

The Effects of Political Polarization on Social Studies Education and What We Should Do

Jeremy Stoddard and Diana E. Hess

Political polarization, or the movement of political views and actions away from the center and toward more extreme views and policies, has doubled in the United States in the past 40 years.¹ Disinformation campaigns, social media networks, and social stratification in the U.S. have also fueled the growth in affective polarization—which signifies the negative views of those who belong to opposing political groups.² A recent report by the Pew Research Center reveals that political polarization has morphed into alarmingly high rates of partisan hostility:

Partisan polarization has long been a fact of political life in the United States. But increasingly, Republicans and Democrats view not just the opposing party but also the *people* in that party in a negative light. Growing shares in each party now describe those in the other party as more closed-minded, dishonest, immoral and unintelligent than other Americans.³

While it is clearly the case that rising levels of political polarization and affective polarization are negatively influencing the political climate in the United States writ large, the impact on teaching and learning in the nation's schools and classrooms is troublesome. As researchers Joseph Kahne and John Rogers explain in an article in this issue, 25 percent of teachers in a 2023 nationally representative study reported that their school or district told them to limit discussions about

political and social issues, and 65 percent decided on their own to limit such discussions. And while these negative effects play out across the curriculum, they are especially and, in many ways, pointedly influencing what is taught and learned in social studies classes. In our own interactions with social studies teachers and school administrators, we frequently hear that many of the most promising and research-based pedagogical and curricular practices are much harder to do now than in the recent past. Some teachers even report being told not to teach about elections—a hallmark of civic education.

The effects of polarization on U.S. social studies classrooms are as numerous as they are widespread. These challenges include restrictions on what can be taught that have been codified in local and state policies⁴ and an increasing distrust on the part of parents and other members of the public about whether teachers are able to be fair when presenting and engaging students in discussions of important historical and contemporary controversies. For students, affective polarization inhibits their abilities to trust others with different political views or their desires to engage in settings marked by ideological diversity in the first place. As researcher Rachel Hutchins explains in this issue, even very young people in the United States are affectively polarized. As she explains, fifth graders are as likely as adults to hold negative opinions of people who have political views different from their own. As one fifth grader wrote in response to an open-ended question, "Democrats are ruining the country"; while about

Republicans, a ninth grader wrote, “They are liars and thieves.”⁵

This lack of trust in schools and teachers on the part of community members, and students holding negative views towards those perceived to be members of a political outgroup, presents major challenges for teachers. It is especially challenging for those who attempt to develop a classroom community where students can engage productively with peers they may disagree with—as Walter Parker refers to Danielle Allen’s notion of “political friendship.” At the heart of political friendship is not an emotional connection, according to Parker, but a mutual view among classmates that they are “equal before the law and one another’s civic regard ... bound together, not culturally so much as politically, by the problems they face in common.”⁶

In this special issue, we asked researchers and practitioners to weigh in on how political polarization and affective polarization are influencing teaching and learning in social studies; what students should learn about both political polarization and affective polarization; and what teachers could do to mitigate their most harmful effects. While all three of these questions are important, we recognize that for many teachers, their primary concern is about what to do—how should the nation’s social studies educators respond to the rise in political polarization and its accompanying affective polarization?

Fortunately, there are social studies educators across the nation working assiduously to embrace the possibility that what we teach and the way we teach could, at a minimum, combat some of the worst effects of political polarization. Even more ambitiously and ideally, social studies could help the nation’s students learn how to imagine a political climate in which difference is not demonized, hostility toward others is not reified, and trust

and political friendship are the aims to which we should target our pedagogical and curricular practices. Multiple examples of these approaches are showcased in this special issue—including high-quality research on promising practices that we think will provide beacons of hope in a time when the problems of political and affective polarization seem so daunting that it can sometimes be difficult to imagine what can or should be done. ■

Notes

1. Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, “Cross-country Trends in Affective Polarization,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* (2022): 1–60.
2. Nolan McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*® (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Jaime Settle, *Frenemies: How Social Media Polarizes America* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).
3. Pew Research Center, “As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration with the Two-Party System” (August 2022): 6.
4. CRT Forward Tracking Project at UCLA Law, <https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/> <https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/map>.
5. Matthew Tyler and Shanto Iyengar, “Learning to Dislike Your Opponents: Political Socialization in the Era of Polarization,” *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 1 (2023): 347–354.
6. Walter Parker, *Education for Liberal Democracy: Using Classroom Discussion to Build Knowledge and Voice* (Teachers College Press, 2023), 91.



Jeremy Stoddard is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research explores the role of critical media education in democratic education. He can be reached at jdstoddard@wisc.edu.



Diana E. Hess is the Dean of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Karen A. Falk Distinguished Chair of Education and a member of the National Academy of Education.
