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Educating for Equitable Voting

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Abstract

Voting instruction typically provided to students is focused on educating for informed voting, but we believe it is essential that schools educate for informed and equitable voting. Indeed, in a well-functioning democratic society, participants need to be prepared to engage in critical, but civil, discourse with and about people who look and think differently from themselves, which necessitates learning about issues of equity. Drawing on the efforts of 20 in-service educators to promote equitable voting ahead of the 2020 election, this study examines the ways in which participants incorporated issues of equity into their instruction and the conditions that supported or limited these efforts. We also discuss our concerns with how voting was taught by participants and provide recommendations for what educating for equitable voting might look like, a goal that has taken on added importance given recent challenges to how K–12 teachers can talk about issues of equity in the classroom.

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DIFFERENCES IN AGE, income, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, and education influence electoral participation as well as political representation. Indeed, in contemporary societies, voter turnout is “skewed in favor of better-off groups” and elected officials “come from more privileged segments of society” (Elsässer & Schäfer, 2023, p. 470). This is certainly true in the United States, where voter turnout rates in the 2020 election were highest among individuals over 65 years old (72%), employed individuals (63%), white, non-Hispanic individuals (70%), and individuals with a bachelor’s degree or higher (74%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a, 2023b). Not to mention more than half of the members of Congress are millionaires, 75% identify as white, non-Hispanic, 72% identify as male, 90% identify as nondisabled, and 94% have a college degree (Evers-Hillstrom, 2020; Schaeffer, 2023; Schur & Kruse, 2019). Furthermore, once in office, legislators’ preferences

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have been found to more consistently align with their affluent constituents (Lupu & Warner, 2022).

Students deserve to learn about the degree to which electoral participation is inequitable and about the factors that may influence participation. In addition, given the democratic purpose of our public schools, educators can and should play a crucial role in teaching the next generation about how to register and cast a ballot, how to research and take action on issues, how our system of voting promotes inequitable access, and why voting matters. We embarked on this study to better support educators in providing such learning opportunities in their teaching and to examine how they might pursue these goals.

In the realm of K–12 education, voting instruction is understudied and underprovided, and the research and curricular examples that are available tend to focus on informed voting rather than equitable voting (Andes et al., 2020). To address this gap, our research team created a professional development course that encouraged educators to provide high-quality voting instruction and to place greater emphasis on issues of equity in the process. Then, we examined the ways in which participants incorporated issues of equity related to voting and elections into their instruction and the conditions that supported or limited these efforts.

In the sections that follow, we present our vision for how to educate for equitable voting and review the literature on the degree to which teaching about voting and elections occurs in schools and what teaching practices support equitable instruction. Next, we evaluate our participants' curricular units and their reflections on implementation to assess how they chose to teach about equitable voting ahead of the 2020 election. Finally, we discuss our concerns with how voting was taught by participants and provide recommendations to better support teachers in the field, a goal which has taken on added importance given recent challenges to how K–12 teachers can talk about issues of equity in the classroom.

Vision for How to Educate for Equitable Voting

Previous research shows that access to voting instruction is uncommon and inequitably distributed (Andes et al., 2020; Kiesa et al., 2022). For those students who are fortunate enough to receive such instruction, we know very little about whether the content of the curriculum and the pedagogy used to implement it is robust or culturally responsive. But the available evidence suggests that teacher autonomy and civic ideology (Fitchett et al., 2022), political polarization (Costello, 2017), school demographics (Journell, 2011), and teacher and administrative support (Stoddard et al., 2021) significantly impact students' access to high-quality learning opportunities about voting and elections.

We believe a high-quality curriculum about equitable voting and elections should include: (a) investigating whether each person's vote counts equally and whose votes count the most (e.g., electoral college, gerrymandering); (b) researching historical and current voter suppression tactics and how they impact specific groups of voters (e.g., literacy tests and voter intimidation efforts); (c) scrutinizing how issues important to an election disproportionately impact specific groups of people; and (d) exploring differences in voter outreach, registration, and turnout rates. Of course,

several content topics may fall into one or more of these categories as they can be explored through different lenses.

In addition, a high-quality curriculum about voting and elections should attend to demographic factors that play a significant role in voting and elections. The factors educators should focus on will vary since different groups will be more (or less) affected depending on the laws and policies of any given locality (see, e.g., House Committee on House Administration, 2019; Tucker et al., 2020). However, we do recommend that educators routinely examine examples of systemic inequality in voting and elections across multiple dimensions of equity including, but not limited to, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, education level, disability, and age.

In the realm of teaching strategies, scholars have argued that equitable pedagogy includes practices such as critical inquiry, discussion, and reflection in ways that center students' lived experiences and empower young people to become civic actors in their communities (Cohen et al., 2018). And since the civic and political agency of young people is dependent on their sense of inclusion in civic and political spheres (Campbell, 2019; Rubin et al., 2021), it is imperative that schools facilitate youth civic belonging and learning about issues of equity (Pitts, 2016), as well as model how to engage in respectful political discourse (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

In short, we argue that educating for equitable voting must entail, at a minimum, equitable access to voting instruction, curricular content that covers issues of equity across multiple dimensions and time periods, and pedagogical approaches that empower students to critically examine, respond to, and fight against oppressive and inequitable voting structures (see Figure 1).

Youth Voter Turnout in United States Lags behind Other Countries

Youth voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds reached an impressive peak of 48% in the 2020 general election, a feat rivaling the turnout in 1972 (49.6%), the first national election after passage of the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a). While similar peaks in 2008 (44.3%), 1992 (42.8%), and 1984 (40.8%) passed the 40% threshold, millions of eligible youth voters were still missing in action. These figures put the United States on par with the world's average for self-reported youth electoral participation at 47.7%, but far below many other contemporary societies including, to name a few, Ecuador (86.6%), Denmark (73.7%), Australia (70.6%), Bolivia (75.7%), Indonesia (66.8%), Turkey (63%), and Kyrgyzstan (53.9%) (Inglehart et al., 2022). Fortunately, research indicates that explicit voting instruction increases youth electoral participation (see, e.g., Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2013).

Voting Instruction Differs Based on School and Classroom Level Factors

A nationally representative youth survey found that only half of young people are taught how to register to vote in high school and Black students were the least likely to receive such instruction (Andes et al., 2020). An even smaller subgroup (35%) made up of

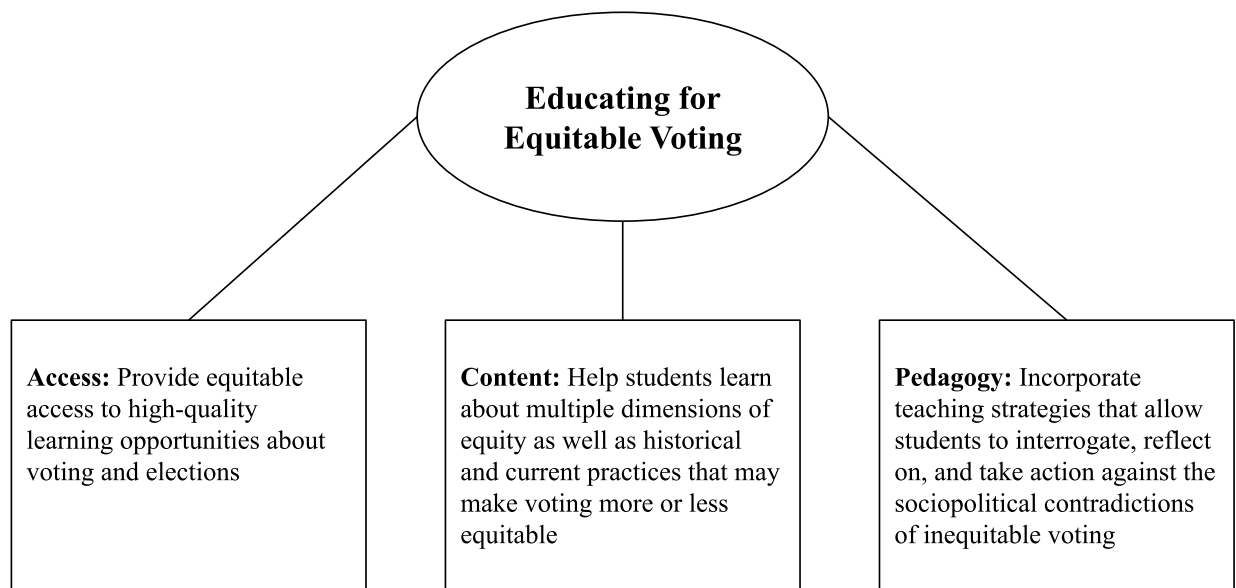


Figure 1. Framework for Educating for Equitable Voting

mostly white teens in urban areas and those with a college-educated parent reported high levels of learning about elections and voting in school and above-average civic engagement (Kiesa et al., 2022). Beyond voter registration, only 23% of high school principals reported that teachers would be involved in professional or curriculum development tied to teaching about the 2018 midterm elections, though schools whose district leadership expressed a commitment to civics (39.7%) were far more likely than those that did not (18.5%) to provide such opportunities (Kahne et al., 2021).

Among educators who taught about the 2020 election, Fitchett et al. (2022) found that teachers reporting greater classroom control and teachers whose values aligned with the broader community spent more instructional time on election-related content. Fitchett et al. also found that teachers with a “conservative” civic ideology (i.e., the belief that civics should focus on policies that promote American exceptionalism) were more likely to ask students to watch a presidential debate, follow news on social media, register to vote, and debate the election in class, whereas teachers with a “critical” civic ideology (i.e., the belief that civics should focus on issues related to social justice, systemic racism, and other critical forms of citizenship) were more likely to ask students to conduct research on election issues, read news articles, and talk about the election with their families. These conceptual distinctions of civic discourse map onto the earlier work of Knight-Abowitz and Harnish (2006), who classified citizenship education as predominantly “civic republican” (i.e., values patriotism, personal responsibility, and civic knowledge) or “liberal” (i.e., values individual rights, equality, and critical thinking) with a limited, but emerging influence from “critical” discourses (e.g., feminist, cultural, reconstructionist) that embody broader political participation and encourage active learning, honest histories, and a culture of discussion and dissent. Unfortunately, conflict that appears to grow out of heightened political polarization discourages many educators from exploring political issues in class (Costello, 2017; Kahne et al., 2021), even though

doing so can strengthen students’ political interest, a strong predictor of political action (Levy et al., 2016). On a more promising note, however, a 2018 nationwide survey showed that support from teacher colleagues and administrators increased the likelihood with which educators taught about the election, regardless of political context (Stoddard et al., 2021).

With regards to equitable access to voting instruction, Journell (2011) found that students from lower-income backgrounds and those tracked into lower-level classes were rarely given opportunities to engage in analytic discussions about the 2008 election, whereas their higher-income and higher-tracked peers were provided with ample and regular opportunities to do so. However, Fitchett et al. (2021) found that teachers were more likely to discuss controversial issues related to elections when the proportion of non-white residents increased. While research exploring the use of equity-focused voting instruction is rare, what does exist recommends covering contemporary examples of voter suppression, providing opportunities for students to take action on real-world issues, and facilitating discussions with students and community members from different backgrounds (see, e.g., Seitz et al., 2018). That said, in a recent study, teachers with “conservative” civic ideologies were less likely to teach about voter suppression, gerrymandering, and the electoral college (Fitchett et al., 2022). This is unfortunate because discussing contemporary issues during an election has been found to increase students’ sense of political efficacy (i.e., the belief that they can influence the political process) (Morrell, 2005). Likewise critical reflection practices about unequal political power positively predicted voting likelihood and sociopolitical action for Black and Latinx youth (Bañales et al., 2020).

Beyond content and pedagogy, research shows classroom and school climate also impact youth political engagement, revealing the role of both explicitly and implicitly taught values (Campbell, 2019). For example, students’ intention to vote increases when they attend schools with a rich civic ethos as measured by the degree to which students believe political views are discussed and respected

in the classroom (Campbell, 2008). Moreover, students are more likely to vote when they feel connected to their school and schoolmates and less likely to vote when treated unfairly by school authorities, an experience that is significantly more common among Black and Latinx youth (Bruch & Soss, 2018).

Equitable Teaching Practices Center the Lived Experiences of Marginalized Students

Given the limited literature examining the extent to which voting instruction incorporates issues of equity and equitable pedagogical approaches, it is worthwhile to examine how scholars in the field of civic education broadly conceptualize equitable teaching practices. Traditionally, scholars focused on measuring and closing “gaps” in the civic knowledge and engagement of marginalized students (Niemi & Junn, 1998), but this focus shifted when research showed that schools serving low-income students and students of color had less access to high-quality civic learning opportunities (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009). Today, critical scholars go a step further by embracing conceptual and curricular frameworks that center the lived experiences of marginalized students. For example, a critically relevant civics education advocates for instruction that pushes beyond political objectivity and allows students to interrogate commonplace democratic ideals like liberty and egalitarianism (Clay & Rubin, 2020). A lived civics approach similarly engages young people in discussions about politics and power in ways that are responsive to their lived realities and focuses on race and ethnicity (Cohen et al., 2018). Meanwhile, culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies work collectively and across content areas to develop students’ critical consciousness about systemic inequalities through asset-based traditions that decenter whiteness and recenter dynamic communities of color (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2021). Together, these frameworks acknowledge that young people have unequal experiences with civic institutions like schools and law enforcement that influence their understanding of themselves and their place in the community, and as a result, they argue that schools need to support students to critically analyze and make sense of these experiences.

Moreover, mainstream schooling frequently marginalizes the roles and contributions of people of color in the development of the United States (Banks, 2020) while also minimizing the racial violence and political oppression they have faced (Brown & Brown, 2015). At the same time, many educators feel uncomfortable talking about race with their students (Beadie & Burkholder, 2021), and discussions about controversial issues like mass incarceration and economic inequality are uncommon (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine, 2015; Parker, 2012). As a result, students are being implicitly taught that it’s not appropriate or valuable to learn about issues of equity at school (Pitts, 2016). However, teaching students to engage in critical thinking, reflection, and discussion has been found to improve their ability to respectfully engage with different political and ideological perspectives (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Moreover, young people who have personally experienced structural inequality, injustice, othering, and community resistance can contribute “unique civic understanding and ways of being” that

are too often ignored or undervalued in the classroom (Rubin et al., 2021, p. 251).

Efforts to conceptualize what equitable teaching looks like also require confronting the homogeneous demographics of the teacher workforce. During the 2017–2018 school year, 79% of teachers in the United States identified as white and 77% identified as female (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Among social science teachers, the gender demographics shift dramatically (55% male; 45% female) (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b), but the racial/ethnic demographics remain largely the same (81% white) (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). With so few teachers of color in the workforce, students of color are more likely to experience implicit bias (Peterson et al., 2016) and less likely to receive culturally relevant or sustaining instruction and mentorship (Mahatmya et al., 2016). Moreover, in a nationally representative survey of social studies teachers about the civic development of youth, teachers of color reported greater instructional emphasis than did their white counterparts on topics that included voting and the discussion of current events and controversial issues (Hamilton et al., 2020).

In addition to the demographics of the teacher workforce, varied factors shape whether and how educators teach about issues of equity. When looking at the impact of political ideology, students rated classrooms taught by liberal teachers as more open for discussion compared to those of conservative teachers, and open classroom climate was positively associated with students’ political knowledge (Gainous & Martens, 2016). Knowles (2017) also identified a link between teachers’ civic education ideologies and their instructional practices such that a conservative ideology correlated with teacher-centered approaches focused on moral standards, a liberal ideology correlated with student-centered approaches with students as active participants, and a critical ideology correlated with inquiry-based approaches focused on deconstructing issues and countering injustice. Moreover, Knowles found that veteran teachers, male teachers, rural teachers, and high school teachers were more supportive of a conservative civic education ideology, whereas teachers working in schools with high percentages of non-white students and teachers working in schools with high percentages of low-income students were more supportive of a critical civic education ideology.

Methods

Drawing on the efforts of 20 in-service educators to teach about voting ahead of the 2020 election, this study examined whether or not participants taught about issues of equity and the factors that supported or limited their ability to do so.

Context of the Study

In the summer of 2020, we taught an online professional development course entitled *Educating for Informed and Equitable Voting* for 47 in-service educators from across the United States. The overwhelming majority of participants were based in the central and western regions of the country (mainly Illinois, Texas, and California) with a smaller group based in the eastern region. While most of the participants were high school (25) or middle school

(14) teachers, a handful of district and county administrators and staff from educational organizations participated in the course as well.

Over six weeks, the course covered topics ranging from trends in youth voting, misconceptions about youth engagement, inequalities in voter turnout, historic and ongoing voter suppression, judging the credibility of online information, and the educational implications for schools and community partnerships. Participants also explored resources, models, and case studies that demonstrated how educators can teach about voting and elections as well as commit to high-quality civic learning practices. To conclude the course, participants developed a curricular unit that explored a variety of dynamics that constrain informed and equitable voting ahead of the 2020 election.

Participants were provided with a template that asked them to describe their theory of action and a minimum of four separate lesson plans. We included a set of five questions to guide participants' thinking about their theory of action (e.g., "What voting-related concerns in your community will you address? Alternatively, what assets would you like to bolster?") and provided

a graphic organizer to help them structure their lesson plans. For example, each lesson needed to outline the content standards being addressed, short- and long-term objectives for students, activity details, timing, staffing, necessary materials and handouts, and resources referenced. To scaffold the process, participants were asked to submit a first draft of their curricular unit, which they presented to a small group of facilitators and colleagues for feedback. Participants were then given the chance to revise and resubmit.

Participant Sample

Throughout the winter and spring of 2021—after the course was completed and curricular units were implemented—we invited educators to reflect on their experiences, and 20 elected to participate. Most of the participants who opted into the study taught in counties whose 2016 election results favored Hillary Clinton (see Table 1). In all, 14 participants worked in a large-majority Clinton county, two participants worked in a small-majority Clinton county, three participants worked in a large-majority Trump county, and one participant worked in a

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Data Collected	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Subject(s) Taught	School Level	State	2016 County Election Results
Amelia	Audio	F	White	Social Studies	Middle	CA	Clinton
Nancy	Written	F	White	AVID	High	CA	Clinton
Louise	Written	F	White	Technology	High	CA	Clinton
Moma	Written	F	White	All	Middle	CA	Clinton*
Mindy	Written	F	Asian	All	Middle	CA	Clinton
Anita	Written	F	Latina	Government	High	CA	Clinton*
Elijah	Interview	M	Asian	U.S. History	High	CA	Clinton
Derek	Interview	M	White	Government	High	CA	Clinton
Katie	Written; Focus Group	F	White	Social Studies	Middle	IL	Clinton
Brewer	Interview; Focus Group	F	White	Civics	High	IL	Clinton
Keke	Interview; Focus Group	F	Black	Social Studies	Middle	IL	Clinton
Rusty	Written	M	White	Civics	High	IL	Clinton
Sebastian	Written; Focus Group	M	White	Social Studies	Middle	IL	Clinton
Hank	Audio	M	White	Civics	High	IL	Clinton
Virgil	Written	M	White	Civics	Middle	IL	Clinton
Robert	Interview	M	Black	Civics	High	IL	Clinton
Ruby	Interview	F	White	Social Studies	High	KY	Trump
Zazz	Interview	F	Native American	Government	High	TX	Trump
Jane	Interview	F	White	U.S. History	High	TX	Trump*
Alexis	Interview	F	White	Social Studies	Middle	TX	Trump

Note. Participants selected their own pseudonyms. * = 2016 county election results determined by 10% or fewer voters.

small-majority Trump county. It is important to note that the political context of the county in which a participant teaches is not an indication of their personal political beliefs or preferences, and we did not ask participants to disclose their political preferences.

Table 1 provides additional demographic details about the 20 teachers who participated in this study. There were seven male participants and 13 female participants; 14 participants identified as white, two as Black, two as Asian, one as Latina, and one as Native American; 12 participants taught at the high school level, and eight taught at the middle school level.

Data Collection

Given teachers' limited capacity during the school year, we gave them the option to participate in the study by completing a written or audio-recorded reflection or conducting an interview with our research team. A total of 11 teachers submitted a reflection, and nine teachers participated in an individual interview. We also examined the curricular units that each teacher created as a result of their participation in our course. Using these methods, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How, and to what extent, did teachers explore issues of equity related to voting and elections in their instruction?
2. What factors supported or limited teachers' willingness to teach about equitable voting ahead of the 2020 election?

Data Analysis

The reflection, interview, and curricular unit data was analyzed using open coding methods based on themes derived from the course (Creswell, 2013). In the first phase of coding, we explored broad categories such as successes, challenges, community context, content topics, and teaching strategies that addressed our research questions. In the second phase of coding, we noted subcategories (e.g., connecting historical and current events) that helped us distinguish between low- and high-quality approaches to teaching about voting and elections, which ultimately informed our understanding of best practices (Creswell, 2013).

Notably, the "equity" category was divided into seven subcategories: age, gender, education level, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, disability, and not specified. These subcategories stem from the demographic dimensions associated with the greatest discrepancies in youth voter turnout (CIRCLE, 2020). Each participant's data was coded based on whether they incorporated these dimensions in the development and implementation of their curricular units or not. In doing so, we utilized strategies from qualitative research to iteratively build a thesis regarding what it means to educate for equitable voting (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Analysis of the "equity" subcategories demonstrated that participants fell into one of three groups based on the extent to which they explored the dimensions of equity just listed:

- Group 1: Participants did not explore any dimensions of equity.

- Group 2: Participants explored one dimension or unspecified dimensions of equity.
- Group 3: Participants explored multiple dimensions of equity.

In the section that follows, we describe how and why participants in each group chose to explore (or not explore) issues of equity related to voting and elections in their instruction and the factors that influenced these choices.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that both supporting and limiting factors impacted participants' efforts to educate for equitable voting. In particular, participants in Group 1 and Group 2 expressed that they limited the ways in which they explored issues of equity because they felt vulnerable during remote instruction and feared pushback from parents who may interpret such discussions as political indoctrination. Participants in Group 3 said they explored issues of equity because doing so aligned with their personal teaching philosophies, their students' lived experiences, and/or their districts' own guidance. In addition, participants acknowledged that teaching about equity through a historical lens offered a layer of protection from pushback, especially in politically conservative communities, even though it meant sacrificing the opportunity to connect student learning to current and local issues.

Group 1: Educators Who Did Not Explore Any Dimensions of Equity

Only one educator said they chose not to explore any dimensions of equity related to voting and elections. This educator, Moma, identified as a white woman working in a small-majority Clinton county and explained that her lessons did not focus on "one specific [race] so that all students can relate to the material." Interestingly, Moma noted that even though students were "curious" about some issues of equity, she felt uncomfortable talking about them over Zoom with "parents listening in" on every class. In her final reflection at the end of the course, Moma acknowledged a fear that some parents might "take the lessons the wrong way" and "get upset with me for teaching them about what voting means and how to vote for someone who supports their beliefs."

Group 2: Educators Who Only Explored One Dimension or Unspecified Dimensions of Equity

Five educators reported choosing to only explore issues of equity related to age or unspecified dimensions of equity. All five of these educators identified as white women, with four working in a large-majority Clinton county and one working in a large-majority Trump county. While most of the educators in this group recognized the importance of exploring voting-related issues of equity as a future step in their instruction, they cited a lack of time, the vulnerability of remote learning, and the chaos of the 2020 election as reasons for not doing so more deeply. For example, Amelia explained that she "started off with age because that's the easiest to

understand” and “it’s been one time crunch after the next” because her yearlong course was truncated to a semester-long course. Nancy acknowledged that she “didn’t explicitly focus on issues of equity” except when “look[ing] at youth voter engagement and discuss[ing] why younger voters don’t really show up to the polls” because “this election was a crazy one.” Along the same lines, Ruby, the educator working in the large-majority Trump county, described how the discomfort of being “projected into somebody’s house” during virtual learning affected her teaching:

You’re being projected into their kitchen or their living room. And there are things that I feel comfortable saying to my students because they’re developing their own opinions, and they’re learning how to support what they feel, and they’re learning how to be an educated citizen and I can say, “I have this opinion, you have that opinion, and that’s okay.” But for me to say into someone’s household, “Hey, sometimes Mitch McConnell makes decisions that I don’t agree with.” That might not be a good decision for my career.

At the same time, Ruby admitted that even before the pandemic forced schools to operate virtually, she never talked about issues of equity related to voting and “didn’t even realize” that access to polling locations “affected Kentuckians until this summer in the primary [election].”

Meanwhile, among the educators who reported exploring only unspecified dimensions of equity, the reasons for doing so were less clear. Brewer, for example, explained that she preferred to bring up issues of equity by asking general questions like “Who do you think is impacted by this policy?” rather than more explicitly asking about certain demographic groups of people. Similarly, other educators in this group provided options for individual or small group work whereby students could choose to explore issues of equity (or not) from a list of suggested voting topics (e.g., gerrymandering, voter ID laws, mail-in ballots).

Group 3: Educators Who Explored Multiple Dimensions of Equity

The remaining 14 educators in this study said they chose to explore issues of equity related to voting and elections along multiple dimensions. However, a critical distinction emerged between those educators who said they only explored issues of equity from a historical perspective and those who said they explored issues of equity from both a historical and current perspective.

Two educators, both of whom identified as white women working in small-majority and large-majority Trump counties, reported that they preferred to teach about issues of equity from a historical perspective. For instance, Alexis explained that discussions of equity in her classroom are tightly tied to “historical context” (e.g., 14th and 15th Amendments) because “it’s such a fine line down here” in Texas. Although she expressed an interest in exploring current examples of voting inequality in the future, Alexis stated:

[It] kind of depends on the mood of everything, when we get there. If that mood changes and swings really to either extreme, then I don’t know if I will, just because I want to be that middle of the road

compass. So, I would really have to kind of see where everybody is, to try to find how I can best address that, without leaving either side just off in the dust.

Notably, when Alexis recounted the story of her own 2020 voting experience with her students, a class discussion about the reduction of polling locations in Texas centered on the inconvenience of the voting process rather than issues of equity. As Alexis explained, middle school students “don’t necessarily attach [voting restrictions] to a specific population yet” and Alexis does not make the connection for them since she doesn’t “know where the kids come from or how it would be handled [at home].”

Much as it was for Alexis, Jane’s curricular unit focused “primarily on historical [voting] restrictions” such as the 1965 Louisiana literacy test and poll taxes, but after taking our course, she decided to connect these issues to current events for the first time. According to Jane, she “didn’t really even think about” teaching beyond the history of voting rights until we “reminded her . . . [that] these are things that are in place today in 2020 . . . [and] that helped bring it into a much more current perspective.” What’s more, Jane’s students were so interested in better understanding “who was trying to keep people from voting and what was the purpose of keeping certain groups from voting” that it “led into good discussions of how power is related to [voting] restrictions . . . and keeping people uninformed.”

The remaining 12 educators, most of whom identified as women of color, white men, or men of color who worked in large-majority Clinton counties, cited three reasons for teaching about multiple dimensions of equity from both a historical and current perspective: (a) responsiveness to students, (b) personal teaching philosophy, and (c) district guidance. For example, Elijah, an educator in Los Angeles, explained that the demographic context of his community makes issues of equity a lived reality for his students and their families:

That was the underlying focus of all of it, especially knowing I have a fair amount of students and families who are undocumented and other students who are formerly incarcerated and whose family members are [incarcerated] and so are also unable to vote. The whole focus for our unit was the takeaway that voting in the United States . . . has not been a consistent path towards equity.

On the personal side, Keke, an educator in Chicago, described the goals for her curricular unit as three-fold: (a) to chronicle the prevalence of voter suppression for women and people of color in “the majority of states . . . both in the North and South,” (b) to emphasize the importance of voting “even if we have the red tape,” and (c) to highlight the stories and voices of “minoritized groups.” Keke went on to explain that these goals were “important to me,” and therefore she tried to “stress that more in my room than ever before [through] this election unit.” Derek, an educator in Los Angeles, likewise expressed that “equity is the entire lens . . . the reason I teach,” and “this work around voter registration and education was the most meaningful work I did with my students.” Finally, Rusty, an educator in Chicago, noted that his district “began the year by refocusing its work on the topics of race and

equity,” and while these topics were “never absent from my teaching, I sought to be more deliberate in naming this as an instructional goal for my class.”

Frequency with Which Dimensions of Equity Were Included in Participants’ Curricular Units

In all, participants were most likely to report incorporating issues of equity related to age (85%) into their curricular units, followed by race/ethnicity (65%), gender (55%), and socioeconomic status (55%). Only one participant said that they incorporated issues of equity related to education level, and no participants reported incorporating issues of equity related to disability. Table 2 catalogs the dimensions of equity covered in each participants’ curricular unit.

Table 2. Dimensions of Equity in Participants’ Curricular Units

Age	Gender	Education Level	SES	R/E	Disability	Not Specified
17	11	1	11	13	0	16
85%	55%	5%	55%	65%	0%	80%

Note. SES = socioeconomic status; R/E = race/ethnicity. Total participants in sample = 20.

Content Topics for Teaching About Equity

When teaching about issues of equity related to voting and elections, participants reported focusing on five content topics: (a) history of voting rights, (b) voter suppression, (c) mechanics of voting, (d) voting data/trends, and (e) issues raised in the election. Table 3 catalogs the content topics used to explore issues of equity in participants’ curricular units.

Table 3. Content Topics Used to Explore Issues of Equity

History of Voting Rights	Voter Suppression	Mechanics of Voting	Voting Data/Trends	Issues Raised in the Election
10	9	6	11	8
50%	45%	30%	55%	40%

Note. Total participants in sample = 20.

Voting Data/Trends

The most common content topic included in participants’ curricular units was voting data/trends (55%), whereby students researched and analyzed demographic differences in voter registration and turnout rates at the local, state, and/or national level. The recurrent reports about teachers’ use of this assignment aligns with the fact that participants were asked to examine voting data/trends as part of a model lesson in the professional development course. However, in the model lesson, participants were encouraged to pull data along multiple dimensions of equity, while in their own units, seven participants said they asked students to examine differences in voter registration and turnout data by age group only, and two participants did not specify the equity dimensions of their assignments. One of the two participants who reported asking students to examine voting data along multiple dimensions of equity, Robert, a Black man working in a

large-majority Clinton county, reported that “we looked at a few elections and just noticed how in urban centers they’re more Democratic and rural areas are more Republican,” and “we talked about age, we talked about race, we talked about [gender] as well.”

History of Voting Rights

The second-most-common content topic that teachers reported using to teach about issues of equity related to voting and elections was history of voting rights (50%). Although these lessons were presented differently throughout participants’ curricular units, they all focused on suffrage movements as part of a chronological overview of U.S. history in general or voting rights in particular. Notably, all 10 of these participants said they examined suffrage movements along multiple dimensions of equity including age, gender, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity. According to Alexis, who is based in Texas, it’s easier to incorporate issues of equity into class discussions when they are tied to events that happened in the past:

Especially when we get into the Civil War and Reconstruction, we can really kind of hit like, “Okay, they had this, they had poll taxes, and all these things. Has that gone away?” And so, I feel like I can better address it there, in a more historical context, than trying to bring it in politically, just because it’s such a fine line down here.

Voter Suppression

The third-most-common content topic that teachers used to teach about issues of equity related to voting and elections was voter suppression (45%). During the course, we discussed several examples of voter suppression including, but not limited to, gerrymandering, voter ID laws, intimidation at the polls, requirements for vote by mail, and the electoral college. Participants’ lessons on voter suppression reflected a similar variety of examples, but only five participants said they focused on the differential treatment of racial/ethnic groups, and four participants did not specify the equity dimensions of their assignments. The former group included Hank, a white man working in a large-majority Clinton county, who intentionally designed antiracist lessons based on feedback he received from his students. The lessons explored how voter suppression disproportionately targets people of color and asked questions such as “How do I make sure that everyone is represented in this system?” The latter group asked their students to think about who may be impacted by voter suppression but did not identify specific demographic groups. Zazz, a Native American woman working in a large-majority Trump county described her process as follows:

We talked about the aspect of the Voting Rights Act that was nullified by [the] court ruling that then opened the door for Texas to set in place the voter ID laws. And we try to stay objective. “Why would you want a voter ID law? Why do you have people register?”

Teaching Strategies Related to Equity

During the 2020–2021 school year, participants were teaching their classes online or in a hybrid format, and nonessential school personnel like researchers were not allowed to observe classes. As

a result, the findings in this section are based on participants' own reports of and reflections on the teaching strategies they used to support students to explore issues of equity during implementation.

Connecting Current and Local Issues to Students' Lived Experiences

Beyond discussing current and local issues as relevant content topics, participants described the importance of providing space for students to consider how such issues impact their own lives or the lives of those in their community. Brewer explained, "Students want to talk about the things that are happening right around them" like the impact of protests against police brutality and COVID-19 on the 2020 election. Mindy, an Asian woman working in a large-majority Clinton county, also reported high student interest in stories from the news:

Students expressed concern about intimidation and manipulation at the polling places. They were also concerned about the possibility of rioting and protesting after the elections. Students were surprised to learn about how people in remote areas did not have access to drop-off locations like we have here in [California] and that there were people who had to drive miles to drop off their ballot.

When Hank implemented a lesson about the local school council election, students identified examples of voter suppression "happening right here and now" including only providing ballots in English, requiring in-person voting during the stay-at-home order, and not providing updated or centralized information about the candidates. And by examining issues of equity at the local level, Hank reported that his students "were able to take these really large ideas . . . rooted in disempowering people who are poor [and] people of color" and apply it to "things happening in their community and say, 'We need to take action on this.'"

Using Inquiry to Interrogate Access and Power

Participants also described the effectiveness of using inquiry-based teaching strategies to inspire students' critical thinking around how individuals have variable levels of access and power in elections. For example, both Hank and Robert said they asked their students to consider whether "voting is a skill" that should be taught to everyone in schools, which led to student-led investigations into and conversations about inequitable access to civic education. And, as Robert noted, "that plays such a vital role in people being willing to vote and their awareness around the system and how it could work if people use their collective voice." After a series of lessons on the history of voting rights and voter suppression, Rusty asked his students to return to their guiding questions "about who makes decisions on equity, who are the beneficiaries and victims of inequity, why does such inequity persist, how would society benefit from more equitable voting, and what would it take to create a more equitable process." The resulting conversations "often prompt[ed] varied, complex responses" about which groups of people hold power in elections and why they might want to stop certain groups of people from voting, especially when their motivations were covert.

Providing Space for Reflection and Discussion

Equally important to the aforementioned teaching strategies, participants reported that it was critical to provide space for their students to reflect on their own thoughts and opinions and then to discuss them with their peers. Brewer aptly noted, for instance, that some students are "really passionate" about issues of equity and readily "bring up these kinds of ideas" in class, while other students may be thinking about equity but lack "the vocabulary and being able to express that." As a result, Brewer is intentional about "making space" for these students to "put their finger on what's going on or what they think about it yet." Hank echoed a related sentiment because analyzing issues of equity "didn't come naturally to some of my students" while working individually, but when these same students engaged in group discussion, they were "able to share ideas with one another, ask questions with one another, and that was helpful." By providing students with time to evaluate their thinking and participate in class discussions, Hank created multiple spaces for his students to "think about those topics and focus on equity in voting."

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that when educators make decisions about whether or how to attend to issues of equity, they are forced to balance a complex ecosystem of support and push-back. Previous studies tell us that a politically polarized climate and a lack of autonomy in the classroom will quell efforts to teach about voting and elections in general, much less systemic inequity more specifically (Costello, 2017; Fitchett et al., 2022). This was true for many of our participants, who felt uncomfortable teaching about issues of equity, regardless of the sociopolitical context in which they worked. These feelings were strong enough that several participants avoided teaching about specific dimensions of equity at all, despite their own recognition of the importance of doing so. This kind of self-censorship hampers educators' efforts to cultivate open class discussions of topics that are relevant to students' lives and facilitate meaningful civic learning opportunities for all (Bañales et al., 2020). Moreover, while participants working in politically liberal contexts may be supported by their school districts and/or surrounding communities to interrogate systemic inequality with their students, they may also have to contend with homogenous ways of thinking that don't push students to critically analyze arguments or provide reliable evidence since the majority already agree. And though such an environment may make it easier to facilitate class discussions, it robs students of empowering opportunities to examine multiple perspectives, empathize with others, and reevaluate their own beliefs (Levy et al., 2016). In this sense, a heterogeneous context may be the ideal environment in which to facilitate class discussions about issues of equity because there is a diversity of thought that mirrors real-world democratic society. Such spaces can offer incredible affordances for civil discourse and deliberation that otherwise need to be proactively constructed by educators to avoid reinforcing political echo chambers (Beadie & Burkholder, 2021; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). The core issue, of course, is creating a classroom and school culture that embraces different ideas and ways of thinking so that

students are not discouraged by disagreement. Such a pursuit, however, may well be far harder in heterogeneous contexts. Rogers and Kahne (2022) found that principals of high schools in “purple” communities were far more likely to report conflict from parents and community members related to civic education than did principals in “blue” or “red” communities.

Moving beyond the why and toward the how, participants revealed a strong preference for teaching about issues of equity across one dimension of equity: age. This finding is not entirely surprising given the course’s focus on the relevance of the youth vote for students, but it highlights the need for better modeling of how to teach about issues of equity across multiple dimensions, especially education level and disability (Kiesa et al., 2022). The glaring absence of these dimensions from participants’ curricular units is a direct reflection of our own failure to shine a brighter light on them during the course. Similarly, participants preferred incorporating issues of equity from a historical perspective, especially among those in politically conservative or politically mixed contexts. There was a clear tension between what teachers wanted to include in their curricular units and what teachers felt they could safely implement in their classrooms without pushback from students, families, and/or administrators. Such a finding calls attention to the need for district- and school-level administrative support for teaching across political and ideological perspectives (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Kahne et al., 2021).

Implications

To support educators doing this work, first and foremost, we need districts and schools to commit to providing high-quality civic education that embraces honest histories, multiple perspectives, productive discussions of current events and controversial issues, student voice, and community engagement. Indeed, public schools were historically designed to prepare young people to be informed and active participants in democracy (Hess & McAvoy, 2015), and 84% of Americans across political parties have agreed that schools should teach about “our best achievements and our worst mistakes as a country” (Jones et al., 2021). And yet, participants in our study chose to censor themselves as a reaction to the context in which they live and work. In fact, they expressed genuine fear of losing their jobs, dealing with backlash from angry parents or community members, and/or being viewed by students, colleagues, and families as partisan or political.

Of course, this is the reality of teaching in the United States right now, but there are actions that districts and schools can take to better support teachers in this work. For example, participants reported feeling more secure when they knew equity was a priority for the district and that district- and school-level administrators would defend their efforts (if need be). That being said, participants said they would have appreciated more guidance on how to handle calls from angry parents or how to write letters home to increase transparency around the curricula, either through professional development or gaining access to sample scripts. Participants also liked the idea of talking about high-quality civic learning opportunities like discussions of current events and

controversial issues during family night to help set expectations and norms as a community. Some even suggested adding simulations, role-play, or practice opportunities for families so they can better understand how those learning opportunities are facilitated. With such civic commitments in place, teachers and administrators can more effectively respond to pushback and be less concerned about the potential for conflict that constrained many educators in our study. Such commitments can also help educators better support each other as they attempt to navigate massive societal tensions in an increasingly polarized political climate (Kahne et al., 2021; Stoddard et al., 2021).

Participants also demonstrated a need for additional training on how to include content that considers multiple dimensions of equity from both historical and current perspectives, as well as asset-based pedagogies that center the lived experiences of marginalized students. Despite recognizing the importance of addressing issues of equity in the classroom, several participants still held on to the notion that equity-focused work is partisan or political. What they failed to consider, however, is the fact that choosing not to talk about equity is also a political act because it supports the status quo and it hurts students of color whose civic and political efficacy and engagement are at risk by not engaging in such learning opportunities. Thus, teachers need support to reassess and realign their own commitments to high-quality civic education as well as support to learn the best ways to implement these practices. Moreover, the importance of providing access to strong equity-focused curricula for training and implementation purposes cannot be overstated. Given the pressures facing teachers, it is incumbent upon curriculum writers to make this work a priority and provide high-quality materials to schools and districts. The Teaching for Democracy Alliance, for example, catalogs lessons and resources on equitable voting instruction. If we want educators to prepare students to engage in critical, but civil, discourse with and about people who look and think differently from themselves, then we need to provide support for educators to further develop these capacities.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the sample size of 20 participants was too small to generalize our findings to a larger population. Second, although the sample includes a diverse group of participants based on race/ethnicity, gender, geography, and political context, it was not representative of the current demographics of teachers working in the United States. For example, the seven males in the study all worked in large-majority Clinton counties, and we only had four participants who worked in small- or large-majority Trump counties. Of course, our sample was entirely dependent on which participants self-selected into the course. Third, given the COVID-19 restrictions imposed on schools and researchers during the 2020–2021 school year, data collection methods were limited to virtual options (e.g., file sharing, video conferencing), and researchers were prohibited from conducting classroom observations. This prevented us from evaluating how a planned lesson played out in real time and what specific dimensions of equity surfaced as a result. Clearly, research

that includes both observations of lessons and student perspectives and learnings from those lessons would be very valuable.

Conclusion

Learning to talk about issues of equity is an important skill that can help students better understand the needs of their communities and the world around them (Bañales et al., 2020). When schools commit to teaching about informed and equitable voting, educators can help students understand how the struggle for voting rights is ongoing in this country and how equitable access is necessary for a more equitable democracy. Furthermore, by teaching about how our voting system operates—not who to vote for—educators support students to form their own opinions about the benefits and limitations of democratic participation.

In many parts of the country today, politicians and various groups are actively trying to prevent educators from providing instruction that explores racism, sexism, and issues of systemic inequality, which is ironic considering most educators avoid these topics (Beadie & Burkholder, 2021). Nevertheless, a political climate bent on censoring equitable teaching practices only further illuminates the need for democratic classrooms that give voice to diverse histories, identities, and perspectives. As such, scholars and practitioners must find ways to support educators to provide critical opportunities for young people to learn about and promote equitable voting in our current and highly contentious political landscape—one in which commitments to equity are very much being contested.

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