



Principles Essay

Our work is not just a project, it's a principled civic organization and movement. At PIVOT, everything we do is rooted in America's founding ideals, and our mission is animated by three in particular: the Consent of the Governed, Freedom of Speech and Press, and Liberty.

Civic engagement is often taught as a future goal rather than a present responsibility. Students are told to prepare, to wait, and to watch while decisions are made on their behalf—decisions about education, the environment, public health, and digital privacy. This model of passive civic education contradicts the democratic values upon which the United States was founded. In response to this disconnection, PIVOT was created: a high schooler-led, international think tank designed to give young people the means, the mentorship, and the institutional access to participate meaningfully in civic life. Through publishing, research, policy development, and legislative engagement, PIVOT enables youth to live out democratic principles, not as distant ideals, but as active responsibilities.

At its foundation, we built PIVOT on the Founding Principle of **Consent of the Governed**, affirming that all governmental authority must derive from the people. It is not simply the right to vote, but the right to be heard and taken seriously in public decision-making. Although youth under eighteen cannot cast a ballot, they are no less impacted by legislation. Their exclusion from policymaking processes weakens both representation and legitimacy. Their exclusion from the civic process creates irreparable damage in the form of civic disengagement, and uninformed voters. However, PIVOT challenges this issue by giving students the training and tools to conduct research on the issues affecting their communities and write formal policy briefs that are presented to decision-makers. In a few months alone, over thirty students have presented their work directly to state legislators, city council members, school board officials, and policy staff. Their work has addressed topics ranging from mental health infrastructure in schools to equitable internet access in rural districts. Through this process, students are not only learning how the government works—they are helping it work better by contributing new ideas, grounded in lived experience and thoughtful analysis.

While Consent of the Governed ensures that youth have a right to be heard in civic life, that voice is only meaningful when protected by the right to speak freely and publish ideas

openly. Just as central to PIVOT's mission is the Founding Principle of **Freedom of Speech and Press**, which affirms the right of individuals to express their ideas, publish their arguments, and engage with the public realm without fear of censorship or dismissal. PIVOT Voices, the organization's student-led publication, serves as a platform where young people can write about the issues that matter most to them—from climate policy and education reform to public safety and digital rights. Writers are able to have a platform that they are not regularly given, a platform that allows them to talk about current events in their communities and issues they are passionate about. These articles are reviewed by a team of trained student editors and mentors who provide guidance on clarity, structure, and evidence. To date, many original articles have been published, written by students in more than thirty states and eleven countries, reaching 6,000+ readers. This work empowers students not only to exercise their rights but to use them well—to write with care, to build arguments that persuade, and to contribute to public discourse with integrity. Their voices do not echo in isolation; they contribute to a chorus of informed, youth-led civic dialogue.

The principle of **Liberty** also guides the work of PIVOT. Liberty, in its fullest form, is the ability to think, speak, and act according to reason and conscience, provided one does not infringe on the rights of others. PIVOT fosters this liberty by providing students with access to knowledge, space to explore their ideas, and pathways to translate their thinking into action. Through the PIVOT Fellowship, students join a community of peers, advisors, and civic mentors who support their development from question to policy proposal. They are not only free to participate—they are prepared to do so meaningfully. One fellow, for example, is developing a policy brief on expanding restorative justice programs in public schools, informed by both national research and personal experiences in her district. With guidance from her cohort and mentors, she is working to revise her proposal and ultimately hopes to present it to her citywide youth advisory council, receiving formal feedback from local education officials. Liberty, in this model, is exercised collectively, thoughtfully, and with purpose.

Alongside these founding ideals, PIVOT is animated by the Civic Virtue of **Responsibility**. Students in PIVOT are not asked to express their opinions, but to substantiate them. Every article, policy brief, and workshop presentation is the product of inquiry, revision, and collaborative critique. Students learn to be responsible researchers, careful listeners, and constructive collaborators. Through civic writing workshops and peer mentorship, they take responsibility not only for their own learning but for the quality of the civic space they share. In doing so, they reflect the view of the Founders that citizenship is not merely a status, but a continuous practice—one that requires effort, humility, and the willingness to engage with complexity.

PIVOT's impact extends beyond its internal programs. It has established partnerships with policy organizations, advocacy coalitions, and legislative offices to ensure that student work reaches those in positions of authority. These partnerships allow students to present their research in real-world settings, to speak with policymakers directly, and to receive feedback that

sharpens their understanding of how civic change occurs. In this way, PIVOT closes the gap between theory and practice, ensuring that students are not only informed but also influential. These efforts are especially important for students from communities historically excluded from policymaking. By design, PIVOT prioritizes access, inclusion, and equity in its programming, actively recruiting students from rural areas, under-resourced schools, and marginalized backgrounds. By being a global organization with over 70 members from 11 countries and 30 U.S. States, we are building a global community built on these civic ideals. Democracy, in PIVOT's view, is strongest when it includes everyone, not only those already positioned to be heard.

Perhaps most profoundly, PIVOT affirms the democratic idea that **voice is not only a right, but a responsibility**—and that this responsibility grows more powerful when shared. Individual ideas become more meaningful when placed in dialogue with others. In peer editing sessions, policy writing workshops, and collaborative projects, students refine their arguments through feedback, revise their thinking through evidence, and come to see civic engagement not as a solitary act but as a collective endeavor. The organization does not rely on charismatic leadership or one-time events. It builds community through sustained effort, shared values, and a belief that democracy must be practiced consistently, with others, and for others.

PIVOT's mission is not to train tomorrow's leaders in the abstract. It is to affirm that young people can lead today, if given the opportunity. Through its programs, its partnerships, and its unwavering commitment to democratic values, PIVOT offers students the space to grow as thinkers, the skills to act as advocates, and the responsibility to serve as stewards of the civic institutions that sustain us all.

By equipping students not just to observe democracy but to shape it, PIVOT lives out the principles that define and sustain the American republic. In a time of polarization and civic disengagement, we believe the best way forward is not silence, but civic speech.