

## Creating Space for Political Instruction

### Questions to Consider before Reading

- Does the inclusion of politics into one's instruction fit within the formal curriculum? How can teachers make space for politics within their instruction?
- How do teachers typically incorporate current events and politics into their classrooms? Is it effective?
- Is political instruction only appropriate for civics? How can teachers incorporate a political focus in history, economics, and geography classrooms?

If one were to interview all of the secondary social studies teachers in the United States, most of them would likely acknowledge the importance of making students aware of current political issues and the American political process. Yet, observations of social studies classrooms have found that these aspects of civic education are often minimized or ignored completely. As political scientist Stephen Macedo and his colleagues (2005) have noted, the social studies curriculum too often teaches

*about* citizenship and government without teaching students the skills that are necessary to become active citizens themselves. There is evidence, for example, that many students learn about the history of voting in the United States but do not connect that knowledge with the disposition or skills to become voters themselves. (p. 33, emphasis in original)

One reason for this disparity is the failure of states to explicitly include analyses of contemporary politics or deliberations of political issues as part of the formal curriculum. For example, in a content analysis

of the Virginia Standards of Learning for Civics and U.S. Government, I found that few standards were designed to stimulate discussions of political issues or encourage active engagement with the political process. Rather, the majority of standards focused on describing the structure of the federal and state governments and ensuring that students were aware of aspects of “good” citizenship, such as obeying the law, paying taxes, and practicing patriotism (Journell, 2010a).

Even when specific issues are mentioned in curriculum standards, they are often treated as historical or static topics as opposed to issues of public interest. For example, in a recent analysis of the portrayal of immigration in U.S. History and Civics standards across different geographical areas of the United States, my colleagues and I found that immigration was almost exclusively positioned as a historical topic as opposed to a contemporary political issue (Hilburn, Journell, & Buchanan, 2016). Jeremy Stoddard and Diana Hess (2016) also recently analyzed how all 50 states presented the 9/11 attacks and the topic of terrorism in their respective standards. While they found that some states framed the War on Terror and continued American responses against Middle Eastern terrorism as open political issues, this stance was far from uniform.

Social studies teachers, then, must go beyond the formal curriculum if they wish to create spaces for discussions of politics and political issues in their classes. This type of deliberate inclusion of politics into one’s instruction tends to vary from teacher to teacher and is often predicated on the educational context and the teacher’s dispositions toward content. The demands of high-stakes testing, for example, may cause some teachers to believe that they cannot afford to “waste” time discussing political issues because it will detract from tested material. Similarly, teachers must see the intrinsic value in having students engage in political discussions.

This chapter will use data from the 2008 study to illustrate typical approaches teachers often take in incorporating (or not) politics in their classrooms. In doing so, I will highlight several impediments, such as high-stakes testing, that make including politics in an already crowded curriculum difficult. Then, I will conclude by offering examples of ways in which teachers can create space for politics in civics, history, economics, and geography classrooms.

### **Typical Approaches to Incorporating Politics into Social Studies Instruction**

The teachers in the 2008 Presidential Election study provide an illustrative contrast in the ways social studies teachers broach politics within their

instruction. Even during a period of heightened national political activity, I found a wide range in how often and to what extent each of the six teachers discussed political issues, including the overarching issue of which candidate would be best suited for the presidency. I use the terms *curriculum-first*, *disciplined-inclusion*, and *opportunity-first* to describe the different extents to which teachers incorporate political instruction in their classes.

### Curriculum-First

Curriculum-first teachers represent the lowest level of political engagement. Teachers who fall into this category choose to proceed with the formal curriculum with few exceptions, regardless of what occurs outside of the classroom. These teachers also rarely extrapolate from the formal curriculum to include discussions of politics or political issues that may be tied to topics contained in state curriculum standards. When politics is discussed at all, it tends to fall within prescribed units of study on political parties or associated topics, such as elections.

Ms. Wilkinson, a first-year teacher at Roosevelt High School, summarized the dilemma felt by curriculum-first teachers when she stated,

I do want to incorporate current events because I do think it is very important . . . but as to where do I fit it in and how much do I talk about it—because if I put up a clip of Hillary Clinton supporting Barack Obama, I mean how much in depth do we go into it? I can't take too long, and I don't want to just give them a short little discussion and cut it off . . . I don't know. It is hard, and I am still struggling with that, how much time I devote to [current political events].

For Ms. Jackson, another curriculum-first teacher at Roosevelt, the solution was to talk extensively about the election—during the two-week unit on political parties and the election process. Outside of that two-week period, however, discussion of the election and other current political issues was virtually nonexistent.

In both classes there were prolonged periods of time in which current political events were ignored completely. As a result, key moments in the campaign—selections of running mates, debates, major endorsements—were never discussed. Perhaps the most representative example of this curriculum-first ideology can be found in Ms. Wilkinson's choice to schedule and administer a unit test the day after Obama won the general election instead of unpacking the historic and political implications of his

victory with her students who were visibly excited by the reality of the first African-American president.

### Disciplined-Inclusion

Teachers who fall into the disciplined-inclusion category recognize the tension between making space for current political issues and preparing students for end-of-course assessments, but they take care to provide at least cursory coverage of politics on a regular basis in their classes. Yet, detailed discussions or analyses of politics and current political issues are often superseded by a perceived need to adhere to the formal curriculum. In these classes, the goal often appears to be awareness of the political world, but elements of political thinking are rarely, if ever, enacted.

Mr. Pierce, a teacher at St. Thomas High School, provides an illustrative example of disciplined-inclusion. Without exception, he would start each day with an overview of major headlines that he had photocopied from local newspapers that morning. For the first 10 to 15 minutes of class, Mr. Pierce would provide background information about each headline, and students would give their opinions to specific questions posed by Mr. Pierce. After that first part of class, however, Mr. Pierce's attention turned to the formal curriculum, and the election and other related political issues were never discussed in any greater depth.

Another variation of the disciplined-inclusion approach can be found in "current event Fridays" and other superficial attempts at forcing students to pay attention to current political issues. These instructional strategies are often well-intentioned; however, they are not effective in encouraging depth of political understanding. Political instruction should not be regulated to a single day of the week or even a few minutes of each day. Although disciplined-inclusion may be preferable to a curriculum-first approach, it does little to move beyond a topical awareness of the issues of the day, and a disciplined-inclusion approach rarely allows students to engage in aspects of political thinking.

### Opportunity-First

Opportunity-first teachers recognize the inherent political nature of the social studies curriculum and realize that politics can be incorporated into nearly every aspect of their instruction. In these teachers' classes, politics is front and center, and they use their political instruction as a conduit to having students better understand the formal curriculum. These

teachers place a premium on political thinking, and their classrooms are characterized by rich discussions of politics and current political events, as opposed to cursory awareness of headlines.

Two teachers, Mr. Leander at St. Thomas and Mr. Ryan at Armstrong, were representative of an opportunity-first approach. In both classes, discussions of the election and the strategies employed by each campaign were a regular element of each teacher's classroom instruction. It was not unusual to see discussions about the election or related political issues continue until all viewpoints were explored and exhausted. In one particularly illustrative example, Mr. Leander's class spent an entire class period discussing the electoral and political ramifications of Obama's choice of Biden as a running mate and how it could impact McCain's vice presidential selection the following week.

It is important to note that neither Mr. Ryan nor Mr. Leander completely abandoned the formal curriculum; on the contrary, preparing students for the end-of-course assessment was a priority for both teachers. However, both viewed the formal curriculum as the baseline knowledge that students should take from their classes. As Mr. Ryan put it, "If [students] are going to see the relevance of politics, I don't think knowing how many senators and representatives is going to do it for them, even though that is stuff they need to know too."

Another pedagogical benefit to opportunity-first classrooms is that they make discussions of politics commonplace, which allows students to become more comfortable with sharing their opinions. As Mr. Leander noted, "Once you get [politics] initiated, you get [students'] passions coming out, and they start talking about it." When in-depth discussions of politics occur sporadically or only within pre-designated units, it is difficult for teachers to foster interest and establish norms of tolerant political discourse.

### **Impediments to Creating Opportunity-First Classrooms**

Of these three approaches, the opportunity-first approach is the most effective in encouraging a deep and sustained understanding of politics. Yet, the vast majority of social studies teachers fall into the curriculum-first or disciplined-inclusion categories, which raises the question of why some teachers are more adept at incorporating politics into their instruction than others. The most obvious possibility is that opportunity-first teachers are simply "better" teachers than the curriculum-first or disciplined-inclusion teachers. However, such an answer is too simplistic. All of the teachers

that I observed in the 2008 study were thoughtfully-adaptive (Fairbanks et al., 2007) in that they had a vision of social studies that recognized the importance of engaging their students with politics and current events. Moreover, all of the teachers were skilled in different aspects of their instruction; Ms. Wilkinson, for example, taught from a student-centered perspective and incorporated aspects of popular culture to get her students interested in the formal curriculum, whereas Mr. Leander used a teacher-centered approach that would make most methods professors cringe.

Another obvious possibility is that the curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion teachers were apprehensive about broaching politics in their classes, particularly during the heightened state of political polarization that comes with a presidential election. While some social studies teachers shy away from the controversial nature of politics (Hess, 2005; Oulton, Dillon, Day, & Grace, 2004), that was not the case with the teachers in this study. All of the teachers, at one time or another, invited discussions of controversial political issues in their classes, and some of the more provocative discussions occurred in the curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion classes (Journell, 2011a, 2011e).

Yet another possibility is that opportunity-first teachers have a deeper knowledge of politics than other social studies teachers; therefore, they can more easily incorporate politics into their instruction. It is difficult to teach about politics and political issues if one does not pay attention to current events or does not have a nuanced understanding of the political process, and research suggests that many social studies teachers do not possess this knowledge (Journell, 2013b). Mr. Leander and Mr. Ryan clearly possessed a wealth of political knowledge, and based on my observations, it may be fair to question whether Ms. Wilkinson or Ms. Jackson had the depth of political knowledge to effectively merge politics into their instruction even if they had felt they were able to.

When teachers lack content knowledge, it not only impacts their vision for how best to enact their instruction, but it also forces them to rely more heavily on the standards and textbooks that make up the formal curriculum (Bain & Mirel, 2006; Ball, 2000). So, it is certainly possible that some teachers may default into a curriculum-first approach due to a lack of political knowledge. Yet, Mr. Pierce's knowledge of politics rivaled that of Mr. Ryan or Mr. Leander, but he did not come close to the same level of depth in his political instruction.

The most likely impediment to creating an opportunity-first classroom, then, is the pressure to adhere to the formal curriculum. For those outside of public education, it may be easy to assail curriculum-first and disciplined-inclusion teachers for failing to provide quality civic educa-

tion for their students. Yet, Ms. Jackson, Ms. Wilkinson, and Mr. Pierce are representative of many social studies teachers in this current era of high-stakes testing and increased accountability in that they have difficulty navigating the tension between teaching “for the test” and creating dynamic lessons that allow students to engage in disciplinary processes and authentic application of the formal curriculum to contemporary issues (e.g., Grant, 2001; Pace, 2015; van Hover, 2006). These teachers recognized the value in discussing politics with their students, but the pressure to have their students perform well on the end-of-course test seemed to prohibit them from being able to enact that vision of quality social studies instruction in their classes. The fact that they taught lower-level classes and, in the cases of Ms. Jackson and Ms. Wilkinson, in a low-socioeconomic school that annually produced substandard scores on state assessments, likely contributed to their apprehension over the end-of-course state test.

Incorporating politics into one’s instruction and preparing students for success on high-stakes assessments, however, are not mutually exclusive. The social studies curriculum is inherently a political curriculum, and almost any topic can be related to contemporary political issues. Similar to the way scholars have argued that teachers can teach historical thinking and other aspects of ambitious history instruction within the confines of high-stakes testing (e.g., Gradwell, 2006), teachers can use the formal curriculum as a springboard for political thinking and discussions of current political issues. In the remainder of this chapter, I will describe ways in which teachers can incorporate politics into their required curriculum.

### Avoiding Quick Fixes

Before delving into how teachers can make space for political instruction within specific social studies disciplines, I first want to caution teachers from superficially infusing politics and current events into their instruction via “quick fixes.” When I discuss the need to incorporate politics into the social studies curriculum with my preservice teachers, they typically jump to the seemingly rational conclusion that all that is necessary is for students to be better exposed to the news. Many of them also report that their cooperating teachers do a “great” job informing their students about politics and current events because they show school news programs at the start of their classes every day.

On one hand, my preservice teachers are correct; most high school students are unlikely to watch the news at home beyond, perhaps, satirical

programs like *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight*, so any exposure to the news they get at school is likely advantageous.<sup>1</sup> Yet, simply showing students the news is often not sufficient for true political awareness or understanding. Moreover, teachers often incorporate news programs into their classes without critically analyzing their appropriateness or usefulness.

There are several companies that produce free news programs designed specifically to be shown in schools. *Channel One* and *Nick News*, for example, are two commonly used programs; however, some educators have balked at these particular programs because they require students to watch product advertisements in order to gain access to the news (Blokhuys, 2008). Another popular option, and the one that I see used most often among my preservice teachers and their cooperating teachers, is *CNN Student News*. This free, 10-minute daily news program is designed specifically for middle and high school students and does not contain any commercials or other advertisements.<sup>2</sup> The structure of each episode of *CNN Student News* is fairly consistent with most nightly news programs. The program is hosted by a regular anchor, and individual segments are often taken directly from CNN broadcasts.

On the surface, *CNN Student News* seems ideal for use in a social studies classroom. In my experience, however, I have found that social studies teachers too often take an uncritical approach to using it as part of their instruction. Showing the program tends to become more of a habit than a deliberate approach to foster greater awareness about politics and current political issues. The program simply becomes part of the daily routine in which teachers use those 10 minutes to check attendance, and students use it to finish homework or chat with friends.

Even if students give *CNN Student News* their full attention, the program does not always provide content that is useful for social studies educators. Each episode usually starts with a serious news story related to a major domestic or foreign current event; however, subsequent segments run the gambit from historical anniversaries to scientific breakthroughs to the latest in entertainment news. Moreover, even the topics that are of interest to social studies teachers or are directly related to politics are not explored in depth.

To illustrate this point, I conducted a content analysis of *CNN Student News* during the month of October 2012, which I hypothesized should have been a period of heightened political awareness given the close proximity to the upcoming presidential election. During that month, a period of time that consisted of 23 episodes, *CNN Student News* aired 127 different segments.<sup>3</sup> The shortest of these segments was 28 seconds while



the longest was 4:10, and the average of all segments was approximately 1:32. It would be challenging to explain the nuances of any complex event in that amount of time.<sup>4</sup>

Although length is one way to measure substance, it is also important to analyze content. Table 1.1 lists the topics of the longest *CNN Student News* segments that aired during the month of October, using three minutes as an arbitrary minimum baseline.

At first glance, this list seems to suggest that *CNN Student News* would be fairly useful for social studies teachers. Only three of the stories

Table 1.1. Longest *CNN Student News* Segments—October 2012

| Time | Date       | Topic   |
|------|------------|---|
| 4:10 | October 31 | The aftermath of Hurricane Sandy  |
| 3:53 | October 5  | A student with a stuttering problem who conquered it through rapping  |
| 3:44 | October 3  | Preparation for the first presidential debate and a history of infamous moments in presidential debate history                            |
| 3:42 | October 1  | Human interest story with Sanjay Gupta about weather conditions and the price of food   |
| 3:28 | October 26 | Classes on computer coding being offered in high schools  |
| 3:22 | October 8  | The September jobs report   |
| 3:20 | October 16 | Preparation for the second presidential debate  |
| 3:18 | October 16 | 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis  |
| 3:18 | October 18 | Update on Malala Yousufazi, the 15-year-old Pakistani girl who was shot by the Taliban for calling for equal educational rights for girls |
| 3:15 | October 19 | Comparison between Obama and Romney’s plans for reducing the deficit  |
| 3:14 | October 11 | Previously recorded interview with Malala Yousufazi   |
| 3:14 | October 11 | Preparation for the vice presidential debate  |
| 3:09 | October 9  | A guy who taped a second from each day of his life  |
| 3:09 | October 30 | The aftermath of Hurricane Sandy  |
| 3:05 | October 29 | An upcoming Supreme Court case on copyright laws  |

(the stuttering rapper, the computer coding courses, and the time-lapsed taping) do not seem to have obvious ties to politics or current political issues. However, the emphasis that *CNN Student News* places on certain stories over others creates questions regarding its ability to foster political awareness. On October 2, for example, the newscast covered both the conclusion of the United Nations General Assembly meeting and the upcoming presidential debate, but the combined amount of time given to those two stories (1:40) was less than that devoted to the story of a professional baseball player getting a second shot at an at-bat a decade after he had been hit in the head by a pitch (2:37). Stories with little political value, ranging from Miguel Cabrera winning the baseball triple crown to a celebration of the Rubik's Cube becoming the most purchased toy of all time, were often given more emphasis than the hard news stories of the day.

Perhaps more importantly, many of the political stories aired on *CNN Student News* during that month lacked substance. For example, on October 4, the program's recap of the first presidential debate included footage of the moderator introducing the rules of the debate, the candidates' handshake, and two short sound bites from each candidate. The program's coverage of the second debate was just as sparse; it showed two questions and partial answers from each candidate but completely omitted what was arguably the most influential moment of the debate, the assertion of moderator Candy Crowley that Obama had referred to the Benghazi embassy murders as a terrorist attack in a White House speech, which contradicted Romney's line of questioning.

In sharing these data, I do not wish to insinuate that *CNN Student News* is an ineffective instructional tool; on the contrary, I believe that CNN is providing a valuable service to educators. In isolation, however, *CNN Student News* and other types of student news programs are inadequate for engaging students with politics. In order to maximize the educative potential of such programs, teachers must view them as a springboard to more substantive discussions or projects related to politics. For example, teachers could use a student newscast to pique students' interest in a topic and then segue into a short seminar or deliberation about one of the relevant news stories from that day's episode, or they could use the program as an introduction to a larger project in which students engage in aspects of political thinking and produce a tangible product, such as a letter to an elected official.

When teachers treat programs like *CNN Student News* as nothing more than 10-minute daily doses of current events that precede the "real" lessons for that day, they implicitly send the message that politics

and current events are detached from the formal curriculum. For students to become truly adept at thinking politically, discussions of politics and current political issues need to be infused within all aspects of the social studies curriculum. In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss ways in which teachers can make spaces for politics within their instruction, regardless of the specific discipline they teach.

### **Making Space for Politics within the Social Studies Curriculum**

The social studies curriculum is inherently political; therefore, incorporating politics into one's instruction does not require a complete overhaul of the curriculum. Regardless of the discipline, teachers can accentuate their formal curriculum by simply relating what they are learning to contemporary political issues or critically analyzing content through a political lens. Below, I offer examples of this approach in each of the common social studies disciplines: civics, history, economics, and geography.

#### **Civics**

Civics is the most obvious discipline within the social studies curriculum for the inclusion of politics. The subsequent chapters in this book focus primarily on research collected in civics classrooms, so I will not spend too much space here discussing how to infuse politics within civics instruction. However, two broad foci encompass the recommendations that I make throughout the remainder of this book with respect to civics instruction: Civics courses should go beyond a textbook understanding of the political world in which students live, and students should be encouraged to take part in the civic process through deliberating issues and engaging in civic action.

For example, a standard aspect of the civics curriculum is studying the how the federal, state, and local governments operate, or what political scientists Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996) have described as the “rules” of the American political system. The description of these rules in most civics textbooks and state curriculum standards, however, is idealistic and sanitized. Take, for example, the common bill-into-law process. Whether students get their information from the famous *Schoolhouse Rocks* video or their textbook, the end product is usually some variation of a diagram showing the President at the top of a pyramid and the House of Representatives and the Senate at the bottom with interconnected lines that show the flow of legislation between the three bodies.

Such a diagram is sufficient for explaining the nuts and bolts of the legislative process, but it does little to explain the political realities that too often affect whether legislation is passed. Lobbyists, political contributions, political retribution, seniority, influence of news media, public opinion polls, and future political ambitions are examples of realities that are not found anywhere in textbook diagrams but are significant influences on the legislative process. When teachers do not go into this level of depth, they not only fail to provide a realistic picture of American democracy, but they also send the message that the legislative process is fairly straightforward; and when students do not see that simplicity play out in real life, they are more likely to become disenchanted with the system (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002).

In civics classes, then, it is essential for teachers to go beyond textbook depictions of democracy and have students explore the realities of politics. One way to achieve this goal is by encouraging students to think politically, which is the subject of chapter 4. Although this type of approach may present a more cynical view of the American political system, forcing students to adhere to a narrative that frames elected officials as always working to serve the needs of their nation and constituents is both poor pedagogy and dishonest.

The other way civics teachers can make space for political instruction is to encourage students to deliberate and take action on issues they find interesting or relevant. Take, for example, the issue of abortion. Nearly every civics curriculum is going to require students memorize the *Roe v. Wade* decision and recognize that abortion remains a contemporary controversial issue. Yet, simply recognizing that an issue is controversial does not allow students to practice engaging with controversy, which is an essential skill needed to navigate an increasingly politically polarized American society.

Mr. Harrison, a teacher from the 2008 study, provides an example of how such discussions can occur. Instead of breezing through abortion as part of a larger lesson on issue positions of Democrats and Republicans like most of the other teachers in that study did, Mr. Harrison opened the floor for a tolerant discussion of the issue, as this excerpt shows:

MR. HARRISON: Let's say there was new legislation out there that says 14-year-olds should be able to decide whether they want an abortion without telling their parents. What do you think?

EDUARDO: They shouldn't be having babies anyway; they are too young. I think it should be 18 or older, younger than that they should use protection if they want to [have sex].

BETH: Most 14-year-olds I know are stupid so . . .

ALBERTO: Abortion can be good or bad. Like what if a girl gets raped? I mean, if you just get pregnant, that is your fault.

DAVID: I think it should be [a woman's] choice. It is their body.

ALBERTO: You say that because you aren't a female and are not going to have a baby.

MR. HARRISON: Ok, well, who is going to pay for all of that? Let's say a young lady has a child and say the parents' insurance doesn't pay for it, what political party would be more beneficial to her?

SEVERAL STUDENTS: Democrats.

MR. HARRISON: Why?

RICKY: Because they raise taxes for social programs.

MR. HARRISON: Right. Just look at what is right out here (referencing the school's daycare center for mothers who have to attend class). That is the result of money given to a program. So, how much influence should religion have on this issue?

CHARLIE: If you are Christian you shouldn't do it because it goes against their idea of life.

ALBERTO: In some other religions you [would] get stoned.

MARC: My cousin in Syrian, or from the Middle East, and if you get pregnant, you have to raise it or else you get killed or thrown in jail.

BETH: I am Catholic, and I was taught that it was wrong. I mean we are here; they have a right to be, too.

MR. HARRISON: What would Obama say about this?

DAVID: He would say it is your choice.

As this excerpt illustrates, Mr. Harrison's students were able to have a tolerant discussion about a highly charged issue in American society while Mr. Harrison simultaneously was able to highlight aspects of the formal curriculum (i.e., which party supports abortion rights and higher taxes to pay for social programs). Instead of simply plotting "pro-life" and "pro-choice" on a T-chart to correspond with Democratic and Republican platforms and moving on, Mr. Harrison allowed students space to discuss the issue in a way that valued their opinions, experiences, and value systems.

The next step for creating a meaningful understanding of politics is to encourage students to get involved with the political system. Meira Levinson (2012) has described this process as "guided civic experiential education" (p. 224), while others have termed it "action civics" (e.g., Center for Information and Research on Civic Engagement and Learning [CIRCLE], 2013). Regardless of the terminology used, this approach to civic education is characterized by having students identify political issues important to them and then working within existing political structures to enact change. Recently, the National Council for the Social Studies ([NCSS], 2013) included "Taking Informed Action" as one of the four essential dimensions of quality social studies instruction. So, while teachers and schools have occasionally been criticized for promoting student activism, encouraging students to become politically active is increasingly considered an essential element of civic education.

Returning to the example from Mr. Harrison's classroom, it is clear that many of his students had strong opinions on abortion. A logical extension of that discussion would have been for Mr. Harrison to have his students channel those passions into a civic action project that supported their opinion on abortion. A basic example would be writing a letter to an elected official, but a more complex activity would be to have students join a pro-life or pro-choice political organization and potentially become active in lobbying or other political efforts. Regardless of the type of action civics approach used, the only way it can be truly contextualized for students is if they have a realistic understanding of the American political system.

## History

Although civics courses are more prevalent today than they were 20 years ago, the American social studies curriculum still remains history-centric (Journell, 2015). Courses in U.S. history, especially, are often the cornerstones of state social studies curricula; these courses tend to be required for graduation and annually tested by states more often than civics courses

(CIRCLE, 2014). Therefore, it is essential for history teachers to infuse politics into their courses as well.

On the surface, it may seem difficult to teach about contemporary politics in a course devoted to past events. However, if one takes the Deweyan (1916) view that history is most effective when taught from a sociological perspective, then connecting historical events to contemporary political issues is not only possible, but also necessary. This type of sociological approach does not mean that history teachers devote copious amounts of instructional time to discussions of politics; rather, the value of history courses in terms of encouraging a deeper understanding of politics for students lies in teachers' ability to contextualize current political events and issues using historical precedents.

For example, if one spends enough time watching cable news or browsing political websites, it is inevitable that he or she will come across a pundit making the case that partisan politics is more divisive than any other time in American history. Without a historical perspective, one might be inclined to agree, and the whitewashed history that students receive in a typical survey of U.S. history does little to challenge this notion. Landmark pieces of legislation are given laudatory names, such as "The Great Compromise" or "The Missouri Compromise," and without proper context, students may see the word "compromise" and conjure images of austere men sitting around a table calmly agreeing to put aside their own beliefs for the good of the country, which stands in stark contrast to the posturing and vitriolic rhetoric that students see on television between Democrats and Republicans today.

To provide students with a richer and more accurate understanding of both historical and contemporary politics, teachers should discuss the political battles surrounding landmark events and pieces of legislation. The ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, the subject of Doris Kearns Goodwin's (2005) book, *Team of Rivals*, and Stephen Spielberg's (2012) biopic, *Lincoln*, is a perfect example of politics in action. Most students probably do not know that the Thirteenth Amendment, often taught as a natural outcome of the Civil War, became a hotly debated issue, even among Northern politicians. They would also be surprised to learn that "Honest Abe" employed a variety of underhanded tactics, such as bribery, patronage, and political intimidation, to ensure ratification. Many of these same tactics are regularly being used by politicians today; however, our 24-hour news cycle makes this type of political behavior less likely to go unnoticed and, as a result, Americans are more likely to view their elected officials as dishonest.

Another example can be found in the Compromise of 1850. History textbooks discuss the outcomes of the legislation and the role of the “great compromiser” Henry Clay but often omit the political battle that played out within Congress before the compromise was passed. Teachers could easily explore the political unrest behind this “compromise” by having students analyze major floor speeches held during the legislative debates. Two of the most famous speeches were from South Carolina’s John C. Calhoun, who opposed the compromise, and Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, who supported the legislation.

Calhoun, who was dying and too sick to deliver his speech himself, argued that the compromise was a futile attempt at trying to maintain the Union. Webster countered three days later, arguing that accepting slavery where it already existed was a small price to pay to maintain the union. Webster’s speech was a political success and helped generate momentum for the compromise. However, Webster became a martyr for his stance, as those from the largely abolitionist New England states admonished him as a traitor and a coward. Webster ultimately resigned his Senate seat in disgrace four months later and ended his political career as President Millard Fillmore’s Secretary of State.

A connection could easily be made between the politics of the 1850s and the rancorous political discourse of contemporary politics in which extreme voices on both sides of the aisle see any sort of compromise as a form of surrender. Both then and now, appearing to hedge one’s beliefs, particularly on issues that are fundamental to the identity of a political group or party, is met with scorn and resentment. Although compromises may appear in history books as monumental achievements, in the moment they are often divisive propositions that cost moderate politicians their careers.

Another way that history teachers can create connections to contemporary politics is by analyzing how regions of the United States have shared similar political identities over time. Electoral trends, for example, provide an excellent tool for understanding both the historical evolution of the two major political parties and current political divisions present in the United States. Sociologist James Loewen (2010) has argued that electoral maps can be used to illustrate how the United States remains a nation divided by regions over 150 years after the Civil War. To update the examples he gives to include the 2012 election, figures 1.1 and 1.2 compare the electoral maps of the 1860 and 2012 elections. In both cases, the shaded states are those that voted for the winning candidate.



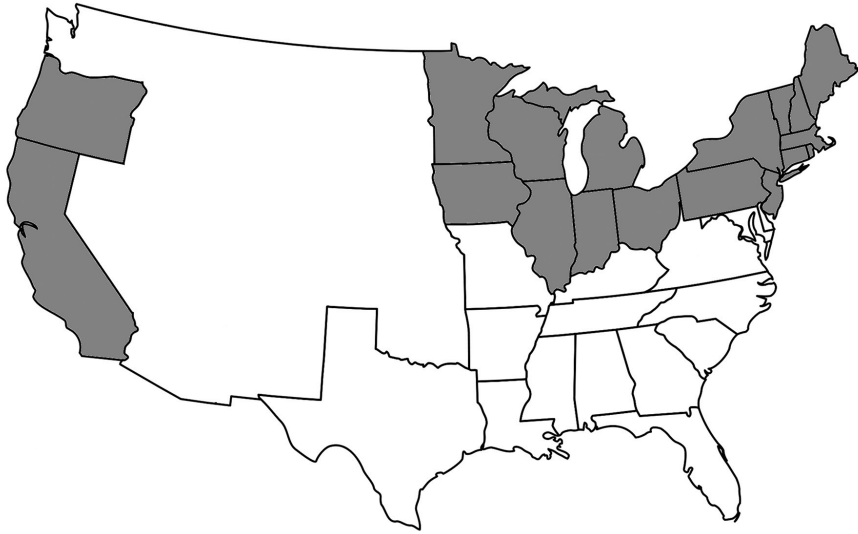


Figure 1.1. Electoral Map of the 1860 Presidential Election.

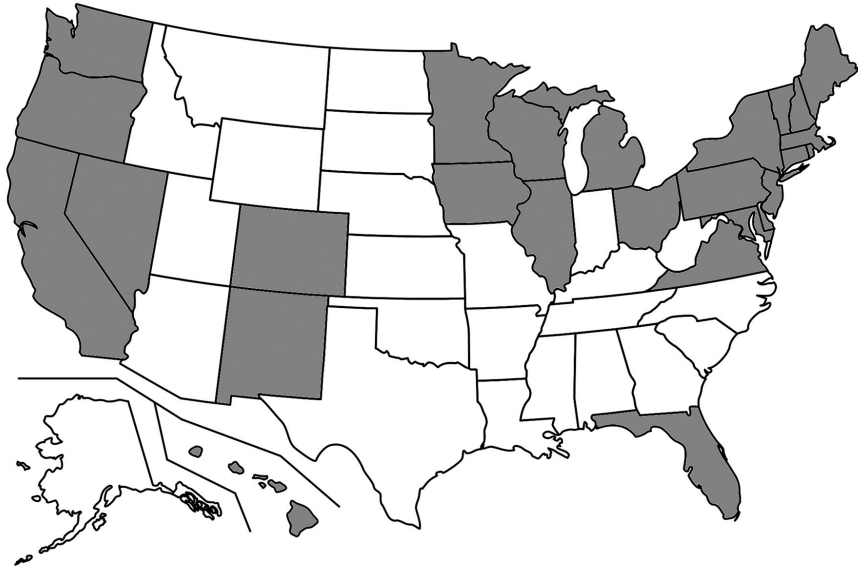


Figure 1.2. Electoral Map of the 2012 Presidential Election.

Although the issues of the day and the platforms of both the Democratic and Republican parties changed dramatically between 1860 and 2012, it is interesting to note the similarities between the two maps. The Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and Western parts of the nation, for the most part, have remained ideologically homogeneous. Teachers could use this comparison to show the roots of the deep political and ideological differences that are highlighted every election cycle. In other words, the United States was a nation of “red states” and “blue states” long before it was fashionable to use that terminology.

What it means to be a “red state” or a “blue state” has changed over time, however. Again, teachers can illustrate this ideological change using electoral maps and regional patterns. Consider, for example, the states typically described as the “Solid South,” specifically South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. From the end of Reconstruction to 1960, those four states voted solidly Democratic.<sup>5</sup> Even in the most lopsided Republican electoral victory during that time period, the 1928 Presidential Election, those four states were part of a solid Democratic bloc, as shown in figure 1.3.

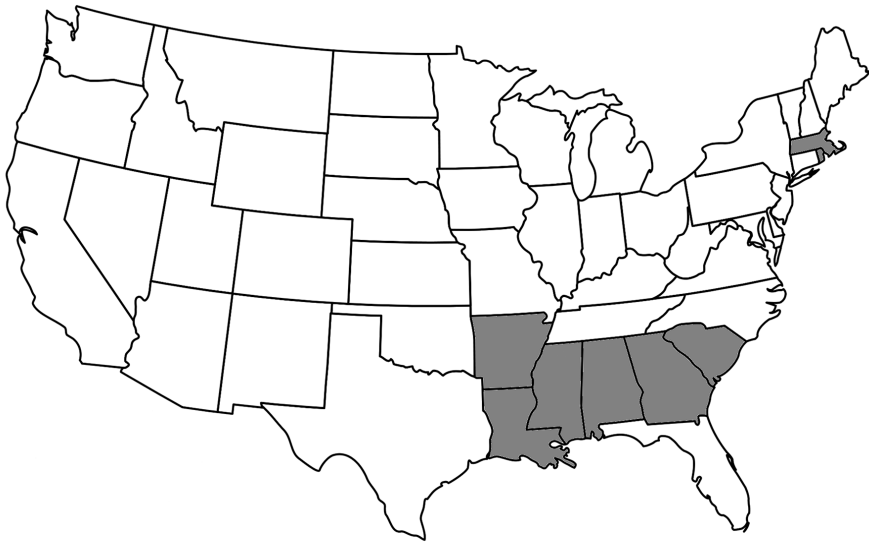


Figure 1.3. States that voted Democratic (shaded) in the Presidential Election of 1928.

From 1964 to 2012, however, these four states have voted, with few exceptions, solidly Republican.<sup>6</sup> Again, the most lopsided Democratic electoral victory during that time period, the 1996 Presidential Election, provides a stark example of the homogeneous ideology of this region. As one can see in figure 1.4, the support for Republican Bob Dole was located predominantly in the Southeast and Midwestern part of the country.

The question for students to consider is whether the collective ideology of those residing within those states changed or whether ideologies of the Democratic and Republican parties shifted. The answer, of course, is a combination of both factors. For example, despite being the “Party of Lincoln” that freed the slaves, the Republican Party began to lose support of African Americans in the wake of economic opportunities provided by the New Deal and increased calls for civil rights legislation by Democratic politicians. This ideological shift by the Democratic Party caused many conservative Democrats to join the Republican Party and was coupled by the geographical Great Migration of approximately five million African Americans from the South to the North between 1940 and 1970.

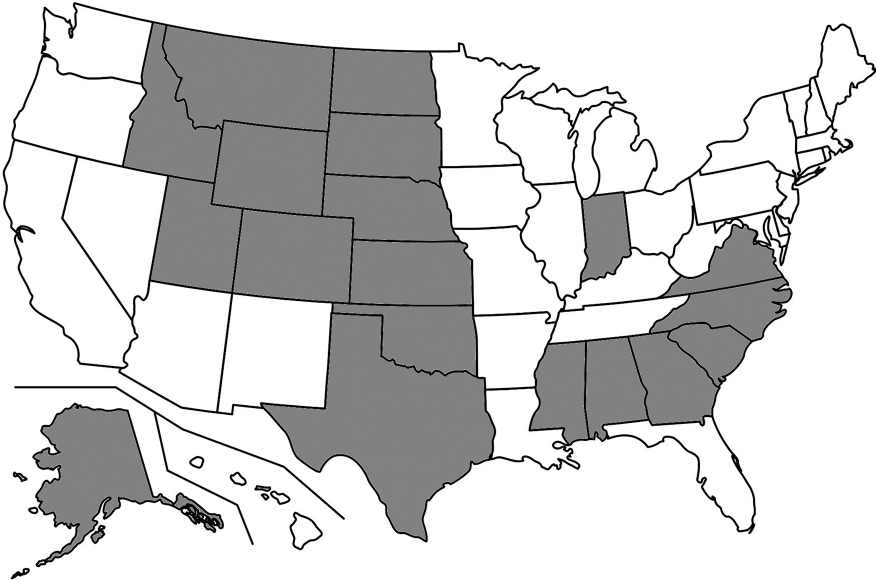


Figure 1.4. States that voted Republican (shaded) in the Presidential Election of 1996.

Civil rights and population shifts are only two causes of this specific ideological change, but the larger point is that teachers can use electoral maps to show students that political ideologies often change over time. In other words, what it means to be a Democrat or Republican today could change over the next several decades. Factions within each party, such as the Tea Party movement within the Republican Party and those who supported Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Presidential primaries, could be compared to other splinter parties throughout history, and students could use recent electoral data to predict future electoral shifts.

Discussing historical legislation and analyzing electoral maps over time are only two examples of how history teachers can incorporate greater political understanding in their courses. Creative teachers can find many ways to consistently tie historical events to current political issues. For example, discussions of the division between Federalists and Anti-Federalists over specific issues, such as the creation of a National Bank, could easily be compared to the ideological beliefs of the current Democratic and Republican parties. Students should be able to recognize that, although the specific issues may be different, the fundamental disagreement over “big government” and “small government” has existed since the nation’s founding. Similarly, specific events, such as the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts and the 2011 Patriot Act, could be compared and contrasted using historical, legal, and political contexts. The history of the United States, and more broadly, the world, is ultimately a political history; therefore, it is appropriate for connections to be made to the contemporary political world in which students live.

## Economics

Economics is often ranked as one of the least popular social studies disciplines by both students and their teachers, and more importantly, secondary school students’ knowledge of economics concepts ranges from dismal to basic (e.g., Clark & Davis, 1992; U.S. Department of Education, 2013; Walstad & Rebeck, 2001). This disdain for economics is often due to teachers using a “chalk and talk” approach in which economics is expressed primarily through graphs and mathematical formulas. Economics becomes a more vibrant discipline when students are able to apply economic theory to real-life scenarios (Rosales & Journell, 2012).

Given the political debates over fiscal policy in the United States, it should not be difficult for teachers to make connections between economics and politics. Anand Marri and colleagues (2013), for example, offered an example of an economics lesson that combines knowledge