

The Challenges of Political Instruction in a Post-9/11 United States

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In the decade since the attacks of September 11th, the political climate in the United States has become increasingly intolerant of opposing viewpoints. This climate, made nearly ubiquitous by 24-hour news cycles and increased exposure to political media, poses quite a challenge to teachers wishing to broach political topics as part of their curriculum. This article highlights a few of the issues secondary educators will face when engaging in political instruction and offers practical, research-based solutions to these issues.

Much has been written about the challenges teachers faced in the days, weeks, and months following the September 11th attacks (e.g., Apple, 2002; Berson, 2002; Berson & Berson, 2001; Cook, 2006; Levesque, 2003; Ray & Pemberton, 2010; Verma, 2005). However, ten years removed from the attacks we know relatively little about how teachers are responding to teaching in a society that has changed dramatically because of that day. September 11th has faded into Americans' collective memory to the point that textbooks report about the attacks dispassionately (Romanowski, 2009; Stoddard, Hess, & Hammer, 2011) and current high school students are too young to truly remember what occurred on that day; however, the fallout from 9/11 has shaped our society, both directly and indirectly, over the past decade and poses continued challenges to teachers in the United States.

The focus of this article is how teachers have responded to the political discourse that has defined American society in the decade since the attacks, particularly with respect to attempts at integrating current social and political issues into their classrooms. After a brief few months of national unity following the attacks, the nation soon became politically divided over the government's response to the War on Terror, and this polarization spread to nearly all elements of American foreign and domestic policy (Mayer, Koizumi, & LaPorte, 2006). Even when terrorism ceased to be the central issue that divided Republicans and Democrats, the animosity that seemed to peak after American troops invaded Iraq remained (Sinclair, 2003). Pundits and politicians on both sides of the aisle not only defended their views, but simultaneously denounced the other side as ideologically and morally "wrong," a label that now stands for unpatriotic, bigoted, xenophobic, or indecisive depending on the context in which it is being used (Jackson, 2007; Mutz, 2007).

Of course, political conflict existed in the United States well before the attacks of September 11th (Farwell & Weiner, 2000). Any student of American history can trace divisive political rhetoric as far back as the founding of the republic; for example, one of the earliest political documents in our nation's history, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, used an "us" versus "them" framework in an attempt to encourage rebellion from England. However, what makes the polarizing political discourse that has occurred since September 11th different from that of the American Revolution or the New Deal or even Vietnam is the fact that it has coincided with the greatest communication era in history (Altheide, 2009). The rise of cable news networks, the Internet, wireless technologies, and social networking has made the dissemination

and consumption of political opinion nearly ubiquitous. Although political discourse is generally considered productive among political scientists, the political rhetoric found in these new technologies, as well as the old standbys of television and radio, is often inflammatory which causes Americans to become both guarded from and disenchanted with politics (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Mutz, 2007).

For many teachers, this political climate has created uneasy classroom environments in which discussing politics or political issues can have negative consequences. For example, since September 11th, there have been multiple reports of teachers being dismissed from their jobs because they voiced opinions about the Iraq War or other political issues that were not consistent with the political climate of their school or surrounding community (Westheimer, 2006). More recently, elementary teachers in New Jersey came under fire after a YouTube video was posted that showed students singing a song that praised President Obama (Corbin, Miller, & Sorrentio, 2009), and many conservative parents across the United States opposed the President's address that was to be aired in every classroom at the beginning of the 2009–2010 school year (Silverleib, 2009). Some districts refused to show the address, and of those districts that aired the speech, most allowed parents to excuse their children from viewing it.

Certainly, broaching politics in public education during such a visible period of heated political rhetoric is a potentially dangerous proposition, and it poses moderate risk for teachers, especially those working in ideologically homogeneous environments (Hess, 2004; Journell, 2010). Yet, Hess (2009) and others (e.g., Parker, 2010) argue that the potential rewards gained by regularly discussing politics at the secondary level are worth the risk. As Manwell (2010) asserts, educating citizens about the nature of democracy through engagement with political issues is essential to maintaining civil liberties for all Americans. Moreover, if the decade since September 11th has taught us nothing else, it is that we need to promote a more politically tolerant and inclusive culture within American society, which requires engagement with difficult issues (Applebaum, 2009).

In order to foster engagement, teachers must first be willing to break away from the practice of political avoidance that has become far too common in public education in the United States. However, even after teachers have made the decision to broach politics in their classrooms, they will most likely face challenges that are both directly and indirectly related to the political climate that has developed in the United States since 9/11. In the remainder of this article, I will briefly discuss reasons why teachers should encourage their students to engage in political discussions along with practical recommendations for how to overcome obstacles they may face in trying to make tolerant political discourse the norm in their classrooms.

Political Avoidance

There exists an old adage that states polite conversation should never include topics of politics or religion because trying to change others' minds about either topic is a futile endeavor, and conversations usually end with all parties not speaking to each other. Although these conventional words of wisdom may hold a kernel of truth, teachers too often take that to mean they should completely avoid all types of controversial discourse in their classrooms (Hess, 2004). However, if teachers reframe their notions of political dialogue from trying to convince others of the admirable qualities of one's argument to a quest for a deeper understanding of opposing viewpoints, then productive political discourse in public education is both possible and necessary (Hess, 2009; Parker, 2003; Parker & Hess, 2001).

The reason it is so vital that teachers encourage political discourse in their classrooms is that most students do not report discussing political issues outside of school, and if they do, these conversations often occur among likeminded individuals (Journell, 2011c). Even in the

most homogenous of schools, students will encounter individuals that are considerably more diverse ideologically than they will at home or in their places of worship (Parker, 2010). Of course, once ideological differences are discovered, the potential for conflict exists. It is this possibility of conflict that frightens teachers, often because they do not feel as though they have been adequately trained to proctor political disagreements in their classrooms (Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004). However, the way in which teachers frame political discussions can considerably influence the tenor of political discourse in their classrooms.

Parker and Hess (2001) differentiate types of communication that typically occur in classrooms and assert that the most productive types of classroom discussion are seminars, in which students discuss topics in order to generate deeper understanding, and deliberations, in which students engage in discussions to find a solution to an issue of concern. While the boundaries between seminars and deliberations can blur, and seminars often turn into deliberations, Parker and Hess contend that both of these types of classroom discussions are productive in that the overarching objective is to learn from others and use that information to further one's own knowledge or solve a common problem.

However, when most teachers allow discussions of political issues in their classrooms, they frame them as “debates”, which Parker and Hess (2001) do not categorize as a true type of discussion because the goal of debates is not to further existing knowledge, but rather to win an argument in which the positions have been predetermined prior to the exercise. Debates are inherently contentious because the focus is on winning rather than listening to opposing viewpoints. This is not to say that debates cannot ever be used in the classroom—being able to persuasively defend one's belief in a public forum is a useful skill—but they should be used sparingly and strategically (Musselman, 2004). For example, when I taught Advanced Placement U.S. Government, I would have two students engage in a weekly debate over an issue, and I made it clear that their goal in the debate was to make the more persuasive argument, even during the second semester of the course when I required students to debate the side of the argument for which they did not personally advocate. However, outside of those 30 minutes per week which were devoted to debates, the expectation for political discourse in my classroom fit within the definitions of seminars and deliberations advocated by Parker and Hess.

When engaging in political discussions, teachers also need to be cognizant of their position in the classroom. Students will naturally look to their teachers for the “right” answer, even when one does not exist. Therefore, whenever possible, teachers should allow their students to carry the political discussion themselves and interact when necessary to clarify information or keep the conversation collegial. Consider the following example of a classroom discussion on abortion that occurred during my study on teachers' instruction during the 2008 Presidential Election (Journell, 2009):

Teacher: 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 female and are not going to have a baby.

Teacher: 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.

Teacher: Why?

Ricky: Because they raise taxes for social programs.

Teacher: 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 is 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.

Teacher: What would Obama say about this?

David: He would say it is your choice.

Students constituted the majority of this conversation; the teacher only intervened to move the conversation from a philosophical standpoint to a political context so that students could better understand the relationship between ideology and public policy. It is also worth noting that the class from which this excerpt was taken was overwhelmingly in favor of Obama in the election. Yet, the teacher seemed to recognize that most of his students were taking a very pro-life mindset. Instead of explicitly drawing the conclusion for them, the teacher closed the conversation by tying it back to the election, which allowed his students to reflect upon the entirety of the conversation and form their own judgments.

However, even when teachers allow their students to lead discussions, classroom power dynamics will always necessitate that teachers make decisions regarding disclosure of their own personal political views. Many teachers refuse to disclose their personal opinions on political issues, believing that it is not their place to use their classroom as a pulpit to advocate their own political beliefs (Hess, 2004). On the surface, such a stance is both admirable and responsible. Certainly, one can imagine the negative repercussions that would occur should a teacher openly tell his or her students they should vote a certain way or support a specific political party. Yet, is teacher neutrality the preferred stance for teachers when confronted with having to disclose their opinions on political issues? There exists a rich literature in social studies education arguing that teachers should disclose their opinions in a measured way that allows them to be challenged by conflicting viewpoints raised by their students (e.g., Kelly, 1986; Passe & Evans, 1996).

The premise behind this stance, or what Kelly (1986) calls "committed impartiality," is that teachers can only model appropriate civil discourse if they disclose their personal views in their classrooms in a way that promotes tolerance and respect. What keeps a teacher who takes a committed impartiality stance from unduly influencing his or her students' political views is the clear admission made by the teacher that his or her views only represent one opinion on an issue which is neither any more or less "correct" than those of his or her students. The resulting class discussions allow teachers to advocate their personal beliefs while simultaneously showing deference to competing views and modeling respectful political disagreement. In this

sense, the act of engaging in respectful political discussion is as, if not more, important than the content being discussed, which is an important lesson for students given the lack of tolerant political discourse being modeled outside of the classroom (Journell, 2011a; Parker & Hess, 2001).

Of course, many teachers will still find comfort in neutrality even in light of theoretical arguments advocating a committed impartiality approach (Miller-Lane, Denton, & May, 2006). The question then becomes, can any teacher ever truly be politically neutral in his or her classroom? In short, the answer is no. The very acts of teaching—deciding what topics will be covered, who will be allowed to speak and for how long, whether discussion will even be allowed—represent a break from neutrality (Reich, 2007). Moreover, remaining silent on political issues can be construed as affirming the status quo, particularly when teachers require students to follow school rules that promote certain political positions, such as standing during the Pledge of Allegiance (Jensen, 2007).

However, the true danger of neutrality is found when this unavoidable partiality occurs unexplained. Research has shown that teachers often exhibit actions that are partial to a certain political ideology even when they are adamant about their neutrality in the classroom (e.g., Niemi & Niemi, 2007). In that same study on the 2008 Presidential Election, I found that the teachers who prided themselves on being “neutral” about the election in their classrooms would regularly make comments that insinuated their true feelings about the candidates and chose instructional techniques that would, often blatantly, advocate a certain candidate or political party. The students in these classes were left to determine whether information they received was political fact or their teacher’s political opinion (Journell, in press-b).

Finally, research has shown that students generally approve of teacher political disclosure, as long as they do not believe their teacher is actively trying to persuade them to adopt a certain political position (Hess & McAvoy, 2009). For example, when I interviewed students from classes in which the teachers disclosed their choice of candidate early in the semester, none of the students claimed to be bothered by their teacher’s disclosure, and most responded that they enjoyed knowing that their teacher had political opinions and was not afraid to share them. Even in the class where the teacher openly advocated for Obama at the expense of insulting McCain and the Republicans, the students, many of whom were McCain supporters, appreciated knowing where their teacher stood. As one conservative student noted, the knowledge that his teacher was a liberal helped him better analyze the political facts that were being presented in class and prompted him to do additional research on his own rather than take what was said in class at face value (Journell, in press-b).

Despite these findings, disclosing one’s political opinions in class may still make many teachers uncomfortable or apprehensive. Yet, I believe that measured disclosure is a method for teachers to implicitly model political tolerance in a way that is much stronger than simply telling students that they should respect others’ opinions. If teachers regularly include political issues as part of their curriculum and model appropriate civil discourse, then they can hopefully counter the intolerant political rhetoric students may encounter outside of class. This approach becomes considerably more important in schools and classrooms that have partisan political compositions.

Fighting Partisan Politics

In a perfect world, political discussions would occur in classrooms that were evenly divided among liberal and conservative students in order to ensure a variety of opinions on any given issue. Of course, those types of classrooms rarely exist since schools are part of the community in which they are located, and the values and beliefs of the local community will often be found within the larger political ideology of a school (Apple, 1979; Dewey, 1916; Foucault, 1991). Teaching tolerant political behavior in a partisan school climate is exceedingly difficult,

especially during this post-9/11 era in which liberals and conservatives attack not only each other's political views, but also each other's value systems and personality traits (e.g., Coulter, 2007; Dickinson, 2011; Olbermann, 2011).

When this type of partisan rhetoric enters schools, it can foster political intimidation and affect students' sense of belonging, especially in ideologically homogenous schools and classrooms. A perfect example of the extent to which partisanship can affect the classroom learning environment can be found in Roosevelt High School, one of the schools I studied in my research on the 2008 election. At Roosevelt, which had an overwhelmingly liberal student body, anyone who supported Republican candidates or voiced Republican ideas was treated as a pariah. In classrooms, this blatant partisanship stifled true political discussion as students were afraid to "sound Republican." In one representative example, a student made an impassioned case for the death penalty for convicted terrorists, but then qualified his argument by emphatically stating that he "didn't want to be a Republican." Throughout the school, the anti-Republican sentiment became so intense that rumors began to swirl that anyone who supported McCain could face physical violence before or after school. One of the students I interviewed professed to not revealing her support for McCain in her civics class because of the threats that were being made at the school (Journell, 2010).

Teachers can help discourage partisanship and political intimidation by creating ideological diversity in their classes. Hess and Ganzler (2007) found that tolerant political discourse can only occur in classrooms in which the teacher is willing to allow discussions of political issues and there is a healthy mixture of political opinions to be shared. In classes where no discussions occur, students do not have the opportunity to share opinions and learn from each other. However, in classes where discussions occur but students are politically homogeneous, the discussions are rarely tolerant and often result in students belittling opposing viewpoints and using stereotypes and clichés to defend their own opinions. This research follows extensive work in political science that has found tolerance forms when individuals of differing political ideologies communicate with each other, but when groups of likeminded individuals discuss politics, the resulting dialogue is often intolerant and advocating political action against those holding opposing viewpoints (e.g., Mutz, 2006; Walsh, 2004).

Of course, fostering ideological diversity where seemingly none exists can be a daunting task. Unfortunately, many teachers tend to reinforce partisanship during their often simplistic definitions of Democratic and Republican beliefs. Creating a chart in which students systematically label ideological positions, such as "pro-life" and "pro-choice," as either Democratic or Republican or liberal or conservative is a useful way of quickly defining the tenets of the two major parties, but if instruction ends there, then all teachers have done is further the "all or nothing" approach displayed on cable news programs and provided a context for students to feel anxious when one of their beliefs does not fit into the identity they have created for themselves (Journell, in press-a).

Moreover, simply telling students that "not all Democrats/Republicans follow a specific ideology" and drawing them a political spectrum on the chalkboard does not provide an authentic context for them to truly understand the relationship between political ideology and an individual's support of a political party. Students need to realize that Americans generally agree more often than not, a fact that one would have a hard time believing if their only source of political information came from cable news and Internet blogs. Teachers should provide examples of political cooperation and bipartisanship as often as they showcase political disagreement. One way to do this is to follow current political events on a regular basis rather than waiting until something controversial, such as universal health care, consumes the nation's attention (Journell, in press-a).

Another way teachers can promote ideological diversity is by showcasing the diversity that already exists in their classes (Bernhardt, 2009). One of the more effective instructional

strategies I observed during my election study was the use of basic liberal/conservative quizzes for students to compare their actual political ideologies with what they may have perceived to be their political affiliations. As I observed students take these surveys, inevitably a handful of the most partisan students in each class would remark that their survey “came out wrong.” Occasionally, students would become visibly upset, as was the case for an avid Obama supporter at Roosevelt High School who, after taking his survey, turned to the teacher and asked, “What if we come out Republican?” Although I do not think the surveys changed any of the students’ candidate preferences, I believe the activity forced students to break, at least temporarily, from their preconceived notions of Democrats and Republicans and could have acted as a starting point for future discussions of political tolerance (Journell, in press-a).

Finally, teachers need to confront one of the main sources of political intolerance and political partisanship in the United States—the media. As Kubey (2004) notes, despite the fact that Americans live in the most media-saturated era in history, “our nation’s schools still do relatively little formal teaching on and through the media, the precise means by which citizens receive nearly all of their information about political processes and elections” (p. 70). In theory, the glut of political media outlets available to Americans should create a more informed citizenry in which individuals have knowledge of multiple sides of an issue, at least compared to the middle part of the 20th century when most Americans could only receive their political information from newspapers, radio broadcasts, and a single nightly news program. In reality, however, most Americans only rely on one or two media outlets for their political information, and they usually choose outlets in which the commentary aligns with their own political ideologies (Pew Research Center, 2010a). Increasingly, Americans are turning to cable news programming which, by their commentators’ own admissions, push partisan agendas (e.g., Binelli, 2011; O’Reilly, 2010). Given the aforementioned research on homogeneous and heterogeneous political communication, it stands to reason that if individuals only consume one brand of political media then their propensity for political tolerance will decrease while their existing political views become stronger (Mutz, 2006).

Teachers have a responsibility to expose their students to all types of political media and analyze the various ways in which media bias can influence public opinion and, ultimately, policy (Wilson & Journell, 2011). Teachers could easily take high-profile news stories and compare and contrast how these stories are being depicted among various liberal and conservative programs, editorials, and political blogs. Such an activity would illuminate the need for students to become critical consumers of media and reinforce the importance of seeking political information from a variety of sources. It is also important that teachers include in their analyses alternative political media outlets, such as *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report*, which represent a new wave of political journalism focused on satiric critiques of mainstream media (Baym, 2005, 2009). Regardless of whether teachers view these types of programs as legitimate news, research suggests that high school students are watching them with increased frequency, oftentimes as their only source of political information (Journell, in press-a; for an excellent primer on how to use *The Daily Show* in class, see Trier, 2008a, 2008b).

Of course, even the most diligent efforts to promote bipartisanship and political tolerance in one’s classroom will fail if students leave that classroom only to enter a partisan environment throughout the rest of the school. A school’s political climate is shaped by strong leadership and the commitment of all actors—administrators, faculty, staff, and students—to adhere to a consistent message of equality and tolerance (Astor, Benbenishty, & Estrada, 2009). In order for political tolerance to become the norm at a school, an expectation for tolerance must be articulated in all areas of the school, including the common areas, such as in the hallways and cafeteria, where a school’s climate is often shaped (Preble & Taylor, 2009).

The Relationship Between Politics and Other Social Issues

One reason politics elicits such strong emotions among individuals is that most political issues are tied, either implicitly or explicitly, to larger social issues, and too often derogatory labels—racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, heartless—are assigned to people based on how they vote or which party they support (de Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003; Farwell & Weiner, 2000). Although it is important for students to know how public policy is linked to larger social issues, teachers need to be cautious in how they approach these issues in class. For example, in my study of the 2008 Presidential Election, I found that students became preoccupied with the race, gender, and religious backgrounds of the candidates running in the election. Depending on the school and the demographic makeup of the class in question, students either believed that Obama could not win because White Americans would never vote for an African-American candidate or that Obama would win because of a record turnout of African-American voters (Journell, 2011b). In a particularly telling example, a Latino student from a high school that had a very diverse student body asked me for my candidate choice on the day before the election. After telling him that I had already voted by absentee ballot for Obama, he then turned to the substitute teacher, who was also White, for her candidate choice. After hearing her response, the student raised his fist exuberantly and said, “Two White people voting for Obama!” (Journell, 2009).

Since September 11th, one social issue that has become explicitly intertwined with politics has been intolerance for religious diversity in the United States (Zakaria, 2004). Much has been written about the discrimination American Muslims faced in the aftermath of the attacks (e.g., Disha, Cavendish, & King, 2011; Schildkraut, 2009) and the need for teachers to teach tolerance and explain that those who committed the attacks on September 11th only constituted a small minority of Muslims throughout the world (e.g., Alavi, 2001; Seikaly, 2001; Verma, 2005). Politics often reignites these racist feelings as candidates routinely reference September 11th and the need for greater national security and tougher immigration policies (Braber, 2002; Davis & Silver, 2004).

While national security is always a legitimate concern, since September 11th, politicians have been quick to use Americans’ fear of Islam as a political tactic (Zakaria, 2004). For example, during the 2008 Presidential Election, many Republicans attempted to use Obama’s religious background, his association with controversial figures, and the fact that his middle name is Hussein to encourage fears that he may not have been completely honest about his religious beliefs, a tactic that may have swayed voters in 2008 and may be responsible for more recent polls showing that close to 20% of Americans believe Obama is a Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2008, 2010b). In another example, Republican presidential hopefuls were asked in one of the early 2012 primary debates whether they would consider appointing a Muslim to their Cabinet should they be elected to the presidency. Two candidates, Herman Cain and Newt Gingrich, emphatically stated that they would not be comfortable with Muslims in their administration and would only appoint Muslims if they were made to take a loyalty oath (Black, 2011).

For many teachers, especially those with strong religious beliefs, intermingling religion and politics may prove challenging. Religion has had a long and often contentious relationship with education, perhaps most notably with respect to debates over teaching evolution (e.g., Groce, Heafner, & O’Connor, in press; Trani, 2004). However, recent research suggests that teachers’ religious certainty can affect their attitudes toward teaching for social justice and tolerant citizenship (James, 2010). In my study on the 2008 Presidential Election, two of the teachers I observed openly told their students that they did not support a non-Christian being elected to the presidency, and one of the teachers even insinuated that Obama was a Muslim. Both teachers admitted to me privately that they were strong Christians and it was hard for them to keep their religious views out of the classroom (Journell, 2011b).

If teachers and students hold this view of Islam, then it will be difficult for them to discuss political issues surrounding religion in a tolerant manner, which not only reinforces existing stereotypes but also places any Muslim students who may happen to be at that school into an uncomfortable situation (Abu El-Haj, 2007, 2010). Therefore, one solution to this issue is to better educate both teachers and students about Islam in order to debunk the common stereotypes that create the unfounded fears many Americans hold of that religion. Prior to September 11th, it would have been difficult to connect a predominately White, Christian class in the United States with members of another cultural group, but in the decade since the attacks, technology has provided multiple ways for teachers to connect their students to other parts of the United States and the world (e.g., Journell & Dressman, 2011; Maguth, Yamaguchi, & Elliot, 2010; Merryfield, 2007). For example, colleagues and I recently connected a group of pre-service teachers in the United States, only a few of whom had intimate knowledge of Islam, with students in Morocco using Skype technology. In the course of a two-hour video-conference in which the participants discussed various aspects of politics and culture, it was evident that a certain level of cultural tolerance developed among the students on both sides of the Atlantic. After the conference, the American students expressed gratitude for having been able to take part in the experience and many stated that it had changed their perception of Islam (Dressman, Journell, Babcock, Weatherup, & Makhoukh, in press).

Perhaps the final thing that teachers should take from this discussion is what Apple (2002) wrote after the September 11th attacks, which is that “no analysis of the effects of 9/11 on schools can go on without an understanding of the ways in which the global is dynamically linked to the local” (p. 1770). It becomes, then, the responsibility of teachers to educate their students and show them that the world is filled with multiple political perspectives that need to be tolerated and respected. Given the strength of faith on individuals’ sense of reality, it may be unlikely that teachers will change the most adamant students’ minds, but all students need to be taught the appropriate way to civilly articulate one’s political views in a democratic society.

Conclusion

Teaching politics in secondary education can be challenging, especially in this politically-charged and intensely-scrutinized era that has come to define political rhetoric in the decade since September 11th. Yet, I would argue that it is more important now than ever for teachers to help their students make sense of the political world that surrounds them. Students run the risk of being inundated with political information every time they turn on a television or log onto the Internet, and if schools are truly responsible for preparing students for life in the 21st century, then a critical understanding of politics and political media is needed.

However, teachers can never forget the lessons learned from September 11th when broaching political topics in their classes. After all, what occurred on September 11th is the ultimate example of when political intolerance and hatred for those with whom we disagree goes too far. Perhaps the most important political lesson that teachers can impart to their students is that political tolerance should be the preferred stance for a civil society. In order to fulfill that promise, secondary educators may have to help set the example because it is appearing less likely that our politicians and political media are up to the task.

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