: Meredith College Participates in Historical Marker Unveiling](#)

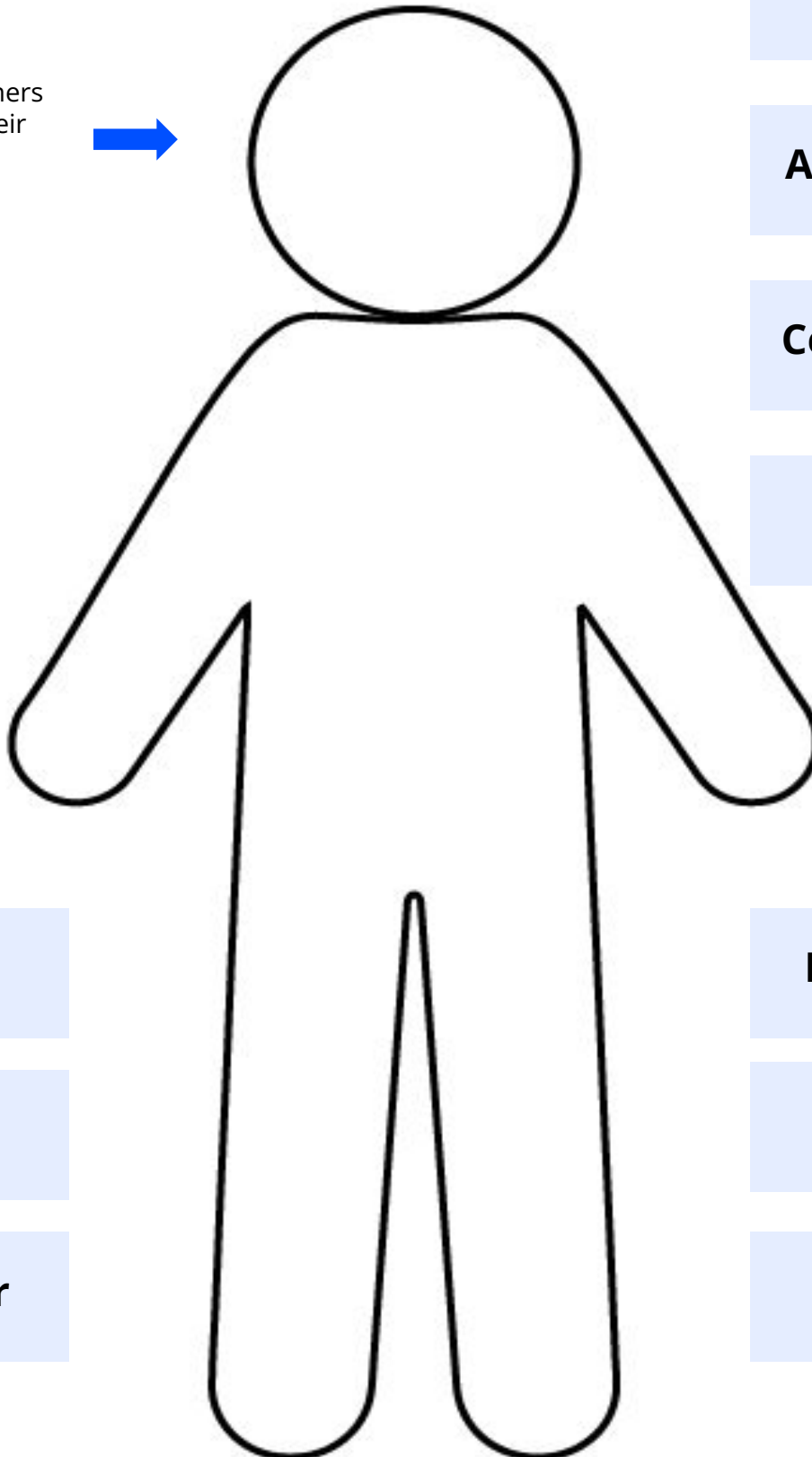
Guiding Questions: As you learn more about this event, develop responses to the following questions:

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Directions: Apply what you have learned by creating your own civic action example using either poster board or the next page. Using information you already know and learned in class, as well as some of the elements of active citizenship below, complete the following.

1. Outline a life-size person or a sketch large enough to write in and around or use the figure on the next page.
2. Identify where the “civic action” examples should be placed on the person, “listen” has been completed as an example for you. If using the interactive student handout on the next page, start a new box by copying each label and filling in your description.
3. Identify examples of what these elements would look like in action within your community or nation.
4. Be creative—consider how these actions inform what America means to each of your group members.

Listen to others
and hear their
ideas and
opinions



Share

Advocate

Celebrate

Vote

Serve

Join

Gather

Discuss

Learn

Listen

Contest Submission Information

[America's Field Trip](#) is a nationwide student contest sponsored by **America250**, the official nonpartisan entity charged by Congress with planning the nation's Semiquincentennial in 2026, also known as the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. America's Field Trip invites students in grades 3–12 to be part of this historic milestone by sharing their perspectives on what America means to them—with the chance to earn a once-in-a-lifetime field trip experience at an iconic American landmark or cultural site, including the Smithsonian's National Zoo, National Archives Museum, Kennedy Space Center, and Yellowstone National Park—just to name a few.

Official Rules can be found at america250.org/FieldTrip/Rules.

- **Submission Deadline:** April 16, 2025 at 5:00 p.m. ET
- **Eligibility:** Any student in grades 3–12 who is a legal resident of any of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, or the U.S. territories is eligible to enter. First- and second-prize awardees from the 2024 America250 America's Field Trip contest, which ended on May 17, 2024 are not eligible to enter or win.
- **Requirements:** Students at each grade level may create artwork, including physical artwork, that is submitted through a high-res photo, digital drawing, or an essay.
 - Students in grades 3–5 may submit writing up to 100 words
 - Students in grades 6–8 may submit writing up to 250 words
 - Students in grades 9–12 may submit writing up to 500 words
- **Judging Criteria:** A panel of current and former educators will evaluate submissions based on **Clarity of Idea** (25%), **Student Voice** (50%), and **Presentation** (25%).
- **Prizes:** 25 first-place awardees from each grade level category and their designated chaperone will receive travel and lodging accommodations for a three-day, two-night trip to a select historical or cultural site. 25 second-place awardees from each grade level category will each receive a \$500 cash award. Award recipients will be announced in May 2025, and field trips will take place in July and August 2025.

How to Enter the America's Field Trip Contest

Students at each grade level will respond to the prompt, "What does America mean to you?" with artwork or an essay. Students must develop submissions individually.

Students must have a teacher, parent, or legal guardian submit their entry through the application portal at america250.org/FieldTrip/Application. A teacher may only submit an entry on behalf of a student with written permission from that student's parent or legal guardian.

For more information about America's Field Trip, including official contest rules, 2025 field trip locations, judging criteria, submission thought starters, classroom activities, and Spanish-language resources, please visit america250.org/FieldTrip or scan the QR code.

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