

---

# Democracy & Education

---

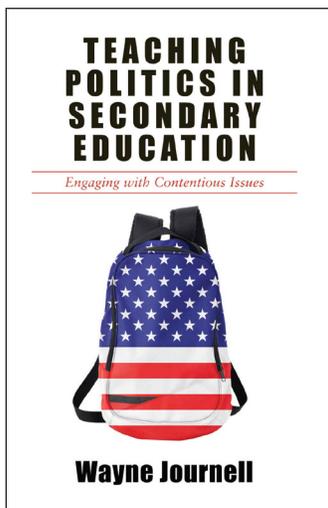
## Developing Political Thinking and Discussion Skills in Civics Classrooms. A Book Review of *Teaching Politics in Secondary Education: Engaging with Contentious Issues*

Patricia G. Avery (University of Minnesota–Twin Cities)

---

**I**N A RECENT nationwide survey (Education Week, 2018), over 60% of middle and high school principals said that their students were more politically engaged after the February 14, 2018, mass shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Youth interest in government and politics was also sparked by the 2016 presidential election; 51% and 48% of middle and high school principals, respectively, reported that their students were discussing these topics more since the election. Will civics teachers be able to leverage this moment and make their classrooms an important space for learning how to navigate skillfully in a highly polarized political environment? Or will they adhere to the traditional civics textbook focus on the structures and functions of government?

Wayne Journell's (2017) *Teaching Politics in Secondary Education: Engaging with Contentious Issues* provides a good first step for educators who want their students to understand and develop the skills to respond to this political moment. It is neither a how-to curriculum guide nor a call for the complete transformation of civics instruction. Secondary social studies teachers and teacher educators will find practical ideas for reorienting civics and government instruction toward the political sphere as it is, not the idealized politics often portrayed in textbooks. The book is an accessible, informative, and engaging read.



Journell's (2017) enchantment with politics and teaching is palpable throughout the book. A former high school social studies teacher, Journell is currently an associate professor at UNC–Greensboro, where he has been teaching the past nine years and researching various aspects of political engagement and pedagogy at the secondary level. In this book, Journell drew heavily on results from his observational studies of teachers and students in civics classrooms

during the 2008 and 2012 elections. Throughout the book, excerpts from authentic classroom dialogue provide some of the most persuasive evidence for why civics instruction needs to change and how it can change. Readers can see how some civics teachers consciously or unconsciously miss multiple opportunities to engage students in deep political thinking, hewing close to the standard curriculum, while others use current events and issues to carefully scaffold students' understanding of complex political concepts and processes.

---

PATRICIA G. AVERY is professor of social studies education in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities. Her research focuses on democratic citizenship education and political tolerance.

Most of the book focuses on two key instructional goals: developing students' skills in political (or policy) thinking and discussing controversial public issues. In chapter 1, "Creating Space for Political Instruction," Journell (2017) argued that all social studies subjects lend themselves to developing students' political thinking and discussion skills, and provided examples from civics, economics, geography, and economics curricula. Chapter 2, "Making Politics Engaging for Students," suggests various ways film and social media can be used to address these two instructional goals.

I found chapters 3 ("Teaching Presidential Elections") and 4 ("Teaching Students to Think Politically") the most intriguing and inspiring because they center on political thinking, an area often overlooked in civics classrooms. This is about understanding "the *game of politics*—how and why politicians make decisions, how they vie for power, and the strategies they use to achieve their goals and garner public opinion for the policy decisions" (Journell, 2017, p. 6). In these two chapters, Journell described his study of Mr. Monroe and his semester-long civics course for sophomores during the 2012 election. Many social studies teachers adhere to their regular curriculum during election season. Thus, it is encouraging to read how a skilled teacher used an election as the basis for his course, with curriculum standards met as they became relevant in the context of the election instead of curriculum standards serving to dictate pedagogy with the election as sidebar.

In Monroe's class, students learned political concepts and strategies as they tracked them in real time through the presidential elections. Students learned about the history of the Electoral College, the significance of swing states, the strengths and limitations of polling data, the value of hard and soft campaign contributions, debate and advertising strategies, and the like by choosing a candidate at the beginning of the semester and then, in like-minded groups, following them through multiple media sources. One particularly creative assignment required students to analyze polling and campaign funding data and assume the role of Mitt Romney's campaign strategist. Given limited time and resources, in which states should Romney campaign? To answer this question skillfully, students must have deep knowledge of the electoral process, including the number of electors in each state and state-level political trends. Although the national polling data is a common fascination in the media, these students came to recognize its limitations. In another assignment, students watched one of the presidential debates and noted when candidates pivoted from uncomfortable questions to respond in ways more advantageous to them. This assignment gave students a purpose for watching the debate and enhanced their skill in detecting a frequently used rhetorical strategy. Throughout the class, students were learning to engage in political thinking, but they were also learning much of the basic political knowledge in state social studies curriculum standards because it was embedded in the context of their class assignments and experiences. Simply put, students are *using* political knowledge to engage in political thinking, much as political scientists do.

Presidential campaigns give teachers rich fodder for developing students' political thinking, but state and local elections,

campaign documentaries and films, and high-profile issues can also serve to develop youth's political thinking in non-presidential election years. Together with Journell (2017), I believe that when civics teachers shift their focus from imparting basic knowledge to developing political thinking skills, they will find multiple opportunities for lessons. Further, by embedding knowledge in meaningful, authentic contexts, teachers are likely to see greater student interest, engagement, and learning.

Although school administrators may see evidence of increased political interest and engagement among youth as suggested by the Education Week (2018) study, there are also some alarming trends in high schools. Teachers have reported greater hostility and incivility between student groups during class discussions, most frequently directed against marginalized groups in predominantly White schools. Some districts have responded by issuing statements asserting the role of public schools in fostering respectful discussions of diverse viewpoints as part of citizenship preparation; however, such statements are often unaccompanied by actions, particularly in terms of providing professional development for teachers. Many teachers, concerned about their lack of skill and preparation in facilitating controversial issues discussions, respond by narrowing the curriculum and thus avoiding politically contentious issues (Rogers et al., 2017).

In the remaining three chapters, Journell (2017) provided a response to teachers' concerns, focusing on how they can engage young people in the deliberation of controversial public issues while cultivating a politically tolerant classroom climate that thrives on diverse viewpoints. He made a strong argument for civic deliberation among citizens as critical to democratic life and for schools as ideal spaces for young people to learn how to talk about public issues with people who are dissimilar from themselves and have opposing views. This is familiar terrain for educators who have followed this area of research and teaching (see, for example, Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Pace, 2015; Parker, 2010).

In chapter 5 ("Addressing Political Controversy in the Classroom"), Journell (2017) used examples and case studies to explain some of the instructional decisions teachers need to make prior to issues discussions: Is it an issue or a topic? Is the issue open or closed? Should I disclose my own views? Journell made a convincing argument for disclosure, noting that teachers who share their views can model two important democratic values: (a) *tolerance* for opposing views by encouraging diverse opinions and being open to new arguments and (b) *transparency*, something akin to "truth in advertising" in the classroom. He argued that "it is when teachers do not disclose and students have no indication of their teachers' political leanings that indoctrination is more likely to occur since students may not be able to differentiate fact from their teachers' opinions" (p. 119).

In chapter 6, "The Intersection of Politics and the Taboo Topics of Race, Gender, and Religion," Journell (2017) described how the six teachers in his 2008 study dealt with "taboo topics" in relation to the Obama-Biden and McCain-Palin campaigns. With few exceptions, the teachers chose to avoid or ignore these topics, even when their students brought them up or made blatantly intolerant remarks. In several cases, the teachers themselves were

the source of crude and intolerant comments, such as when two teachers declared that Palin was “hot” and another associated the Muslim faith with terrorism.

In chapter 7, “Creating Politically Tolerant Classrooms and Schools,” Journell (2017) emphasized the important role of administrators and teachers in creating a tolerant school and classroom climate that supports all students in the exchange and interrogation of opposing viewpoints. He suggested that educators may not be aware of the level of (in)tolerance experienced by their students because many of the students, sensing their views are not welcome, remain silent. This is a crucial point: “Political tolerance is often not visible to those within the ideological majority” (p. 159). In his class observations, Journell noticed many students who were silent during political discussions for fear they would be humiliated or ostracized for their views. He recommended that school leaders conduct confidential surveys or focus groups or solicit an outsider’s observations to help schools establish a baseline from which they can develop action plans.

In the conclusion, Journell (2017) reflected on the implications of his research. Foremost is the need for civics teachers to have a strong knowledge of politics, political institutions, and current events, as well as the interest and curiosity to stay informed, with attention to how social media is changing the “game of politics” (consider the importance of Facebook and Twitter in the 2016 campaign).

There are many exceptional approaches, organizations, movements, and curriculum projects that offer exciting opportunities for young people to become more civically enlightened and engaged at this historic juncture (e.g., Youth Participatory Action Research [YPAR], Educating for Participatory Politics [EPP], Generation Citizen, Black Lives Matter, March for Our Lives,

*Active Citizenship Today*). However, many civics classrooms are still places where textbook reading and recitation dominate, teachers avoid talk about politically “hot” issues, and, not surprisingly, students fail to see the relevance of civics content or the broader political sphere to their lives.

The political landscape is rapidly changing, and all young people deserve civics classes that will develop their political knowledge and skills so that they can participate in shaping those changes. Civics teachers and teacher educators can build on this moment by creating authentic learning experiences around current political events and issues. *Teaching Politics in Secondary Education* is a good place for teachers and teacher educators to start rethinking traditional civics pedagogy.

## References

- Education Week. (2018). *Civic education in K–12 schools: Results of a national survey*. Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education.
- Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hess, D. E., & McAvoy, P. (2015). *The political classroom: Evidence and ethics in democratic education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Journell, W. (2017). *Teaching politics in secondary education: Engaging with contentious issues*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Pace, J. L. (2015). *The charged classroom: Predicaments and possibilities for education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Parker, W. (2010). Listening to strangers: Classroom discussion in democratic education. *Teachers College Record*, 112, 2815–2832.
- Rogers, J., Franke, M., Yun, J.E., Ishimoto, M., Diera, C., Geller, R., . . . Brenes, T. (2017). *Teaching and learning in the age of Trump: Increasing stress and hostility in America’s high schools*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access. Available at <https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/teaching-and-learning-in-age-of-trump>