Teaching Controversial Issues in a Time of Polarization

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Although civic education has experienced a significant revitalization during the past two decades, America’s high schools are not adequately preparing young people for self-governance and civic participation. While an estimated 90 percent of American high school students take a Civics or American Government course, a majority of graduates are deemed less than “proficient” in their knowledge of civics in a standardized exam. Nor does taking a course translate into civic action, as turnout among America’s newest voters (18- to 20-year-olds) was only 15 percent in the 2014 midterm elections and 39 percent in the 2016 presidential election. Furthermore, young people’s access to civic-learning opportunities varies greatly by race, ethnicity, geography, and income level, producing unequal capabilities to participate fully in civic life. Empirical data on overall levels of youth participation and on staggering inequality warrant a need to explore new approaches, along with ways to improve current practices. In this article, we explore the latter by asking how discussion of controversial issues—one of the Six Promising Practices presented in The Civic Mission of Schools—can be more widely deployed so that all students, regardless of their background, have access to meaningful and productive discussions about contentious topics that affect our society. We focus on the role of two sets of prospective allies—families and principals—in fostering these discussions.

Defining the Problem
The need to integrate controversial-issue discussions across disciplines and grades has become even more pressing as opportunities for this foundational means of democratic engagement become increasingly rare in society at large. Modeling of productive disagreement and civil discourse may be vanishing; one can easily find myriad news stories and opinion pieces lamenting the erosion of shared norms for public discourse. Our political leaders have walked in step with American voters who often demand ideological purity, resulting in the devaluation of political compromise and stagnation in Congress. For instance, David Schkade and his colleagues recruited people from liberal and conservative communities and had them deliberate political issues among their own ideological groups. Those from the liberal community became more liberal, those from the conservative community became more conservative, and the ideological distance between the two groups widened as a result of the interaction. Such polarization has led to lower levels of comfort and tolerance for people with dissimilar views. Political polarization—coupled with economic, racial, and ideological self-sorting—may help explain why only 33 percent of Americans think they can trust others, a far lower proportion than just a decade ago.

Media Echo Chambers
Although the media theoretically offer a vast range of opinions and facts that enrich students’ formation of ideas, the reality is starkly different. Research reveals that, either concomitantly with or as a byproduct of residential self-sorting, the media ecosystem roughly follows the overall polarization trend. This self-sorting has an especially powerful impact on youth because of their use of social media and their habits for consuming news. Specifically, a larger proportion of youth get their news online than any other age group, and young people are substantially more likely to get their news online than via other platforms. In addition, youth are more likely to use...
social media than members of other age
groups. Individuals who get their news
online typically choose media outlets
that are ideologically similar and rarely
read news from the opposing side. In fact,
these individuals are rarely exposed to
moderate viewpoints. Social media, in
turn, allow not only for informational
self-sorting as with online news, but
also for a process akin to residential
self-sorting. The effect of online inter-
actions in these echo chambers mirrors
the research showing how offline delib-
eration with like-minded individuals
produces further polarization. The net
result is that online interactions with
like-minded individuals produce insu-
lated communities in which individuals
polarize towards the dominant commu-
nity narrative.

Embracing Disagreements
The ability to embrace productive dis-
agreements based on serious consider-
ation of fact patterns, and on the opin-
ions that emerge from these facts, is a
key civic competency that often results
in compromises or changes in opinion.
One effective remedy to unproductive
political discourse and ideological shifts
toward the poles is for youth to engage
in cross-cutting communication about
political issues. In these communications,
individuals with differing political views
have conversations about their own posi-
tions with the goal of understanding the
other’s position and increasing tolerance.
Cross-cutting political discussions are
important in helping students under-
stand, rather than demonize, people who
hold different views. Engaging in con-
troversial-issues discussions in schools
provides a powerful counterbalance to
the stream of negative political discourse
that young people experience. Indeed,
youth who engage in more discussions
of controversial issues do better in terms
of their level of civic knowledge, support
for democratic values, and frequency
of actions associated with deliberative
democracy. We argue that it is impor-
tant to help young people develop the
habit of engaging in productive, cross-
cutting discussions about contentious
social issues during their high school
years rather than after their political
identities become firmly entrenched and
closed to alternative perspectives.

Failing to develop the necessary skills
for productive discussions of controver-
sial issues can result in serious conse-
quences, including the propensity to
avoid politics altogether. Indeed, adult
Americans are becoming averse to nor-
ormal and legitimate political conflict.
Because they have this aversion to
conflict—and because they lack experi-
ence engaging with people with whom
they disagree—a growing number of
Americans are less likely to participate in
the political realm. This appears to be the
result of a vicious cycle: People become
embedded in like-minded communities and embrace a fact-pattern that conforms to a preexisting view. They then become more likely to express negative emotions when deliberating, which can become unproductive and even include personally damaging comments and behaviors, especially in online discussion of political issues. For some people, the final step in this cycle is to withdraw entirely from political participation.17

Anticipating Pushback
The increase in polarization within local communities makes educators fear pushback from parents when they incorporate anything that can be viewed as “political” into their teaching.18 Because of this dynamic, many teachers choose to avoid talking about controversial issues altogether.19 Others have remarked on how polarization promotes accusations of bias against teachers and schools.20 In these cases, teachers may employ certain practices, such as discussion of current events, but may not fully embrace cross-cutting dialogue strategies because they fear that doing so will unleash opposition that could affect their career and livelihood. What is the pathway through which teachers make decisions to engage in—or more commonly not engage in—the discussion of current and controversial issues in their classrooms? We probe this question below, focusing on the ways in which administrative and community support affects what teachers believe and do in relation to discussion of controversial issues. The goal of this examination is to explore additional ways to encourage more controversial-issue discussions in schools.

Looking at the Numbers
The results of our analyses of survey data from high school Civics and American Government teachers indicated that teachers who perceive more support from their district were more likely to promote student voice and to have more positive feelings about classroom deliberations.21 Furthermore, we found a relationship between perceived community support (i.e., families in the community supporting a Civics teacher’s decision to integrate elections and political issues) and indicators of community disadvantage (such as higher poverty rates and lower college-going rates): teachers in schools in more disadvantaged communities reported less community support. The results of our analyses elucidated the influence of stakeholder support. Figure 1 (on p. 327) summarizes the results of our analyses: both perceived support from principals and parents directly impacted teachers’ values about student voice. The more support educators perceived, the more comfortable they were with students’ right to express their opinions and to disagree with them. Additionally, values about student voice directly affected the

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frequency with which teachers engaged in controversial-issue discussions, with those who held more positive values about student voice engaging in more frequent discussions of controversial issues. Finally, while there was no direct relationship between perceived support from principals and controversial-issue discussions, there was a direct correlation between perceived parental support and the frequency of discussions of contentious issues.

Takeaways and Implications
We propose three takeaways from our analysis. First, educators’ beliefs about expression of student voice, including their feelings about student disagreement with teachers, are an important indicator of teachers’ actual practice. The more educators endorse this idea, the more likely they are to integrate controversial-issue discussions with high frequency. Second, it appears that when multiple stakeholders support teachers’ decisions to talk about elections and political issues in their classrooms, educators are more likely to express their firm belief in the value of student voice, which in turn increases their use of controversial-issue discussions. Parents seem to be a particularly important driver: systematic inequalities in civic participation may reflect how teachers perceive parental support to teach about elections and politics. In disadvantaged communities, teachers may not get explicit support from parents even if they support this type of teaching in principle. Thus, there is a need to provide additional support and encouragement for teachers who want to conduct controversial-issue discussions in schools located in disadvantaged communities. Finally, we observed the important, albeit indirect, role that principals play in encouraging student voice schoolwide, which contributes to a greater likelihood that controversial-issue discussions will take place.

From Theory to Practice
At the time of this writing, there is support from special-interest groups and at least one state-level policymaker for a ban against teachers discussing any political issues, court cases, and current legislation in schools.22 Despite such opposition, controversial-issue discussions are central to supporting youth civic learning and promoting the health of a democracy by countering the worrying trends in polarization and incivility. Our findings have three major implications:

- Teachers who already value promoting discussions by making sure that students have a voice are in a unique position to be champions for integrating controversial-issue discussions into their schools’ curriculum. These teachers could be some of the first that the school or district supports with professional development to integrate controversial-issue discussions; then they could help other
teachers through mentorship and a train-the-trainer model.

- Teachers and other school personnel need to engage in outreach to parents to help them understand civic education, with a particular focus on collaborating to promote controversial-issue discussions in a nonpartisan context. It is especially important to cultivate parental support by promoting parent engagement in more disadvantaged communities. Conducting outreach to parents can not only help garner support, but also alleviate concerns that teachers may be interested in indoctrinating students in a certain viewpoint. Furthermore, parents can encourage their children to discuss current and controversial issues at home, which in and of itself is a strong driver of civic competencies.

- Unequivocal and explicit support from principals to frame school as an active site of rigorous discourse about wide-ranging social and political issues has enormous, yet often overlooked, potential to advance civic learning. Principals can embody a school climate that not only welcomes discussions of controversial issues, but that also allows students to feel comfortable exploring their opinions and views on political issues without indoctrinating them into a specific set of beliefs. Educators may want to consider involving principals in conducting outreach to and partnerships with parents in the community as a strategy for fostering civic learning.

The ability to navigate the political climate of the community in which they teach is a serious issue for a significant number of educators. Although high school Civics and Government teachers’ primary charge is to prepare students for informed civic participation, our survey data show that 25 percent feared that...
they would face pushback from their stakeholders, especially parents. Many teachers indicated that their fears were based on the experience of receiving vigorous criticism from a parent or supervisor when they thought they were simply teaching civics in a nonpartisan manner. We were reminded of this important finding in 2017, when our partners on the Teaching for Democracy Alliance (TFDA) voiced similar concerns coming from the educators they work with. Many teachers felt the need to integrate controversial-issues discussions more than ever because of the many reasons cited above, yet they often felt helpless upon realizing that they had to win their own campaign to do so. That is why TFDA member organizations co-created a 2018 toolkit to help teachers advocate for strong civic-learning experiences for all students. The toolkit provides concrete ways for schools to self-assess which of their practices are consistent with research-based best practices to promote civic learning. It is designed as a conversation tool for teachers, school administrators, parents, and others who are interested in advancing civic education of students in their community. The TFDA toolkit is but one way to help teachers and stakeholder feel more confident about engaging in controversial-issues discussions and ultimately to support youth civic learning and engagement in ways that promote productive contributions to society. Today’s students are introduced to political discourse through adults’ examples, and currently these examples are far from ideal. At the same time, we have an opportunity to reinvigorate how we promote productive deliberation in our classrooms and whom we can enlist to support these efforts in order to encourage better civic-learning outcomes for all students.

Notes
6. The Civic Mission of Schools was originally published in 2003 as a result of a consensus among civic education experts on the six practices that were essential in preparation of students for civic life. These practices included formal instruction in government, history, law, and democracy; incorporation of classroom discussions of current issues and events; community service and service learning; extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for students to be involved in their schools and communities; student participation in school governance; and opportunities for simulation of civic practices.
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