

Introduction to the 2020 Election Special Issue

Jeremiah Clabough, Guest Editor
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Social studies educators face a daunting task with teaching civic education in the aftermath of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Donald Trump's political career has been predicated on stoking political hyperpartisanship to portray himself as the defender of Republicans' beliefs and opponent of Democrats' policies that he deemed harmful to the United States. Trump has challenged his opponents' patriotism as can be seen with Collin Kaepernick and even went so far to say that some of his political enemies should be arrested (Cheney, 2020; Serwer, 2017). He entered the political arena pushing birther claims with no evidence that President Barack Obama was born in Kenya (Halperin & Heilemann, 2013). This brand of right wing politics continued throughout Trump's administration as demonstrated by his response to the tragedy at Charlottesville and urging that he would fight to prevent the removal of Confederate monuments dotting the American landscape (Collins & Subramanian, 2020; Diamond, 2017). Trump's actions have mainly been used to frame himself as a right wing cultural warrior, despite the fact that he made large campaign donations to Democrats prior to his entry into the American political arena (Kurtzleben, 2015). The ripple effects from the Trump administration are still being felt in U.S. society as will be discussed in the following pages.

Donald Trump, 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, and U.S. Capitol Riot

Donald Trump's actions after his defeat in the 2020 U.S. presidential election only worked to exacerbate the issues from his four years in the White House. Trump has claimed with no credible evidence that he won the 2020 U.S. presidential election, even though he lost in the electoral college in 2020 by almost the same margin that he won by in 2016, while also losing the popular vote by more votes in 2020. Trump's lawsuits in battleground states like Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Georgia were quickly dismissed in over 60 court cases, presided by some of the very judges that he nominated over the course of his administration (Cummings et al., 2021). After months of stoking unsubstantiated claims, Trump's supporters attempted to lead a political insurrection by storming the U.S. Capitol to overturn the results of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. There have many numerous attempts by Trump's enablers to silence investigations into

the attempted political coup by domestic terrorists at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, which can be seen with recent attempts by Republicans in the U.S. Senate to block the January 6th Commission (Nobles et al., 2021). Donald Trump, his political allies, and many members of the political right refuse to confront the reality that Joe Biden won the 2020 U.S. presidential election and continue to excuse the actions during the Trump administration that have moved the Republican Party several steps further to the political right. The differences with Donald Trump's Republican Party and the previous iterations of the party were so extreme that the previous two Republican Presidents, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush, did not vote for the Republican Party's most recent standard-bearer (Martin, 2021; Reuters Staff, 2017). These political realities have an impact on civics classrooms.

Challenges of Teaching Civic Education in Contemporary U.S. Society

The political realities of the United States complicate the ways that civics educators teach about American democracy. Our K-12 schools and universities have often been political battlegrounds between conservative and liberal forces. Schools have faced increasing political pressure during and after the Trump administration to teach a social studies curriculum that conforms to political right wing beliefs about U.S. history. This can be seen with the short lived 1776 Commission led by the Trump administration, which attempted to reframe American's origin and history to conservative's beliefs, values, and biases (Schuessler, 2021). While it is undeniable that the political left has also attempted to shape school social studies curricula, the political right has done so while trying to mitigate aspects of U.S. history that do not agree with its members' worldviews. This can be seen with recent controversies about teaching issues of race such as slavery and systemic racism in schools with the work from the 1619 Project and Ibram Kendi's books on Critical Race Theory (Serwer, 2021). Conservatives want schools to focus on American exceptionalism while minimizing issues of class, race, and gender throughout U.S. history that they view as divisive and paint the country in a negative light. In fact, many Republicans have opposed the bipartisan legislation called the Civics Secures Democracy Act co-sponsored by Senator Chris Coons (Democrat from Delaware) and Representative John Cornyn (Republican from Texas) to increase funding to civics education out of the belief that funds will be used to teach Critical Race Theory (Packer, 2021). They have failed to realize that social studies teachers have for decades taught about the structural and systemic nature of racism

in U.S. history. Issues connected to race have certainly been a driving force in the U.S. political discourse over the past year.

Race Issues during the Summer of 2020

The summer of 2020 will be remembered for the impact that COVID-19 had on American society, but it will also be remembered for protests connected to race issues, specifically the extrajudicial killing of Black people by police officers. The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by excessive police force led to mass protests throughout the United States. The video leaked showing George Floyd's death only increased the call for reforms to police departments around the country (Searcey & Zucchion, 2020). The calls for police reforms even got to the point that Pat Robertson, a well-known conservative religious leader, spoke out in opposition to the actions of the police in Minnesota. As a man of the Christian faith, Robertson could not stand idly by and say nothing when the violence and social injustices were right in front of his eyes (Choi, 2021). Of course, not all conservatives took Robertson's stance on police issues, as seen by some in the Trump administration claiming that systemic racism in U.S. law enforcement does not exist (Cole, 2020). Unfortunately, many political issues in the United States have been viewed over the last 30 years through a tribal lens (Kornacki, 2018). If a person's party is for an issue, then, the Party must be always right, and any dissension is swiftly purged from the Party. This tribal mindset can be seen by Republicans recently removing Liz Cheney from leadership in the House of Representatives for criticizing Donald Trump's role in the January 6th riot (Sprunt, 2021).

The Dawn of the Second Gilded Age and COVID-19

The last 40 years of U.S. history have been a Second Gilded Age. The First Gilded Age occurred shortly after the U.S. Civil War as industrialism made great advancements in the mass production of goods, which resulted in massive wealth inequalities between robber barons and their workers. The issues from these massive gaps in wealth disparity were glossed over since robber barons made massive campaign donations to U.S. politicians. The last 40 years have seen a Second Gilded Age through public policies and laws that disproportionately favor the most affluent in U.S. society (Bartels, 2016; Frank, 2004). Therefore, class, gender, and racial issues are constantly boiling beneath the surface. Some have tried to ignore these issues while others have tried to capitalize on these items for their political gains. However, the global health pandemic COVID-19 has highlighted items that even those that try to be blind to such issues

cannot deny. For example, the difficulty of switching to online education was exacerbated by the lack of access to high-speed internet in poor communities, especially those of color (Richards et al., 2021). The current challenge is whether Americans take civic action and pressure their political leaders to address these lingering issues or leave these items unresolved. Like many of our Founding Fathers and educational philosophers like John Dewey, I argue that solutions to many contemporary issues are best addressed by social studies classrooms that critically engage students in historical and contemporary issues (Barr et al., 1977; Clabough, 2017; Dewey, 1916; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Oliver & Shaver, 1966).

The Role of Civic Education

The transformation of our social studies classrooms into “laboratories of democracy” helps to ensure that our students are prepared for the numerous responsibilities that come with being democratic citizens (Clabough & Wooten, 2016; Clabough, 2018). Our social studies classrooms are the safest spaces where students can analyze different policies and reach their own decisions about those items that they want to support or oppose (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018; The National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). What is needed is both innovative ideas to engage students in contemporary issues and federal policies that make funding civic education a priority. While we cannot address the funding issue directly in this themed issue, we can highlight innovative approaches with cutting edge research conducted by some up-and-coming and well-known social studies scholars.

Contributors to This Themed Issue

Many of the articles in this special themed issue embody the concept of research into practice. The authors highlight the methods used in their research projects to the point where readers could replicate similar projects in their classrooms. They highlight many of the pertinent issues in their articles that civic educators must grapple with in the aftermath of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. These issues include how to talk about Trump’s false claims about the 2020 U.S. presidential election, how to critically teach about race issues, and how to analyze historical and contemporary women that have impacted U.S. society.

In the first article, Mark Percy explores how to utilize media literacy skills to deconstruct Donald Trump’s arguments about issues before, during, and after his administration. Specifically, he employs “Whataboutism” and Occam’s Razor to examine the fallacies with some of Trump’s arguments. These issues include Trump’s claims about voter fraud during the

2020 U.S. presidential election and his arguments about the riot at Charlottesville. Percy's methods provide teachers with resources to analyze Trump and other politicians' statements. The approaches used in Percy's article can strengthen students' media literacy skills and prepare them to make informed decisions as democratic citizens.

Next, Jon Schmidt discusses a research project implemented in Chicago schools that used a critical civic engagement framework. The critical civic engagement framework helps marginalized urban students not only tell their stories but also works to develop their civic identities. Schmidt discusses his observations of an AP Government class, the interviews with the teacher, and focus group interviews with students to share their takeaways from doing projects connected to a critical civic engagement framework. He found that this framework helped students see the relevance of civic education in their daily lives.

Then, Brian Fugione, Scott M. Waring, and Richard Hartshorne share the results of their study focusing on a project to get students actively involved in the process of investigating, planning, and developing civically-focused projects in their local communities. They used a variety of data collection methods to examine the impact of students completing their projects. These data collection methods include observational data, informal interviews, surveys, field notes, researchers' logs, and document analysis. The authors argue that their project helped students realize the power that democratic citizens have in applying their civic agency to impact, alter, and change social, cultural, economic, and political institutions.

Next, Irene Walker discusses a research project she implemented in an urban charter school in the Southeast with a 100% African American population. In her research project, she interviewed some students that had previously done a Black History project to research a member of the African American community that took civic action to be a change agent. Walker shares how these students described meaningfully learning about African American history and seeing how previous generations worked to address issues of racial discrimination. These students also discussed how examining historical figures' actions motivated them to also be change agents to address contemporary public issues.

Finally, Alyssa Whitford's article discusses how she implemented a research study with a group of elementary students to look at how they talked about historical and contemporary women in U.S. history. She discusses how these students' perceptions about the role women have and can play in U.S. history shifted over the course of her project. Whitford's project was a

series of lesson plans delivered over Zoom due to COVID-19 that had students examine several women through trade books that redefined the roles of women in U.S. society. She also did pre- and post-interviews to see how students' beliefs about women changed. The findings from her study suggest that elementary students were more likely to not define women in stereotypical roles and see contemporary issues of inequity still impacting women's daily lives.

Conclusion

The United States is in a perilous position. Americans must rebuild the U.S. economy, which was severely impacted by COVID-19. We must also heal the wounds caused by our political discourse over the Trump administration and realize that certain behaviors are outside the norms of our democratic beliefs. Some reading this introduction may accuse me of being partisan, but I see everything said here as being an American. Americans should oppose politicians' statements, actions, and public policies that are in contradiction to our democratic norms. For example, the first comment that caused candidate Donald Trump to get noticed was his comments that stereotyped immigrants as criminals (Phillips, 2017). This is a textbook example of a racist statement. We could also look at Trump's arguments against John McCain that he liked "people that weren't captured." (Fritz et al., 2019). The fact that any political candidate would make such comments about one military POW and then generalize this to all POWs is morally reprehensible. This is especially noteworthy coming from a member of a Republican Party that constantly states how much it supports our military men and women. It is important to remember public issues discussed in my introduction will not solve themselves. Even in our tribal world of American politics, U.S. citizens must call out and hold politicians accountable for their words, policies, and actions. The articles included in this themed issue discuss how to equip students with some of the civic literacy, thinking, and argumentation skills in social studies classrooms needed to do just that, and thus work to create a more equitable U.S. society for all citizens.

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Author Biography

Dr. Jeremiah Clabough is the secondary social studies program coordinator at The University of Alabama at Birmingham. He is a former secondary social studies teacher. He is the lead editor of *No Reluctant Citizens: Teaching Civics in K-12 Classrooms*. His research interests focuses on utilizing activities that develop students' civic thinking skills.