



Civil Discourse: Election Tips and Tricks

Educational institutions play a vital role in teaching the next generation about civic values and democratic citizenship. As an educator, you are in a unique position to influence your students and inspire them to create change in their communities and beyond.

During election cycles, students will inevitably have questions about candidates and election processes and may turn to you for advice. Do not be nervous to engage! These conversations offer you an opportunity to help students foster critical 21st-century skills. Exploring civic concepts related to elections and engaging in civil discourse in the classroom about topics students are passionate about also will help them foster crucial social emotional skills outlined in the [six Cs model](#) by learning scientists Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and Roberta Golinkoff. The six Cs help students learn to collaborate, communicate, think critically, innovate, and feel confident.

Consider the following tips and guiding questions to prepare yourself for discussing elections in the classroom:

- It starts with you! Remember that as an educator, you are a facilitator and guide in a student's learning. Your role is to help them learn how to think, not what to think. This means supporting students in teaching civic knowledge and skills such as how elections work, promoting inquiry by encouraging students to research credible information about issues they are passionate about and how a political candidate's platform aligns, and creating space for civil discourse around issues students bring up.

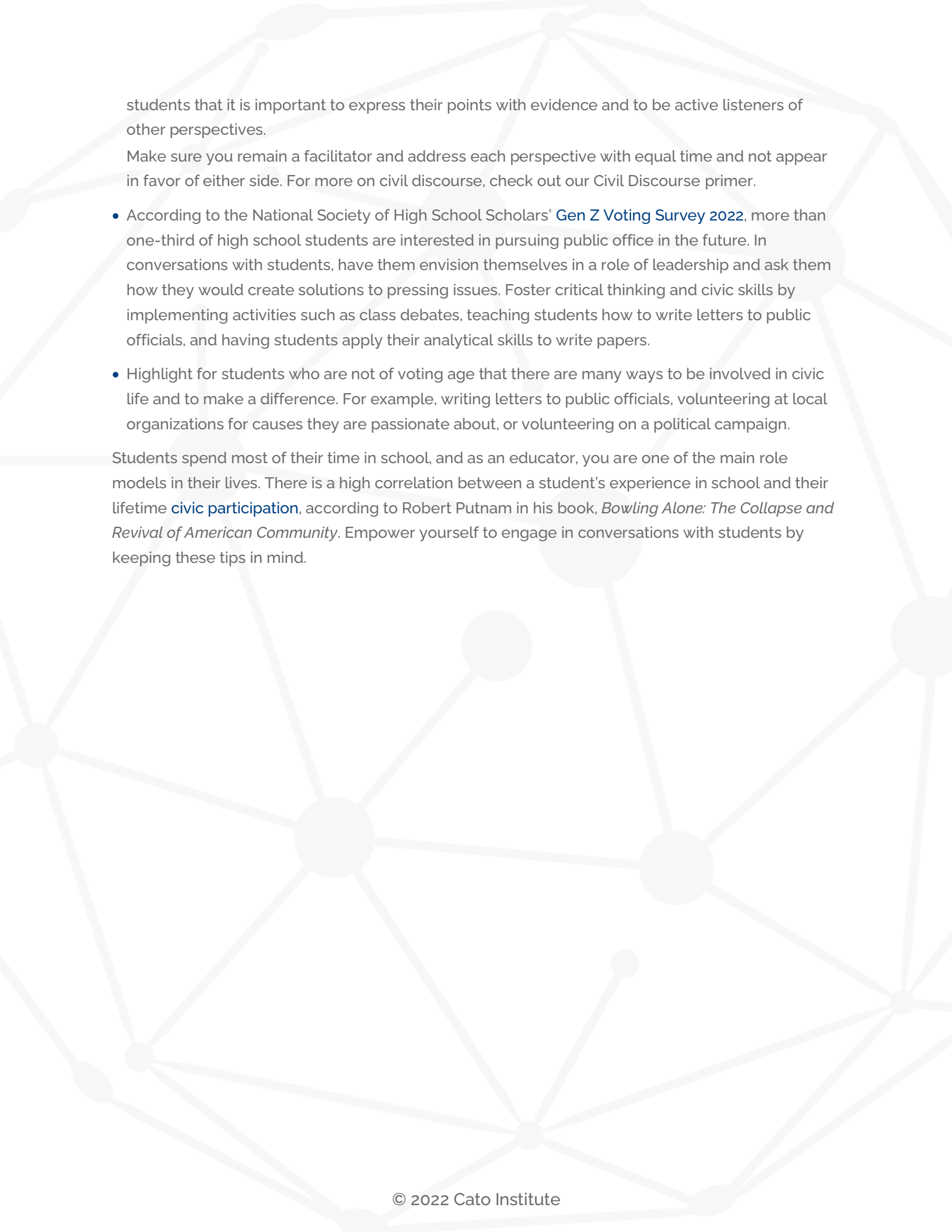
Again, your role is **NOT** to be an expert on all the issues students bring up but to model for them how being informed is part of lifelong learning and a healthy civic culture.

- Invite students to have conversations about issues they are passionate about. As educators, you know students may come with questions at any point of the day. Conversations may happen in class, in advisory groups, or in the hall.

If asked about your opinion on an issue, share objective credible facts you may know, but explain that it is important they research information themselves as well, guide them to how to do that research, and then let them make their own conclusions based on the evidence. Encourage students to consider the "why" in supporting a candidate or an issue and how they can learn more.

- In class, create space for practicing civil discourse around issues students are passionate about. Whether contentious or not, it is important not to shy away from these conversations as it helps students develop healthy communication habits in discussing topics of disagreement.

When practicing civil discourse, work with students to establish conversation norms, stick to one issue, and keep it goal-oriented to build understanding across different perspectives. Remind



students that it is important to express their points with evidence and to be active listeners of other perspectives.

Make sure you remain a facilitator and address each perspective with equal time and not appear in favor of either side. For more on civil discourse, check out our [Civil Discourse primer](#).

- According to the National Society of High School Scholars' [Gen Z Voting Survey 2022](#), more than one-third of high school students are interested in pursuing public office in the future. In conversations with students, have them envision themselves in a role of leadership and ask them how they would create solutions to pressing issues. Foster critical thinking and civic skills by implementing activities such as class debates, teaching students how to write letters to public officials, and having students apply their analytical skills to write papers.
- Highlight for students who are not of voting age that there are many ways to be involved in civic life and to make a difference. For example, writing letters to public officials, volunteering at local organizations for causes they are passionate about, or volunteering on a political campaign.

Students spend most of their time in school, and as an educator, you are one of the main role models in their lives. There is a high correlation between a student's experience in school and their lifetime [civic participation](#), according to Robert Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Empower yourself to engage in conversations with students by keeping these tips in mind.