

"History plays an important role in education because it's important to understand why we do the things we do as a society. Learning this history can encourage both civic participation and empathy, and should be done so that we, as a society, remember our past and can build toward a better future. Equally, activism and civic participation matter for building a better future in terms of sustainability, a clean safe beautiful city, and educated populous working together."



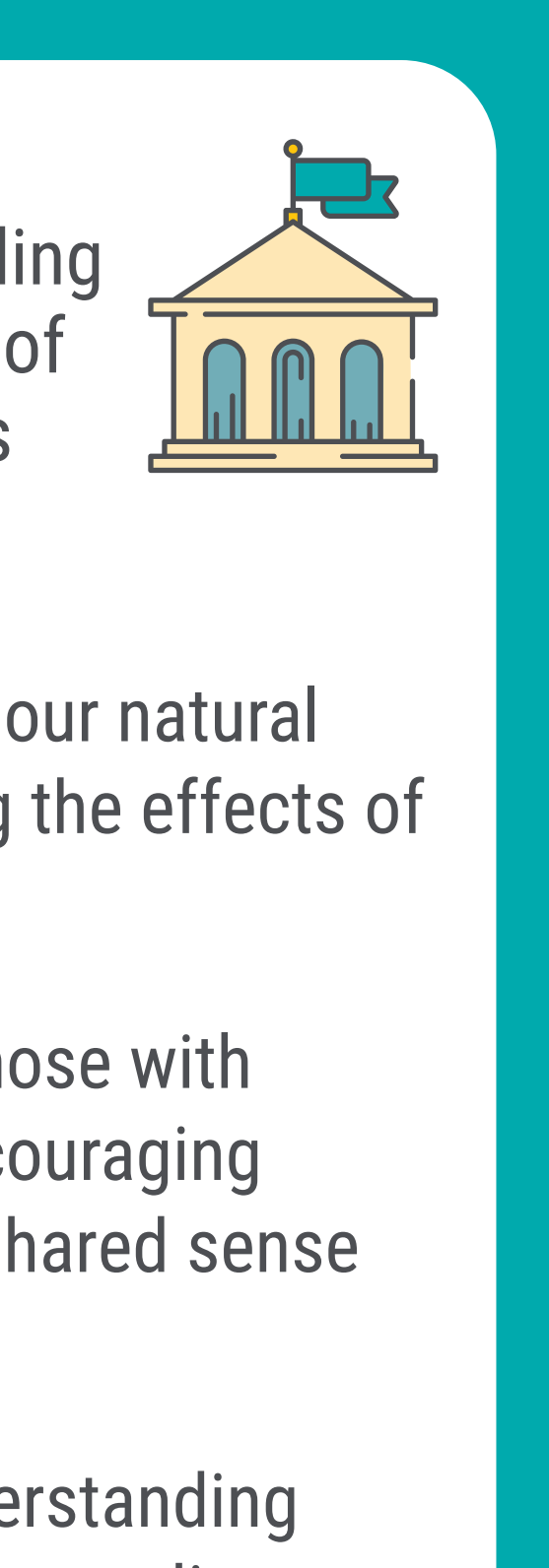
Let's start off with some good news:



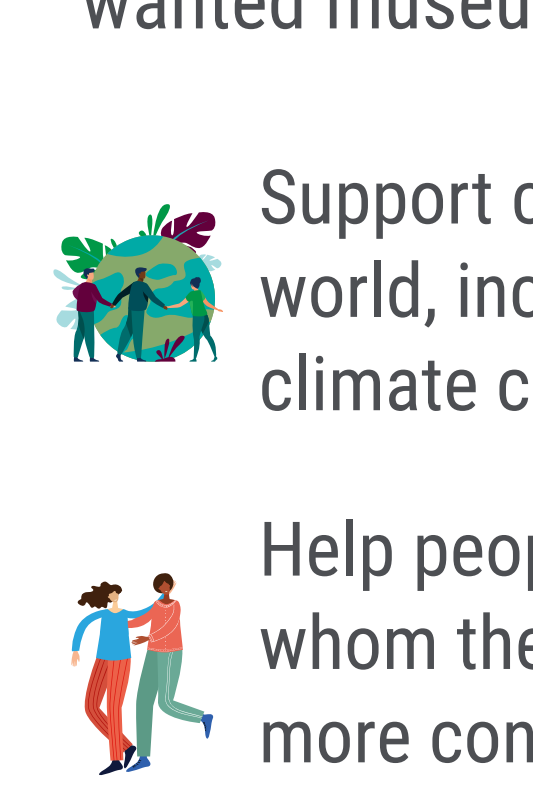
Three-quarters of the public think museums are an important part of our civil society, and that museums have a role in supporting civic knowledge and participation.

For many, museums are exactly the right places to learn about civics. After all, museums are keepers of historical evidence that demonstrate civic ideals as well as past threats to those ideals. In museums, we can also learn about other people and their worldviews, as well as the consequences of humanity's actions, so we can then work collectively towards solutions.

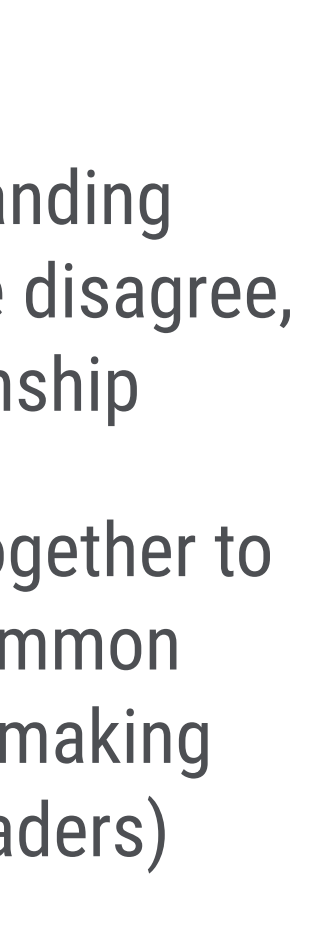
We see this clearly when we examine both quantitative and qualitative results from the 2023 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers. And in this Data Story, we are going to look explicitly at this three-quarters of respondents.¹



"Promote being kind to our planet and show that our being here and how we live affects the world and everything else in it."



When we asked what role museums should play in building our civil society, the majority of these supportive respondents wanted museums to:



Support conservation of our natural world, including reducing the effects of climate change

Help people humanize those with whom they disagree, encouraging more connection and a shared sense of humanity

Promote civility and understanding towards those with whom we disagree, as a way of reducing partisanship

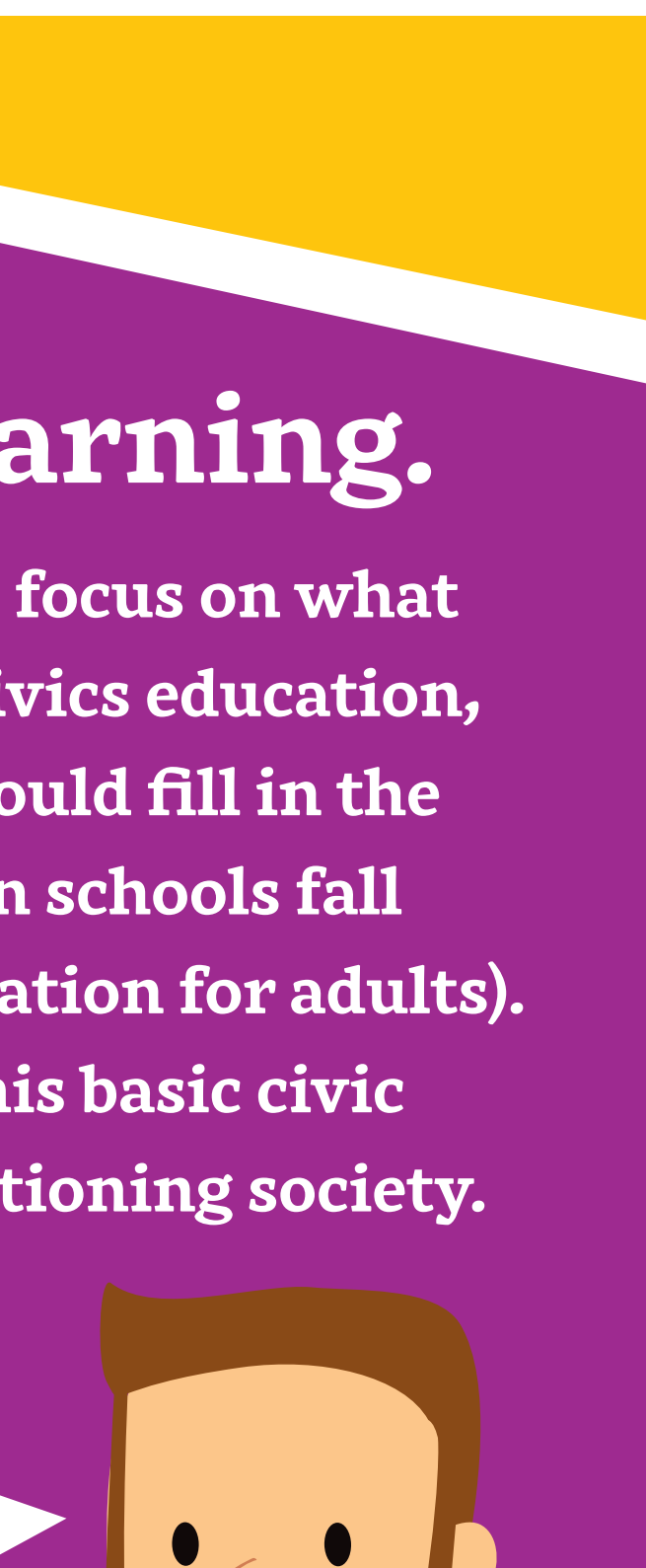
Encourage people to come together to solve societal issues/find common ground (which could include making recommendations to civic leaders)

These supportive respondents also received an open-ended question asking them to consider how museums could effectively encourage civic learning and/or participation. Their responses fell into five main categories:

1 History.

This was the most common theme that emerged, focusing on how, as keepers of history, museums could illustrate how civic leaders of the past have brought people together, led the country through difficulties, and overcome hardships in ways that are inspiring to us today.

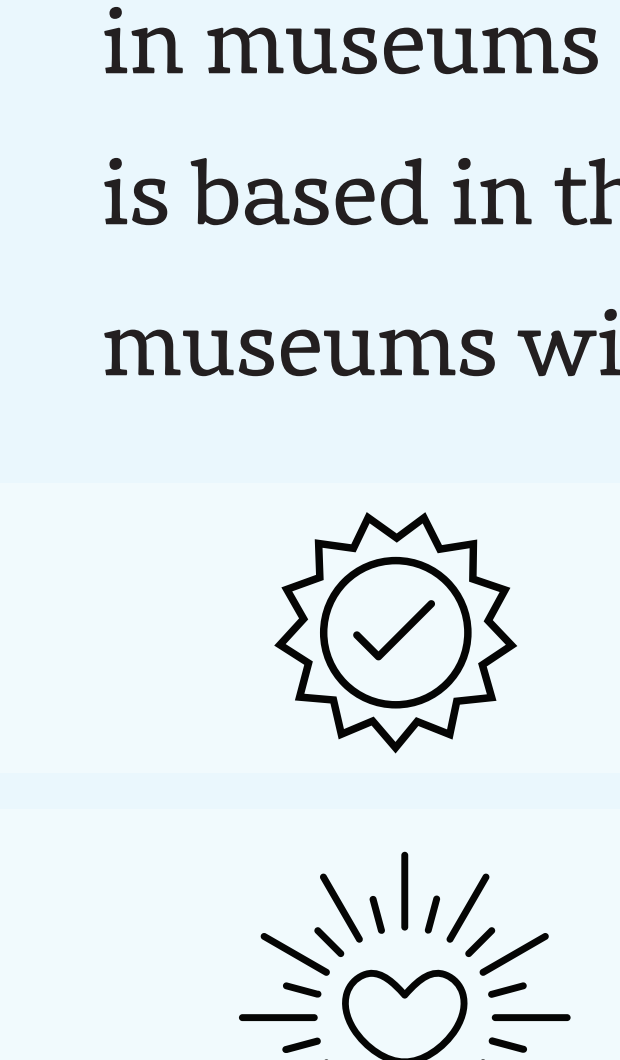
"Museums provide a connection, a bridge to past, current, and future ideologies. What lessons are given by the past? What lessons are we currently evolving? What do we want the future to reflect?"



2 Multiple perspectives and the human experience.

Museums share the breadth of life experiences of people in our communities and our world. This includes exposing visitors to the differences and commonalities of the human experience.

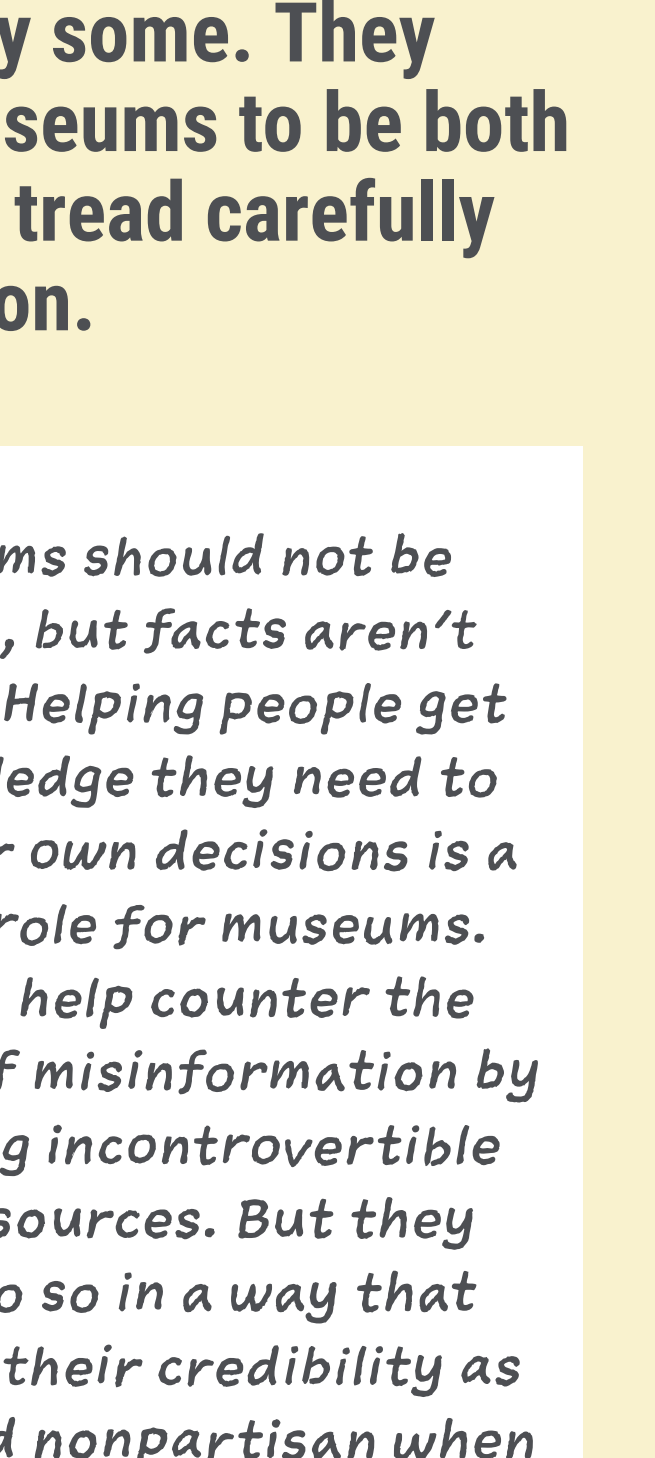
"Museums are great places to appreciate the human condition, so it would follow that they would also be great places for civic engagement; a place to understand our connection to the bigger community and humanity."



3 Practical suggestions.

Respondents also provided specific, actionable suggestions for things museums could do to support civics and civil society, such as enrolling people to vote, hosting forums to discuss community issues, etc.

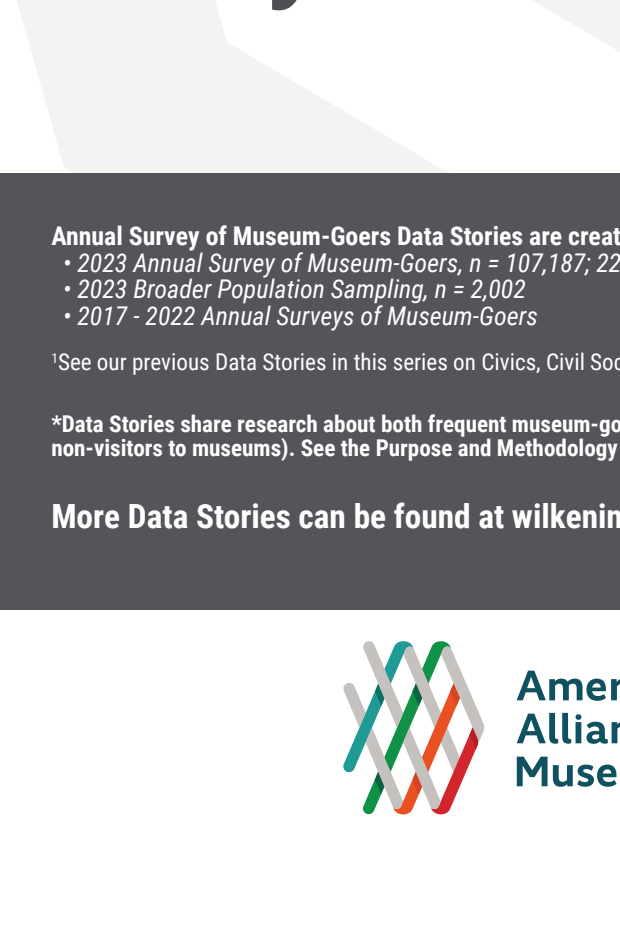
"I think museums need to push people to think about their future and how to help or change things. I think voter registrations at museums is smart."



4 Bringing people together.

Reinforcing three of the most common quantitative responses (above), museum-goers expanded upon the need for people to discuss ideas and challenges facing our society. Crucially, they felt museums were ideal for this because they trust that museums would serve as objective, nonpartisan meeting places that foster and represent different perspectives and values.

"Breaking down the societal barriers that divide us is critical to a well informed and inclusive citizenry. Museums provide a place where all views can be expressed through the arts and where discussion is free and uncensored."



5 Museums are places of learning.

These respondents tended to focus on what could be considered classic civics education, suggesting that museums should fill in the gaps of civics education when schools fall short (and continue the education for adults). Many went on to note that this basic civic education was vital to a functioning society.

"Civics can be taught in countless ways, but maybe people don't even know what civics are and that they are important for a learned society. Maybe we need to start with the basics."

For these supportive respondents, the faith they have in museum-goers as civics educators is based in their trust that museums will:

Share truthful information

Have good intentions to bringing people together to work toward something

Facilitate discussions without judgment or explicit partisan agenda

That trust is a fragile thing, however. Even though most museum-goers view the content shared by museums as trustworthy and evidence-based, they also acknowledged it is perceived differently by some. They implored museums to be both brave and to tread carefully for this reason.

"Museums should not be partisan, but facts aren't partisan. Helping people get the knowledge they need to make their own decisions is a valuable role for museums. They can help counter the epidemic of misinformation by presenting incontrovertible original sources. But they should do so in a way that maintains their credibility as factual and nonpartisan when it comes to politics."

As we continue to share research results, we are committed to helping you be both brave and effective in your work in museums.