

## **The role of politics in the classroom**

By Julie Heng

To say that our country has become polarized through politics may be a slight understatement. The United States' atmosphere has become incredibly divisive since the change of agenda that resulted from the 2016 general election.

In the aftermath, classrooms are expected to remain relatively unaffected, but politics always finds a way into everyday conversation.

In some ways, given the assumption that schools prepare us for the future, having politics in the classroom can be a very beneficial opportunity, as it allows students to argumentatively debate the merits and consequences of various actions and beliefs.

However, real life does not work out in the cookie-cutter way that many envision. In Ann Arbor, a city that overwhelmingly voted for the liberal ticket (Washtenaw County tallied 128,025 Clinton-Kaine votes compared to 50,335 Trump-Pence votes), it may be especially easy to align with one side or another. High school students can often be quick to judge and bite, which can lead to even more exclusion for those with a minority opinion.

Naturally, questions arise over where should the line be drawn. Is there room for teachers to lean towards one end of the political spectrum in class? Or should all political debates stay off the table altogether?

One of Huron's U.S. history teachers, Sarah Roldan-Dodson, sits at her desk at the front of her room, flanked by a bust of Lincoln and a large American flag. She mentions that political discussions in classrooms are not usually incited by teachers themselves, but they are more of a response to questions that the students themselves make, especially in her history classes. There, Roldan-Dodson explains, she makes an effort to emphasize making connections between events that have transpired in the past with what may be unfolding in the news.

“We’ll be reading a primary source, and a student will connect it to modern day—so [politics is] brought out by the conversation in class,” Roldan-Dodson said.

She went on to explain how several primary sources concerning Chinese exclusion and Japanese internment and how her students voluntarily draw parallels with the current status of immigration, such as the travel ban or DACA.

“[I]f we see something that has happened in the past [occur in the present], I think it is relevant to discuss.”

Huron U.S. Government and Global Politics teacher Andrew Face agrees earnestly.

“Current events should play a role because they help keep subject matter relevant to the students, which I think can engage students,” Face said.

Of course, this is not to say that prejudice is completely removed on the part of the teacher. Even historical interpretations can vary based on political alignments, and many can argue the benefits or consequences of wars and legislation. More often than not, teachers incorporate politically-infused commentary, references, or opinions in lectures. Especially in the past two years, through eventful campaigns and elections, it seems politics has emerged more frequently. Over 60 percent of polled students notice occasional political references made by teachers in class.

“[N]early everywhere you look, there is politics, even in classes that have nothing to do with it,” freshman Josh Cullen noted. He firmly believes that the place for politics is only in social studies classes and that teachers have one goal: to make “the conversations proper, not a scream fest.”

However, politics *does* inevitably find a way into science labs and ELA lectures. Another solution, proposed by sophomore Dante Bailey, would be to eliminate politics among students altogether. The best method of prevention, he argues, would be to have the teacher not have the class discuss these topics out loud. Rather, they could strictly belong on opinion-based surveys and essays. This way, all viewpoints are addressed and respected without any potential fistfights brewing between students.

Whatever the method, the key here is to ensure that no one’s integrity or dignity is intentionally attacked. There is no place for students to feel vulnerable or at risk.

“[T]he teacher’s role is to act as a facilitator and a mediator and to ensure that students are focusing on the issue and not making it become personal,” Face said. “School is a safe environment for students to engage in civic dialogue in the the real world.”

However, “the teacher holds the power in the classroom, and, if they pick a side, those who do not agree can sometimes (if outnumbered) have a harder time expressing their ideas,” senior Soham Naik said.

He believes the teacher’s ultimate role is to point out as many ideas as possible and sometimes play devil’s advocate to stimulate students in discussion.

“What we sometimes forget is that there are others who don't follow the same political ideology as we do. Just because our political outlooks do not coincide doesn't mean any of us is more correct,” Naik added.

This is actually the general consensus given by experts in the education field. The paradox of exercising different schools of thought in a public institution designed to feed a certain way of thinking has been studied all over the country. Schools constantly face a struggle regarding what skills students should be taught and what concepts they should instead personally explore and formulate.

Diana E. Hess is the co-author of *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* and the Dean of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In an nprEd interview, she explains about several conclusions made about politics in the classroom. In her book, based on a study she conducted from 2005 to 2009, she studied the political leanings and behaviors of 21 teachers in 35 schools. The one important thing for teachers to remember, according to Hess, is to not “give students the impression that there’s a political view that they should be working toward.”

“[E]ven though there can be really good ethical reasons for teachers to share [their views], in a very polarized time, that sharing can be misinterpreted....That being said, we have no evidence from the study of teachers who were actively and purposely trying to indoctrinate kids to a particular point of view,” Hess said. In conclusion, “this feeling that the public seems to have that teachers by definition are trying to push their political views on students is just false.”

One needs to recognize that most teachers who add political-leaning references do so unconsciously, not to provoke hostility. One must realize that teachers, after all, are human and maintain their own grounds when it comes to political beliefs. They may be very vocal about their beliefs, but it's not to alienate those with other perspectives. Many say they would welcome an intellectual debate as to why a different outlook makes more sense.

The take-home message is that students do generally want to engage in political discussion, especially as it pertains to a developing world stage in which they are growing up. Many students join groups such as the Junior State of America, as well as Huron's Young Democrats or Young Conservatives. Some even give their rationale for joining these political groups as being a method to gain a better understanding of all sides and to hear out the (potential) opposition.

The role of politics in the classroom is not meant to divide. Politics can be used as a tool in order to better the communication between those with different beliefs and engage lively debates that better us as free-speaking citizens of the United States.

Roldan-Dodson sums it up.

"Sometimes I think politicians could actually learn a lot from the students," she concluded. "I think [students] bring far more mature answers and discussions to the table... and they support each other."