Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers (ASSERT)

Teacher Political Disclosure in the Trump Era

Rebecca Cooper Geller

University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming, USA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Cooper Geller

I serve as Assistant Professor of Secondary Social Studies Education at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, WY, got my Ph.D. in Education from UCLA, and taught at the elementary and middle school levels in Oakland, CA for six years. My ultimate goal is to create spaces to support critical social studies education, preparing teachers to challenge racism in schools, and supporting teachers to create classrooms that are humanizing and nurturing for students of color. I am interested in civic and democratic education, critical race theory, research-practice partnerships, and social studies education. My own professional development efforts have been focused on learning about teaching social studies in rural contexts. Outside of my professional pursuits, I spend my time rereading my favorite books by Philip Pullman and Jesmyn Ward, watching Top Chef and The Great British Bake-Off, and relaxing, eating, and going on adventures with my husband and son.

Keywords Controversial Issues, Discussion, Teacher Neutrality, Teacher Political Disclosure, Classroom Discussion

Accepted August 2020
Published September 2020

Pages: 37-41

INTRODUCTION

Social studies teachers often use discussions of controversial social and political issues to help students learn how to practice democratic citizenship (Hess & Mcavoy, 2015), though talking about topics that are inherently controversial can be, well, controversial. That is especially the case when political polarization, incivility, and sociopolitical hostility come into schools and classrooms, which educators have increasingly reported happening since the 2016 presidential election (Dunn et al., 2019; Natanson et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2017). One especially challenging component for teachers in these discussions is their decision

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

about whether and how to reveal their personal political beliefs and opinions in the classroom, called teacher political disclosure. I studied how high school social studies teachers in different kinds of communities around the United States—urban to rural, red states to blue states—were thinking about political disclosure in today's polarized, contentious political climate (Geller, 2020).

THE RESEARCH:

This research follows up on a larger study of teaching and learning in the Trump era from the summer of 2017 (Rogers et al.), where the research team at UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) surveyed 1,535 teachers working in 333 high schools that were representative of U.S. public high schools and interviewed 35 of the surveyed teachers to go in-depth about what they were experiencing in their schools. (The schools we sampled were representative of U.S. public high schools, but the teacher sample was not necessarily representative). The schools we enrolled in the study were located in diverse local contexts all around the U.S., ranging from very liberal to very conservative contexts, in urban, suburban, and rural settings.

The IDEA study did not specifically focus on teacher political disclosure, though it often came up in the 2017 interviews. I was interested in exploring disclosure and teachers' experiences with it over time, so I recruited them to participate in another round of interviews with me in summer 2018 and finally asked just a few teachers to do one more interview after the 2018 Congressional midterm elections. All told, I looked at 30 interviews with social studies teachers: 18 interviews from 2017, eight from 2018, and four from 2019, as well as an open-ended question on the survey from 2017.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS:

These interviews revealed a lot about teacher political disclosure across the U.S. in the Trump era. Most of the teachers I interviewed, like most social studies teachers generally (Journell, 2016), wanted their students to make up their own minds, and assumed that revealing their personal beliefs in the classroom was tantamount to indoctrination and wanted their students to make up their own minds. However, they also said that the polarization and contentiousness in the political climate made it difficult for them to know the right thing to do in the classroom. While the dynamics they described—bullying, contentiousness, racism, and intolerance—are not unique to the Trump era, most described feeling that they had been heightened or unleashed since the 2016 presidential election and a number of them observed that their students were parroting Trump's language.

For one, teachers felt that nearly all the topics in their social studies classes felt partisan. It became incredibly difficult for some to avoid disclosing when everything from teaching the historical fact of the Holocaust to teaching critical media literacy felt like statements of partisan preference. Teachers described feeling that "it was a duty as a teacher" to assert factual information and teach students to be more critical consumers of media. They also

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

indicated that doing so felt like political disclosure. They took great pains to enact neutrality in the classroom. Yet other research has found that whether or not teachers mean to disclose their beliefs, they constantly send political messages in the classroom (Journell, 2011; Niemi & Niemi, 2007).

Since 2016, some teachers felt less comfortable talking about their politics in the classroom, while others felt it was their "responsibility to speak up" about topics that they thought were relevant to their students or issues in the news. A teacher with a number of undocumented students wanted her students to feel safe with her, and she believed that meant she had to speak out against the Trump administration's immigration policies. Though she had always tried to hide her political beliefs in the classroom in the past, she felt things were different now and enacting neutrality was less important than supporting her students' sociopolitical safety.

It is important to emphasize that these sentiments were expressed by teachers who identified across the political spectrum, irrespective of community political context; they were not limited to any particular kind of community, school, classroom, or teacher. Sometimes their political beliefs aligned with the communities in which they taught, but not always.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS:

Teaching—especially teaching social studies—has never been apolitical or neutral; the belief that it can be is an all-too-common misconception held by teachers. Once teachers recognize that non-disclosure is a political choice too, the question instead becomes: how can teachers' political opinions in the classroom be used in ways that are responsible, professional, and help students learn? Some suggestions for thinking about political disclosure include:

- Focus less on trying to appear politically neutral, and focus more on how you can disclose your political beliefs in ways that support student learning. Researchers have argued that when teachers disclose but encourage students to disagree with them, teachers' political opinions can be just one of many opinions in the classroom. They can model how adults make sense of political issues, allow students space to make up their own minds, and give students the ability to contextualize teachers' comments (Journell, 2016).
- Teaching controversial issues and figuring out how to disclose in a polarized climate is difficult, uncomfortable, and necessary. Context matters. Making professional, reflective decisions to disclose political beliefs is, I argue, the more ethical stance for teachers, but that doesn't make it easy. Knowing when or how to disclose on different issues isn't a one-size-fits-all decision, but requires knowing your students, school leaders, and community. It may also require courage, as disclosure can have social and professional consequences.
- Some issues we discuss in classrooms (e.g., immigration) may make discussions more interesting, but they have serious, real-world consequences for young people in our classrooms. How teachers leverage their own opinions can have consequences for

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

marginalized youth. Teachers often look for topics that are relevant to students' lives. That relevance can be helpful, but it can also mean that students are more vulnerable to intolerance from their peers. If teachers draw on issues that touch on the lived realities of oppressed and marginalized groups, they must be particularly thoughtful about the impact that their words—and their silences—may have. Teachers should think about how disclosing can make classrooms safer for marginalized youth.

To this final point, this study is an important reminder of a core challenge for teachers who want to avoid disclosing their political beliefs in the classroom: there is no neutral option. When teachers are confronted with moments in the classroom in which they can disclose or reveal their political beliefs, they should understand that enacting neutrality sends a political, status-quo-reinforcing message to students. When teachers profess to be neutral sources of information and then send subtle, often unintended political messages, they are actually participating in indoctrination. If, as a student, my teacher is constantly making arguments against one political party but not the other under the guise of presenting neutral facts, I will be more inclined to see those arguments as fact and not recognize any bias within them. Students deserve to know who they are listening to, they deserve to be able to contextualize the political messages they receive, and they deserve the opportunity to voice their dissenting views. Balancing these priorities while also addressing increasing incidents of bigotry and hate speech in the classroom is difficult. There is no easy, prefabricated solution for teachers to cut-and-paste into their classrooms, yet it is well worth the effort to reflect upon how they can disclose in ways that are professional, carefully considered, and grounded in supporting the young people in their classrooms.

REFERENCES

Dunn, A. H., Sondel, B., & Baggett, H. C. (2019). "I Don't Want to Come Off as Pushing an Agenda": How Contexts Shaped Teachers' Pedagogy in the Days After the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. *American Educational Research Journal*, *56*(2), 444–476. Retrieved from https://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0002831218794892 10.3102/0002831218794892

Geller, R. C. (2020). Teacher political disclosure in contentious times: A "responsibility to speak up" or "fair and balanced"? . *Theory & Research in Social Education*, *48*(2), 182–210. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2020.1740125

Hess, D. E., & Mcavoy, P. (2015). *The Political Classroom*. New York: Routledge.

Journell, W. (2011). The disclosure dilemma in action: A qualitative look at the effect of teacher disclosure on classroom instruction. *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, *35*, 217–244.

Journell, W. (2016). Making a case for teacher political disclosure. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, *31*(1), 100–111.

Natanson, H., Cox, J. W., & Stein, P. (2020, February 13). *Trump's words, bullied kids, scarred schools.* Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/local/school-bullying-trump-words/x

Niemi, N. S., & Niemi, R. G. (2007). Partisanship, Participation, and Political Trust as Taught (or Not) in High School History and Government Classes. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, *35*(1), 32–61. Retrieved from https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2007.10473325 10.1080/00933104.2007.10473325

Rogers, J., Franke, M., Yun, J. E., Ishimoto, M., Diera, C., Geller, R. C., Berryman, A., & Brenes, T. (2017). *Teaching and learning in the age of Trump: Increasing stress and hostility in America's high schools.* Retrieved from https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/teaching-and-learning-in-age-of-trump

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry