

“Research & Practice” features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Given the intense political polarization in the United States, teaching about the 2020 elections may be especially challenging for educators. Wayne Journell has been conducting research on teaching politics and elections for over a decade. Here, I invited him to share his research findings. Based on his research as well as the work of other scholars, he offers concrete teaching suggestions, as well as thoughtful advice for educators.

—Patricia G. Avery, “Research & Practice” Editor, University of Minnesota

Teaching About the 2020 Presidential Election

Wayne Journell

Covid-19 has made classroom teaching this fall more challenging than normal. Masks, social distancing, and remote learning make instruction both difficult and unpredictable for all educators. Social studies teachers, though, are navigating an additional source of tension: the 2020 presidential election. The contest between President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden has been divisive, vicious, and has certainly captured the attention of students.

My scholarly work has focused on the teaching of politics and controversial issues in secondary education, and in that line of research, I have had the opportunity to study best practices related to these quadrennial events that bring civic intrigue into the classroom like few other events can.¹ In this article, I outline some important considerations for teachers as they navigate the election this fall. These recommendations are aimed at middle and high school classrooms, but many could be adapted for younger learners.²

Seize the Opportunity

Presidential elections have been described as “the quintessential example of teaching social studies” due to the authentic connections teachers can make between the formal curriculum and the political world in which students live.³ Yet current events often do not fit neatly into state curriculum standards and, as

a result, some teachers miss out on the opportunity to make these connections and capitalize on student interest in the election. During my study of the 2008 presidential election, for example, I found a wide range of approaches to incorporating the election among the civics teachers I observed. Some teachers stuck strictly to their pacing guides and only mentioned the election in passing (with one teacher so devoted to her schedule that she gave a unit test on the day after the election), while others talked about the election only during the two-week unit on the executive branch and political parties.⁴

Not surprisingly, interviews with students in those classes indicated that they had developed a less sophisticated understanding of the candidates and the election than students whose teachers discussed the election on a more regular basis. In two of the classes, for example,

the election was discussed on a daily basis. In these classes, the teachers not only provided regular updates on the status of the race, but they also viewed the election as an opportunity to develop students’ awareness of their own political ideologies and biases, encourage skills of tolerant political discourse, and practice critical media literacy in addition to making authentic connections with aspects of the formal curriculum, such as the Electoral College.⁵

A teacher that I observed during the 2012 presidential election offers an example of the extent to which teachers can capitalize on an election year.⁶ The teacher, Mr. Monroe, created a semester-long election project that culminated in a school wide mock election that his classes proctored. In order to maximize students’ understanding of the election, Mr. Monroe readjusted his entire curriculum to correspond with the natural progression of the campaign. Over the course of the semester, students worked in groups based on their affinity for Barack Obama or Mitt Romney and analyzed party platforms, researched the candidates’ positions, created digital campaign commercials, and kept abreast

of major developments during the campaign. The culminating project for each group was a tri-fold display that was used to help schoolmates make an informed decision on “election day,” when they voted in the school library using an Internet voting simulation program.⁷

Of course, the opportunities afforded by presidential elections also come with some risk. The vitriolic rhetoric that accompanies national elections, coupled with the belief held within some political circles that educational institutions seek to indoctrinate students, can make discussing elections difficult. Research on the 2016 presidential election, for example, found that many teachers felt uncomfortable teaching about the election due to comments made by then-candidate Trump and the polarized political climate they found themselves in.⁸ Some schools and districts even went as far as prohibiting teachers from discussing the election in their classrooms. Such concerns are certainly valid; however, my research suggests that they can be mitigated by a healthy, proactive school environment that emphasizes collegiality and political tolerance, creating a context in which the benefits of discussing elections outweighs the risks.⁹

Create Spaces for Inquiry and Political Thinking

Presidential elections offer ample opportunities for students to engage in the disciplinary practices of political scientists, which also lend themselves to the types of inquiries advocated in the C3 Framework (see www.socialstudies.org/standards/c3). Due to the high-profile nature of presidential elections, there is more data (e.g., polling data, campaign finance data) available for teachers to construct disciplinary inquiries than there might normally be. In Mr. Monroe’s classroom, for example, discussions of polling data were an almost daily occurrence. Students learned about concepts like “margins of error” and how averages of multiple polls, as found on RealClearPolitics and FiveThirtyEight, provide a more accurate representation

than any singular poll. Also, they tracked polling data over time to identify outliers and recognize which polls consistently produced results favorable to one candidate or another.¹⁰

More importantly, teachers can have students apply their knowledge of these types of data to inquiries about the election. For example, as I write this article two months before the 2020 general election, Biden is leading in every swing state and is within the margin of error in some traditionally Republican strongholds (e.g., Arizona, Georgia, Texas). Teachers could have their students take the role of Trump’s campaign manager and strategize about the best way to get Trump to 270 electoral votes. Conversely, students could debate the merits of Biden spending resources in a state like Texas instead of focusing exclusively on the states that flipped from Obama to Trump in 2016. These types of questions have no “right” answer, but they require sophisticated knowledge of the Electoral College, polling data, fundraising, media markets, and the cost of advertising. In short, students would be engaging in an authentic simulation that mimics the tough decisions that the Trump and Biden campaigns are grappling with this fall.

Presidential elections are also ideal for helping students engage in what political philosophers have termed “thinking politically.”¹¹ This type of knowledge moves beyond the nuts and bolts of the political system as described in textbooks and instead focuses on “*the game of politics*—how and why politicians make decisions, how they vie for power, and the strategies they use to achieve their political goals and garner public opinion for their policy positions.”¹² Presidential campaigns are highly sophisticated operations that play to voters’ emotions and preconceived worldviews, and these attempts to tap into voters’ psyches can often be more influential to the outcome of an election than the candidates’ platforms. From the lineup of speakers at their respective conventions to their willingness to be photographed wearing a mask, every decision

that Trump and Biden make leading up to November is designed to sway voters’ opinions. If students are made aware of these psychological ploys, they are more likely to start recognizing them on their own, which can help them separate political theatre from the substantive issues that *should* be the focus of elections.

Learning to think politically also extends to the political information that students will encounter outside of school on television and social media. Much has been written about the Russian attempts at influencing the 2016 election with “fake news,” but politicians have been using biased and misleading information to affect the outcome of elections for decades. Whether it is a campaign commercial that spins partial truths or a blatantly false meme posted by a Russian troll, the reason why they work is the same—they play to what people already want to believe. Therefore, attention to political psychology concepts such as *motivated reasoning* and *confirmation bias* should be an essential element of one’s election instruction.¹³ Students need to recognize their own biases and understand how those biases influence their ability to evaluate information and make political decisions.

Rethink Disclosure

As soon as teachers begin discussing the election, students inevitably ask, “Who are you voting for?” Though teachers have been conditioned to avoid disclosing political beliefs to students, my research suggests that social studies teachers should rethink that stance. Many scholars have made arguments in favor of teacher political disclosure; in short, disclosure provides needed transparency for students, allows teachers to model tolerant political discourse, and helps cultivate a sense of trust between students and their teachers.¹⁴

Yet many teachers view disclosure as a risky proposition due to fears of being accused by parents and administrators of attempting to indoctrinate students. Another concern often expressed by teachers is that they feel their voice



Tri-fold displays created by Mr. Monroe's students for 2012's mock Election Day (Photos by Wayne Journell)

carries so much weight in the classroom that if they were to share their opinions, it would discourage students who disagreed with those opinions from contributing to classroom discussions.¹⁵ Certainly, there are teachers who actively push their beliefs on students and penalize those who disagree with them. These teachers often receive highly publicized disciplinary action or end up as objects of derision on cable news networks, which only exacerbates teachers' fear of disclosure. It is important to remember that such teachers are often being rebuked not *because* they disclosed but for *how* they disclosed, and fortunately, they represent a minority of social studies teachers in the United States.

Most social studies teachers attempt to be politically neutral in their classes, and while that may be a worthy goal, neutral classrooms cannot exist. The act of teaching requires making decisions about what to cover, who should be allowed to speak, for how long, and so on. It is impossible for teachers, who are human beings with strong beliefs and developed worldviews, to completely remove themselves from those types of decisions. In my studies of presidential elections, nearly all of the teachers declined to disclose their candidate preference to their students and professed to teach in a neutral manner, but none of them did. As I sat in their classrooms, day after day and month after month, I

would regularly note times when they said or did things that advocated for their political beliefs or preferred candidate.¹⁶

This "political seepage" revealed itself to be problematic when I interviewed students at the end of the semester.¹⁷ Many of the students had not picked up on these acts of unintentional disclosure, and as a result, the teachers' personal opinions were processed as facts by their students, leading to a skewed understanding of the candidates and the election. These same students often made incorrect assumptions about their teachers' political leanings based solely on demographic factors such as the teacher's race and socioeconomic status.¹⁸

Teachers can avoid such issues by taking what Thomas Kelly called a *committed impartiality* approach to disclosure.¹⁹ Committed impartiality means that teachers are open about their political beliefs to their students but teach in a way that is balanced and allows competing views to receive a fair hearing in the classroom. In short, a committed impartiality approach means that teachers acknowledge that their students' opinions on political issues are just as valid as their own. In addition to greater transparency and allowing teachers to model tolerant political discourse, my research has found that committed impartiality offers additional instructional benefits.²⁰ Students enjoy knowing

where their teachers stand, provided that they do not feel pressured to conform to their teachers' beliefs, and they respect their teachers for being passionate about civic issues.²¹ Also, I have found that classroom discussions are often more vibrant and respectful in classrooms where teachers disclose, even when the teacher and students disagree politically.

All of that said, the 2020 presidential election is taking place during a period of heightened political polarization in the United States, so many districts and school administrators may issue blanket decrees, like in 2016, prohibiting teachers from discussing the election or publicly revealing who they support.²² I believe such knee-jerk reactions are shortsighted and representative of a lack of trust in the professionalism of teachers; but, of course, if one's district or school has such a policy, then it would be wise to adhere to it. If not, though, I would encourage teachers to rethink their fear of disclosure and give committed impartiality a try.

Be Aware of Potential Trauma

One of the reasons why districts and schools felt compelled to censor discussions of the 2016 election was that Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign was widely viewed as an attack on immigrants, people of color, and other traditionally marginalized groups in the United States. While

previous presidential elections have been infused with identity politics that made aspects of teaching about them difficult, Trump's rhetoric during the 2016 election was overtly divisive.²³ From the promises to build a wall on the Mexican border and ban Muslims from entering the United States to the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape describing sexual assault against women, the Trump campaign presented teachers with a host of unexpected challenges. Based on his tenure in office thus far, Trump's 2020 campaign wasn't likely to be more subdued. Moreover, this election will coincide with cultural divisions that have intensified to a point not seen in the United States since the 1960s, as evidenced by the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests and the increased demands to tear down monuments dedicated to the Confederacy and other aspects of white supremacy throughout U.S. history. There is a strong likelihood that these cultural debates will be pushed to the center of the national discourse as Trump seeks to shift the spotlight away from the pandemic.

When politicians target specific groups, particularly groups that have been historically marginalized, it creates the potential for physical and emotional trauma for students who identify as members of those groups. The "Trump Effect" that occurred during the 2016 campaign and directly after Trump won the election has been well documented; many students felt empowered to vocalize "virulently racist, anti-Islamic, anti-Semitic, or homophobic rhetoric in their schools and classrooms" as a consequence of Trump's rhetoric.²⁴ Research also found that many students who identified with the groups targeted by Trump came to school scared for their safety and worried that they or their family members might get deported should he win the election.²⁵

Based on their research during the 2016 election, Beth Sondel, Hannah Carson Baggett, and Alyssa Hadley Dunn developed a "pedagogy of political trauma" that teachers may find

helpful in supporting students who feel traumatized by rhetoric during the 2020 campaign. They argue that teachers first must recognize potential trauma and tend to students' socio-emotional well being. Then, as a way of helping students better understand the political reality they find themselves in, as well as giving students a sense of agency on how to deal with potential civic harm or uncertainty, they encourage teachers to cultivate students' civic knowledge and capacities and help them toward developing plans for activism and resistance.²⁶ Other research on students during the 2016 election suggests that teachers can use historical knowledge to help students contextualize vitriolic political rhetoric and encourage resilience and resistance to discriminatory policies.²⁷

Finally, research has shown that teachers may need to break from attempts at neutrality in order to protect the safety of their most vulnerable students.²⁸ It should not be considered partisan, for example, to condemn sexual assault or assert that everyone living in the United States has value and should be treated humanely, even if they entered the country illegally. Might such a response draw the ire of a student or parent? Possibly, but teaching sometimes requires taking a stand to protect one's students, even if the one causing harm is a candidate for the highest office in the land.

Conclusion

So far, 2020 has been defined by the unimaginable. From virtual conventions to debates over the validity of mail-in ballots, the 2020 election period has been unlike any presidential contest in history. Regardless of the outcome, it will be a pivotal moment for our nation—one that our students will need help understanding and contextualizing. They will be better able to do so if the election is a consistent aspect of their social studies instruction this fall. ●

Notes

1. A comprehensive synthesis of my work can be found in Wayne Journell, *Teaching Politics in Secondary Education: Engaging with Contentious Issues*

(Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2017).

2. Empirical work on teaching presidential elections in elementary classrooms is limited; for an exception, see Katherina A. Payne and Wayne Journell, "We Have Those Kinds of Conversations Here...: Addressing Contentious Politics with Elementary Students," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 79 (2019), 73–82. For instructional suggestions, see Wayne Journell, Laura A. May, Vera L. Stenhouse, Laura E. Meyers, and Teri Holbrook, "Scaffolding Classroom Discourse in an Election Year: Keeping a Cool Mood in a Heated Season," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 25, no. 1 (2012), 6–9; Mary E. Haas, Barbara Hatcher, and Cynthia Szymanski Sunal, "Teaching About Elections During a Presidential Election Year," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 21, no. 1 (2008), P1–P4.
3. Mary E. Haas and Margaret A. Laughlin, "Teaching the 2000 Election: A K-12 Survey," *Journal of Social Studies Research* 26, no. 2 (2002), 20.
4. Wayne Journell, "The Influence of High-Stakes Testing on High School Teachers' Willingness to Incorporate Current Political Events into the Curriculum," *The High School Journal* 93, no. 3 (2010), 111–125; see also, Erin A. Bronstein, "It Isn't in the Curriculum: World History Teachers' Views on U.S. Presidential Elections," *The Social Studies* 111, no. 3 (2020), 123–132.
5. Journell, "The Influence of High-Stakes Testing"; Wayne Journell, "Teaching the 2008 Presidential Election at Three Demographically Diverse Schools: An Exercise in Neoliberal Governmentality," *Educational Studies* 47, no. 2 (2011), 133–159.
6. Journell, *Teaching Politics*.
7. The voting program Mr. Monroe used was National Student/Parent Mock Election (nationalmockelection.org).
8. Alyssa Hadley Dunn, Beth Sondel, and Hannah Carson Baggett, "'I Don't Want to Come Off as Pushing an Agenda': How Contexts Shaped Teachers' Pedagogy in the Days After the 2016 Presidential Election," *American Educational Research Journal* 56, no. 2 (2018), 444–476.
9. Wayne Journell, "Ideological Homogeneity, School Leadership, and Political Intolerance in Secondary Education: A Study of Three High Schools During the 2008 Presidential Election," *Journal of School Leadership* 22, no. 3 (2012), 569–599.
10. Wayne Journell, Melissa Walker Beeson, and Cheryl A. Ayers, "Learning to Think Politically: Toward More Complete Disciplinary Knowledge in Civics and Government Courses," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 43, no. 1 (2015), 28–67.
11. See, for example, Michael Freedman, *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013); Michael Walzer, *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, ed. David Miller (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007).
12. Journell, *Teaching Politics*, 6.
13. For an explanation of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias, see H. James Garrett, "Why Does Fake News Work? On the Psychosocial Dynamics of Learning, Belief, and Citizenship," in *Unpacking Fake News: An Educator's Guide to Navigating the Media with Students*, ed. Wayne Journell (New York, N.Y.: Teachers College Press, 2019), 15–29; for an example of how these concepts can be applied to information found online, see Wayne Journell and Christopher H. Clark, "Political Memes and the Limits of Media Literacy," in *Unpacking Fake News: An Educator's Guide to*

- Navigating the Media with Students*, ed. Wayne Journell (New York, N.Y.: Teachers College Press, 2019), 109–125; for historical examples of presidential propaganda that play on these psychosocial processes, see Wayne Journell, “Using YouTube to Teach Presidential Election Propaganda: Twelve Representative Videos,” *Social Education* 73, no. 7 (2009), 325–329, 362.
14. Jenni Conrad, “Navigating Identity as a Controversial Issue: One Teacher’s Disclosure for Critical Empathic Reasoning,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 48, no. 2 (2020), 211–243; Rebecca Cooper Geller, “Teacher Political Disclosure in Contentious Times: A ‘Responsibility to Speak Up’ or ‘Fair and Balanced?’” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 48, no. 2 (2020), 182–210; Thomas E. Kelly, “Discussing Controversial Issues: Four Perspectives on the Teacher’s Role,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 14, no. 2 (1986), 113–138; Jennifer Hauver James, “Reframing the Disclosure Debate: Confronting Issues of Transparency in Teaching Controversial Content,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* 4, no. 1 (2009), 82–94; Journell, “Making a Case for Teacher Political Disclosure,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 31, no. 1 (2016), 100–111; Journell, “Teacher Political Disclosure as *Parrhêsia*,” *Teachers College Record* 118, no. 5 (2016), 1–36.
 15. Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, “To Disclose or Not to Disclose: A Controversial Choice for Teachers,” in Diana E. Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2009), 97–110; Jonathan Miller-Lane, Elissa Denton, and Andrew May, “Social Studies Teachers’ Views on Committed Impartiality and Discussion,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* 1, no. 1 (2006), 30–44.
 16. Journell, “The Disclosure Dilemma in Action: A Qualitative Look at the Effect of Teacher Disclosure on Classroom Instruction,” *Journal of Social Studies Research* 35, no. 2 (2011), 217–244; Journell, “Teachers’ Controversial Issue Decisions Related to Race, Gender, and Religion During the 2008 Presidential Election,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 39, no. 3 (2011), 348–392.
 17. Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2015), 199.
 18. Journell, “The Disclosure Dilemma”; Journell, “Teacher Political Disclosure as *Parrhêsia*”.
 19. Kelly, “Discussing Controversial Issues: Four Perspectives on the Teacher’s Role.”
 20. Journell, “The Disclosure Dilemma”; Journell, “Teacher Political Disclosure as *Parrhêsia*”.
 21. These findings have been corroborated by others; see, for example, Hess and McAvoy, “To Disclose.”
 22. I also recognize that the Fall 2020 semester will look and feel different for many teachers across the United States. Disclosure requires building trusting relationships with students, which may be more difficult when teaching remotely.
 23. Journell, “Teachers’ Controversial Issue Decisions.”
 24. John Rogers, Megan Franke, Jung-Eun Ellie Yun, Michael Ishimoto, Claudia Diera, Rebecca Cooper Geller, Anthony Berryman, and Tizoc Brenes, *Teaching and Learning in the Age of Trump: Increasing Stress and Hostility in America’s High Schools* (Los Angeles, Calif.: UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, 2017), vi; see also, Maureen Costello, *After Election Day: The Trump Effect: The Impact of the 2016 Presidential Election on Our Nation’s Schools* (Montgomery, Ala.: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016).
 25. Dunn, Sondel, and Baggett; Payne and Journell; Beth Sondel, Hannah Carson Baggett, and Alyssa Hadley Dunn, “For Millions of People, This is Real Trauma: A Pedagogy of Political Trauma in the Wake of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 70 (2018), 175–185.
 26. Sondel, Baggett, and Dunn.
 27. Paul J. Yoder, “‘He Wants to Get Rid of All the Muslims’: Mexican American and Muslim Students’ Use of History Regarding Candidate Trump,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 48, no. 3 (2020), 346–374.
 28. Dafney Blanca Dabach, “‘My Student Was Apprehended by Immigration’: A Civics Teacher’s Breach of Silence in a Mixed-Citizenship Classroom,” *Harvard Educational Review* 85, no. 3 (2015), 383–413; Geller; Payne and Journell.

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