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## "Everything is Political Now": Teaching Politics in the Age of Trump

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DePaul University  
College of Education

**“Everything Is Political Now”:  
Teaching Politics in the Age of Trump**

A Dissertation in Education  
With a Concentration in Educational Leadership

by  
John G. Lund

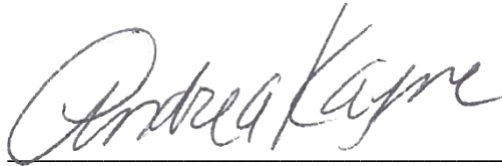
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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We approve the dissertation of John G. Lund.



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## **ABSTRACT**

Many American high school government and history teachers aim to convey curriculum content without bringing in their own personal political beliefs or biases. However, in the hyperpolarized political climate of the past decade, teachers have grappled with teaching their courses when potentially controversial political or cultural issues come up in class conversations or lessons. Their teaching decisions and the classroom environment can have an impact on students' learning, mental health, and their own views on American politics, history, and culture. This qualitative, narrative inquiry study examined 10 high school teachers' practice of teaching politics in the age of Trump. Findings revealed that although the 10 teacher participants from around the country keep their personal political views to themselves, students might be able to tell their political leanings based on tone, facial expression, or course materials. Furthermore, the rise of misinformation and disinformation from social media, cable media, and word of mouth continues to be a problem in government and history classrooms. Finally, findings also revealed that over the past decade, school political climates have moved left, and fewer students openly identify as politically conservative. At the forefront of the participants' work is student learning—with an emphasis on teaching students to think, but not how to think or what to think. Through this research, the lived experiences of these 10 government and history teachers can help to educate other teachers and school leaders how to teach and lead in divided times, and allow readers of this study to reflect on their own practices.

Keywords: Teaching, high school, government, politics, Donald Trump, Trumpism, history, culture

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH PROBLEM**

### **Elephant in the (Class)Room**

On a cold night in March 2016, the editors of a high school newspaper were hard at work putting the finishing touches on the latest issue when one editor's phone lit up with texts from the student body president. Texts were sent back and forth between the editor and the president, before the editor's phone rang. The student body president, on the other end, was emotional, and sounded as if she was crying as the editor put the call on speaker phone. The issue of the newspaper being published would contain the results of a school-wide mock vote aligning with the date of the state's presidential primary election. Along with the secret ballot vote, some students were interviewed about how they voted. The editors wanted to get a sampling of students who had voted for every candidate running in the primaries, and it just so happened that the student body president had been comfortable, at first, with commenting on her views when interviewed by newspaper staff.

But something changed in her mind to be public about her political views by the time the newspaper was going to press. She pleaded with the editor not to publish that she had some politically conservative views.

In addition to teaching AP U.S. Government & Politics, I teach the journalism class that publishes the school's student newspaper. The editor brought his phone, on speaker with the senior class president, over to my desk, and asked me, the advisor and faculty sponsor of the student newspaper, what they should do.

The student body president was concerned that she would "lose all" her friends if they found out she had voted Republican. She pleaded for us not to publish it as if we were publishing that she had committed some sort of crime. In a student newspaper that regularly featured

politically liberal commentary, never did the editorial board receive negative feedback for printing those views. To be politically liberal was, and is, the default at this high school. Liberal views are honored as the school's de facto values in some classes. Being able to look at politics from multiple political vantage points was becoming almost unacceptable for some students and faculty in the school community.

The pleas of the student body president put the editors and me in a hard position. In the journalism course, I taught the students that something reported "on the record" was fair game for publication, as long as it was appropriate. A student simply voting for a Republican candidate in a primary election, whether it was Sen. Marco Rubio, Gov. John Kasich, Sen. Ted Cruz or then-candidate Donald Trump himself, is appropriate for publication. It's not a crime. It's not illegal. It's not taboo. It's not obscene. But in the current political climate of an urban public high school, it may be considered offensive by some readers.

The newspaper didn't have any other student, in a school of a thousand and a half pupils, that would go on the record saying they voted Republican and why. The reasons were all the same: fear of the push back that they would get from peers, and even faculty; fear that they would lose friends; fear that people wouldn't see them the same way; and fear that people would slap a red Republican label, that could be correlated with negative connotations, on them.

While this situation wasn't something that met the newspaper's criteria not to publish, I also didn't want to make the student body president on the other end of the editor's phone more upset and cause harm to her mental and even physical health over voicing her political view. The student newspaper did not publish her comments. The student newspaper staff changed their layout, opting not to include pull quotes about students' voting patterns so as to avoid the

awkward layout of having supportive quotes under the portraits of Sen. Bernie Sanders and Sec. Hillary Clinton, but none for the Republican candidates.

This situation gave me pause—about how I teach politics—and how I encourage diverse viewpoints be heard, read, and viewed from across the political spectrum. But now, perhaps, giving one’s honest political viewpoint could cause the person harm. The hyperpolarized climate in the United States has made it hard for some to have a calm discussion of viewpoints without tensions flaring and participants shutting each other down without listening to the other before retreating to their respective corners with blinders on to any views that don’t jive with their own.

When the world around us is so toxic that a student’s mental and physical health could be at risk just for sharing their political opinion or choice for president, the teacher’s *in loco parentis* kicks in to protect the student from that potential harm. In the age of Trump, teachers are faced with reexamining their political calculus and recalibrating their styles of teaching about politics and political issues.

If a teacher practiced a display of what they interpreted as being politically neutral in their own classroom, how do they maintain neutrality, the act of giving equal time and unbiased exposure to all political points of view in a government and politics course, when they interpret actions by the democratically elected government as destroying the institutions they inhabit and should maintain and protect? That is the balancing act many teachers and educational policy-makers face in the age of Trump.

Students of any age can be cruel to each other, and when one becomes bullied for their political views, it presents a challenge to a successful political learning environment. One of the four editors of the newspaper that school year was, and is, politically conservative himself. The school newspaper’s policy is that students who are on the newspaper cannot be quoted or part of

stories unless they are a key factor in a newsworthy story, so that is why we didn't have him quoted instead of the student body president. But the conservative editor, Kyle Stewart (a pseudonym used for privacy), had had enough of students never wanting to go "on the record" in the newspaper as anything even close to identifying as conservative, and didn't like the way conservatives were treated in some of his classes. So, he did what any newspaper editor could do—he wrote an opinion piece that was published in the final issue of the student newspaper of the school year.

Stewart, in high school, was a cross-country runner and middle-of-the-road student academically with a strong interest in filmmaking. A reserved, polite, and mild-mannered student, Stewart never once spoke out rudely against liberal points of view in my AP U.S. Government & Politics class his junior year of high school. He respected other's opinions and hoped that they would treat him the same. In his June 2016 column, Stewart "came out" of "the conservative closet," lambasting the school community for not being a welcoming environment to political minorities (Appendix A). Proving his point, Stewart was on the receiving end of both cyberbullying via social media, where students stooped as low as to tell him to kill himself and in-person bullying where students screamed at him in his academic classes. His name has become a verb used by the school principal. To be "Kyle Stewarded" is to be shamed for being in a political minority. This instance, before Donald Trump was elected president, and the subsequent American political era that has followed it, led me to explore how high school students and their teachers respectively navigate the stark political divide and walk the political tightrope.

Stewart said he hoped that the piece would encourage other political conservatives who felt oppressed by the school's political climate to be open about their views and to see that there

was “nothing to be afraid of.” But perhaps there was something to be afraid of. Immediately, Stewart was the brunt of derogatory comments, often being called a racist. He said people were saying that his “white privilege was showing,” but Stewart explained he is actually of Mexican and Irish descent, with a majority of his family Hispanic. Stewart told me,

All I was saying was that if you're conservative, it's okay to be conservative. I never said people shouldn't be allowed to marry someone who is of the same sex. I never said that people who are transgender are either male or female. It was almost like a game of telephone where people heard my name and then they made up a story about me, and it had a snowball effect. People had written my name on bulletin boards at school saying that I was a dumb ass, that I was racist. I had former students tagging me on Facebook saying that I'm a ‘piece of shit, and someone telling me to light myself on fire. (Stewart, 2019, Personal Communication)

While there was a petition to the school administration arguing for some type of consequence for Stewart for what he wrote, they determined the derogatory labels that were hurled at Stewart to be a bullying situation.

The treatment of political conservatives at the school has had differing effects on the various students in the school. Some of them have dug in their heels, and become stauncher in their views, others have decided to keep their views closer to their vest, and undoubtedly, some choose to not make their views known at all for the fear of their peers’ reactions.

The day the newspaper came out, Stewart was cornered in his English class by three students and the teacher. He said there were students yelling at him and crying, telling him that he is wrong and that he had made the school climate worse for those who are in the LGBTQ community because of what he had written.

Stewart's goal of opening the conservative closet was only somewhat achieved. His column made quite the splash, paving the road for other political conservatives to find the courage to find one another through a club developed the following fall. However, when one at the school is found out to be a Republican it is generally met with the same shock, surprise and disgust Stewart experienced.

That fall of 2016, students at the school formed a Republican Club (and a complementary Democrat one). Initially, this was aligning with Stewart's vision to have an understanding that one can have different political views than other students. But the club was met with familiar hostility. Members of the school's Republican Club might find themselves on the receiving end of a shove or push when wearing their club sweatshirts, or their posters advertising the club might be found ripped and torn on the floor soon after being put up. Other Republican Club members had their fliers torn or crumbled up and tossed at their faces at a school club fair. When the yearbook came out at the end of the year, some would find pictures of the group members in the yearbook and write hateful and derogatory comments by their names. The Republican club lost its founding members when they graduated from the school, and not unlike most school clubs, mainly sustained by certain friend groups, died out.

After the newspaper column situation, in the wake of the offensive comments coming from president-elect Trump, and in an attempt to reach out to my few politically conservative students, I tried to find voices that counter the negative label that the liberal students were putting on being a Republican in general. For one activity, I had a history class listen to an NPR Fresh Air interview that Terry Gross conducted with social anthropologist and economist, Richard Rothstein. The interview was about social policies and how he believes the federal government's social policies and laws created the ghettos in America and segregation as we see



it today and that some of the things that we're seeing play out is a direct consequence of that. In that interview, he mentions how President Richard Nixon's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Republican George Romney, Mitt Romney's father, started what was called the Open Communities project. The goal of this initiative was to stop giving federal funding to neighborhoods in America that were basically closed neighborhoods that kept people of color and ethnic whites out. George Romney essentially said, "Your streets, your highways, whatever it is, whatever we can do, any federal funding for education, whatever we give you, you're not going to get it until you open up these communities to everyone" (Gross, 2015). It caused such a public outrage at the time that Nixon wanted to fire George Romney over it.

During the listening, I paused the NPR piece and asked the students if they knew who George Romney is or if the name sounded familiar. Luckily, they did know the name and they were able to connect it to Mitt Romney. I then said, "Let's pause for a second and identify which party George Romney is a part of." Then they dissected what they had just listened to and how the "Republican" label does not have to equate with "racist." I urged them to consider that while the school might be heavily liberal, not everyone has the same political views. Republican students should not feel like they cannot speak up about their politics for fear of being labeled a racist. They should not be bullied or blacklisted from their friend groups simply because they have conservative values. Issues, not people, should be criticized and debated.

### **The Political Classroom**

While teachers have always held various personal political leanings, whether to let those beliefs influence their classroom decisions and teachings has been left to various circumstances of curriculum, district or school policies, or their own personal choices. As an AP U.S. Government & Politics teacher, I practiced keeping my personal political beliefs to myself, and

aimed to give my students as many varying viewpoints on issues without favoritism to one political viewpoint or the other, so that they can be exposed to different ideas and make up their own mind. When I first started teaching almost a decade ago, students said to him, “Mr. Lund, I can’t figure you out. Sometimes you say things that are pretty liberal, and sometimes you say things that are quite conservative.” I would respond, “Good. You shouldn’t have to figure me out, and don’t worry about what I think. I don’t want it to sway your thinking.” Some teachers don’t feel authentic if they keep their personal political leanings out of their teaching. Some might share some of their beliefs once in a while, but preface it that it is their opinion, and nothing more.

While I avoid disclosing my personal political opinions, I like to make a point to emphasize respect for the office of the presidency by calling the president by the title and their last name, not a nickname and not just by their first or last name. So, I would use the formal “President Trump” in front of my students, regardless of my own personal feelings about him. I wanted to remind my students that there is a particular job associated with that position, and we need to pay attention regardless of opinion or favorability of that person.

While I respect the office, Trump’s words and rhetoric can evoke judgment and opinion regardless of personal politics. In class, students would be going over current events, and the news would involve the former president using his slogan, “Make America Great Again” and using certain words over and over again like “great,” “beautiful,” “tremendous,” “crooked,” “witch-hunt,” and “sad,” whether in a speech or in a tweet. The students would laugh, and I sometimes would, too, but then I would try to keep it focused on what the point of the story was. However, it was here, in the new age of Trump, that I began to lose my ability to always keep

my political opinions to myself as my laughter, tone, or simple facial expressions at certain times could make it obvious to the students how I felt about Trump without even verbalizing it.

Keeping my opinion out of discussion became more challenging for me in the age of Trump. With the way Trump treats the media, the names he calls his opponents, his tweets, and his use, or, as some might say, abuse, of presidential power, it is very difficult not to wade into those instances when a student asks you, “Mr. Lund, can he do that though?”

This is what led me to conduct this study. I sought to find out if other high school government teachers are doing anything differently in the age of Trump than they had done during previous presidential administrations, and if so, what changed? I wondered if the location, demographics, and the type of school impacts these results. Does the school mirror the cultural and political divisions that exist in the country at large? Or is the school community so homogenous that it becomes a partisan silo?

The high school government classroom could very well be considered ground zero in the formal development of young ideological minds in America, a practice that has stood for decades. The room should ideally be a zone where students are safe, comfortable, and able to express and to challenge one other’s budding views in a respectful way. Running a government classroom does lend its challenges to the teacher, where often the question is whether it is appropriate or not to bring in the instructor’s political opinions to the student body, especially at such a formative age (Thayer, 2016). Student questions of controversial issues are inevitable, but all too often, teachers dodge the opportunity to address those issues of student interest, and in doing so, miss out on an opportunity to engage students politically, enhancing their own personal civic awareness and sparking passion that extends beyond the classroom walls (Milner, 2017). But while controversial issues have always been around, there perhaps has never been a more

contentious time for current high school government class instructors, at least in their own careers than the past presidential administration provided. The candidacy, campaign, presidency and lasting rhetoric of Donald Trump has turned politics upside down, and has made what is already a tightrope that government and politics teachers walk every day to offer their students an unbiased experience even thinner.

In response to “an unprecedented spike in hate crimes and threats” on school grounds, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) issued a guidance “for faculty in the wake of the 2016 election” (AFT, 2017, para. 1). The guidance stated that “teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject,” adding that they should be careful “not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject” (AFT, 2017, para. 4). In regards to free speech, the AFT said that “on a campus that is free and open, no idea can be banned or forbidden. No viewpoint or message may be deemed so hateful or disturbing that it may not be expressed” (AFT, 2017, para. 6). In keeping with the topics of the classroom, the AFT also said that if a topic raised by a student is not relevant to class topics, “the faculty member may ask that discussion to cease” (AFT, 2017, para. 6). While the AFT said that “no viewpoint or message may be deemed so hateful that it may not be expressed,” they stressed that “hostility or intolerance to persons who differ from the majority must be strenuously condemned” with regards to offensive speech and harassing behavior (AFT, 2017, para. 6).

Because of this guidance, many students seek clarity when they enter an American government classroom these days. When the news and the way policy is rolled out do not match what is in their textbooks, students turn to the government teacher. When students cannot determine what news is real, what news is fake, and what policy threat is legitimate or not, they ask the government teacher. Perhaps this is why the Advanced Placement version of an

American government course, AP U.S. Government & Politics (AP Gov.) ranks “fourth or fifth in annual enrollment of the nearly 40 AP courses offered” (Parker & Lo, 2016, para. 3).

However, too many teachers are afraid to express their views, or are afraid of what will happen if they say the wrong thing, and tensions can run higher than teachers might remember in the not-so-distant past before the Age of Trump came into focus.

Since the Age of Trump began, there is little research on the specific topic of Trump’s impact on the teaching of government courses in American secondary schools. Because of this, I conducted this research by interviewing government and history teachers.

### **Problem Statement**

While government teachers have long grappled with whether to let their own personal political biases influence their teaching and classroom culture, few political eras have challenged educators teaching politics the way that the age of Trump has with what content they teach and bring into the classroom, how to balance the tensions between engaging in authentic controversial political issues and creating a classroom climate that is fair and welcoming to all, and how to provide a balance of allowing freedom of speech and thought without alienating or offending students. From an American public inundated with various information sources, and a president who calls many of those sources “fake,” to potential policies that directly impact some students’ livelihoods, helping students understand how the government works with an administration that is anything but textbook can challenge the teaching styles and methods of even teachers who have long believed that the classroom is no place for them to air their own opinions.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact that the age of Trump has had on high school government and history teachers, their teaching and the learning environment of their classrooms. I sought to better understand the ways in which high school teachers provide political instruction by analyzing the practices of a number of government and history teachers in the midst of the age of Trump and how the hyperpolarization and diminishment of democratic structures and norms may have impacted the way they teach and how they feel about their teaching.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

Examining how teachers handle teaching politics since Donald Trump became president requires a theoretical framework that allows one to reflect on what content to teach, how to balance the tensions between engaging in authentic controversial political issues and creating a classroom climate that is fair and welcoming to all, and whether to disclose their own political views.

The theoretical framework for this study combines the work of several authors. Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy (2014) advocated for a school culture that is aimed at preparing students to live in a world where conflicts and controversies are ever present to help produce a more democratic civic culture by focusing on questions of what content to teach and bring into the classroom, how to balance the tensions between engaging in authentic controversial political issues and creating a classroom climate that is fair and welcoming to all, and to whether or not to disclose their own political views. John Dewey (1899) said that what the wisest parents want for their child, the rest of a community must want as well. He emphasized the role of not just the parents of a child, but the school and the greater community that surrounds that child in their

education. Dewey (1916) looked at the school as a miniature community and urged that the morals (and ethics) that are taught in the classroom should be emulated in society and vice-versa. Almost a century later, Amy Gutmann (1999), built off of John Dewey but questioned his assertion that what the wisest parents want for their child, the rest of a community must want as well. Perhaps most stunningly resonant for those who are critics of President Trump would be Gutmann's (1999) view that "citizens and public officials can use democratic processes to destroy democracy" (p. 14). U.S. Supreme Court Justice Steven Breyer (2005) looked through a prism of "Active Liberty" to encourage connections between people and their government that involve responsibility, participation, and capacity. In sum, they form a theoretical framework that teaches students how to be a participative citizen in the democratic process. Students are encouraged to be responsible, fair and listen to others, be aware of the structure and power in the government and prepare for a world where conflicts and controversies are common.

The message I took away from these authors, primarily Hess, McAvoy and Gutmann, is for the teacher to encourage a welcoming classroom environment where all political views can be heard, discussed and debated in a respectful manner. Hess and McAvoy (2014), in particular, argue that education has a vital role to play in preparing students to live in a world where conflicts and controversies are ever present, and in helping to produce a more democratic culture. By carefully teaching controversial topics and knowing when it is appropriate to allow their own views into the classroom, a teacher can foster an open thoroughfare between the school and society—an open avenue to influence government, and politicians' responsibility to uphold the morals and ethical values that they should espouse upon young and impressionable minds.

Government and history teachers' considerations of what content to teach and bring into the classroom, how to balance the tensions between engaging in authentic controversial political

issues and creating a classroom climate that is fair and welcoming to all, and to what degree, if any, they disclose their own political views in the Age of Trump are amplified in creating a successful learning environment and facilitating a proper microcosm of society and democratic culture. Hess and McAvoy (2014) wrote, “one of the most important functions of schooling is indeed to prepare students for participation in a vibrant democracy, to sort through arguments, to have evidence for their claims” (p. xiv). They argued that schools are, and ought to be, political sites. The political classroom is one that helps students develop their ability to deliberate political questions. When teachers engage students in discussions about what rules or norms ought to be adopted by a class, thereby creating a welcoming environment that can address controversial political issues, they are teaching them to think politically. Similarly, when teachers ask students to research and discuss a current public controversy, such as, “Should same-sex marriage be legally recognized?” they are engaging in politics (Hess and McAvoy, 2014, p. 4).

Hess and McAvoy (2014) have been ardent supporters of the political classroom and the impact it has on American political socialization. However, they acknowledged that polarization is making it more difficult for teachers to create balanced political classrooms, and they argued that engaging students in political deliberation is both possible and necessary. The concept of political socialization is in the AP Government curriculum. It is a unique topic as students learn about the actions teachers and students carry out in class on a regular basis. Gutmann (1999) explained,

Most political scientists who write about education subsume it under the concept of political socialization. Political socialization is typically understood to include the processes by which democratic societies transmit political values, attitudes, and modes of



behavior to citizens. Since many of these processes are unintended, political socialization studies tend to focus on what might be called “unconscious social reproduction.” (p. 15) On the other hand, when education is distinguished from political socialization, it is hard to resist the temptation to focus entirely on schooling, since it is our most deliberate form of human instruction.

At the end of the day, Dewey wrote that “society is a number of people held together because they are working along common lines, in a common spirit, and with reference to common aims.” This is true, and but those commonalities have become hard to find during the current political era. While all might have the best intentions for what they want in America, or in the world, it is often what is best for them as individuals. Dewey continued, “the common needs and aims demand a growing interchange of thought and growing unity of sympathetic feeling” (Dewey, 1899, p. 10).

Breyer wrote in *Active Liberty* (2005) that as a true participant in society, you cannot be neutral about attacks to democratic institutions. A teacher who might subscribe to being neutral and open to including many viewpoints in their teaching, balancing debate and discussion in a welcoming environment for all students, might have to break from withholding their views, opinions, if they feel that democratic institutions are at stake.

Breyer’s theoretical framework of active liberty refers to a sharing of a nation’s sovereign authority among its people. Sovereignty involves the legitimacy of a governmental action. These thoughts come into direct question when one might look at the legitimacy of Trump’s tweets, actions, or ideas that are not constitutional.

Breyer wrote it should be possible to trace without much difficulty a line of authority for the responsibility of making of governmental decisions back to the people themselves – either

directly, or indirectly through those whom the people have chosen to make certain kinds of decisions in certain ways. And this authority, Breyer wrote, must be broad. It should have support of the public. But since one cannot mean the entire public, since that is next to impossible, is having the support of just your loyal followers enough to claim of having a “mandate to lead”?

While Breyer encouraged one to be a true participant in society, be it through voting, town meetings, political party membership, or issue-or interest-related activities, he noted that civic participation is a choice, not a compulsory action. He continued those opportunities to better oneself should be available to those who seek them. The people and their representatives must have the capacity to exercise their democratic responsibilities.

In sum, Breyer, Dewey, Gutmann, Hess and McAvoy all bring relevant theories to this research study. Teachers can ponder Hess and McAvoy’s big three questions when questioning how they create a classroom climate that is fair and welcoming to all students, plan a lesson that deals with a controversial political issue or divulge personal political beliefs in response to an in-class question. Teachers can think of Breyer and Dewey when advocating for strong political participation from their students and preparing them for a lifetime of civic action. But it is Gutmann who rings the alarm bells that government and history teachers might want to ring today when the content they teach—about how a democracy should function—runs counter to what is happening in the real world when public officials can use abuse their power to undermine the foundations of vital democratic institutions.

### **Research Question**

What are the perceptions and experiences of high school government and history teachers regarding curriculum and instruction in the age of Trump?

- a) How has the age of Trump impacted how teachers perceive their decisions about what content to present to the class as a controversial political issue?
- b) How has the age of Trump impacted how teachers perceive balancing the tensions between engaging students in authentic political controversies and creating a classroom climate that is fair and welcoming to all students?
- c) How has the age of Trump impacted how teachers reflect on withholding and/or disclosing their views about the issues they introduce as controversial?
- d) How do teachers perceive how their school's political climate might have changed in the past five years in light of the age of Trump?

### **Researcher Background and Assumptions**

With a background including a bachelor's degree in political science, work on political campaigns and Capitol Hill, covering politics in print, broadcast, behind and in front of the camera, for various news organizations, and most importantly as an AP U.S. Government and Politics teacher of the last nine school years, I brought an eagerness to learn about how other educators' teachings may or may not have changed during the Trump administration.

I assumed I would find various results, of some teachers sharing their political views, others withholding their views, and some, feeling that it is their responsibility to "correct the record" and make an example Trump's style of leadership as unorthodox, offensive, and sometimes, unconstitutional. I assumed that some teachers would incorporate Trump's current events as part of the ongoing learning, as I believe one should, regardless of who is president. Tying an American social science curriculum to what is currently going on in the country makes what could very well be a dull textbook come alive and make unfamiliar topics more relatable. I

assumed that school and district policies will dictate the freedom and flexibility a teacher has in bringing in their own viewpoints and teaching materials to their courses.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The pundits like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue States: red states for Republicans, blue States for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states. We coach little league in the blue states and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq, and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America. (Barack Obama, Democratic National Convention, July 24, 2004)

Four years before Barack Obama was elected president of the United States, he burst onto the national political stage with what those who celebrated his keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention saw as a plea for bipartisan politics and national unity (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008). While there have always been Democrats in red states and Republicans in blue states, Obama's speech acknowledged and challenged the common narrative being echoed by cable news hosts and those sharing their opinions in the new medium of social media—that political division was deepening, with a polarized grip poisoning the American political well into the red versus the blue.

*Political polarization* refers to cases in which an individual's stance on a given issue, policy, or person is more likely to be strictly defined by their identification with a particular political party (e.g., Democrat or Republican) or ideology (e.g., liberal or conservative). With each passing election, year, season, or Presidential tweet, the great divide between the right and the left deepens (Pew Research Center, 2014). James Madison, in his Federalist Paper Number 10 (1787), feared the inevitable problems that would come with political factions and competing schools of thought. The country was split, geographically, during the Civil War in the 1860s, but the country has never really been whole. Over the past half century, a series of dividing tactics for political power, combined with the amplification of those divisions through cable, internet and social media have sown a deep division that could be

impossible to overcome. The divisions resulting in political polarization come from many angles—a combination of division between and within races, classes, genders, education levels and religions. Steep divisions leave a dwindling number of moderate politicians and growing success of fringe candidates on both sides of the political aisle. Compromise is thrown out the window and any politician who does not toe their party line faces the threat of a hardline partisan primary challenger to the right or left of them, leading to gridlock and stalemates in the halls of Congress and incivility in the forums of social media. While trends in recent elections, media agenda setting and the rhetoric coming from the White House show no sign of healing the political divide, it is important to understand what led us to this point and what clues it may offer for the future. As John Dewey (1819) looked at the American classroom as a microcosm of society, one can imagine that political polarization does not stop at the school house gate. As Hess and McAvoy (2014) questioned, teachers also must navigate what topics to teach, how to balance potential tensions between engaging students in controversial topics and creating a learning climate that is fair and welcoming to all students, as well as contemplate whether they should withhold or disclose their political viewpoints in the classroom in such a politically divisive period of time. This review of literature examines how, over the past half-century, racial, socioeconomic and class division have been amplified through culture wars, politicians, the media and the internet. It discusses what our current political and cultural climate means for the future of American government and the people it is supposed to serve, with a focus on American students, society and classrooms.

## **Methods**

The extent of the literature on the topic of political polarization is large, with articles looking at the subject around the world. Articles for this review were compiled through mining

references of existing literature reviews, academic studies and analysis articles as well as periodicals like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. Searches for “political polarization,” “echo chambers,” and “identity politics” were executed through ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Surprisingly, scholarly searches came up short for the subject of “identity politics.” Perhaps that is because it is a newer term, and could be a topic for further research.

## **Findings**

### ***American Political Polarization Past***

The campaigns for the 2018 midterm elections, protests surrounding a controversial Supreme Court nomination and subsequent hearing, and almost daily tweets and comments coming from the president that some considered divisive, displayed a country divided over its politics, its future, and who we are as a country (Cohn, 2018). But with all the headlines over political division, one could think that this split is something new, when in reality, it is not new at all, but rather, we are seeing it on display in different mediums. Political factions and divisions date back to the founding of the country. Federalists and Jeffersonian-Republicans were divided over tariffs, the national bank, and the concept of federalism in the 1790s (Tocqueville, 1865/1966). Whigs and Democrats continued with similar issues in the 1830s and 1840s (Gerring, 1998). Democrats and Republicans were polarized on slavery in the 1850s, agriculture, and currency issues in the 1890s, social welfare programs as part of the New Deal in the 1930s, and civil rights in the 1960s. (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Sundquist, 1983).

Kimball and Gross (2007, p. 267) wrote that party polarization is “accompanied by an ‘us versus them’ mentality [among the electorate] in which partisanship shapes the way people see the political world.” Even if voters themselves are not really that far apart on many issues, they still have a tendency to think of their own party or position as “good” and the other as “bad”

(Jacobson, 2007). That same us versus them mentality can permeate the American school building and its classrooms, except that in that environment, the teacher would be looked to for their greater influence over the narrative through what content they select to teach, how they balance classroom discussion and dialogue, and whether they bring their own political views into the classroom. Political polarization has increased by “vitriolic presidential campaigns, the decline of bipartisanship in Congress, and the increasingly nasty tone of political discourse in the media and on the internet” (Olson, 2008, p. 704).

Joel Olson (2008) argued that the four most common reasons for political polarization are values, institutions, class, and race.

### ***Values***

Thomas Frank (2004) wrote that American politics is gradually more divided because the American working class has been deceived by political leaders to vote for social issues such as abortion, affirmative action, and same-sex marriage rather than on their own economic interests. While Frank (2004) lamented that Kansans, instead of fighting a class war are railing against same-sex marriage, he does not explain just how or why those in the middle of the country got to that spot in the first place.

### ***Institutions***

Our institutions, like Congress, and the White House, are more polarized places now because, Olson (2008) argued, of *culture wars*, conflicts between groups with different ideals, beliefs, and philosophies. With more *safe districts* (districts that are consistently won by the same party) through gerrymandering processes, conservative districts become more conservative and liberal districts become more liberal, leading to candidates and future politicians who are further apart from each other, politically. Those who hold onto *safe seats* (seats that are



consistently won by the same party) are also more likely to taunt the opposition party, further accelerating the degree of partisanship and polarization (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

### ***Class***

Frank (2004) also argued that socioeconomic class differences can lead to political polarization. While low-income whites have not left the Democratic party in large numbers, upper-income whites have embraced the Republican party. McCarty et al. (2006) argued that class has a greater impact on polarization than values and institutions as they believe race to be part of larger economic developments. Because African Americans tend to vote overwhelmingly Democratic, McCarty et al. (2006) argued that polarization is mainly a cause of the division of white socioeconomic classes.

### ***Race***

University of Michigan history professor Matt Lassiter (2007) argued that race and class mutually affect each other. Lassiter found that wealthier whites' suburbanization and commitment to Republican policies have been prompted by racial fears (such as desegregation of public schools) as well as economic interests. Further, race and taxes collided in the 1960s to break up the New Deal coalition as the base of Democratic party, leading northern ethnic whites and southern whites to leave the Democrats for the Republicans (Edsall, 1991).

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 under President Lyndon B. Johnson, the Democrats became the party of racial liberalism, a party that endorses government policies to enforce racial equality. Initially, the mantle of racial liberalism brought the party more support as fit well with their ideal image as being the party of the average man or woman (Edsall, 1991). After the civil rights movement of the 1960s, political parties became increasingly polarized on racial concerns. White southerners left the Democratic coalition, and African Americans almost

unanimously joined the Democratic party (Layman et al., 2006). But all races sticking together and coalescing around a respective political party would not be the plan of some in political power.

Olson (2008) argued that political polarization is a consequence, in part, of the changing nature of white identity, or *whiteness*, since the civil rights movement when whiteness transitioned from a form of social standing to a norm. Political campaigns by Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, and Richard Nixon tapped into the white resentment of the decline of white's social standing by mobilizing white anxieties in a way that hurt Democrats' grip on their strong alignment with the country's civic ideals (Olson, 2008), instead painting them as the party of *big government*, which was code for unfairly taxing the virtuous middle (majority) to pay for programs that benefit welfare recipients (a minority). As long as Democrats were seen as the party for blacks, Nixon adviser Kevin Phillips (1969) believed that whites would continue to default to the Republican party, and that they didn't even need or want African Americans' votes. While it would be seen as near impossible for the Republicans to ever capture the entire white vote again, they decided on the next best thing and the intention to capture the support of a majority of them (Lublin, 2004). The irony of the move was that while the Republicans gave a home to white resentment, they did so by dividing the white race, and sowing the seeds of future political polarization (Dillard, 2002). Vice President Spiro Agnew avoided the overtly racial discourse seen as unacceptable after civil rights movement victories while tapping into the bitterness felt by some whites and "constructing a narrative of a 'forgotten majority' as the 'virtuous middle' squeezed between an elite of 'impudent snobs' from above and a 'constant carnival' of criminals and campus radicals from below" (Olson, 2008, p. 711).

Among the intellectual elites Agnew identified as looking down on the virtuous middle was television news media, liberal-minded college campuses, popular music and movies with drug references. Agnew praised Confederate leaders as “great Americans” and warmly evoking the Confederate past and era of white standing while not condoning slavery or segregation, rather declaring that “the forgotten American does not enjoy being called a bigot for wanting his children to go to a public school in their own neighborhood” (Coyne, 1972, p. 381).

Agnew’s notion of the virtuous middle and everything that goes along with their aspirations, assets and hobbies as the standard-bearing norm lives on today in contrast to those of racial minorities and those living below the poverty line. Today, the LGBT community, those who are disabled, and undocumented immigrants could join as part of the group that Agnew would view as beneath the virtuous middle or what the default has been classified to be.

### ***American Political Polarization Present***

Fifty years ago, political party researchers viewed the major American political parties as “relatively weak,” (Duverger, 1963). By contrast, American political parties today are ideologically further apart, with less overlap, and partisan identification affecting thought and behavior in both political and nonpolitical contexts (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014). Graphs illustrating this trend are in Appendix B.

Today, how devoutly religious one is has become a factor in their political beliefs. The division between anyone who is more of a religious *traditionalist* (one who has orthodox religious beliefs and a high level of religious commitment) and a religious *modernist* (those who are less committed to traditionalist religious practices) and *seculars* (those who are non-religious) has become more crystalized as traditionalists have become part of the new base of the Republican party and modernists and seculars have found their home in the Democrat party

(Layman et al., 2006). Religion plays a significant role in the culture wars as conservatives call for the protection of Constitutional religious freedom, and liberals claim civil rights violations. Religious freedom was at the center of recent U.S. Supreme Court cases where a baker refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple and a privately owned company refused to offer benefits to their employees that include contraceptives (Gjeltén, 2018).

The rhetoric and actions of political leaders today demonstrate that hostility directed at the opposition is acceptable, even appropriate. Partisans feel free to express animus and engage in discriminatory behavior toward the opposing side. “Classic studies by psychologists” have shown that the simple act of identifying with a specific group in any competitive environment can trigger negative evaluations of opponents (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015, p. 691). Just think of any sports fan and what they might typically say of their favorite team’s rivals—negative evaluations of the opposition is inevitable, but the hostility between Republicans and Democrats has only increased since the 1980s (Haidt & Hetherington 2012; Iyengar et al., 2012).

Unlike race and gender, which are traits one can usually identify at first glance, political preference is less obvious to the naked eye. Instead, we learn our political stripes from office or work conversations, social media, car bumper stickers, or lawn signs (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). The United States has been through periods before of the norms of marriage shifting, like inter-racial marriage, and same-sex marriage, but while the those two have seen approval ratings increase over time, for *inter-partisan marriage*, the prospect of one’s children marrying someone of the opposition party, approval ratings have decreased (Iyengar et al., 2012). Iyengar and Westwood (2015) found that since individuals choose rather than inherit their party affiliation, partisan hostilities are more acceptable as one can hold their opposition responsible to their choice, rather than an affiliation that they have no choice over.

Increased levels of partisan affect have fairly clear implications for the political process. Hostility for the opposition party among rank-and-file partisans sends a clear signal to elected officials that representatives who appear willing to work across party lines run the risk of being perceived as “appeasers” (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

### ***News Sources, The Internet, Social Media, and Echo Chambers***

While American political parties have become more polarized, the advent and everyday use of the internet and social media for news and communication has also driven political polarization. This seeps into students’ political socialization, and therefore into the classroom and discussion. In fact, the regularity with which one consumes news from the internet can broaden disagreements between Republicans and Democrats on a wide range of political issues (Tewksbury & Riles, 2015). We expect an informed citizenry to search for the information they can use to form opinions and as the basis for voting and other political behavior but with a never-ending list of news sources, it may be hard to determine the legitimacy of a source or story. In the U.S., there are radio, cable television, internet and magazines that cater to a specific partisan or other self-identifier group. Because of the easy availability of those options, Americans now might select to get their information from a source they know politically aligns with their own views, opening the door for a biased and one-sided opinions, add to that equation that humans, as is, are already imperfect processors of news information (Jervis, 1993) and one has the potential for some ill-informed citizenry. This places emphasis on the importance the teacher plays in exposing students to other viewpoints with what they select to bring into the classroom curriculum.

Groeling (2008) found that *Special Report* on Fox News Channel “was disproportionately likely to report polls that showed declines in approval of President [Bill] Clinton.” DailyKos.com

is more likely to pick up wire stories that portray Democrats in a positive light and FoxNews.com and FreeRepublic.com often don't show the same stories that Daily Kos does, and present stories favorable to the Republican platform (Baum & Groeling, 2008). One study found that two-thirds of daily visitors to NYTimes.com identify as liberal, as are just over three-fourths of those who visit HuffingtonPost.com daily. On the other end of the spectrum, three-quarters of daily FoxNews.com visitors identify as conservative, and smaller opinion websites like RushLimbaugh.com are further ideologically skewed (Prior, 2013). In a study by Iyengar and Hahn (2009), participants were shown random news stories affixed with the commonly known news logos of Fox News, NPR, CNN and the BBC. For participants who identify as Republican, their desire to read an article increased 25 percent when an article had the Fox News logo. For those who identify as Democrat, their desire decreased by 10 percent to read the same Fox News-labeled article. Meanwhile, adding the CNN or NPR logo reduced the desire of Republicans to read the article by 10 percent (Prior, 2013).

Partisan selective exposure worsens when people only get information from those same biased sources, leading to their own political perceptions and behaviors that become skewed (Tewksbury & Riles, 2015). This situation is illustrated in the concept of selective exposure (Frey, 1986), which is rooted in the theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Selective exposure occurs when people want to avoid situations (or news exposure) that might challenge their predispositions and opinions (Graf & Aday, 2008).

Any journalism or political science major knows that the media's agenda setting theory is built on the premise that basic norms and practices in journalism will produce a relatively homogenous news agenda (McCombs, 2004). This, for the most part has historically rung true, until the broadened range of partisan media options today have begun to take the same news or

issue, but only give their spin on the story, generally ignoring the other points of view. Today's media options leave consistent liberals and conservatives to live in separate media worlds that have little overlap of sources for their political information and news (Rainie, 2017). The more news consumed, the further one can be politically polarized. Studies show that those who get their news online and from television were more ideologically extreme than someone who consumed news from just one medium. Consuming news in this fashion presents the opportunity that audiences can obtain content encouraging polarization. Once people are only digesting one side of the news, they develop knowledge and beliefs that are the opposite of those doing the same thing, but on the other end of the political spectrum (Tewksbury & Riles, 2015). When the other side's story or point of view is exposed as fact, one opposing that view might be quick in today's political climate to call it "fake news" (Love, 2018).

With the breadth of information sources available, one could assume that the wide range of perspectives would serve as an equalizer or provide people with a range of perspectives. But scholars have not observed that result (Tewksbury & Riles, 2015). Bail et al. (2018) address that in the early days of social media, optimism was expressed that the platforms might offer people a way to consume diverse viewpoints and forms of media coverage. But as time has passed and algorithms have taken shape, people tend to form social network ties to those with viewpoints similar to their own. However, because of the nature of social media, it is difficult to determine whether "social media networks shape political opinions or vice versa" (Lazer et al., 2010). In their study, Bail et al. (2018) found that Republicans who followed a liberal Twitter bot became substantially more conservative post-treatment, with the liberal messaging backfiring on that group. Democrats exhibited slight increases in liberal attitudes after following a conservative Twitter bot, but not to significant levels. So, a diverse grouping of news and information did not

diversify one's opinions or make them open to listening to other points of view or sides of a story, instead it solidified one's partisan beliefs, or caused feelings of anger and aversion (Gervais, 2015).

When faced with an opposing viewpoint on social media, studies have found that people are less likely to react as they would if faced with the same point of view in person. A teacher's decision to bring controversial topics into the classroom can provide opportunity to learn, listen, discuss and debate in person that one might otherwise never encounter on their own. The anonymity and few constraints on expression that social media communication provides results in incivility online, and considerably more than would a face-to-face reaction (Coe et al., 2014). Social media use makes it possible for everyday people to interact with masses of others, and unlike an in-person conversation about politics, it could likely be with complete strangers, and these interactions can affect political attitudes and behavior (Bail et al., 2018).

While Bail et al. (2018) found that partisans, especially conservatives, were apt to become more hardened in their personal viewpoints than reason with the opposing side, Amelia Tate (2018) unearthed an entire far right social media network, where hate speech is the norm. Gab is the Facebook or Twitter for the political far right. This might come as a surprise to some as it is hard to come by being that Apple and Google have banned the Gab app from their phones. Since "Twitter banned neo-Nazis from its platform in December [2017]" (Tait, 2018, para. 2), Gab has attracted those on the far-right of the political spectrum. A political conservative was attracted to Gab, but "got tired of the endless Jew-bashing" and conspiracy theories on the site and left after a few months of membership. Just like Facebook and Twitter, Gab isn't alone in the far-right social media universe. Instead of Patreon, a crowdfunding website that allows fans to help new artists get started, there is Hatreon, which promises to make "pro-



white music for a better future.” Instead of YouTube, there is PewTube and WASP Love is a dating site that caters to any combination of “Christian, confederate, home-schooled, white-nationalist and alt-right” (Tate, 2018). Fake news can lead to real life violence. Voat is an online forum that peddles conspiracy theories, notably “Pizzagate,” the concocted idea that Hillary Clinton was at the center of a pedophile ring run out of a Washington, D.C. pizzeria that led to a man who entered the restaurant “to investigate” and fire three shots (Tate, 2018) giving unfortunate proof that people are “surprisingly bad at distinguishing credible information from hoaxes” (Quattrociocchi, 2017).

Fake news in the dark corners of the web gained most prominent notoriety in the Age of Trump with QAnon, “a complex web of conspiracy theories featuring a vast range of characters, events, symbols, and jargon...that touches on aspects of cultic movements, Internet scams, and political doctrine” (Rothschild, 2021, p. 3). QAnon followed in the footsteps of Pizzagate with the claims of pedophilia-obsessed conspiracy theories. In 2018, actress Roseanne Barr asked her Twitter followers to “put her in touch” with the unknown person behind QAnon, known as “Q” (Rothschild, 2021, p. 40). Not long after that, Barr tweeted that “President Trump has freed so many children held in bondage to pimps all over this world. Hundreds each month. He has broken up trafficking rings in high places everywhere” (Rothschild, 2021, p. 41). This was not coming from a no-name or anonymous figure, but rather from a household name of a television star. Q gained traction in popular web channels like Reddit, Twitter, and private Facebook groups. Q praised Trump, attacked John McCain, and “claimed that John F. Kennedy, Jr. had faked his death in a 1999 plane crash and would soon be returning to assume the vice presidency” (Rothschild, 2021, p. 108). Trump praised QAnon on more than one occasion in the 2020 campaign, though he claimed at the same time to know nothing about it (Rothschild, 2021).

It came as no surprise to those who follow politics that QAnon followers were among the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and other fringe right groups that invaded the United States Capitol building on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, in an effort to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election and “Save America” by keeping Donald Trump in power. The echo chambers of conservative media and social media allowed groups to plan, plot, and radicalize others into joining them in their far-flung, baseless conspiracy theories and ideas. Trump never condemned QAnon and their ideas; he praised them while maintaining he did not know anything about them. Trump’s rhetoric and lies fueled QAnon’s momentum right to the halls of Congress, both with the insurrectionists, but also in newly elected members of Congress who subscribe to Trumpism and themselves have indicated support for QAnon.

To be sure, the World Economic Forum considers the viral spread of digital misinformation to be among the main threats to human society (Törnberg, 2018), and on equal footing with terrorism (Quattrociocchi, 2017). When presented with unfiltered information, people will appropriate that which conforms to their own thinking, known as the confirmation bias, which helps spread “fake news” (Quattrociocchi, 2017). And if one thinks of the viral spread of misinformation in a social network like a wildfire, “an echo chamber has the same effect as a dry pile of tinder in the forest; it provides the fuel for an initial small flame, that can spread to larger sticks, branches, trees, to finally engulf the forest” (Törnberg, 2018). Studies find that those in echo chambers have a lower threshold for being convinced by a given narrative because of the trust level they place in their fellow like-minded users (Törnberg, 2018).

### ***The 2016 Presidential Election***

The degree of polarization in the United States was, and is, on full display after the 2016 presidential campaigns and election. Regarding polarization in 2016, President Barack Obama

said, “the capacity to disseminate misinformation, wild conspiracy theories, to paint the opposition in wildly negative light without any rebuttal—that has accelerated in ways that much more sharply polarize the electorate and make it very difficult to have a common conversation” (Remnick, 2016). Against indications of almost every poll leading into Election Day, Donald Trump divided, dog-whistled and played into the fears of a polarized base to win the White House. While change from one incumbent president’s party to a president of the opposing major party is nothing unprecedented, electing an outsider who could outlast any negative news story that would otherwise bring down any other candidate was shocking to some, especially those on the left and in the media, but had some on the right claiming they knew he would win. The result highlighted the ideological fault lines of America and the echo chambers in which many Americans operated over the last year and half of the campaign (Jacobson, 2017).

Trump was initially opposed by the Republican establishment. He never gained the support or endorsement of any living Republican presidential nominee. They rejected his personality, character and “unorthodox positions on the economy (opposition to free trade and entitlement reform) and foreign policy (questioning traditional alliances, praising Vladimir Putin), and dubious devotion to social conservatism” (Jacobson, 2017, p. 11). Trump was similar to Agnew in political campaign strategy by combining elites and minorities as his opposition in his divisive rhetoric. That rhetoric was viewed by the establishment Republicans who rejected him as short-sighted; they believed policies of that nature would hurt the party’s long-term prospects by alienating the fastest-growing demographics of the country. But he defeated 16 experienced Republican politicians for the party’s nomination and then defeated the first female major party nominee for president, that many considered, whether they supported her or not, to have the strongest resume for the job in recent memory.

Trump voters were hungry for a change. Some felt left out of the economic recovery that took place during Obama's administration (Tankersly, 2016). Some felt that a regular, establishment Republican would be more of the same. Trump supporters were "less educated, more likely to have blue-collar jobs, older, more religious, disproportionately male, and overwhelmingly white" (Jacobson, 2017. p. 21). Trump's populist message spoke to them, and the cheerleading from partisan news sources repeated and shared on social media gave the vote of confidence from some conservative media pundits. Trump won non-college educated whites by 40 points over Hillary Clinton (Huang et al., 2016). Trump didn't back down or resist making racist or sexist comments, and perhaps that was on purpose, after all, he was running against the first female major party nominee while the first African American president sat in the White House. Trump invoked sexist remarks about his opponents, like Carly Fiorina and Hillary Clinton, and news reporters like Megyn Kelly. There was also a decade-old *Access Hollywood* tape that surfaced in which Trump boasted of sexual assault (Schaffner et al., 2018).

Trump was speaking to his new-found base, and that base wanted to go back to how things were in the past, anything that was in opposition to culturally progressive politics (Sides & Farrell, 2016). When groups feel threatened, they retreat into tribalism. Some of Trump's supporters feel threatened as the U.S. nears the first time in its history when whites become a minority group. One study found that whites believe that they have replaced blacks as the primary victims of racial discrimination in contemporary America (Sommers & Norton, 2012). When groups feel mistreated and disrespected, they close ranks and become more insular, more defensive, more punitive, more us-versus-them.

Clinton, by contrast to Trump, moved to the left in an attempt to get the votes of her primary opponent, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders. She consistently spoke to a number of issues

important to African Americans and Latinos such as criminal justice reform, immigration reform and gender inequality. By doing so, she was viewed in an increasingly negative light by conservative whites (Schaffner et al., 2018). In 2016, there were two echo chambers alive and well, those who were “with her” and those who felt that America needed to be made “great again” (Jacobson, 2017, p. 12).

Trump capitalized on the previous fears of non-credentialed media being called “fake news” and instead called any story or news publication, network, or reporter that he did not like, or was adversarial to his agenda “fake news.” This distortion of truth, and giving credence to those who peddle and dismiss falsehoods as “alternative facts” continue to play into American political polarization (Jacobson, 2017, p. 13).

Trump’s first impeachment by the House of Representatives came in December 2019, just as a virus began spreading in Wuhan, China. Three months later, in March 2020, that virus known as the Coronavirus or COVID-19, was worldwide, and life as everyone knew it in the United States came to a screeching halt. In February 2020, I was discussing public opinion and presidential approval ratings in his AP Government & Politics class. Looking at the correlation between President George W. Bush’s record-high approval rating and the immediate national unity felt in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, I said to my students, “Based on the deep divisions in our country right now, I don’t know if you’ll ever see that type of unity in this country in your lifetime. I don’t know what type of event would have to happen to pull everyone together like then.”

But when the pandemic hit the next month, I thought, “here’s what brings everyone together. A pandemic, a common enemy, everyone will rise to the challenge.” Similar thoughts were echoed by George Packer (2021),

Here finally was a crisis that could pull Americans together as hadn't happened in the two decades since September 11, 2001. The biology of a pandemic is designed to show the limits of individualism and affirm a truth that's too hard to keep in mind—our common humanity. Everyone is vulnerable. Everyone's health depends on the health and behavior of others. No one is safe unless everyone takes responsibility for everyone else. No community or region can withstand the plague without an active national government. (p. 16)

But with the lack of a national directive from the Trump administration, or, sometimes, conflicting messages, states, school boards, and some local municipalities were left to make tough, and all too divisive decisions.

When the virus began to spread here, no one knew what to do. The authorities gave confused instructions or none at all. Families and organizations were left to make their decisions alone: go on riding the train, keep the office open, send the kids to school, visit friends? Or cancel everything, buy the last rolls of toilet paper, and take shelter? Americans woke up every morning to a feeling that was for many of us—though not all—radically new: our government didn't care if we died. (Packer, 2021, p.18).

The pandemic was not the event that pulled everyone together, and no event, person, or idea still has. Instead, the pandemic, and the efforts to stop it in the name of public health became politicized and divisive, and often the battlegrounds were in local school board meetings or schools where parents protested and voiced their opinions on the issues of vaccines, face mask-wearing, and school closures.

The 2020 election would happen during a pandemic. Voting by mail became commonplace in the pandemic since some people would prefer to not wait in a long, crowded

line with people standing perhaps closer than the then-CDC-recommended six feet apart. Trump, aware of his polling began to sow doubt into the outcome of the election, claiming before the election even happened that the only way he would lose would be through a fraudulent election. Trump charged that the mail-in ballots, traditionally a popular method of voting among Republicans, would be “a complete fraud,” and others predicted that the outcome would result in a civil war. The sowing of doubt into the institution of our American elections system and along with it the trust that our democracy stood for the people, by the people, was appalling to many.

The election was called by the networks on Saturday, November 7, 2020 for democratic nominee former Vice President Joe Biden. Biden gave a victory speech from a socially distanced parking lot in Wilmington, Delaware, where celebrants honked their horns in support of the new president-elect and his vice-president elect Kamala Harris, the first female and person of color to assume that office.

Before Biden and Harris could be sworn in on January 20, 2021, Trump refused, and still refuses, to concede the election. With claims of fraud and victory, Trump attempted, through his lawyers, supporters’ “stop the steal” rallies, and his own conversations with state secretaries of state, to “overturn the results of an election in which 158 million Americans voted, the most ever, and rejected him by a margin of 7 million votes” (Packer, 2021, p.13). Trump’s effort to stay in power came to a head on January 6, 2021, when his most vocal supporters, their heads filled with conspiracy theories peddled by the right-wing news channels and publications, and believing in their president’s word, invaded the United States Capitol building in a deadly insurrection during the ceremonial certification of the Electoral College’s votes.

Trump rallied his supports before they marched to the Capitol to “fight like hell, or you won’t have a country anymore.” Only late that day, after the plea of politicians from across the

political spectrum, and some within his own administration, did Trump release a video instructing his supporters to “go home,” but not without again speaking about how the election was “stolen” from them.

I know your pain, I know you're hurt. We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election and everyone knows it, especially the other side. But you have to go home now. We have to have peace. We have to have law and order. We have to respect our great people in law and order. We don't want anybody hurt.

It's a very tough period of time. There's never been a time like this where such a thing happened where they could take it away from all of us—from me, from you, from our country. This was a fraudulent election, but we can't play into the hands of these people. We have to have peace. So go home. We love you. You're very special. You've seen what happens. You see the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil.

I know how you feel, but go home, and go home in peace. (Donald Trump, January 6, 2021)

President Biden and Vice President Harris were inaugurated under heavy guard, in a ceremony closed to the public for pandemic and security reasons. Both of those reasons were made as divisive as they were because of the lasting impact, words, and rhetoric of Donald Trump and Trumpism.

### ***American Political Polarization Future***

If Donald Trump continues with a divisive rhetoric, even now as a former president, giving credence to extremists, peddling fallacies, and doubling down on culture war issues, the “cultural divide reflecting ... partisan splits along the dimensions of race and ethnicity, age,



education, gender, region, religiosity, and social values” will continue to widen (Jacobson, 2017, p. 39).

As America becomes more diverse ethnically and racially, whites, especially those with a lower education level, have responded with leaning more conservative and Republican, while racial and ethnic minorities tend to favor liberals and Democrats. Trends that the racial and ethnic differences drive political division more than any other personal demographic differences pre-date Trump’s political career. But his welcoming of white nationalists and hardline anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant voices into his coalition and administration has caused fear for those identify as a member of those minority groups (Jacobson, 2017). The hyperpolarization has not been easily healed, even after the Trump presidency, for the wounds and strong feelings on both sides are actually deeper in the aftermath of “The Big Lie” (the conspiracy theory that Trump won the 2020 election). Beyond Trump’s presidency or even lifetime, the possibility of a different candidate for national office using Trump’s successful strategy and brand of harsh rhetoric and untruthful conspiracy theories, or as one can call it, “Trumpism,” while unorthodox and divisive, is something to watch for in the future

Most literature surveyed writes of negative consequences, with positive outcomes for only the political fringe. A *Washington Post* editorial soon after the 2004 election warned that polarization “can lead only to stalemate” as it can “condemn Congress to gridlock [and] alienate citizens from their government.” For some scholars, it is the frustration in the policy-making process that helps polarization continue. Binder (2003) and Jones (2001) show that party polarization in Congress is closely aligned with legislative gridlock and policy inaction (Layman et al., 2006). Beyond the beltway, polarization is blamed for decline in civility of American political decorum and debate. While the rhetoric from those in Congress (Jamieson & Falk,

2000) can be strong enough to pull people into their partisan corners, it is the increasingly partisan nature of political discussion on radio, television, and the internet, as well as negative political advertising attacking opponents that deepens the rift (Layman et al., 2006; Sinclair, 2002). As for positive future outcomes, “clearer policy differences between the parties and their candidates mean that citizens are better able to distinguish between candidates’ issue stands and thus to cast policy-oriented ballots” (Layman et al., 2006).

While differences in policy might make it easier for one to cast a ballot, I find this analysis short-sighted in that a political moderate might see both sides of an issue and prefer a compromise between the two sides. Polarization benefits fringe elements like Trump train conservatives on the right and self-identified Democratic Socialists on the left, and both can thank social media for giving voice to those who might have not felt they had a megaphone before.

### ***NSFW? What to Teach and What Not to Teach in The Political Classroom***

When this researcher looks at a classroom, he looks at it as a microcosm of society. It represents the neighborhood and community it serves. Dewey (1916) wrote,

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which have kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 1916, p. 87)

Dewey put his trust in the communication and interaction of actual groups working together for both improved education and improved society. The breakdown in communication and the retreat to comfort zones is hurting American discourse and sharing of ideas.

While those on the right might feel that their liberal peers are unwilling to engage in conversation, some on the left might say that certain topics are no longer open for discussion because, as a Cornell student said, “ignorance is hostility in this political climate” (Steinmetz, 2017, para. 27). The student meant that it is everyone’s responsibility to educate themselves on political and cultural viewpoints. This forces the teacher to re-think what topics are appropriate to bring to the political classroom. These topics will change over time, but regardless of time period, it is difficult to determine with certainty what is appropriate. Some activists disagree. Gay rights activist, and one of the founders of the AIDS quilt project, Cleve Jones said, “Some of the younger activists will say things to people they don’t agree with like, ‘It’s not my job to educate you.’ Well, it is your job” (Steinmetz, 2017, para. 28).

The question of whose responsibility is it to educate mainstream society about various social movements and prevent ignorance can be felt over long-held school traditions, too. Noddings (2013) discussed why “under God” exists in the Pledge of Allegiance and said students should hear why it is there. The Pledge of Allegiance entered into public schools during the Eisenhower years to contrast Americans from those “Godless communists” (citation?) The same conversation should happen for all controversial issues and realize that while all students will not agree on everything, their reasoning might not be terribly far apart. Even by listening, they might find common ground on another topic instead of taking broad strokes and labeling a person to be a certain awful thing just because they might support a person or an ideal.

Noddings offered a frank assessment of political education that resonates with this researcher. She said the American political education consists primarily of American history and some civics. Students learn about the country's past and how the government works. They tend not to learn about the philosophical differences of politics beyond the labels of liberalism and conservatism (Noddings, 2013). Noddings argued a greater emphasis should be placed on civic activity, which she says has been squeezed out of curriculum in the last three decades as emphasis on academic study and achievement took over. For example, in many high schools today, there is no discussion of socialism (Noddings, 2013). But perhaps various forms of governments, including socialism, are a worthy concept missing from our civics courses. Maybe it might even show our liberal and conservative students that there are more ideas than just the two boxes you think are available. Perhaps that can stop the political civil war of the lunchroom.

One of the battle grounds of this war is textbooks. Meira Levinson writes in *No Citizen Left Behind* (2012) while some who are politically conservative view some history and government textbooks as unpatriotic, those with a politically liberal view have argued that history and government textbooks are Euro- or white-centric. This is a classic conservative vs. liberal argument, especially in a government class. Of course, this is all framed on someone's experiences that impacts their point of view. That should be an engaging conversation, but, like with any political discussion, tempers can flare, and that can lead a person to shut down, believing the fight is not worth the effort.

Macedo et al. (2005) wrote that the problem plaguing too many government classes across the country is that the courses are more likely to teach citizenship and government content without teaching the skills necessary to become active citizens and that more of an emphasis should be placed on what is going on in the day's politics and current events.

The American Government classroom is a critical piece in the political socialization of an informed citizenry. A person's first exposure to political beliefs and opinions tends to be through family (Achen, 2002), but a primary means for developing one's political socialization is through interactions at school (Sapiro, 2004). High school students especially appear to be swayed by the political opinions of their peers. (Forrest & Weseley, 2007).

Before jumping into controversial issues, Conover and Stanley (1984) said teachers should evaluate what students already know coming into the class from lived experiences and what types of discussions they have had with family and friends. After that, teachers should fill in any gaps or correct any misunderstandings of general concepts (Conover & Stanley, 1984). Wayne Journell and Erin Castro (2011) stressed that idyllic political instruction should present political issues in a way that harnesses the interest of the students by making the concepts relevant.

In addition to textbooks and traditional media formats, the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom has many rich technology resources to help engage students beyond traditional lecture, discussion, and classroom debate. Journell (2011) said many teachers show clips of major news events, campaign stump speeches, and even *Saturday Night Live* clips to attract student interest. Using interactive online electoral maps help literally map out any scenario that could occur on election night, a great visual to project to a class so as to let them interact with different potential outcomes. Rap battles, or rewriting lyrics to a popular song with the policies outlined by a political candidate are a way to apply actual issues in a way that high school students tend to respond to. After students recognize that perhaps they do not entirely align with every single stance of any given political party, students can creatively imagine their own fictional third party, complete with symbol, slogan, and issue platform. Students can learn a lot about politics by

trying to figure out in which regions of the country their imagined party will do well and where they will have to campaign hardest (Journell, 2011). All these methods grab the attention of the American teenager, but they must be done in a way that engages proper, respectful dialogue and a comfortable learning environment.

In the aftermath of the George Floyd protests of 2020 as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, schools and school districts around the country made policy and agenda decisions to place an emphasis on being anti-racist in their practices. Pushback could be felt when conservative parents threatened to pull their children out of their schools, but it was also felt at the school board level. Some worried that applying an anti-racist lens to classroom curriculum “will teach children to hate America or divide the nation by emphasizing our differences” (Waxman, 2021, para. 4). Controversy has raged over critical race theory (CRT), a decades-old academic framework that scholars use to interrogate how legal systems—as well as other elements of society—perpetuate racism and exclusion. “Opponents of CRT now invoke it as a catchall term for any discussion of systemic racism. All of a sudden, this once obscure bit of pedagogy is “the hottest topic in conservative politics” (Waxman, 2021, para. 4). Right-wing conservative media will peddle CRT as the brainwashing going on in the classrooms across America, each of them portrayed as being run by a left-wing socialist indoctrinating students.

Conservative activist groups and state legislatures have launched a campaign “to weaponize the teaching of critical race theory, driven by a belief that fighting it will be a winning electoral message” (Waxman, 2021, para. 5). However, even teachers who are conservative in their own personal political beliefs know that resisting CRT is just the next divisive tactic perpetuated by the right to demonize a vulnerable group, America’s teachers and educators. Or, as Waxman (2021) wrote, “In short, ‘Make America Great Again’ has evolved into ‘Teach

America's Great Again'" (para. 6) as school board candidates and members across the country are confronted by conservative-minded constituents and even people from outside districts, grilling and peppering the officials with questions, accusatory statements and demands.

Simply put, "it's a debate between people who think children shouldn't be burdened with the past, and those who want kids to learn how the legacy of the past shapes American society today" (Waxman, 2021, para. 7). The division is the latest in the culture wars, and this one, like many others, will continue to be debated in American school board meetings, faculty meetings, and history and government classrooms around the country.

***A Fine Line: The Balancing Act for Teachers Between Presenting Controversial Topics and Maintaining a Welcoming Environment***

The idea that the school is a microcosm of society as a whole holds true as political polarization has yielded heightened political tensions in colleges and high schools across America. The 2016 campaign, election, and aftermath heightened the sense of political interest while deepening the political divide. The University of Kansas, viewed as a "liberal oasis" in the red state of Kansas, saw its College Republican club grow from being "on life support" to having 50 members, even though they did not endorse a candidate for president. They face constant obstacles on the campus, such as their campus chalking (advertisements) being washed away purposefully (Knott, 2017).

The Higher Education Research Institution has polled incoming freshmen for decades and found that in 2016 there was a historic low of students who identified as "middle of the road," at 42 percent. 36 percent were left of center, and 20 percent were to the right (Steinmetz, 2017). Conservative students complain, though, that they are not free to exchange ideas in what feel to them like liberal echo chambers. "Holding different views means people don't want to

talk to you,” Harvard junior Conor Healy said. “It means people feel you deserve social punishment.” A recent college graduate said, “I should be able to tell people I voted for Trump without worrying they’ll do something to my car” (Steinmetz, 2017, p. #?). If some of his supporters had not felt bullied into silence, Trump’s win might not have been such a shock to everyone (Steinmetz, 2017).

This generation has grown up in an already fracturing political culture. Republicans and Democrats were never best friends, but their distaste for each other was pretty mild based on survey data from the 1970s. The negative feelings have steadily grown since the early 2000s, which political scientists call “affective partisan polarization.” As each side demonizes the other, compromise becomes more difficult to reach (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

Dewey’s (1916) ideal—to be open and willing to engage in dialogue with others, both who think like you and those who have differing, perhaps opposite opinions—is becoming less and less frequent, both in the high schools where I have worked, but also at college campuses and dining room tables around the country.

Noddings (2013) wrote,

Aristotle described a good friend as one who points his friends upward. A good friend does not ‘cover’ for us or ignore our less exemplary acts. He or she reminds us of our best selves and works with us to actualize our ideals. Similarly, patriots should acknowledge the wrongdoing of their country and criticize failures to live up to our written ideals. (p. 132)

This is why friends or peers with different persuasions must open their eyes, ears, and hearts, and hear one other out. At the same time, we cannot be so defensive that we think that everything one’s beloved country has ever done is correct. No country, and no person, is perfect. The sooner



we are able to recognize that, and humbly embrace that, the better. Instead, as Noddings pointed out, our nationalistic pride has gotten in the way of building a truly deliberative democracy. Too many simply shut down when faced with engaging with someone who does not see things the same way.

Beyond the topics teachers may address to teach adolescent students, the lens, methods, styles and tones through which they teach concepts matter as well. Recent immigrants tend to ignore the American political process either out of an enduring sense of fidelity to their native country or a sense of distrust in American politics driven by the institutional racism encountered by many communities upon coming to the United States (Abu El-Haj, 2007; Mitchell & Parker, 2008). Callahan et al.'s (2008) research suggests that the number of social studies classes a recent immigrant takes can reverse outlooks and produce positive thoughts toward civic engagement. Journell and Castro (2011) found that the cookie cutter approach of a traditional curriculum leaves little room for those with different backgrounds to feel a sense of belonging, and thus, they lack engagement in learning. Government teachers have found success when using an issue near and dear to students' hearts to engage them with class concepts. By using the issue of immigration as a framework for instruction to recent immigrants, teachers were able to strike the delicate balance of teaching the prescribed curriculum while recognizing the backgrounds of their students (Journell & Castro, 2011).

Journell (2011) observed that, in the 2008 campaign, with the fascination of the potential of the first female or first African American president, government teachers were successful in capturing the interest of high school students, but also missed the opportunity to really engage in a deep understanding of American politics. The fascination with the 2016 election did include the first female nominee of a major political party, but it was the unconventional approach of

Trump, and all the media attention it garnered, that had students seeking answers in the government classroom.

Richard Milner (2017) argued that because of the 2016 election, classroom discussions about race and politics are more important than before. Milner recalled a moment when his 7-year-old daughter asked why people were mad at each other on a cable news channel. He told her that they were not mad at each other, just passionate about their views. In hindsight, Milner (2017) felt he had missed a teachable moment of how people should listen to each other's views with his daughter.

Milner said the same thing is happening in classrooms across the country. And it's not just partisan politics or Trump. The Charlottesville white supremacist rally, pardoning of Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio, police brutality, NFL players kneeling during the national anthem, the Flint water crisis, and immigration are all controversial topics that students can discuss in class. Instead of missing important opportunities for students to critically think, engage, learn and develop thoughts on topics they might not know both sides about, teachers should deliberately keep controversial topics at the center of classroom instruction (Milner, 2017).

Diana Hess (2009) found that students enjoy discussing controversial issues in class as it makes the curriculum more relevant and exposes them to new ideas and thoughts. She found that even in politically homogenous classes, students recognized and appreciated ideological diversity when discussing political topics. In contested presidential elections, nuanced arguments tend to give way to emotional partisanship, and the educational benefit is diminished. This puts more pressure on teachers to engage students in constructive dialogue, but students tend to have a better chance to learn constructive strategies for defending a position from teachers than from political candidates in presidential debates (Hess, 2009).

Justin Christensen (2016), an AP Government teacher of 10 years, went further than Hess by saying some of the behavior exhibited during the 2016 election was a challenge for teachers to navigate because “discussing Trump and his attention-grabbing techniques” (para. 1) put them in uncomfortable situations. For someone who strives “to maintain political balance” in his classroom, it became increasingly difficult when Trump’s tweets “seemed to promote fear of an entire religion” (Christensen, 2016, para. 1).

Christensen (2016) noted that if Trump had been a student in his class, he would have broken Christensen’s own classroom rules or expectations:

For example, he would fail to meet my expectation that students treat each other with respect and avoid profane language. Trump has mocked a reporter with a disability. He has criticized the appearance of Carly Fiorina, Megyn Kelly and Heidi Cruz. He has said he will “beat the s— out of” ISIS. He has stated that he would “like to punch (a protester) in the face.” He has even alluded to his own personal anatomy. (Christensen, 2016, para. 7)

Christensen also points out he expects his students to use facts to defend their claims, something Trump has an “astonishingly poor” record of doing (Christensen, 2016, para. 8).

Christensen, who founded the #hsgovchat on Twitter in 2013, has used the hashtag as a source to see how other government educators around the country have grappled with applying Trump’s rhetoric to the classroom. He shared a sampling of tweeted responses with PBS Newshour, including the following: Roy Starling (@DocStar11) tweeted “use them as exs. of immature, abusive rhetoric, unfit for civil discourse on any level. That’s not taking sides.” Erik Anderson (@ericanderson) tweeted, “He’s the only candidate I’ve ever seen where I’ve been unable to stay unbiased myself. It’s been a real challenge.” Stephanie Pollack (@PollackWTW)

tweeted, “I talk about free speech u may not agree what he has to say but he has the right to say it” (Christensen, 2016, para. 9).

To navigate teaching government in the Age of Trump, Christensen suggested asking students if the president’s rhetoric meshes with their own classroom rules and behavior standards, understanding why he makes controversial statements (think about free media attention), understanding his appeal and deeper roots of why that could be, evaluating what experts think of his policy proposals, and teaching students how to fact check (Christensen, 2016). Christensen’s guiding questions stem from his classroom expectations for how people are to talk to one another, conduct research and develop informed opinions. Teachers must enforce their classroom expectations, even if a presidential candidate breaks them (Christensen, 2016).

***Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell? Whether Teachers Should Withhold or Disclose their Political Views to their Classes***

Milner (2017) cautioned that if teachers aren’t properly prepared to discuss such controversial issues, they could do more harm than good. He emphasized that the teacher’s goal in the classroom is not to indoctrinate students or embrace a specific point of view. The goal should never be for the teacher to push their own agenda, but offer all views, including counter views to students’ comments. A vibrant classroom discussion where all feel comfortable sharing should be the goal (Milner, 2017).

Andrew Jones (2017) agreed with Milner, saying that for class discussions, the teacher should be the “neutral judge” where they preside over the debate, not injecting their personal views into it (para. 9). Debate, Jones said, should always be judged on the merits of the arguments made for them, not necessarily the political position itself. In the case when a

classroom is lopsided to one political end of the spectrum, Jones (2017) said playing devil's advocate will help ensure all viewpoints get heard, even if they aren't those of the instructor.

Hess found most teachers choose to not disclose their political leanings, but strike a balance in their introduction of the issues by presenting both sides of an issue, careful to not show a bias to either side (Hess, 2004). But even if a teacher isn't eager to jump right out there and put their views in front of their students, their silence might get noticed. So, what happens when a student asks or wants to know what their teacher thinks about an issue? Jones had two options: the first is for a teacher to keep their views to themselves. That is a teacher's safest bet, but it also might dilute any possible enriching discussion. The second, and more controversial, option would be for the teacher to disclose their opinions while constantly stressing that this is their personal view, and that students must make up their own minds. Making a judgment call on which way to handle that situation depends on the age and maturity of the classroom and the relationship and rapport the teacher has already established with the class (Jones, 2017).

Some government teachers who choose not to disclose their political opinions wonder if students can tell where they lean by reading any tea leaves. Zach Crandall, a government and politics teacher at Buffalo Grove High School, asks his students every year if they can guess his political stripes, and each year, there is an even split between Republican and Democrat guesses. That is Crandall's goal—that they don't know his political leanings. He strives to present “balanced, impartial lessons” (Thayer, 2016, para. 4). Some teachers will not wear political buttons or hang political posters in their classrooms, while others post candidates' bumper stickers, both for the sake of remaining neutral. In regards to wearing, posting and displaying campaign logos and literature, “some school districts have policies to that effect” (Thayer, 2016, para. 5).

Even if districts don't have a policy, some teachers make it their own policy to remain neutral. Mary Ellen Daneels said she felt her Community High School government students' classroom discussions and simulation were more effective if she kept her opinions out of them. "[If] I insert myself, in a way, I'm inserting myself in a conversation where it should be between them," said Daneels. She also keeps any political signage out of the classroom (Thayer, 2016, para. 24).

Whether a teacher brings in their viewpoint, honors opposing viewpoints or keeps theirs completely to themselves, Hess recommends teachers avoid using their classroom for their own political soapbox (Hess, 2009). One teacher learned that the hard way. Social studies teacher William Walker of Prairie Ridge High School in Crystal Lake, Illinois, was placed on leave in October 2016 for endorsing Hillary Clinton and showing his students a video critical of Donald Trump (Thayer, 2016). A teacher's freedom of speech has been challenged in court before. The U.S. Supreme Court held in the case of *Pickering v. Board of Education*, 391 U.S. 563 (1968), that a teacher's speech is protected. The court found that the dismissal of a public school teacher for public statements regarding issues of public importance, without a showing that his statements were knowingly or recklessly false, violated his First Amendment right to free speech (*Pickering v. Board of Education*, 1968). While *Pickering* didn't deal with a teacher's speech inside the classroom, it did set a standard for public employees' freedom of speech.

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution protects a public employee's speech that addresses a matter of "public concern," meaning that the speech is the subject of "legitimate news interest," or, put another way, "a subject of general interest and of value and concern to the public at the time of publication" (Laurin, 2017, p. 1618). The public concern requirement is a prerequisite to reach the balancing test established in *Pickering*, which balances

the employee's interest in speech and the employer's interest in efficiency. Thus, categorizing the speech's content is a key part of First Amendment analysis (Laurin, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

This literature review illustrates that while every American navigates this new political era, some in favor, and some opposed, the American government teacher has the critical job of setting the record straight to the formidable minds of high school students while finding concepts and issues that engage the minds of all students. While there is guidance aplenty for those who seek it on how to approach teaching politics in the classroom, there is little formal guidance or official guidelines on just how to do so in today's environment of political controversy (Journell, 2011).

The American political climate has been progressively more polarized, with opposing sides increasingly listening to fringe elements who have found their voice through the growing use of the internet, social media, partisan broadcasting, and divisive rhetoric from elected officials.

Further research could be done to investigate what situations can lead to unification, finding common ground and closing the ever-widening polarization gap. I struggled to find anything written about how to bring politics back from a politically polarized society to one with civility and respect for those with other viewpoints than their own. Finding out how secondary government and/or history teachers navigate the polarized political climate in their classrooms in the age of Trump would be the goal of the research in the chapters to come.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the personal political predispositions, inclinations, orientations and/or biases of secondary social science teachers and the degree to which those biases impact the teaching and learning environment of their classrooms in today's political climate. I wanted to examine whether, and if so, how this current political climate impacts secondary social science teachers' choices in materials (reading, content, images, sources, tone) for lessons as well as how those teachers engage in discussing controversial issues. High school social science departments can also be called social studies, or history departments, depending on the school or school district. Government, politics, and civics, or any combination of those words can be used to name the course that covers the study of American government. Teachers of U.S. History teach the history of the country since the first settlers arrived in America, either chronologically or thematically. Both government and history courses are in social science departments at the high school level. Government and/or history teachers were the specific kinds of secondary social science teachers that this study sought to examine and research.

### **Rationale**

While there is a significant amount of research on the study of political polarization, and studies on how past election seasons played out in classrooms (e.g., Journell, 2011), much of the research was prior to the unique Age of Trump. There was far less research on how events and movements of the past 10 years impact the teaching of government and history courses in American secondary schools. While partisanship has existed since the beginning of the republic, the current political climate seems to be delivering a different sense of tension to secondary



social science teachers' courses. Because of this, this study was conducted by interviewing social studies teachers, whom students tend to look to for clarity in their subject of expertise. When minds of any age, but especially young minds, can be impacted by misinformation and disinformation, it is important to be able to seek clarification and answers when presented with potentially confusing or conflicting narratives that can come from today's information sources. In an age when politics is anything but business as usual, and in a climate where political tensions run high, the social studies classroom is ripe for research. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact that the past 10 years has had on secondary government and history teachers and the teaching and learning environment of their classrooms. I sought to better understand the ways in which high school teachers provide instruction and lessons in the arena of politics and how they felt about teaching in the current climate. For teachers, it is not uncommon that they do not get to plan, observe, and share pedagogical strategies due to their course load or schedule, making for quite the isolating experience. In addition, for those who have to teach specifically about government and politics, it is possible that they are the only one in their school. By doing this study, I aim to open a helpful dialogue as a window into how other educators are teaching high school students about government and politics in the years in and surrounding the Trump administration.

## **Methodology**

Narrative Inquiry was the methodology used for this study as it provides the ability to tell the authentic and true stories of various individuals who share a commonality. Narrative inquiry allows for research to include accounts and stories of experience to form the narrative "text" of this research approach. Further, narrative inquiry was suited for this study because it honors an individual's experience as source of knowledge, it is respectful of the common experience

(between teachers in this case), it allows for a relationship between the researcher and participant to conduct the interview and examines the meaning people create from their lived experiences and provides a rich description of that experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Narrative inquiry is a well-suited method for the retelling of teachers' personal experiences in and outside their classrooms. "People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). While narrative inquiry data sources can include field notes of shared experiences, interviews, storytelling, letter-writing, autobiographical and biographical writing, and newsletters, this study was conducted with a focus on the one-on-one interview between myself, the researcher and the participant.

Additional reasons why I chose to use narrative inquiry as the methodology for this study include: an increased emphasis on participants' reflections, more attention given to what the participants know, how participants think and make decisions, and shedding light on participants' stories and experiences. Further, narrative inquiry works well for a researcher who prefers face-to-face interviews and conversations.

## **Research Context**

This study was conducted in the context of secondary government and/or history teachers' lived experiences, particularly those who have taught the subject for years before and during the Age of Trump. Furthermore, because the context of this study was teacher-focused, there was significant attention placed on how teachers made curricular decisions for their class, how they balanced controversial topics and discussions, and to what degree their own political views were brought into the classroom.

## **Research Sample & Sources of Data**

Because the participant pool is typically small in qualitative research, it was imperative to seek out participants with similar knowledge of the field to maximize the likelihood of rich data (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006). The participants consisted of experienced secondary government and/or history teachers so that they could potentially compare teaching prior to and during the age of Trump. After receiving IRB approval, I sent an email (see Appendix C) to teachers that communicated the purpose of the study in a non-threatening and low-pressure manner (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006). Participant teachers were reached out to through snowball sampling, where my colleagues and teachers I have met through conferences over my career connected me with potential participants they knew, and then those participants sometimes did the same (Creswell, 2011). The email message outlined my identity, a description of the study, and the participant's role in the study. Literature suggested that a small sample size was sufficient to uncover the main points of the phenomenon (Gonzalez, 2009); therefore, 10 participants who responded to the email were selected for the study. I strived to include teacher participants from various schools and regions to include geographic diversity of shared experience in the study and to explore whether there were differences in traditionally blue states versus red states and swing states.

The recruitment email to potential participants communicated that the interview would be done in a space which was safe, confidential, and sensitive to one's identity, and given the constraints of the pandemic period, able to be conducted over Zoom. After recruiting potential participants, I contacted the participant teachers to set up a time to be interviewed. Interested participants were scheduled for an interview session at time that was convenient to their own personal schedule. An informed consent form was signed by the participant before the recorded interview conversation could be conducted (see Appendix H).

Ultimately, interviews were conducted with 10 participant teachers. I engaged with the data in an indirect manner as to revisit the data several times (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). By working in such a way, I coded and categorized the data in order to conceptualize the content from the transcriptions. I engaged in two types of coding when analyzing the data: open coding and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Through open coding, meaning and ideas were gathered from the raw data. Subsequently, axial coding began once these ideas were discovered, allowing for connections to be made among the codes. By structuring the analysis in such a way, I was able to conceptualize the data in a cohesive way and ultimately produced the central findings of the study.

### Summary of Interview Participants

The findings from this study emerged as a result of 10 one-on-one interviews. Per the stated inclusion criteria for the study, the participants were high school teachers of social studies. More specifically, all participants happened to teach government and/or history courses and have all taught for at least five years. The participant data is outlined below in Table 1.

Participant Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pseudonym	Twyla	Ted	Stevie	Jocelyn	Alexis	Roland	Moir	David	Patrick	Johnny
Sex	Female	Male	Male	Female	Female	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male
Race / Ethnicity	Black	White	Latino	White	Latina	White	White	White	White	Latino
State Teaching in	Michigan	Mass.	Florida	Colo.	Calif.	Texas	Illinois	Illinois	Mass.	Florida
Years Teaching	24	18	8	7	6	10	24	9	15	18
School Type	Small, Private	Small, Private	Small, Private	Mid-Size, Public	Mid-Size, Public	Large, Public	Large, Public	Large, Public	Mid-size Private	Mid-size Private
Classes Taught	US History, World History, Global Crises, Caribbean Studies	US History, 1968, Political Polarization: from Nixon to Obama	Contemp. History, History of the Americas, Criminology, Intro. To Criminal Law	Gov't, AP Gov't & Politics, World History, AP World History, US History, Economics	AP Gov't & Politics, US History, Economics	AP Gov't & Politics, AP US History, US History, Economics	AP Gov't & Politics, AP US History, Economics	Journalism, Honors US History, AP Seminar, AP US History	Journalism, AP Gov't & Politics, US History, Latin American Studies	AP Gov't & Politics, AP US History, Honors US History, AP World History

Role(s) Outside the Classroom	Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; SOAR: Students Organized Against Racism, Black and LGBTQ+ Affinity Groups	Monitors diploma requirements	Gaming Club		Rainbow Alliance		Student Government Association	Newspaper Advisor, Environmental Justice Club, Republican Club	Newspaper Advisor	Diversity Club, Social Justice Club, Gaming Club
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Table 1. *Summary of Participants*

### **Data Collection Method: Interviews**

10 secondary government and history teachers were interviewed about how their daily work of teaching their courses to a high school age group may or may not have changed or shifted due to factors such as school political culture, the hyperpolarized political landscape, changing cultural norms, misinformation, and disinformation. I gathered data through interviewing to help tell government and history teachers' authentic stories.

Interviews were conducted individually for each participant over Zoom due to the Covid-19 pandemic and adherence to CDC social distancing recommendations. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each. Interviews were audio and video recorded to provide an accurate transcript of the conversation. Interviews were conducted with common questions guided by my interview protocol (see Appendix I), with further probing questions with some interviewees.

Because the approach to interviewing was semi-structured, I followed an outline but also left room for more off-the-cuff conversations and stories that were on topic but allowed time to follow-up on those unique tales of lived experiences pertaining to the subject matter. While I can refer to the interviews as conversations, it should be understood that they were by and large, one-way conversations, with me not inserting my own opinions and stories into the conversation but conducting the interview to get the participant's story. By conducting the research in this way, I was able to create an atmosphere that was inviting and open, giving the participants a chance to

share their personal experiences. Lofland and Lofland (1995) suggested providing room for interpretation of ideas is key to building rapport with participants. As such, meaning is developed in the interaction, generating a significant lived experience (Kvale, 2006). Interviews created a space for a participant to tell a story, providing me with rich detail as to their lived experience and allowing for the development of patterns and themes (McNamara, 1999). The developed protocol for the semi-structured interview acted as a guide for the conversation, providing a foundation for the rest of interview (Flick, 2002). The goal in asking these questions throughout the semi-structured interviews was to understand how a secondary government and/or history teacher's approach to teaching their subject potentially changes during times of challenging and controversial political and cultural movements, potentially resulting in new knowledge to the field.

The overarching research question revolved around how do social science teachers teach politics in an era of cultural and political change? More specifically, I wanted to know: How do social science teachers make choices in materials (reading, content, images, sources, tone) for lessons? How do social science teachers engage in issues that spontaneously arise? I also engaged respondents in questions regarding how do teachers' personal political biases impact the teaching and learning environment of their classrooms? All questions try to get to the main takeaway from the research, determining what impact the age of Trump has made on government and history teachers' teaching.

### **Coding Process**

In qualitative research, assigning codes, or labels, to data gives the researcher a chance to make sense of the raw data that was collected. Miles and Huberman (1994) and DeCuir-Gunby and Marshall (2011) suggest that codes be assigned to chunks of data so that ultimately, meaning

is developed from the first-hand accounts collected by the researcher. The researcher ought to work to uncover specific details of an experience, therefore, by implementing a coding process, meaning is developed by becoming immersed in the data.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis occurred through multiple times coding the interview transcripts. Data was coded to search for common themes to guide the findings of the research report. The participants were each given a pseudonym to protect their identity. A list of the identities to which the code name corresponded was kept separately in a locked safe. All electronic files, such as the transcripts, recordings, and videos were kept behind a password protected file folder that only I have access to. The data, initially recorded by audio recording or by Zoom, is necessary for the research methodology of narrative inquiry.

The data of the interviews was recorded by recording the Zoom interview. The recordings were transcribed by a transcription service, and then coded by myself.

In qualitative research, assigning codes to data gives the researcher a chance to make sense of the raw data that was collected. I worked to uncover specific details of government and history teachers' lived experiences, and therefore, by implementing a coding process, became immersed in the data. As the coding process unfolded, I found significant statements from the interviews with each statement giving personal meaning to a particular lived experience. This study's codes were created based on repetition of words, actions, thoughts or beliefs (Creswell, 2011). From there, the codes were color-coded for my ease of sorting and locating them by commonality. Ultimately, I combined codes to help simplify them into succinct and clear themes, some with corresponding subthemes to give meaning to the reported experiences, ultimately addressing the study's central research question of "what are the perceptions and experiences of

high school government and history teachers regarding curriculum and instruction in the age of Trump?” I determined the emergent themes by noting the frequency of certain commonalities. After the six themes emerged, I paired the study’s commonalities and findings with the research sub-questions so that connections could be made in hopes of filling the relevant gaps in the scholarship. The themes which grew out of the data analysis process are shared below in *Table 2*.

<b>Emergent Theme #1:</b> The Trump Impact on the Student Body and Faculty (the macro level of the school)
<b>Subtheme 1A:</b> Green: school political climates move left
<b>Subtheme 1B:</b> Red: “out” Republican students are increasingly in decline in high school student and faculty populations. With school communities push to the political left, most openly Republican students are in retreat.
<b>Subtheme 1C:</b> Orange: The leftward lurch to counter Trumpism has opened the door to Orange: an increase in student and school political activism for liberal policies.
<b>Subtheme 1D:</b> Fuchsia: To make classrooms as inclusive as possible, teachers try to appeal to perhaps outnumbered or singled out Republican students and to show tolerance of all viewpoints by making a point to bring up stories of conservative family members and loved ones and explain that those people are loved regardless of different viewpoints or misplaced derogative labels that other students might affix to them in anger.
<b>Subtheme 1E:</b> Meanwhile, Brick Red: A generational difference emerges: parents seem to be consistently to the political right of their children.
<b>Emergent Theme #2:</b> The Trump Impact in the Classroom (the micro level of the school).
<b>Subtheme 2A:</b> Brown: All major events and actions that disrupted participants’ curriculum and planned lessons can be linked back to Trump’s policies or rhetoric including the January 6th Insurrection of the United States Capitol building.
<b>Subtheme 2B:</b> Purple: All major events and actions that disrupted participants’ curriculum and planned lessons can be linked back to Trump’s policies or rhetoric including the day after the 2016 election (Nov. 9, 2016)
<b>Subtheme 2C:</b> Twitter Blue: All major events and actions that disrupted participants’ curriculum and planned lessons can be linked back to Trump’s policies or rhetoric including his tweets, comments, and behavior
<b>Subtheme 2D:</b> Yellow: All major events and actions that disrupted participants’ curriculum and planned lessons can be linked back to Trump’s policies or rhetoric including police brutality and the national 2020 George Floyd protests, the Black Lives Matter movement causing schools to develop anti-racism agendas.
<b>Emergent Theme #3:</b> Sunflower Orange and Royal Blue: Teachers aim to demonstrate civility and democracy in classrooms



<b>Emergent Theme #4:</b> Hot Pink: “They might ask, but they don’t tell” (teacher’s decisions to keep their political views private from their students).
<b>Emergent Theme #5:</b> Lavender: The Rise of Misinformation and Disinformation in the classroom
<b>Emergent Theme #6:</b> Grey: The Political Classroom, Trumped

Table 2. *Emergent Themes and Subthemes*

## **Ethics**

Participation of respondents (secondary government and history teachers) in the research was voluntary. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage if they wished to do so. Research participants were not subjected to harm in any way whatsoever, and the respect for the dignity of research participants was prioritized through compassionate conversational interview questions. If, at any time, a participant felt uncomfortable, they would not have to answer a question, and could end the interview. Full informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to the study. The confidentiality and protection of the privacy of research participants was ensured through pseudonyms and disguising any other information that might reveal one’s identity used in reports. As previously mentioned, all materials related to the study are behind password protection folders only I have access to.

Research through interview was done without any exaggeration or deception, and I avoided giving information that might have been misleading. Questions were asked without any positive or negative tones, or without any tone of assumption that might have swayed the interview subject. All communication in relation to the research was done with honesty and transparency. Interviews with respondents were done with professional compassion and the use of offensive, discriminatory, or other unacceptable language was avoided.

Questions, tone, or dialogue did not change from me regardless of the response from the research subject. For example, if a respondent had opinions on political issues the opposite of me, or perhaps was talking about how they indoctrinate students, which goes against my personal

belief of how a teacher should conduct themselves in the classroom, their answers and practices were accepted as is without commentary or judgement from myself and let those stories color the potential diversity of the results. If a teacher was worried about confidentiality, I would remind them that their name, regardless of how they feel, would not appear in the study, but rather a pseudonym. I assured research subjects that their responses were in strictest confidentiality, and their identity will not be shared with anyone. Interviews were conducted in one-on-one Zoom meetings for pandemic safety precautions.

During this study, I was mindful of my biases from my own prior experiences as to not implement these biases into the experiences of the participants. Doing so resulting in *epoche*, or suspending judgment, from my personal views and beliefs about topics and concepts discussed as to not influence the study's findings (Lin, 2013).

### **Quality / Trustworthiness**

I came to this study with a strong interest as a high school government teacher who was struggling to maintain an unbiased classroom environment in the age of Trump. I brought a fair, yet compassionate and understanding attitude to the interviews while acknowledging my own assumptions and bias. As a former television journalist, I have been trained in how to keep my own opinions in check and did the same as I interviewed respondents and wrote the report. The report contains descriptions and background on all respondents, providing transparency, but, for ethical reasons, not enough detail to reveal the identity of the participants (Lin, 2013). Editing and coding was used in the analysis process to see how my work relates to others' understandings in similar contexts.

As with any interview, doubt can exist that one is not telling the truth. In a narrative inquiry study, it is the research subject's lived experience that provides the anecdotes and

answers for the report. It is my assumption that the research participants told the truth. I took the research subjects' stories at their word, and let their tales illustrate the unique dilemmas that a government or history teacher in the age of Trump faces.

### **Positionality Statement**

As a fellow high school government teacher, and experienced interviewer, I believe I was able to elicit stories and personal accounts and narratives from other secondary social science teachers as one of their peers, even if they never met before. The conversation that occurs between two people with a shared experience is much different than someone with no similarities or common ground and is certainly different than a superior or school or district administrator asking questions of a teacher's teaching practices. Further, it is very different from someone outside the education community asking questions of a teacher and not having that first-hand knowledge of what they might be going through.

As an AP Government & Politics teacher, and someone who has studied political science and worked previously in congressional offices and covered politics and campaigns from a journalistic lens, the blending of political science and journalism, both in content and practicality, is something I have strong background knowledge in and helps me frame questions and research. I didn't lead on with that information, as I wanted to make the research subjects feel as comfortable as possible and have no intimidation, which, in my opinion, they should not have.

I understood the internal struggle that a classroom teacher can encounter over whether to reveal their personal feelings on politics, candidates, and the government in general. I understood the planning process that goes into a class, and the unplanned moments of students' questions that arise and how a teacher can be put on the spot to address controversial subject material.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I have witnessed students bullied for their political views. I also witnessed students sobbing in class the day after the November 2016 presidential election because they, or one of their friends, was an undocumented immigrant who feared deportation. I have seen students navigate the politics of gun control after the Parkland, Florida shooting in February 2018 and subsequent national school walkouts. Again, students who chose to not walk out at my school had fingers pointed at them for their views. Those who did walk out, navigated whether they wanted to risk detention or consequence for leaving.

As a teacher, and more importantly, a government and politics teacher, I had been looked to as a guide in these situations. Just as a leader's behavior might be mimicked by their constituents, a teacher's tone and views should be carefully chosen in those difficult situations. When a president conducts himself in a way that would earn him a trip to the principal's office if he was a student of mine, it makes it that much more difficult to teach about the presidency when the incumbent is reckless with the office. Navigating those situations without alienating his supporters or making a Republican or conservative student feel alienated can be tricky. I stressed the difference between Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal, and stressed that they are simply beliefs and positions, and one should be able to separate one's political views from one's person or personality. But where my dilemma arises in the age of Trump would be when the president lies and conducts himself in a disrespectful way. In the age of Trump, I found myself focused on differentiation between right and wrong, or constitutional or unconstitutional, while carefully trying to respect all political views and make sure readings and materials for the course showed as many sides or points of view as possible.

I recognized that some teachers have trouble opening up about their teaching methods and stories to someone who could be a complete stranger, but I felt that since I am someone who

has probably experienced similar situations, the subject felt comfortable enough to share their stories.

As someone who grew up in a homogenous, mostly white, suburb of a major midwestern city, attended public schools, student taught in a racially, socioeconomically and politically diverse all-boys Jesuit high school in a poor urban neighborhood, taught in a racially and socioeconomically diverse urban public high school and a racially and ethnically diverse suburban private school, I have been in different types of school cultures and is able to relate to structures, demands, and policies placed on teachers at various types of learning institutions.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

This study was conducted among 10 high school social science teachers who teach across the United States. Selection of teachers was done by reaching out to school faculty members that have taught for at least five years so that they are able to compare to how they taught before the Trump administration.

Limitations would include that 10 random teachers of government and history do not constitute a large enough number of teachers to make a true determination of what teaching politics in the Age of Trump is like for everyone everywhere. Qualitative research does not claim generalizability, but readers of this study can learn what it is like to teach high school politics in a polarizing political and cultural climate.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

This study examined how 10 American high school government and/or history teachers teach their curriculum content while navigating controversial political questions and lessons in a period of hyperpolarization and cultural change while aiming to create an inclusive atmosphere for all viewpoints. The existing literature on how one teaches a high school government, politics, or civics course during polarized and political times does little more than to address teaching in the 2008 election and the practice of giving equal time and voice to opposing viewpoints (Journell, 2011). As such, this project sought to fill a void in the literature in hopes of supporting the future of government and history teacher development in the United States. The methodology of narrative inquiry was used to help fill the gap in the scholarship, allowing me to obtain first-hand accounts of teachers' conscious lived experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

The findings of this study included the personal perspectives of the teacher participants which ultimately helped answer the central research question of, "What are the perceptions and experiences of high school government and history teachers regarding curriculum and instruction in the age of Trump?" Specific interview questions revolved around how do government and/or history teachers teach politics in the age of Trump: How do government and/or history teachers make choices in materials (reading, content, images, sources, tone) for lessons? How do government and/or history teachers engage in issues that spontaneously arise? I also engaged respondents in questions regarding how teachers' personal political biases impact the teaching and learning environment of their classrooms. The interview protocol was designed to find answers to the primary research question which was: What are the perceptions and experiences of high school government and history teachers regarding curriculum and instruction in the age of Trump.

As the coding process unfolded, I found 130 significant statements from the interviews (averaging 13 statements per participant), each statement giving personal meaning to a particular lived experience (Schuemann, 2014). At this point, I condensed the statements into categories. The categories were created based on repetition of words, actions, thoughts or beliefs (Creswell, 2011). From there, the categories were color-coded based on my perception of the category's meaning. Ultimately, I reorganized categories to help simplify them into succinct and clear themes that aligned with the primary research question and sub-questions. Table 3 outlines the categories and corresponding colors. The following colors were used to identify the major commonalities and serves as a legend to Table 3:

- **Sunflower Orange**: How to teach in this era: establish norms together and teach students how, not what, to think
- **Fuchsia**: Teachers mention love for conservative friends/family
- **Brown**: Trump and Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection
- **Purple**: Trump and the day after the 2016 election
- **Twitter Blue**: Trump's tweets, comments, & behavior
- **Yellow**: Trump and BLM issues
- **Royal Blue**: Controversial discussions more likely in government classes
- **Lavender**: Media literacy and mis-/dis-information
- **Hot Pink**: Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions
- **Red**: Out Republican students in decline
- **Green**: School political climates move left
- **Brick Red**: Generational difference in political views
- **Orange**: Trump and student activism
- **Grey**: Trump mentioned by participant

Sub-questions that were related to the overarching research question aligned with these commonality categories as follows:

Sub-question A) How has the age of Trump, a period of cultural and political change, impacted how teachers perceive their decisions about what content to present to the class as a controversial political issue?

- **Sunflower Orange:** How does a government and/or history teacher teach their content area in this hyperpolarized era?
  - All participants were found to set ground rules early, “establish norms,” together as a class. Establishing norms involves setting the ground work for the class to form their own rules on how to talk to each other about politics on the first day of school. Over time, teachers teach students to not personally attack each other, but rather, question policy.
  - Teachers must teach students to think but not how to think or what to think. Participant teachers are against indoctrination, and imposing their own political beliefs directly upon students and classes, but teach their students to think critically and analyze political and cultural viewpoints from all sides and opinions.
- **Fuchsia:** Teachers model civility and separate people from their politics
  - Teachers try to instill in their students that their classmates come from different religions, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and family value systems, and teaching them that because of that, one doesn’t have to agree, but one does have to figure out how to live together. In trying to relate to likely school minority community of self-identifying Republican or politically conservative-minded students, teachers will bring up stories of their own conservative family members, friends and loved ones to show that while they might disagree with some of their politics, it doesn’t mean that they do not talk to them.

Sub-question B) How has the age of Trump impacted how teachers perceive balancing the tensions between engaging students in authentic political controversies and creating a classroom climate that is fair and welcoming to all students? Findings show the most frequently mentioned



events and issues that high school social studies teachers had to carefully navigate in the past decade can all be linked back to President Donald Trump's policies or rhetoric and include: the January 6th Insurrection of the United States Capitol Building, the day after Trump's 2016 election (Nov. 9, 2016), his tweets, comments, and behavior, police brutality and the national 2020 George Floyd protests, the Black Lives Matter movement causing schools to develop anti-racism agendas and navigating divisive times by trying to bridge the gap that is widening between the two major political parties.

- **Brown:** Trump connected to the events that led to most common controversial discussions: The January 6th Insurrection of the United States Capitol Building
  - Participants were most emphatic that the January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 Insurrection of the United States Capitol Building was the most difficult event to navigate and explain to students. Teachers were now put in a position of explaining that the president of the United States might very well be in support of overturning the results of the 2020 election that he lost. The idea that a president would subvert the will of the people to retain power and appeared to be trying everything in his toolbox to do so was alarming and disturbing. The violence, destruction, death, and disregard for the Constitution on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, at the Capitol Building was the result of years of divisive rhetoric coming from Trump, misinformation, disinformation, and lies coming from social media, right wing cable news and websites, conspiracy theorists, groups, and cults, and the White House.
- **Purple:** Trump connected to the events that lead to most common controversial discussions: the day after the 2016 election (Nov. 9, 2016)

- Participants discussed in detail the difficulty to face their classes on the morning after the after the 2016 election. On Nov. 9, 2016, teachers interviewed said they were caught off guard by Trump's win, and while they wanted to instill that he won fair and square, and that he would be the next president, that they also had to balance the concern they had for their undocumented students who were terrified that they or their parents would be deported or ripped apart from each other. Various minority communities were also in fear based on his campaign rhetoric and promises. Others were concerned for the institution of the presidency and all levers of the federal government. While participants had those concerns, they wanted to put forth as neutral a demeanor to the results as possible, keeping in line with their beliefs that a teacher keeps their personal political views to themselves. That proved a challenge for participants that day.
- **Twitter Blue:** Trump connected to the events that lead to most common controversial discussions: his tweets, comments, and behavior
  - Participants said the ongoing divisive rhetoric from President Trump proves to be challenging to address in their classes. When the president of the United States, a position students are taught from an early age to usually look up to as the leader of the country and as a role model, spewed such hatred, crude, crass, and demeaning language and statements about anyone who disagreed with him. Whether through his tweets, speeches, written statements, or other expressions, Trump's behavior was one that not only should not be modeled by students, it would be behavior that would land them in the principal's office.

- **Yellow:** Trump connected to the events that lead to most common controversial discussions: police brutality / BLM / anti-racism / George Floyd protests
  - Navigating the Trump’s divisive rhetoric about the Black Lives Matter movement, White nationalist dog whistles in the wake of the Charlottesville “Unite the Right” deadly tiki torch rally, and seemingly always defending police when racism was in play but not when they were defending the Capitol from rioters and insurrectionists on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 proved to be a challenge for participant teachers addressing those situations with their high school government and/or history classes.
- **Royal Blue:** Government classes more likely to have controversial discussions than other social sciences and history classes
  - A high school government class, sometimes with the words “politics” or “civics” in the course title, is one where content covers the legislative, executive and judicial branches of the federal government, the U.S. Constitution, federalism, civil liberties, civil rights, public opinion, and the impact of linkage institutions on the government and its citizenry like the media, interest groups, political parties, campaigns, elections and voting. A high school history class, could cover the chronological or thematic history of the United States, or various global regions. Other courses traditionally found in a high social studies department include psychology, sociology, economics. In teaching these concepts, participants who taught both government and history classes said that topics which they felt to be controversial or difficult to address and discuss came up more often in their government classes than in their history classes.

- **Lavender:** Disinformation and misinformation continue to be a big problem. Media literacy being taught in most schools interviewed and others saying they need to do more of it or start doing so.
  - The permeation of disinformation and misinformation on the internet, whether on social media or non-reputable news sources, or from cable news channels that have pundits airing conspiracy theories masked as news journalists delivering facts, or word-of-mouth from a loved one or person one values, continue to be a big problem in the high school government and/or history classroom and in the larger school community in general. To combat this, media literacy lessons are being taught in most schools interviewed and others saying they need to do more of it or start doing so. Media literacy lessons focus on teaching students how to determine what is factual, how to sense bias in journalism, and determine reputable sources.

Sub-question C) How has the age of Trump impacted how teachers reflect on withholding and/or disclosing their views about the issues they introduce as controversial?

- **Hot Pink:** Teachers keep their political views to themselves, although admit that their personal biases can be pointed out
  - Unanimously, the 10 participant teachers keep their political views to themselves, although most add that students can probably tell where they lie politically. The 10 participant teachers do not think it is proper to impose their viewpoints or make the class about their views, but are cognizant that students might have preconceived notions about a teacher's political leanings based upon the sources that they might routinely use in the course.

Sub-question D) How do teachers perceive how their school's political climate might have changed in the past five to 10 years in light of the age of Trump?

- **Red:** Out Republican students in decline
  - As school political climates move left, the number of students who are out or comfortable with self-identifying as “Republican” are increasingly in decline in high school student and faculty populations. It is important to note that while there are many people in the United States who identify as Republican, not all of them support Trump and the ideals of Trumpism. This includes political conservatives and moderate conservatives.
- **Green:** School political climates move left
  - While participants indicated that students and faculty gradually, on average, moved politically left, with more progressive ideals both in academic approaches, such as including the histories of historically marginalized groups, and in school inclusive measures, such as gender neutral bathrooms and making space for clubs for students representing various self-identifying groups over the past decade or more, there was a much more urgent push to the left in the wake of the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. While school communities moved left with more urgency, participants mentioned it was parents who sometimes spoke out against all of the progressive moves made by schools.
- **Brick Red:** Generational difference: parents seem to be consistently to the political Right of their children
  - What is a “political issue” to adults might be something that’s already quite decided among teens. With some schools’ conscious push to the left, it left some more

politically conservative-minded White families feeling “blamed” and, if possible, looking for the exit doors of the school. Some parents are to the political right after fleeing Communist countries, some are to the conservative because of their larger pocket books, and some might be more religious more socially conservative than their children and that generation.

- **Orange:** Trump leads to an increase in student / school activism
  - The candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump shook many apathic and uninterested adolescents into becoming student activists for climate change awareness, gun control, women’s rights, Black lives, the undocumented, and other issues, in and outside of their schools.

Not connected to any specific research sub-question, one additional commonality emerged:

- **Grey:** While the name Trump, or any reference to the former president was not made by me, the researcher, during the interviews, all but one of the 10 participants mentioned Trump by name at least once throughout the interview.

Table 3 illustrates visually the commonalities in the participants’ experiences.

Participant Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pseudonym	Twyla	Ted	Stevie	Jocelyn	Alexis	Roland	Moira	David	Patrick	Johnny
Out Republican Students in Decline	Out Republican Students in Decline	Out Republican Students in Decline	Out Republican Students in Decline	Out Republican Students in Decline	Out Republican Students in Decline		Out Republican Students in Decline	Out Republican Students in Decline	Out Republican Students in Decline	Out Republican Students in Decline
School Political Climates Move Left	School Political Climates Move Left	School Political Climates Move Left	School Political Climates Move Left	School Political Climates Move Left	School Political Climates Move Left	School Political Climates Move Left	School Political Climates Move Left	School Political Climates Move Left	School Political Climates Move Left	School Political Climates Move Left
Trump and Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection	Trump and Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection	Trump and Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection		Trump and Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection	Trump and Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection				Trump and Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection	Trump and Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection
Trump and the day after the 2016 election		Trump and the day after the 2016 election			Trump and the day after the 2016 election		Trump and the day after the 2016 election	Trump and the day after the 2016 election		
Trump's tweets, rhetoric, & behavior	Trump's tweets, rhetoric, & behavior	Trump's tweets, rhetoric, & behavior					Trump's tweets, rhetoric, & behavior		Trump's tweets, rhetoric, & behavior	
Trump and BLM issues	Trump and BLM issues				Trump and BLM issues		Trump and BLM issues	Trump and BLM issues		Trump and BLM issues
Teaching in this era: establish norms together and teach students how, not what, to think	Teaching in this era: establish norms together and teach students how, not what, to think	Teaching in this era: establish norms together and teach students how, not what, to think		Teaching in this era: establish norms together and teach students how, not what, to think		Teaching in this era: establish norms together and teach students how, not what, to think		Teaching in this era: establish norms together and teach students how, not what, to think		
Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions	Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions	Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions	Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions	Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions	Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions	Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions	Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions	Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions	Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions	Teachers try not to disclose personal political opinions
Media literacy and mis-/dis-info.	Media literacy and mis-/dis-info.	Media literacy and mis-/dis-info.	Media literacy and mis-/dis-info.	Media literacy and mis-/dis-info.	Media literacy and mis-/dis-info.	Media literacy and mis-/dis-info.	Media literacy and mis-/dis-info.	Media literacy and mis-/dis-info.	Media literacy and mis-/dis-info.	Media literacy and mis-/dis-info.
Controversial discussions more likely in gov't classes		Controversial discussions more likely in gov't classes		Controversial discussions more likely in gov't classes	Controversial discussions more likely in gov't classes	Controversial discussions more likely in gov't classes	Controversial discussions more likely in gov't classes		Controversial discussions more likely in gov't classes	Controversial discussions more likely in gov't classes
Gen. difference in political views	Gen. difference in political views	Gen. difference in political views	Gen. difference in political views	Gen. difference in political views		Gen. difference in political views				Gen. difference in political views
Trump mentioned by participant	Trump mentioned by participant	Trump mentioned by participant	Trump mentioned by participant	Trump mentioned by participant	Trump mentioned by participant		Trump mentioned by participant	Trump mentioned by participant	Trump mentioned by participant	Trump mentioned by participant
Trump and student activism	Trump and student activism			Trump and student activism	Trump and student activism					
Talking about conservative loved ones					Talking about conservative loved ones		Talking about conservative loved ones	Talking about conservative loved ones		

Table 3. Initial Codes and Color Identifiers

After reviewing the categories, I organized the data into succinct themes with corresponding subthemes to give meaning to the reported experiences, ultimately addressing the study's central research questions (Creswell, 2011). I noted which codes appeared frequently throughout the data as to verify the strength of the code, ultimately becoming a relevant theme and subtheme (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). While frequency of categories within data can warrant the inclusion of a theme, it is of most importance to confirm that the six emergent themes and subthemes capture the essence of the study's research questions (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). I determined the emergent themes to be relevant to the study's findings due to the explanations reported of how high school government and history teachers grapple with the issues of today in a modern classroom.

### **Overview of Emergent Themes Found**

#### ***Emergent Theme One: The Trump Impact on the Student Body and Faculty***

As school political climates move left, the number of students who are out or comfortable with self-identifying as "Republican" are increasingly in decline in high school student and faculty populations. It is important to note that while there are many people in the United States who identify as Republican, not all of them support Trump and the ideals of Trumpism. Some who do not support Trump might be more politically moderate like Sen. Lisa Murkowski, Sen. Susan Collins, or Sen. Mitt Romney. Some who do not support Trump might be politically conservative like Rep. Liz Cheney. But, whether as a candidate, the incumbent president, or now as a former president, Donald Trump has remade the majority of the Republican party to reflect his political policies and stances, and most strikingly, a high degree of loyalty and allegiance to himself from elected Republicans or those seeking elected office. The label of "Republican" in high schools across the country can often be viewed as the having the same meaning as those to a



different “R” label in 2021, racist. Whether fair or not, high school culture can be dominated by the popular thought and labels, and this label is seen in participants’ schools for those who identify as Republican, political conservatives and even moderates, depending on the geographic location, and political culture of the region one’s school is in. The leftward movement in school culture applies to both the student body and composition of faculty. As Patrick said, “It’s gone from left to wicked left, as we say. It’s gone further and further left, especially once Trump was inaugurated, and especially since last summer, after George Floyd.”

The leftward lurch to counter Trumpism has opened the door to an increase in student and school political activism for liberal policies including climate change awareness, gun control, women’s rights, Black lives, the undocumented, and other issues. Social studies courses, especially government and/or history classes, have made conscious efforts to include the histories of historically marginalized groups and unsung voices. Schools have taken measures over the past decade or so to be more inclusive for all, such as installing gender neutral bathrooms and making space for clubs for students representing various self-identifying groups. In 2020 there was a much more urgent push to the left in the wake of the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests. To make classrooms as inclusive as possible, participant teachers try to appeal to perhaps outnumbered or singled out Republican students and to show tolerance of all viewpoints by making a point to bring up stories of conservative family members and loved ones and explain that those people are loved regardless of different viewpoints or misplaced derogative labels that other students might affix to them in anger. Meanwhile, a generational difference emerges: parents seem to be consistently to the political right of their children. What is a “political issue” to adults might be something that’s already quite decided among teens. With some schools’ conscious push to the left, it left some more politically

conservative-minded white families feeling “blamed” and, if possible, looking to leave the school. Parents at other participants’ schools are to the political right of their children for various reasons including the trauma of fleeing Communist countries, their wealth, religious views, or being more socially conservative than their children.

### ***Emergent Theme Two: The Trump Impact in the Classroom***

The most frequently mentioned events and issues that the 10 high school social studies teacher participants had to carefully navigate in the past decade can all be linked back to President Donald Trump’s policies or rhetoric. The events and concepts that were most commonly mentioned by participant teachers include: the January 6th Insurrection of the United States Capitol Building; the day after the 2016 election (Nov. 9, 2016); Donald Trump’s tweets, comments, and behavior; police brutality and the national 2020 George Floyd protests; and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Participants were most emphatic that the January 6th, 2021 Insurrection of the United States Capitol Building was the most difficult event to navigate and explain to students. The 10 participant teachers were now put in a position of explaining that the president of the United States might very well be in support of overturning the results of the 2020 election that he lost. The idea that a president would subvert the will of the people to retain power and appeared to be trying everything in his toolbox to do so was alarming and disturbing. As Alexis said,

The beginning of that [first] class [of the semester], they didn't even care to see me introduce myself. They're just like, “Are you watching this?” And I'm trying not to panic everyone because also this whole year has been about me trying to get them calm and give them support and consistency and not trying to panic them. I was just like, “Okay, well, this is something that we have never seen here.” I tried to keep relating it back to

the claim of election fraud and that these have all been dispelled by states, by the Secretaries of States, by the court cases. There's no factual evidence to widespread fraud in this election. Trying to bring it back to the facts. The next day, [it was] all they wanted to talk about. I was letting them ask questions or just state your opinion, just how are you feeling. Generally, the vibe was “We're scared.” Very unsettled.

Participants discussed in detail the difficulty to face their classes on the morning after the 2016 election. Teachers interviewed said they were caught off guard on November 9, 2016 by Trump's win, and while they wanted to instill that he won fair and square, and that he would be the next president, they also had to balance the concern they had for their undocumented students who were terrified that they or their parents would be deported or ripped apart from each other. Various minority communities were also in fear based on his campaign rhetoric and promises. Others were concerned for the institution of the presidency and all levers of the federal government. While participants had those concerns, they wanted to put forth as neutral a demeanor to the results as possible, keeping in line with their beliefs that a teacher keeps their personal political views to themselves. That proved a challenge for participants that day. David explained,

I had a hard time not talking about it in a way that was slanted. I am genuinely disappointed in how I addressed it, because I think I was angry about the results, and it definitely showed to the kids. I don't think that was necessarily the most productive way to approach it.

Beyond those two major dates, participants said the ongoing divisive rhetoric from President Trump was challenging to address in their classes. It was inconceivable to them that the president of the United States, a person whom students are taught from an early age to

usually look up to as the leader of the country and as a role model, spewed such hateful, crass, and demeaning statements about anyone who disagreed with him. Many of Trump's tweets, speeches, written statements, and other expressions would violate the classroom norms of the participants.

### ***Emergent Theme Three: Teachers Aim to Demonstrate Civility and Democracy in Classrooms***

Two major commonalities emerged as participant teachers explained how and what they teach in the age of Trump: set ground rules early and establish norms together as a class. Establishing norms involves setting the groundwork on the first day of school for the class to form their own rules on how to talk to one other about politics. Over time, participant teachers teach students to not personally attack each other, but rather, to question policy. Most teachers interviewed abide by the philosophy that they must teach students to think but not how to think or what to think. Despite personal differences, students must figure out how to live together. As Roland said,

I tell them, "My goal in this class is not to get you to think the way I think. My goal is to get you to think. If you write a paper and you are diametrically opposed to [how I think], as long as you've made a coherent and cogent argument, you're going to get all the points. I just want you to be able to argue your position."

Participant teachers are against indoctrination and are careful not to impose their own political beliefs directly upon students and classes. Rather, they attempt to teach their students to think critically and analyze political and cultural viewpoints from all sides and opinions. Participant teachers try to instill in their students that their classmates come from different religions, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and family value systems. People will not agree on everything, but they still have to figure out how to live together. In trying to relate to

likely school minority community of self-identifying Republican or politically conservative-minded students, some teachers interviewed will bring up stories of their own conservative family members, friends and loved ones to show that while they might disagree with some of their politics, it doesn't mean that they do not talk to them. In one common thread, every teacher who teaches government classes said that controversial discussions are more likely to come up naturally in their government classes than in other social science and history classes that they teach. A high school government class, sometimes with the word "politics" or "civics" in the course title, is one where content covers the legislative, executive and judicial branches of the federal government, the U.S. Constitution, federalism, civil liberties, civil rights, public opinion, and the impact of linkage institutions (e.g., the media, interest groups, or political parties) on the government and its citizenry. A high school history class could cover the chronological or thematic history of the United States, or various global regions. Other courses traditionally found in a high social studies department include psychology, sociology, and economics.

***Emergent Theme Four: They Might be Asked, but They Don't Tell***

Unanimously, the 10 participant teachers keep their political views to themselves, although most add that students can probably tell where they lie politically. Participant teachers do not think it is proper to impose their viewpoints or make the class about their views, but they are cognizant that students might have preconceived notions about a teacher's political leanings based upon the sources that they might routinely use in the course. Sources of content selection and course readings and video clips can sometimes be a clue to a teacher's political preferences. Ted explained,

Well, the kids see me walking around with *The New York Times*. It's a cue. It's a cue. If I'm making a reference to something that we're learning in class, the physical cue is

literally let's look above the fold of the *Times* this morning. It's a pretty strong political cue in terms of like, "All right. Where's this guy coming from?"

Only one teacher out of the 10 said that their school has a "soft" policy to avoid injecting their own political opinion into lessons. The other nine teachers said their school has no policy on whether a teacher keeps their views to themselves, leaving them autonomy over that decision.

### ***Emergent Theme Five: The Rise of Misinformation and Disinformation in the Classroom***

The permeation of disinformation and misinformation on the internet continues to be a problem in the high school government and/or history classroom and in the larger school community in general. Merriam-Webster defines misinformation as "incorrect or misleading information," while defining disinformation as "false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth." (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Misinformation and disinformation can be found on social media or non-reputable news sources, or from cable news channels that have pundits airing conspiracy theories masked as news journalists delivering facts, or word-of-mouth from a loved one or person one values. David cited the social media platform TikTok as a primary means of spreading false information:

I hear a lot of, "I read on TikTok, I heard this on TikTok." I heard a student, who was a really successful student say, "I heard on TikTok that Joe Biden cheated. I like Joe Biden, but he definitely cheated in this election."

Media literacy is taught in most participant teachers' schools, and others said they need to do more of it or start doing so. Media literacy lessons focus on teaching students how to determine what is factual, how to sense bias in journalism, and how to determine reputable sources.

### ***Emergent Theme Six: The Political Classroom, Trumped***

While President Donald Trump was never mentioned by me, the researcher, in any questioning, the 45th president's name did come up in answers by all participants but one. This study's findings suggest that it is nearly impossible to avoid the impact that Donald Trump and Trumpism has had on the social studies classroom. Through his divisive rhetoric, name-calling, his sometimes-unconstitutional decisions, disregard for the truth and expert opinions, and the undermining of vital American democratic institutions, Trump, his actions, personality, and unconventional ways of grabbing media attention sucked up the oxygen in high school government and history classrooms. In the age of Trump, students have frequent "what if" and "can he do" style questions for their participant teacher and their class depending on the unusual or norm-shattering action of the day. As Twyla said,

Anything that [Trump] did or said, I had a [student] that would come in the next day, a couple of kids in particular that were very [against Trump's] views, and would come in and just start, just to sort of get reactions from their peers, and so I had to put the stop to that because it wasn't productive. It wasn't really a conversation. They just wanted to sort of blast and insult each other, like he would, and our classrooms are not a place for that. And so that's where the rules come in. That's where I have the reminding them about how we're having a discussion. That's not really a discussion, right? And that's part of getting the kids to understand that you coming in and insulting someone is not a discussion, but it happened, I have to say, quite a bit, more than I can remember in the past when Trump was our President.

## Themes

Vaismoradi et al. (2016) suggest themes in qualitative research are the main products of data analysis. They go further to say, much like other authors in the field, that qualitative analysis and themes development are cyclical processes, often requiring the researcher to return to data in order to fully immerse themselves in the content.

As I engaged in the data analysis process, there were six central themes that emerged from the data: “The Trump Impact on the Student Body and Faculty” (the macro level of the school), “The Trump Impact in the Classroom” (the micro level of the school), “Teachers aim to demonstrate civility and democracy in classrooms,” “They might ask, but they don’t tell” (teacher’s decisions to keep their political views private from their students), “The Rise of Misinformation and Disinformation in the classroom” (the polarization of the media landscape and rise of “fake news” and what some teachers do to combat it), and “The Political Classroom, Trumped” (the fact that teaching politics in the age of Trump is hard to do without most classroom conversations becoming about President Donald Trump’s policies, behavior, and rhetoric). These themes, which emerged from participants’ interviews are what helped give meaning to the study’s central aim, which is to better understand how high school government and history teachers across the United States grapple with difficult and controversial political questions and lessons in a period of hyperpolarization and cultural change while aiming to create an inclusive atmosphere for all viewpoints.

### **Theme One: The Trump Impact on the Student Body and Faculty**

As school political climates move left, “out” Republican and politically conservative students and faculty members are increasingly in decline in high school populations, regardless of whether they are a Trump-supporting Republican, or a “Never Trump” Republican. It is



important to note that “Republican” refers to those who identify as a member or voter of the major American political party. Meanwhile, some students might not identify with the Republican label, and instead choose to identify as politically conservative in their ideological beliefs. Further, while there are many people in the United State who identify as Republican and/or politically conservative, not all of them support Trump and the ideals of Trumpism. Some who don’t support Trump might be more politically moderate. Some who don’t support Trump might be politically conservative. But, during the age of Trump, Donald Trump remade the majority of the Republican party to reflect his political policies and stances, and most strikingly, a high degree of loyalty and allegiance to himself from elected Republicans or those seeking elected office. Findings show that the label of “Republican” in high schools across the country can have a similar stigmatization as wearing a scarlet letter. Whether fair or not, high school culture can be dominated by the popular thought and labels, and the terms Republican and conservatism can be viewed as synonymous with Trump and Trumpism in the age of Trump. As David said,

I've run the High School Republicans, the High School Democrats and the Environmental Justice Club. I [was the faculty sponsor for the] Republicans last year, which lasted, this is where it gets interesting, lasted about five seconds because no one showed up.... I think a lot of kids are afraid to identify as Republicans are more conservative because of Trumpism and what that means. They're afraid of being bullied. They're afraid of being seen as racist when, in fact, most of our kids are probably just more fiscally conservative, socially liberal or that's what their parents believe. I think they're afraid of being judged. They're afraid of being seen as outcasts. They're afraid of being called out in school. They're just, I think, generally afraid of that title that might come with that.

The leftward lurch to counter Trumpism has opened the door to an increase in student and school political activism for liberal policies. In an effort to make classrooms as inclusive as possible, teachers try to appeal to perhaps outnumbered or singled out Republican students and to show tolerance of all viewpoints by making a point to bring up stories of conservative family members and loved ones and explain that those people are loved regardless of different viewpoints or misplaced derogative labels that other students might affix to them in anger.

***Subtheme 1A: School Political Climates Move Left***

Twyla has taught at a private high school in a midwestern college town for over two decades. Today, she teaches history and is the school's director of diversity, equity and inclusion. She said while her school has moved left at a gradual pace over her two decades working there, the school made a conscious and calculated move to the left in the fall of 2020 to adopting an anti-racist agenda for the school and for its faculty to integrate into their curriculum. Twyla shared,

Over the years, I haven't seen it change as much. It's been fairly slow progress. I think summer 2020 was the first time that I saw a sort of serious push towards the liberal side, after the murder of George Floyd and our administrators saying they want to be anti-racist. And that pushed our school definitely into a more liberal realm, so much so, that I know there are some [politically conservative] families that have left [the school], and there are some families that question it, but it is what it is right now.

Twyla mentioned that her school's conscious push to the left had caused some more politically conservative-minded white families to feel "blamed." But she said she believes there are politically conservative minded families and students in her school's community—they just don't make it known.

It's interesting because I always think of [political conservatives in her school's community] sort of like an iceberg. So the political culture seems on the top like it's very liberal, right? But right there under the surface I think is a fairly conservative view.

Twyla said her small private school had very few students of color when started 20 years ago, but now students of color make up 55 percent of the student population. Twyla said there has been pushback from some community members along the way: "There were questions of rigor when more students of color came to the school." And when the school began introducing a special week of programming called "Diversity Days,"

I had some white boys that came to me, and they're like, "All right. Every time Diversity Days come around, I feel like someone might say that I did something wrong." So they were feeling like, "I feel like people are looking at me." And so we had a conversation about that.

Twyla said that beyond Affinity Groups based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or religion for students to belong to, specific new clubs have emerged around the George Floyd protests, like SOAR (Students Organized Against Racism).

Ted's private school in New England where he teaches history has moved left over time. Today, he says it is decidedly left, and so is he. At Stevie's private school in the South where he teaches history and criminology, he said that teachers and adults in the school community, parents included, are more likely to be conservative than the students: "It's a place where lots of folks have escaped trauma, from much of Latin American far-left, authoritarian governments, like Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua or Cuba. So, I'd say that my colleagues are very politicized." But Stevie cautions that could be different depending on the department one teaches in.

My department, which is social studies, tends to have more politically left-wing people, but there are still a sprinkle of folks that are hard-right. Maybe they were more politically moderate or traditional establishment Republicans like Mitt Romney or John Kasich, and even then some that are, I'd say more... I don't know what you'd call today, "America First" Trumpists? Still a couple of those.

For the students in Stevie's community, he sees the leftward lurch amplified by social media usage.

I think that [my community] is a unique situation, where we have that trauma. When it comes to my students, there's always been a more left-wing bent, always. Younger people tend to be more idealistic anyways. But, in the past eight years, [social media and] TikTok has radicalized them a little bit.

At her old public school on the West Coast, Jocelyn worked in a community that was more vocally conservative, based on religious beliefs. "Due to the religious component and Seventh-day Adventism as a religion tends to be more on the conservative evangelical side, end of the world, Jesus is coming, et cetera." But Jocelyn, who teaches government, history and economics, noticed a marked shift away from those conservative viewpoints when Donald Trump came onto the political stage:

I would say since probably maybe 2016, 2017, there started to be more of an offshoot of like, "Hey, these things are not good." Liberal voices started to become a little more vocal at that point in time. Trump made people aware we need to band together because we don't know what will happen. Trump has made it more important to know how the government works. If you can vote, get out and vote, make your political voice known. History repeats itself.... I think the [Trump] administration made me as a teacher more

aware about how important it is to have conversations about politics and not just like, oh yeah, that happens in Washington and we're thousands of miles away. And I think it's really easy to become disengaged when you don't actually see stuff happening.

Jocelyn said getting out the vote, and engaging her students in serious discussions about the power of voting is more imperative today.

For me, [Trump's election and rhetoric] shook me up and it was like, hey, you can't be someone who has studied history for as long as history teachers have and see [this kind of] history repeat itself. And there's so many notes of some really scary things that are going on. Like, comparisons to Hitler's rise to power. Certainly when [in class] we talked about World War II, [students are] like, "Oh Miss, that kind of sounds familiar," it just made me more aware of the importance of connecting modern and past.

Jocelyn, a self-described liberal herself, moved to the Rocky Mountains in 2020, and to a different political climate, and new public school demographics to match. "Certainly at the school that I'm at now, it's predominantly very liberal, with a very heavy emphasis on teaching social justice and teaching a large population of DACA kids. So that plays into it."

Similar to Twyla's private school, Alexis's public school on the West Coast is increasingly liberal and activist with progressive political positions becoming baked into school policies and agendas. Alexis said,

The school district doesn't shy away from controversial issues. The superintendent says Black Lives Matter, so that is not "political," but rather now it is policy. [I've seen a] big uptick in student activism and that is supported by the school district.

Alexis, who teaches government, history and economics, said that many students have been inspired to vote by Trump. The school has seen multiple student walkouts for progressive causes

like gun control and climate change awareness. She said there was a lot of the “Not my President” Anti-Trump rhetoric in her school during the former president’s administration. To illustrate just how left Alexis’s school is, Alexis found it comical that when she uses CNN as a source in class, some students tell her that is too conservative of a news source.

Self-described Texas conservative Roland, who teaches government, history and economics, said he feels his school’s student population is evenly divided between those who lean or are left and those who lean or are right on the political spectrum. But even for Roland’s traditionally conservative community, that 50/50 split is a newer thing, whereas in the past the students skewed more to the right like their parents.

Moir, who teaches government and history in a large public high school in a midwestern urban area, said she teaches at school that has made a sharp left turn since she came to the school five years ago. Moir has never told any colleagues or students that she identifies as Republican out of fear of retribution. To be clear, Moir said she “despises” Trump and his divisiveness, vitriol, and demeaning things he says and said she feels she is more of an Adam Kinzinger Republican. Her school is changing with how the country is changing—the left is going further left and the right is going further right, and sanity, Moir said, is losing.

It has felt very negative and heavy with [left-leaning faculty] very angry and adamant about what they would perceive as a right political culture in the school, and so they're shifting further left. Again, right now I think that it just seems very negative and heavy. Maybe that's positive in some way if it's moving towards progress. I have felt like there's not as much people looking to work together towards a solution, but rather attack each other. It felt very negative and heavy. Yeah, that's how it felt this past year.

Moira specified that some faculty are attacking one another and calling the school's administration racist while pushing for "endless" anti-racism trainings. After each anti-racist training that takes place, more are called for because of the perception that some faculty don't embrace the trainings when they occur. The 2019–2020 school year ended remotely when the Coronavirus pandemic hit the United States, and it was during that time that George Floyd was killed by a police officer during an arrest over counterfeit currency. The event caused national protests for days and sometimes weeks calling for police reform. At Moira's school, the event yielded a loud student backlash against the teachers for not addressing it in a satisfactory manner.

In 2020, at the end of the [school] year, when we were all remote and remote was new and we had the George Floyd protests and these other incidents, and it was difficult to respond in real-time, because, again, remote was new and the school year was ending and students had such a negative reaction to our response. I'll speak for myself, at least mine, saying that I didn't do enough.... But I don't know what is enough. We have to be so careful of the way we teach and what we teach and how we do it and what we say these days. I tried really hard this year to incorporate all of those events right away, which is challenging because you want to do it responsibly and in the right way, and we're all human and make mistakes.

Like Moira, David, who teaches history and journalism, also teaches at a large public high school in a midwestern urban area that is also moving "far left." He noted that activism has increased both with students (walkouts, paraphernalia, stickers on laptops, and t-shirts, for example) and among the faculty. David identifies as a liberal but has found himself to the political right of some of the movements going on in his school. He said, "There is a very tense political culture at the school now where you apparently cannot be liberal enough." David sees a

change in the people hired when a vacancy opens up: “Before, the school hired academic professionals, but now sees hires as only qualified if they identify as a social justice warrior or have an agenda that fits that mold.” David blames his school administration’s lack of response to the louder faculty voices only getting louder and making the workplace environment more tense.

Our school’s administration feels largely absent and just lets the loudest voices in the room steer the show, which ends up being people that are on the left and the very far left. So, they're kind of running the show right now. I think Administration needs to take more active role in terms of advancing a school culture and community that's healthy for everybody that makes everyone feel welcome. That regardless of what you look like, what your beliefs are, that you can express those beliefs and feel comfortable doing that and not have to be fearful.

David blames the school’s administration, which he historically liked and approved of for the current hostile environment by not having a vision of their own and answering to the loudest voices before they got louder.

I think that the principal's style is that it is better to not say anything than to “rock the boat,” and always take “the path of least resistance.” There's this belief that you don't want to offend anybody, but by not saying anything, you're therefore offending people. It's kind of an old school belief, I think, that you just focus on doing the job itself and not necessarily being aware of that today, in education, culture outside of school, current events outside of school, definitely work their way into school. We're not teaching in the 1950s anymore, where you're reading curriculum out of textbook. Today, we’re living it.

Like Ted, Patrick also teaches at a private school in New England. Patrick teaches journalism, government, and history. He is a moderate Republican and an alum of the school.



Patrick said his school has gone from Left to “Wicked Left.” “If you’re not left wing, you’re called out as racist. Republicans are ostracized in education. If you say anything contrary to the most liberal thing, you’re looked at as the enemy.” And like Jocelyn, Twyla and Moira, Patrick recognized the two biggest leftward push movements when Trump was inaugurated and during and after the summer of 2020 and the George Floyd protests. Patrick said he would share more conservative viewpoints with colleagues or students if it was okay with the administration of his school—but anything not left leaning is a no-no. Patrick said,

Well, I'll say that I'm a moderate Republican, which is rare here in [his New England city]. I'm not a Trump fan, did not vote for Trump. Twice, I voted against him. But I feel that, at my school in particular, if you're not gung ho left-wing, you'll be called out as being racist or as being someone that is not on board with equality. It started after George Floyd was murdered. The school sent out an email, as many schools did, public, private, charter, saying that we are complicit in perpetuating a racist institution. I was very upset about that email because I'm also an alum of where I work at, and I don't at all feel that we perpetuated racism at all. And I felt that the school had spoken on my behalf, for something that I really didn't feel was accurate or even their right to do.

And then from there, the school also hired an outside DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) consultant, which I am all for, but the DEI consultant wanted to do an audit of all of our courses, to see if we're being sufficiently empathetic in what we were doing, when I had never received any type of complaints or issues in the past. Just because something horrific had happened outside of our community, it does not mean that there are similar types of behavior or emotions, or actions happening within. So I felt, and I still feel, a little like I'm being force fed DEI initiatives through a fire hose.

But while Patrick finds frustration with some of the cultural push from the left, he is also “sickened” with a cultural push from the right, the CRT (Critical Race Theory) debate.

I'm really sickened by this talk of Critical Race Theory and us, as history teachers, being attacked. I'm not embarrassed to say I've never even heard of Critical Race Theory before this came out, nor do I think I had to. It's a legal theory and Republicans are using it as a coverall for teaching anything divisive or seemingly controversial about American history, which just makes me feel almost physically ill to my stomach. So just as much as I have trouble with the left, I have trouble with the extreme right as well. I feel that I'm under attack, that our profession is under attack by radical Republicans who think that Critical Race Theory should be used as a coverall for anything negative, controversial, divisive about American history.

Patrick continued with his disgust for the CRT debate, reflecting on his own teaching of history.

I don't know how to teach American history without talking about how race has played and continues to play an integral part in that story. Gender plays an integral part, immigration, classism. And that's not to say that it's not also important to highlight positive aspects of our history as well, but you can't say [that's all you can teach].

Whenever I see more state legislatures try to do so, I'm just shaking my head, thinking that, man, it's the 1950s, 1960s, McCarthy witch hunt style terror all over again with these just disgusting individuals who, A) think they actually know what CRT is, and they don't. But then, B) thinking that history courses should be sanitized for a purely patriotic view of our past.

Patrick says that the issues teachers, schools, and their communities are facing right now is because of the “extreme polarization on both sides of the political spectrum.”

You can't teach history without teaching about race. It's not like we don't discuss the great things that we've done, but at the same time, you cannot sanitize history. I'm a pretty educated guy. [CRT] isn't something that I had ever learned about, that I had ever even thought about. I think it's just being used as a coverall, as propaganda for right-wing nut jobs.

Like Stevie in the South, Johnny is from a nearby community. Johnny, who teaches government and history, identifies as Cuban American. He is a former Republican who has taught for 18 years at a private, independent school in the South. In addition to teaching, he is his school's diversity coordinator. Johnny said teachers and students have both moved to the political left since he's been there. When he started working there, he said, some teachers kind of leaned to the political right. The student population has shifted furthest left. When he started there, Johnny said there was more of a 50/50 balance of liberals and conservatives among students. Like Stevie, because of the Latin American makeup of his school (65 percent of the student body comes from Venezuelan, Columbian, or Cuban backgrounds), the school still has many conservative students. Still, the study body has experienced a shift to the political left whereas parents at the school skew more conservative. Johnny hypothesizes that the students might go to the political left simply to buck their parents' views.

***Subtheme 1B: "Out" Republicans Decline in High School Student and Faculty Populations***

Twyla said that at her private, independent midwestern college town high school, students who openly self-identify as Republican, regardless of their opinion on Trump, are a demographic with falling numbers. But she believes that is just for those on the top of the school's conservative iceberg—and that she feels there are plenty more, but they are just beneath

the surface and not open about their politics. The shrinking student Republican Club numbers bother the director of diversity, equity and inclusion:

We had a group of students that work on the Democratic Party and a group of students that are part of the Republican Party. And they would have pretty strong debates between them. But over the years it seems as if the Republican Party students seems to have gotten smaller. I don't know exactly why that is, but that is something that has always bothered me is that that group has a much smaller voice than when I first started teaching.

Twyla said that her school lost some conservative families with the anti-racist push of 2020.

They were white families who felt like they were being blamed, she said. Twyla recalled a politically conservative girl in her history class who kept her opinions to herself. But when the student became "a Trumper," Twyla said others drew the line with working with her in class.

While Ted in New England said his class on polarization allows for some conservative viewpoints, he said that he has heard the narrative in his school that Republican students feel they cannot have much of a voice. Ted said that since he rarely hears conservative opinions in his class that he then often finds himself playing Devil's Advocate to get those views and perspectives into class discussion.

Where both Ted and Jocelyn saw Trump support dwindle in their respective schools from 2016 to 2020, Alexis said if someone is a die-hard Trump supporter, they are going to make it known, but that could backfire on the Trump-supporting student. Alexis said she has a pretty liberal group of students but does have conservative students here and there. Alexis honors student preferences for who they would like to work with on Zoom (during the pandemic remote learning) or in person. She recalls most students chose not to work with one student because students would tell Alexis, "She's transphobic and a Trump supporter." Once, Alexis was having

her class play Kahoot, a popular interactive review quiz game, and someone made their username “build the wall.” Sensing the controversy and offense that would undoubtedly come with that phrase, she nixed the ability to create one’s own Kahoot name by implementing a name generator.

With conservative voices being few and far between in Alexis’s liberal-minded school community, it can lead those few conservative students to feel frustrated. Alexis recalls a conversation she had to have with a student when he started lamenting his frustrations about being a victim of “reverse racism.”

Things got a little intense with two white male students in class when we were talking about race and one of them brought up the reverse racism thing. I remember telling the student, “Well, in order to actually be racist, you need to have power. What you're talking about is prejudice.” He was talking about an experience where he used to live in this town that was predominantly Black and that he usually felt bullied by the Black kids. And yeah, I'm sure that happened and he felt the way he did about it, but when we're talking about systemic racism in class, that's talking about a power structure where you have a legacy of oppression versus African Americans in this country. He was just like, “So, no one can be racist against me.” It turned into this whole thing and I just remember crouching down in between the desks, and everybody else was working on an assignment and we had this conversation out loud, everybody could hear it. Just distinguishing between prejudice and racism, or systemic racism.

Alexis was trying to correct a student on a controversial viewpoint, while validating his own experiences with what he perceived as mistreatment because of who he is.

I was trying to make him aware of what those two things are and the difference between them, and also not denying that he had that experience and felt that way. It wasn't necessarily my opinion, but let's get the learning right. Then, the student said, "I'm sick of being told that I have white privilege and that I'm racist." And I said to the student, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Have I ever called you racist?" He said, "No." And I said, "Okay." And said, "But..." He was saying in some other teacher's class, something about [being called out for] white male privilege. Alexis stopped him. "Okay, let's acknowledge that I have never once called you racist or said anything negative to you about that. In my class, do I always let you speak up and state your opinion?" And he was like, "Yeah, you do." And I was like, "Okay, good. It just needs to be respectful." But also when you are getting into a different territory, I just want to make sure you understand what these two things mean. We talked more about white male privilege. And that does not mean that you have had everything given to you in life, or that you do not work hard. White privilege does not mean that white people don't struggle. It simply means that there are obstacles and barriers that affect other people much more than they do white men in general. I felt like it was a great conversation. And he was just like, "Yeah, okay."

But teenagers being teenagers, the story ended as too many adolescent situations do.

We talked a little more about it and he was just like, "I'm going to be honest with you, I am just riling up all these kids. I'm not really a Trump supporter. I like to think it gets people to giggle." I was just like, "Oh, my God."

Alexis guides her students to explore changes in the GOP to help them to focus on issues instead of expressing extreme and generalized partisanship. She said her students often ask,

“Has the Republican Party always been like this? What happened to the Republican Party?” Especially back in the day. How was it that the Republican Party, the party of Lincoln, is what it is now? We'll talk about that history, civil rights and the parties flipping... I don't shy away between talking about how conservatism used to be. The Republican Party was focused mainly on the laissez-faire economic aspect of things. It was the pro-business party. It stood for low taxes, deregulation of markets and things like that. Because students today are very aware of how extreme it's become. I won't talk about my own political views, but I'll mention how I have a lot of people in my family that were lifelong Republicans, your Reagan-y type conservatives, but that there's definitely been a shift away from those economic issues to the culture issues of today. Or the shift of immigration policies, how the Republican party used to be relatively pro-immigration for economic reasons to today when a student writes “build the wall.” There are policy shifts throughout the history of the parties.

Moirra also felt the need to make references in class to political conservatives she personally knows and loves in her class because she felt that her students were getting the impression that they were all just like Trump. She said she knows of very few out Republican students and that the number of them at her large urban midwestern high school is falling. Similarly, David, at the large urban midwestern high school where “you apparently cannot be liberal enough,” the school’s Republican Club “died after 5 minutes” with students not coming because they were afraid of being judged, tied to Trump, called out online and ostracized. David said, “There are students that are more on the conservative side and don't feel comfortable saying what they feel, because they're worried they're going to get bullied.” He said it is up to the teachers to make sure it's a safe environment in the school for people on both sides of the

political aisle. David said he thinks that students of all political persuasions must learn to not paint with broad strokes.

People on the left must understand that not everybody on the right is a radical misogynist racist conservative who hates immigrants, and I think people on the right should understand people on the left aren't all, like, Birkenstock-wearing, latte-drinking, New-York-Times-reading caricatures.

He added that if the student population at his school was actually more ideologically split like 50/50 or even 60/40, a lot more problems would occur. But because the school is overwhelmingly liberal, those that aren't in the majority political persuasion feel they can't voice their opinion because the loudest voices on the other side will drown them out. Peer pressure plays a role, too. During the national school walkout for gun control in March 2018, David suggested there might have been students that may not have wanted to walk out but did because they felt if they didn't do it, they might be socially ostracized by their fellow students and even friends. David said that if he was a politically conservative student at that school, he would walk out even if he wasn't for gun control just so he wouldn't have to face the likely bullying that would accompany not falling in line with the dominant political ideology.

David said he believes in creating an environment in which people can have honest dialogue that might reveal disagreement on opinions, but that will be grounded in good intentions. He believes people generally want the same thing: the average citizen wants to have a job, to be happy, and to vacation a couple of times each year. It's just how we get to those commonly desired results that we differ on. David also said he believes it is important to get students to recognize that a lot of the issues dividing Americans are wedge issues, created to divide the electorate, and get each side to think the other side hates them, so we come out and



vote against them, more than perhaps voting for something we believe in. Having students become politically aware, and recognizing how politics work is an important goal that educators should have in this political climate.

For Patrick at his Massachusetts school that has gone from left to “wicked left,” Republicans, if they exist there, are silent. Patrick said this is a shame since diversity is not just black and white, but should include blue and red, too. Often when schools think about the concept of diverse, and the plethora of different ideas, backgrounds, and stories that are brought to the classroom to provide a rich and robust course or experience, it is usually thought of in terms of race, ethnicity, ability level, and religion. Patrick said he thinks diversity of political thought would benefit students for the world beyond high school and college.

While Johnny in the South identified as a moderate conservative when he started college, he has moved politically left since then, and so has his school, with few out Republican or politically conservative students in the building. Across town, Stevie estimates that his school’s conservative student population is down to 20 percent even though the school is situated in an area that is represented by a Republican governor, senators and representatives. Johnny and Stevie are from the same region, and while their students inch leftward, the voting constituency of that area traditionally votes Republican—but as Johnny cautions, “not the Donald Trump kind of Republican,” but more moderate Republicans. The area is made up of those who fled Communist countries and are fearful of too much government control, which generally is more associated with political liberalism and the Democratic Party in the United States.

***Subtheme 1C: Schools Witness Increase in Student and School Political Activism for Liberal Policies***

The candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump shook many apathic and uninterested adolescents into becoming student activists for climate change awareness, gun control, women's rights, Black lives, the undocumented, and other issues, in and outside of their schools. Jocelyn said Trump made people aware they needed to band together, and educate themselves on how government works, and vote so that history does not repeat itself. Twyla witnessed students creating new school clubs like SOAR (Students Outspoken Against Racism) and her school adopting an anti-racist agenda and school policy. Alexis saw her school's superintendent declare that Black Lives Matter is part of their district's educational agenda. David and Moira saw numerous student-led walkouts disrupt the school day and traditional learning. While there was an increase in politically liberal activism, school communities in general moved leftward and led to a simultaneous decline in conservative students being open about their political beliefs. As Alexis said,

It's a super active political environment. Our school is totally cool with it. When there's walk-outs planned, our school supports it, gives [students] a mic, lets them take over the front steps and give speeches. They say, "All right, we're going to give you guys 15 minutes and then you got to get back to class. If you leave, you'll be absent." So it's not, "Go nuts," but definitely a supportive school for letting them voice their concern on various events like immigration and gun control.

***Subtheme 1D: Teachers Try to Show Tolerance of Diverse Viewpoints by Bringing Up Stories of Conservative Family Members and Loved Ones***

Since the 2016 election, attitudes in and outside the classroom have changed. David said that while he would not say that students are “kinder” to each other, he sees his students listening to one other. He reminds them that their classmates come from different religions, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and family value systems. To model acceptance, David continuously brings up his family. David tells his students that his mother and most of his family vote Republican, and that, yes, they voted for Trump, and just because they voted for Trump, and he might disagree with some of their politics, does not mean that he doesn’t talk to them anymore or that he gets in political arguments with them. He emphasizes that he loves them and they mean very much to him. David said, “You have to be able to separate the person from their politics.”

Alexis has brought up the history of the Republican party and the past views of the party when it stood for other things than the policies of Trumpism. She has brought up her own family members that proudly subscribed to the Republican policies of the past. Part of some of the participant teachers’ strategies here involve their own recollections of dialogue with family members with whom they have disagreed. Moira recalled her mother’s opinion that the controversial Confederate statues in the South should stay up for “history”:

My mom was one of those people who thought that Confederate symbolism was Southern culture, Southern pride. I think so many people don't understand the history behind the Confederacy and the Confederate statues, and I felt it important that students all know that. That would be an example of a time where I feel like political opinion is based on a lack of knowledge and that my students should have all the information in

order to make their own assessment. There was no way to do that here. There's no way to give them that information without also being biased.

***Subtheme 1E: Generational Difference Emerges: Parents to the Political Right of their Children***

Perhaps it's the old adage of "if you're under 40 and aren't liberal, you don't have a heart, and if you're over 40 and aren't conservative, you don't have a brain," but most participants indicated that the parents of students at their high schools are more likely to be more politically conservative than their children. While the reasons for this are beyond the scope of this study, participants offered some demographic indicators. Stevie and Johnny thought that adults in their school communities with Venezuelan, Columbian, or Cuban heritage might want to avoid leftist policies. Roland's southern state and Jocelyn's old west coast community are both traditionally conservative. The parents at Twyla and Ted's private independent schools tend to be quite wealthy.

Twyla explained,

What is a "political issue" to adults might be something that's already quite decided among teens. For instance, LGBTQ rights—the kids are always ready. Before we actually started to have a GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) or an LGBTQ+ club, the kids wanted it. They wanted it for like five or six years before it was allowed. It was the adults who said, "We can't. We're not ready." So while adults weren't ready, it's the kids that are pushing and that want to progress. Gun control walkouts, gender neutral bathrooms, you name it—the kids want to do it and the adults are the ones that are like, "we're not ready for that."

Ted said while his overall school community would be decidedly left, “I think you still would have had adult community members that thought of themselves maybe as more conservative or right leaning.”

While school communities, at least those occupying the classrooms and hallways on any given school day, students and faculty, lean to the political left among participants, there is an emerging generational gap in participant teachers’ schools where the parents are further to the political right of their children. Those views could be held by students, too, but as Twyla said in her iceberg metaphor, they choose to not show them, and rather keep those ideas beneath the surface.

## **Theme Two: The Trump Impact in the Classroom**

The most frequently mentioned events, actions and issues that participant teachers had to carefully navigate in the past decade can all be linked back to President Donald Trump’s policies or rhetoric: the January 6th Insurrection of the United States Capitol Building; the day after the 2016 election (Nov. 9, 2016); his tweets, comments, and behavior; police brutality and the national 2020 George Floyd protests; the Black Lives Matter movement causing schools to develop anti-racism agendas; and navigating divisive times.

### ***Subtheme 2A: Major Event that Disrupted Participants’ Curriculum and Planned Lessons***

#### ***Linked to Trump, his Policies or Rhetoric: the January 6<sup>th</sup> Insurrection of the United States Capitol Building***

Patrick in New England said the January 6, 2021 insurrection of the United States Capitol building by hundreds of Trump supporters with an intention to stop the certification of the election and overturn the results was his most challenging moment teaching due to the shock value of the unique and unprecedented event. Patrick recalled,

After the January 6th riots, or the invasion of the Capitol, I switched gears quite quickly to address it. I've also been pretty outspoken about this being wholly unacceptable, and we should not stand for it. This not an act of patriotism, but rather domestic terrorism. I forget what I had originally planned for that day, but of course, whatever it was didn't happen. We spent two or three days just on the insurrection, violence, and loss of life that ensued. That was just horrific.

It wasn't just Patrick deciding alone to address the insurrection; his students specifically asked him to do so.

There needed to be a space for students talk about that, and they wanted to hear from me. They had asked me for my thoughts, as they had emailed me the night [of the 6<sup>th</sup>], "Are we going through address this in class? Students want to hear from you." So it wasn't so much me just getting up on a lectern and pontificating. I'm always cognizant of not pushing my beliefs onto them, but this was something that was so clear cut to me that this is not my opinion. This is just a fact. And you [need] to hear it that way. These are not patriots. And I think I did criticize Trump to my students, for not coming out right away to condemn this act, for actually never really doing so, in my opinion. And again, I knew that most of my students were liberal anyway.

Patrick encouraged his students to speak up, too.

Some [students] wrote op-eds for the student newspaper and website. I encouraged folks to write to their local and federal representatives, to express any concerns or questions that they might have. One student, actually before January 6th, even spoke to the governor about civil discourse, which was interesting. I gave that as a resource for my students to listen to. I tried to give some kind of historical precedent, which really doesn't

exist. The only other time was when the White House was stormed and burned down [in the War of 1812], and the different Capitol buildings were burned down. I said, “This is the first time it's happened by American citizens, not British troops.” And then students, they were also concerned that, and I still get emails about this, about why there's no official commission like the 9/11 or Warren Commission to look into this, to hold whomever accountable. I have no issue calling that out.

For Alexis on the Pacific coast, January 6th was the first day of the new semester at her school including the first day of a brandnew government class and new students she didn't know. She explained,

Oh, my God. [The insurrection was] not what I had intended on talking about that first day. We did not get to the syllabus. I remember in the first class, [the news was] just breaking in. They hadn't really gotten in [to the Capitol] yet. Kids were asking, typing in the chat, “Are you seeing what's going on?” I was like, “yeah, we've known that a rally was going to happen and I think people are expecting things to get a little intense, but they're getting a little more intense.” I remember thinking, “The national guard is going to be there in a second.” And then [during] the lunch break is when they were breaking in [to the Capitol].

But as the events continued, it became more difficult for Alexis to conduct a traditional first day of class.

So my next class, I was shaking. I definitely did not eat lunch and was just watching this like, “Oh, my God.” The beginning of that class, the [students didn't] even care to have me introduce myself. They're just like, “Are you watching this?” And I'm trying not to panic everyone because also this whole year has been about me trying to get them calm

and give them support and consistency and not trying to panic them. I was just like, “Okay, well, this is something that we have not seen here.”

Alexis tried to give context of the day and the events that have brought the country to that moment.

I tried to keep relating it back to the claim of election fraud and that these have all been dispelled by states, by the Secretaries of States, by the court cases. There's no factual evidence to widespread fraud in this election. Trying to bring it back to the facts.

But as with many major events, it wasn't a one-day thing. Students continued to ask questions.

But the next day, all they wanted to talk about was the insurrection. I was letting them ask questions or just state your opinion, just how are you feeling. Generally the vibe was 'We're scared. Very unsettled.'

Only mere months after the summer of 2020 and the George Floyd protests, comparisons between treatment of those acting out in both the Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, and those rioting in city streets in the summer of 2020 were everywhere. Alexis said,

The vast majority of them brought up race and just how obvious it was, compared to the Black Lives Matter protests over summer, how different these people were treated compared to the protests over the summer. They were saying if these were Black people there would be people dead at the Capitol. They brought up a lot of those aspects.

However, Alexis cautioned that to view this event, or any event, one needs context, and not just small cherry-picked clips that might paint an entirely different picture than what happened on the whole.

I think, too, at first when you were just seeing those videos of cops waving them in or one taking a selfie, definitely pointed out that. I also kid that yes, we see that but you also



have to remember that when we're seeing stuff online, video clips show you a second of an interaction. You're not seeing the whole context. Before everyone gets all wild, make sure you know this with anything on the internet. You could see one clip of a video and it's not the entire thing. We talked about that a lot. Later on, talked about how there was also tons of cops giving their lives trying to fight these people off and to paint them all as waving them in is just using a broad brush. It was, whew.

Alexis told her students that like them, she doesn't have all the answers but she will at least listen to all of their questions.

I try to let them ask me the questions they want to ask and I tell them I don't have the answers to everything, I'll try to answer things the best I can. But also, especially in that specific instance, it was just letting vent their feelings and their fears. It was a way that we all weirdly connected really quickly at the very beginning of the semester because they had never met. But there's definitely been times like that where lesson plans go out the window. This is history, we'll live in it and I think it's fine to process it. The best we can, at least.

Like most teachers that day whether it was the first, second, or fortieth day of class, Jocelyn hit pause on previously planned lessons and curriculum after January 6, 2021.

I did a lesson on nationalism, especially because it sort of fit in with what we were talking about with nationalism pre-World War I. And so to be able to say like, 'Hey, we learned what nationalism means. This is where it goes totally terrible.' I try not to make it just for my own sanity, but there's some stuff like the Capitol riots that you can't not talk about.

At Johnny's school in the South, the school administration directed the social studies department classes to address the January 6<sup>th</sup> Insurrection with their classes in a break from their planned lessons.

I think that was the right thing to do, and I think it was the best thing to do. I'm glad that we did it. However, we're studying history, we're not studying contemporary events. I think there's a connection between those two. Understanding the past will help us to understand the present, for sure.

Unlike most other participants, Johnny indicated that he would prefer to not discuss current events in his history classes.

I resist this break from curriculum to suddenly blending in with the historical stuff that I'm doing, suddenly talk about this thing just because it happened. We can't treat history as it is about current events. I honestly resist that in my curriculum. I don't just stop and say, 'Okay, we're going-' I think that when you're like 'This happened in the world. You should bring it in right now,' there's this kind of immediateness that we have where it very easily flows into the culture of outrage [and not] taking a moment to consider all the various factors that could be factoring in to any one single moment, or even to wait and pause to see what the actual evidence is out there.

***Subtheme 2B: Major Event that Disrupted Participants' Curriculum and Planned Lessons***

***Linked to Trump, his Policies or Rhetoric: The Day After the 2016 Election (Nov. 9, 2016)***

While January 6, 2021, is a day Alexis will never forget teaching, November 9, 2016, is right there with it. The day after the 2016 election found many teachers caught off guard with an election result no one ever really imagined happening: Donald Trump was the President-Elect of the United States.

Alexis said,

One of my memories that will stay with me forever is, I was new at the school, I didn't really know anybody. The day after Election Day, I'm driving to school crying and I get there, park my car, get out and see another teacher who I've never even talked to before, and we just look at each other and walk up and hug each other. It was just like, all right, let's go do this. I walk into the hallways, there's two teachers in a secret spot crying and hugging.

It was a situation we see every four years; one of the two major political party's nominees had just been duly elected the president of the United States. But in many school hallways and teachers' lounges that morning, it wasn't the same feeling one has the morning after a presidential election, even if the person you didn't vote for had won. Alexis continued,

I walked into my department chair's room, who I was probably the most familiar with, and there's a bunch of other teachers in her room, and everyone's asking each other, "What do we do? What do we say? How are we going to do this?" Someone said, "Today we're going to process. Just tell everyone, 'We're going to let this sink in today and we're going to talk about it tomorrow, let's not get into it today.'" But nobody actually stuck to that. I went to my classroom, [and was] trying to get set up, and one of my students walks in, this young, super-sweet girl, she's one of the few Black kids at the school. She just walks in totally distraught. Just walks in and hugs me and was crying, and I'm hugging her, and then other kids start walking in and they all just come in and start hugging. It turned into this giant group hug of a relatively new class, a lot of people didn't really know each other, and some kids were crying. It was nothing anyone was intent on doing, it just happened.

Perhaps everyone was tired, but while there are parts of November 9, 2016, that participant teachers remember well, there are also parts of the day that were a blur, as Alexis noted:

I was trying to keep it together as best I could. I don't remember what we really talked about, I just remember I didn't really know what to say. I remember a kid wrote on the board really big, "Vote." And these kids couldn't vote, but you could just tell they were inspired to vote after that. There was a general vibe of anti-Trump and a lot of distress.

Meanwhile, at David's large, public midwestern urban high school, it wasn't the outcome anyone expected. On that Wednesday morning, students at David's school were crying, hugging each other. David said, "It felt like the end of the world." David admits he had a hard time not talking about the election in a way that was slanted. David doesn't think his approach that day was the most productive. If he could get a do-over, David would lead the class in questioning what happened and why polls were incorrect, not injecting his personal opinion. While he would handle the situation differently today, David admits that the day after the election was therapeutic since he got to vent about it all day.

Even five years later, Moira said, "I think a lot of people are still processing what exactly happened then." Moira recalled many absences that day, both students and faculty. Moira felt "conflicted" over faculty absences on that day saying, that it sent the wrong message to students that a professional couldn't bring them self to work the day after a democratically elected official was elected. Student absences might have been more understanding as Moira said some students felt that Trump represents a direct attack on who they are, referring to undocumented students, those of color, or members of the LGBT community.

***Subtheme 2C: Major Event that Disrupted Participants' Curriculum and Planned Lessons***  
***Linked to Trump, his Policies or Rhetoric: his Tweets, Comments, and Behavior***

The adversarial press is always something a president of the United States will get agitated by, that is normal. But for a president of the United States to call that press corps “the enemy of the people”? That is not normal. But that’s exactly for President Trump did. He mocked the press, would call certain journalists “terrible” and most frequently, call any news source or story that he didn’t like, “fake news.” For an office which has its own press office, and reporters from every reputable news outlet in the country, and many from around the world covering it as well, Donald Trump’s presidency often circumnavigated the traditional outreach to the press through the White House communications office in favor of the president’s favorite social media platform, Twitter. Through Twitter, Trump mocked veterans like Sen. John McCain, who Trump said he liked veterans who were not captured, a dig at McCain’s five and a half years spent tied up as a prisoner of war in Hanoi, Vietnam. Trump announced his presidency saying that Mexicans were crossing the border and that they were rapists and murderers. When white supremacists marched in Charlottesville, chanting “Jews will not replace us,” Trump said there were fine people on both sides of that argument. And when his supporters stormed the United States Capitol building on January 6, 2021 in an effort to overturn the 2020 presidential election that he lost, Trump still refused to concede and said those insurrectionists were “very special people” and that he loved them. The behavior of a president is something I was raised to look up to as a child, regardless of whether my parents voted for the person. We would pause what we were doing when a president spoke to the country, we would listen to the state of the union addresses, and I enjoyed (and clearly still do) learning about the history of various presidential administrations, especially how they led the country through turbulent times. But

Donald Trump was not, and is not, presidential. In an environment where one wants to keep their views and biases out of the classroom as much as possible, explaining and teaching about Trump in a government or history class can present challenges for participant teachers. David said as Trump's rhetoric devolved, the harder it was to teach about him and explain his behavior.

I think at first, it was a little bit easier to talk about [Trump voters] that saw themselves as "forgotten Americans," people that were in the middle of the country and trying to relate that to people that live in cities. [With Trump,] Black people in cities felt ignored. There was an understanding about the resentment and anger and why he was an appealing candidate. But as the Trump Presidency went more and more off the rails over four years, capping off in the Capitol insurrection on January 6, it became almost impossible to explain his support, let alone his actions.

Throughout the Trump presidency, the phrase "not my president" has been uttered at marches, rallies, and throughout social media platforms. The phrase continues today, perhaps not used as frequently by Trump supporters for President Joe Biden, but it presents a moment where participant teachers felt they needed to correct, clarify, and promote civility. Alexis recalled,

I remember getting into an argument with a kid because I said something about Trump and using the term "we" or "us" and she said, 'No, that's not my president.' And I'm like, 'Sorry, even if you don't like him, he is. He represents your country that you're a citizen of.'

Trump's tweets are so unpresidential that there are books published just to show outlandish his social media messages are. Ted in New England said the tweets always got his students' attention.

[The tweets] get students fired up. And when other Republicans don't call him out, when it comes to talking about the GOP and some of the principles of the party, it's become harder and harder to try to articulate what their principles are, and then the values that are associated with those particular principles.

It's not just Trump's rhetoric, but also his policies, like his Muslim ban, that could stoke division and hatred, as Twyla recalls in her role as Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion:

There's some kids who come to me who are Muslim students who have said, "Hey..." It hasn't happened to all [of our Muslim students], but happens sometimes, and some kid will say something like call him a terrorist and then say to me, "Oh, it's just a joke," right? That's what our kids do, it's like, "Oh, I'm just joking."

When an influx of Columbian students immigrated to the country came to Johnny's school, some white "Anglo Americans" ridiculed the new students for their limited English skills in the middle of one of Johnny's Harkness style discussions. So, the next day, he flipped the script and did a Harkness discussion in Spanish, and the Columbian students really "came alive." The white students' ridicule was due to the broader contentious and controversial immigration issue perpetuated by President Trump and his rhetoric.

"Never Trump" Republican Moira said his behavior made teaching during the age of Trump worse than she could have expected. Moira used to think that she was great at creating a balance for all students of diverse backgrounds so they could all feel welcome in the classroom. However, she said that since Trump came into politics, that it is much harder to do so because of his divisiveness. She said because of his rhetoric, it makes many feel that the Republican Party is toxic, and she acknowledges that one might see that same toxicity spreading in some of the

GOP's newly elected members of Congress. As a result, government classroom conversations have changed.

Today, we're not having discussions of liberalism and conservatism but instead about what is right and what is wrong. Teaching in the Trump presidency was harder than teaching at any other point in my quarter century career, for obvious reasons, and I hope that it goes back to where one party over the other is not good or bad, and we can just teach about what's going on without demonizing a group. That became really difficult when the leader of a party was not a nice person.

***Subtheme 2D: Major Event that Disrupted Participants' Curriculum and Planned Lessons Linked to Trump, his Policies or Rhetoric: Police Brutality, the 2020 George Floyd Protests, and the Black Lives Matter Movement Leading Schools to Develop Anti-Racism Agendas***

While Moira indicated "lots of negative and heavy vibes" throughout teaching in 2020, including the George Floyd protests, she acknowledges that the "loud student backlash against the teachers for not addressing it in as great of a manner as they had wanted" caused her to pause, reflect and realize that they were right and the teachers at her school "didn't do enough." But Moira is still trying to find out "what is enough."

David said U.S. History classes used to focus on presidencies, government, courts and the accomplishments of the white men who held those offices. The last two years' racial events with George Floyd and BLM, he is still learning how to react properly and what his role is in this but he's figuring it out. Today (in 2021), David places a greater emphasis on American "culture" in his U.S. History classes, hearing the stories from the lenses of previously unsung groups with more emphasis on understanding racial dynamics of different time periods. But he echoes Moira's feelings that when George Floyd was murdered, it was at an already difficult time for



educators as they were grappling with the sudden switch to remote learning and the beginning of the pandemic. David remembers trying to understand what his role was:

[I was] teaching remotely and [when George Floyd was murdered and the protests ensued] we really had to just stop what I was doing and think, “What does this mean? What happened? What is the historical context here? How do I cover this, too?” That last question how do I cover it, I’m still figuring that out. I don’t know how to cover that. I just let the kids talk. Do I try to lead something? Do I connect it to past historical examples?

David wondered what would meet the criteria these days to stop curriculum and lessons in their tracks and cover current events.

As these sorts of things happen more and more and we’re expected to talk about it more and more in class, I think that’s something that we must think about as teachers. What is our role there? We could stop class all the time and talk about what’s going on, but then we wouldn’t learn any history or context. We’ve had to modify what we’re doing, which has also caused us to lose content and not finish the class material because we’ve been so disrupted by various events in terms of covering the actual course curriculum content.

Twyla’s school adopted an anti-racist platform that went into effect in the fall of 2020. Teachers at her school are evaluated on how they incorporated anti-racist teachings into their courses.

Summer 2020 was the first time that I saw a sort of serious push towards the liberal side, after the murder of George Floyd and our administrators saying they want to be anti-racist. And that pushes our school definitely into a more liberal realm, so much so that I

know there are some families that have left, and there are some families that question it, but it is what it is right now.

For Alexis, her school district made “Black Lives Matter” part of district policy.

Our superintendent sends out emails for Black Lives Matter, we make equity and justice and equality a cornerstone of our education. Our district definitely doesn't shy away from controversial issues, or what may be seen as controversial issues. At our school, teachers wear Black Lives Matter shirts and have signs all over our schools, a Black Lives Matter display case with pictures of kids that have been killed by cops.

Alexis acknowledged though that everything isn't one-sided. She said teaching about current event that deal with police issues is tricky because she has students whose parents are police officers and students who are of color and she wants everyone to feel welcome and that their views are valid.

Johnny mentioned that perhaps it took the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests to push his private school administration in the South to approve a Black history class he's been trying to get approved for years.

Finally, the African Diaspora course that I'm teaching now, I've been trying to get that on the books for years, but very clearly is a response to what's happened because of George Floyd, or with that incident. That course was green-lighted because people suddenly realized that there was a very direct need right now.

However, Moira acknowledged that teaching about race can be harder for some to do than others that aren't as well versed or weren't taught about race, or the struggles of other groups in their own educational upbringing or societies. She said, “I tried really hard this year to incorporate all of those events right away, which is challenging because you want to do it

responsibly and in the right way, and we're all human and make mistakes.” Moira added that she feels teachers’ hearts are in the right place and want to do the right thing for all their students, but even attempting to create a balanced tone and curriculum in a time of political and cultural change has the potential to leave someone in the classroom feeling left out or hurt by someone else.

### **Theme Three: Teachers Aim to Demonstrate Civility and Democracy in Classrooms**

Regardless of content or subject matter, participant teachers today aim to create a positive learning environment for students to learn in where they are free to share thoughts, questions, and their confusions about course content and navigate the waters of adolescence. For participant teachers, creating a welcoming place for students of all political stripes is important, but can be challenging in the age of Trump.

In analyzing the 10 participant interviews, two major commonalities emerged about teaching in the age of Trump. First, most participant teachers set ground rules early and “establish norms” with students, together as a class, early on in the school year. Second, teachers interviewed mostly abide by the philosophy that they must teach students to think critically without teaching them what to think.

For David at his large urban Midwestern public high school, his goal is to get kids to see multiple sides of an issue, even if they disagree with it, to understand why that might be a viewpoint.

It's getting harder and to do that. It was always my goal to get the kids to see other sides and to think about things. I don't want them to walk away with a certain perspective. I don't want them to walk away loving or hating America because of me. I want them to have formed their own opinions about history and things about where the country should

go. It's not my place or my job to tell them what to think. It's my job to give them tools for how to think.

In recent years, David has moved to focus on having more views heard—positive contributions from unsung groups, often representing minority communities. He said students are tired of hearing about the terrible things that happened to Blacks; they want to hear about their contributions.

David said he is still willing to challenge kids more and play devil's advocate in order to get them to think critically, even express ideas that they might see as unpopular, in an effort to get them to challenge, argue and think about more complex ideas going on. David doesn't inject himself into conversations because "you can get into trouble." Instead, he just lets his students talk and share out. David said he had a white male student in his journalism class apologize to him later for not participating in an earlier class discussion that dealt with race because he didn't feel equipped to properly contribute to things he hasn't experienced. David had a female student in fall 2020 question the 1950s housing practices, and it devolved into relentless online bullying. Peers were bullying her so badly, calling her "racist," that she had to leave the class permanently. David said it is better to err on the side of caution with these rules: "Understand both sides, establish norms, understand what is offensive and why and to whom and toe the line—don't deviate from it." David said without a doubt, classroom conversations in the age of Trump have become harder to have.

Ted in New England seems to embrace discomfort in his classroom. He said, "Conflict is a necessary part of teaching American politics and history. We need to expose students to as many new ideas as possible and get students to think, not how or what to think." While Ted

identifies as liberal-minded, if no conservatives step up, he will play devil's advocate and represent the political right.

Twyla at her Midwestern private independent school in a college town said she sets the ground work for the class to form their own rules on how to talk to one another about politics on the first day of school. She instructs them not to personally attack, but rather, to question policy. She said while textbooks are fine, she prefers to focus on unheard stories and unsung voices. She hopes that the unheard stories offer something different and will maybe help students pay attention as she finds the current high school generation can't focus even on a video for more than 15 minutes without losing attention.

A history teacher for over 20 years, Twyla has strong feelings when it comes to the CRT debate and her curriculum. Twyla said,

Patriotism should be having more knowledge about our history as a country—where we've come from and the faults of our ancestors—we are human! No one is perfect. But knowing our history and how far we've come should cause patriotism—not shame. I don't know why people think that when we teach history if we tell them all the truth, the good and the bad, that somehow kids aren't going to be patriotic. If anything, I feel that it endears kids to [this country] more because then this person isn't on a pedestal. Like,

“Oh, they were a human.”

Outside her own classroom, Twyla serves her school in the role of Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion—a role that she said “changes all the time” but one where she can find herself interacting with various classrooms and grades across the school.

There's a lot of difficult [discussions going on in her classroom and the school]. I mean, I have to be honest. With Trump's presidency, there were a lot even in my world history

classes. Anything that Trump did or said, I had a kid that would come in the next day just to get [a rise] from their peers that were very anti-Trump, so I had to put the stop to that because it wasn't productive. It wasn't really a conversation. They just wanted to sort of blast and insult each other, and our classrooms are not a place for that. So that's where the rules come in. That's where I have to remind them about how we're having a discussion. And that's part of getting the kids to understand that coming in and insulting someone is not a discussion, but it happened, I have to say, quite a bit more than I can remember in the past, when Trump was President.

For discussions in her classroom, Jocelyn said she never aims to be the dominant voice or viewpoint in the classroom. She models how to discuss yet at the same time, she doesn't want to be an umpire, either. Jocelyn and Roland both set classroom norms early and urge students to debate issues, not one another. Stevie tries to challenge his students to be able to understand the opposite of what they believe and argue that point of view even if that is not how they truly feel.

Even in a time of a fast news cycle that could contain any element of cultural upheaval or another element of an unprecedented leadership style in the federal government, Moira said students expect the teachers to quickly change, adjust, and adapt plans to cover current cultural events. Moira said she used to think that her balancing between political sides in a controversial political conversation was a strength of hers, but she said that doing so in the age of Trump is much harder. Moira fights the view that the conservative media keeps repeating, saying that public school teachers indoctrinate their students. Some might, she said, but none that she knows of. Moira always wants to give balance to both or all sides of a political argument, but she found that much harder to do during the Trump administration.

I sometimes find myself, because I do lean right personally, politically, I think maybe sometimes I try to over-correct, and then maybe my presentation goes further left, and that I think is more recent in the political climate that, as part of how things have changed in the past four years under Trump that being a Republican is “bad.” That's definitely affected the way I teach. So, while I try to be very balanced, I find myself maybe shifting a little further left in more recent years.

To attempt to successfully teach in the politically divided times we are living and learning in, all teachers interviewed said they set ground rules early and “establish norms” with students, together as a class, early on in the school year, a process some call “contracting.” This gives students ownership over their behavioral expectations. The teachers interviewed are very much against any form of indoctrination as they mostly brought up the philosophy that they must teach students to think but not how to think or what to think. While this study’s participant pool could have included any secondary social studies subject teacher, all 10 participants taught government & politics or American history. All who taught a government course also taught history, and every teacher who teaches government classes (seven out of the 10 interviewed) said that their government classes were more likely to have controversial or contentious discussions about current events naturally come up than in other social science and history classes that they teach.

#### **Theme Four: Students Might Ask, but Teachers Don’t Tell: Teachers Keep their Political Views Private from Students**

Unanimously, teachers interviewed keep their political views to themselves, although most added that their students can probably tell where they fall on the political spectrum. Only one teacher out of the 10 said that their school has a “soft” policy to avoid injecting their own

political opinion into lessons. The other nine teachers said their schools have no policy on whether a teacher keeps their views to themselves, but that they all choose to keep their views close to the vest.

Johnny's school has a soft policy or preference that teachers don't disclose personal views, so, he doesn't come out and say, "this is what I am." But by the end of the school year, Johnny said that his students probably know where he is. He said he was a moderate conservative when he was entering college and is now more liberal. At his private school in the South, he does find himself surrounded by more politically conservative students during office hours—who will ask him political questions and debate issues with him.

Maira did explicitly break her personal policy of keeping views to herself with the debate over Confederate statues in the South. She felt it was necessary as a government and history teacher to be clear about the issue.

When there were the discussions and pretty intense debates a year or so ago about removal of Confederate statues and symbolism, I did preface my opinion with, "I typically keep my own politics out of this conversation, but I feel very strongly that those should all come down for these reasons." Then I gave them historical evidence of what so many people don't understand. I backed my opinion with historical reasoning of, the Confederacy only lasted for five years, it's a representation of treason. To me, I don't even feel that should be political, but because it was, that would be an example of me typically keeping my own opinion out of it, but feeling it just was important for historical context to tell them why I think the way I do.

David said a teacher has to show the students it's okay to express things, but it's also not okay for a teacher to tell them what to think or how to think, or that one side of the political aisle is more



correct than the other, and modeling that. Since November 2016, when David “had a hard time” not concealing his feelings after Trump’s election, he has moved further and further away from inserting his emotions, thoughts, and opinions into his teaching. He now sees his job as how to help them think about such a situation through questioning, “why did it happen?” Or, “if you don't want it to happen, what can you do to prevent it from happening again?” instead of, “this is awful, this is terrible.”

Conservative Roland in Texas said he has consciously done a better job of keeping his political views private in the past five years than he did prior to the Trump administration. He said that he “jabs both [political] sides and makes a cognizant effort to make sure he does. His goal is to get students to think – not to necessarily agree with him or think like him.

Twyla said she keeps her political views to herself, but added, “except it probably shows.” She tries to not to inject her opinion because “I don’t want students to say something because they think that it’s something that I want to hear.” She felt her personal non-disclosure policy of political views challenged when teaching about issues of race and DNA, questions regarding transgender issues, and the intersection of sexuality and religion.

So at first, I was trying to just have a conversation with the kids to understand that, “Whether you understand it or not, this is this person's lived reality.” Same thing happened when we showed a movie this year in advisory. It was about a Muslim man who started out by saying he was gay. [He spoke about the] language of inclusion. I had families contact myself and I know contacted the head of the school and the dean of students saying that they didn't like the video because it's impossible, that you cannot be Muslim and be gay.... I was trying to have a conversation with a student who came to see me about it because he was really upset that we showed it. And he was trying to explain

to me that if you're a Muslim, [the religion] doesn't allow you to be gay. And I was like, "I understand what you're saying,... [but] this is his truth. This is what he is saying he is. So how am I going to respond to this man who says this is what he is?" The [student] was having a really hard time with me and kept saying, "No, no, no." And finally I said, "I hear you, but here's the deal. This is what he says he is, and we take people as they are. And if this is what he says he is, if he knows the Quran the same way you do, if this is his reality, then that's it." There's no arguing over whether or not we can show this video. I'm telling you, this is what he says is his truth and his reality. It was a difficult conversation. Twyla recalled another time where she could not hold back her views regarding the transgender community.

Another young man, he started saying that trans people aren't real people, and instead he threw in the old medical debate [from] way back when that they're just confused and it's just a psychological disorder. And I was like, "No. I've got to just stop you and tell you no. You're wrong." I cannot let other students leave thinking that transgender people have a psychological disorder. I said, "Yeah, we used to think that way, but we also used to measure brains and [give credence to] eugenics.... So we cannot rely on what old science once said because we know better now, and we do better, and you're just wrong. We can have a conversation more about this later, but you are just wrong on this."

So every once in a while, I just cannot [keep my viewpoints to myself], especially if it's about taking people's humanity away. I cannot have that. You don't have to agree with the lifestyle, but I'll tell you that you don't have the right to say that you have a mental disease and that you don't exist. Just no.

Ted in New England said his school has no school policy on political viewpoints, and maintains a strong tradition of autonomy. He said he could see students being confused on or perhaps have a clue to his political views perhaps with his repeated use of *The New York Times* as a source for news and articles in class. Ted said he does not want students to know his political views because he does not want any of them to fear that he might grade them down if they do not agree with his political views. He wants his students to make their own conclusions, not to write “how my teacher feels.”

Patrick in New England does not advertise that he is a moderate Republican, but if students ask, he will let them know. While he said did not vote for Trump in 2016 or 2020, he said he feels he would share more conservative views if he felt that it was okay with his school’s more liberal administration. Patrick cites the January 6<sup>th</sup> Insurrection as when he was the most outspoken he has been on an issue to classes, even publishing Op-eds of his own in various publications. He spent two class periods on it, and students clamored for his thoughts. While he generally keeps his views to himself on most current day topics, the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> were too important not to say how he felt.

Alexis said she keeps her opinions to herself when it comes to teaching. She states truth when there are lies and fake news circulating, and media literacy to be had. She often swallows her thoughts and has a good poker face. Alexis elaborated,

It's funny, because people normally know I'm a super liberal person, and I've had friends ask me that before too, how do you stay neutral, things like that. I think because I'm pretty Socratic in class I'll just post questions and let them think about and form their own opinions on things. They'll ask me who did I vote for and obviously I'm like, “I can't tell you, doesn't matter.” They'll ask my opinions on some things and I'm always like, “My

opinion on this is irrelevant. You don't need to know.” I guess when I know I have some conservative kids I always make a point to let them speak their piece, as long as it's respectful, and that's a whole thing in my class. I have sentence stems on the wall, I'll laminate a thing of how to disagree respectfully.

We have questions and debates, and as long as it's respectful I validate everybody's thoughts and opinions and encourage everyone to speak up. I say it all the time, that is democracy—going through different opinions, questioning others and listening to others, acknowledging that we all live in our own little bubbles and it's important for us to see things from everybody else's perspectives. Whether you agree with it or not, you need to hear it and try to see it from their side. I don't ever give my opinion. I try and keep things factual. So when there's questions of things, I try and keep it to the facts and the truth. I think there's nothing controversial about stating the truth about the election or stating the truth when there are blatant lies.

While all the teachers interviewed said that they keep their political views to themselves, they are all also quick to point out that they are human, and while we can do our best to bottle up emotion and put on a poker face, we all have our moments where the guard is let down, whether consciously or subconsciously. A major commonality among teachers interviewed is that they want students to think on their own, develop their own thoughts, independent of who is instructing the class, not to say or write an answer that the student thinks the teacher would want to hear.

### **Theme Five: The Rise of Misinformation and Disinformation in the Classroom**

The permeation of disinformation and misinformation on the internet is a big problem for the participants in this study—in their classrooms and in the larger school community. False

information is widespread—whether on social media, from non-reputable news sources, from pundits (masquerading as journalists) airing conspiracy theories on cable channels, or by word-of-mouth from a loved one or person one values. To combat this problem, some participants teach specific media and news literacy lessons to their classes while some others interviewed feel they need to do more of it and do it better. Media literacy lessons focus on teaching students how to determine what is factual, how to sense bias in journalism, and how to determine reputable sources.

David said he believes his students are suffering from a 24/7 news cycle of “hysteria” surrounding Trump and his administration, which can lead to burn-out, tiredness, and news fatigue. It was hard for the participants to teach current events in their classes when students were decidedly unenthused about the news, current events, and Trump. David blames Trump’s constant belittling of the news media, whether calling them “fake news” or the “enemy of the people” as well as what he believes is a climate of “constant crisis” where people are made to think that the United States is being invaded by border migrants or that Democrats are in favor of infanticide. David said he believes ultra-conservatives are perpetuating these lies to divide the country, while acknowledging that he also feels that there are politicians and activists on the far left that also can exaggerate a point to make a media sound bite.

David cited the social media platform TikTok as a primary means of spreading false information:

I hear a lot of, “I read on TikTok, I heard this on TikTok.” I heard a student, who was a really successful student say, “I heard on TikTok that Joe Biden cheated. I like Joe Biden, but he definitely cheated in this election.”

Misinformation and disinformation, while both untrue, do not have to be all doom and gloom, as David recalled:

I overheard this one happen in person this year between students [in my U.S. history class]. They were both talking about misinformation on TikTok and they're talking about the COVID vaccines, and [one of the students] said, "Yeah, it's just silly all the stuff it says, like it affects fertility and women and it doesn't make any sense." Then the other student said, "But, I heard on TikTok," and she said this all serious, "It makes your boobs grow bigger." The other student just kind of went along with it, responding, "Oh I didn't know that." I'm glad I overheard that conversation, and wasn't part of that conversation.

Jocelyn also said she heard false information circulating among students about COVID and the vaccines:

I would say to the students, "Okay, you're going to find two sources about COVID and tell me why you think this is a good source of information, or, why you think this is not good information and be like the Backstreet Boys and "tell me why." It's my favorite line.

Jocelyn notes that it isn't just the information and how reliable or unreliable it may be, but for students to recognize the source of their findings, and whether it is reliable.

And then I also asked them, "Okay, just what have you heard exactly? Where have you gotten your information from?" And a lot of them are, "Oh, TikTok," or, "My sister's a nurse," or, "My dad said this because he watched the news," or whatever. [I'm] getting them to think about where they get their information from and getting them to look at it through a critical lens to say, "Hey, is this really good information?" Or evaluate it on a scale of one to five, is this credible, not credible, biased, not biased. And even stuff that is

biased, why is it biased? Or what purpose does this bias serve? Who would read something like this and think that, oh yeah, this is true information?

Johnny said while historians seem to always be doing the work of media literacy, that there certainly has been an increase in the need to teach students about how to decipher myths and “fake news” from actual facts during the age of Trump.

I think it would be delusional to say that misinformation and disinformation does not affect what we do in class, or the discussions we have in class. I think what I try to do is when misinformation or disinformation does come in to the classroom, in a direct way, to let those become good case studies to pick apart. So a student says, “I read yesterday that the vaccines kill as many people as COVID does.” It's like, “okay, well what's your source? I'm really curious about that. What's your source? Can you bring it in?” If they can't produce it, I'm like, “Well, you need to be careful about ingesting information you don't even have at your fingertips.”

Johnny says that media literacy, in a way, is what historians have always done—to look at various sources, and find the facts. Said Johnny,

I think ultimately that's another thing that my courses are about, is about kind of interrogating evidence and therefore to some degree about media literacy. That's what historians do. I'm not really so much trying to train them in memorizing names, dates, and knowing facts. I'm trying to train them to think like historians. Yes, misinformation creeps in, but to be honest, students always walk in with some sort of misinformation or limited information at least.

Stevie said TikTok is where students get their information, but in class, he usually counters with Associated Press or Reuters wire service articles. Stevie said social media has pros

and cons: there are good things about it, like students learning about things that they would not have encountered before (like Tulsa and Juneteenth), but it is also “a constant problem” that does harm. Stevie said it felt nearly impossible to fight the “wild west” of social media and its vast reservoir of misinformation and disinformation. Stevie said that the pay walls around credible sources like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and even local reputable newspapers is not good for dissemination of actual, factual news because instead, people will go to fringe fake news sources.

Moira saw an increase in misinformation, but she found that Zoom, during pandemic remote learning, was also helpful in that students could share links which sometimes helped her to debunk “fake news.” Roland said the vast amount of sources of information should be a great thing, but the proliferation of disinformation and misinformation makes it not so great because it leads more students to doubt “any and all” news sources and their family members as well.

Alexis said she is vocal among her colleagues in the constant push for news literacy. She said she considers misinformation and disinformation the biggest threat facing the country. She spends “lots of time communicating what is reliable, trustworthy, reputable.” Often, she will answer a student’s question with “Let’s look it up.” She encourages students to read from different sources. Like Moira, Alexis found that the Zoom chat feature (along with her rapport) made it possible for the few conservative students to open up to her about their feelings and concerns. Alexis said that the chat feature worked better for students who better express themselves in writing instead of verbally participating.

Alexis places a big focus on identifying material that is reliable and trustworthy, although some of her students on the political left have said to her that CNN (which she uses often as a source) is too conservative of a source. Alexis said,



I do a little unit on media literacy and the role of the press. During the Trump years, we definitely talked a lot about what actually is "fake news" and what is the role of the press and why would someone want to go into journalism with how the president spoke about journalists. I remember having them read an open letter from Sen. John McCain about the attacks on the press and just how important it was for democracy to have a free press. I remember showing the students a speech from Sen. Mitt Romney in class. A lot of kids were like, "Wow." I remember these liberal leaning students being like, "Huh. I got a newfound respect for that guy." [I try] to show them perspectives that they're probably not used to.

Alexis said she has subscriptions to *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Forbes*, and uses CNN10 and BBC often in class, an in effort to bring in various, but reliable, viewpoints. She regularly schedules library lessons on "fake news," too. She wants students to understand the difference between news and opinion, and she said that becomes obvious with examples from Fox News Channel.

When it comes to Fox News, though, when we do our media literacy stuff, we'll go over the difference between news and editorial and opinion and how that gets bundled together a lot on Fox News. In general, I don't think that's a reputable news source. It wouldn't be listed as a reputable news source, but we'll use it in distinguishing between opinion and how that gets tricky when your name is Fox News.

Patrick said his students bring misinformation and disinformation to the classroom "all the time."

Students say, "Oh, I saw on Instagram that this happened, or that so-and-so said this, or that." [I'll] ask the students, "Where? Show me where. Give me the source. I haven't heard that." And the source is some shenanigan. Clearly made up, fake news. And these

are coming from juniors and seniors. So I get upset, and I tell them, “Well, unless a credible news source has verified that, like *The New York Times*, like BBC, what have you, don't bring it up in class. You're just wasting everybody's time.” But students are so willing to trust the first thing that comes across their screens, especially during a spur-of-the-moment discussion or conventional discussion in class, that they forget to verify or cross-check with other platforms. I don't want to say I shame students, but I certainly do call them out in class, as nicely as I can. It's a huge issue.

While Patrick laments that misinformation and disinformation frequent his class so often, he acknowledges that what makes the “fake news wars” even more problematic is when the actual, credible, news publications occasionally get something wrong that makes it sometimes harder to argue their legitimacy and accuracy rates.

It really frustrates me. I think part of it is they don't know, but it's also a little bit of laziness on their part, combined with apathy. I think the students that are best at media literacy are the ones that actually are involved with student journalism, producing news themselves. It's not to say that *The New York Times* doesn't mess things up too, but there's a difference between fake news and just getting things wrong now and then.

Whether it be heavily politically slanted cable channels like Fox News Channel, dark corners of the world wide web—like Info Wars, social media like TikTok, Parler, Facebook, Twitter or Instagram— “fake news,” conspiracies, and cherry-picked examples often taken out of context breed and spread like wildfire. Today, we find teachers taking the needed steps to combat misinformation and disinformation that can not only be misleading but can ultimately be anti-democratic and deadly.

## **Theme Six: The Political Classroom, Trumped**

While President Donald Trump was never mentioned by me, the researcher, in any questioning, the 45th president's name did come up in answers by all participants but one. While there is not much detail to explain here, it is clear that it is nearly impossible to avoid the impact that Donald Trump and Trumpism has had on the social studies classroom. While all presidents have their fans and those who dislike them, there is only one president at a time. If these participants' interviews took place during another presidential term, or in the immediate aftermath of one, it is hard to hypothesize what they would have said, or if the recent or incumbent president would have come up in participants' answers, recollections, and stories. Political figures are bound to come up in a government class, if for nothing more than identifying who the incumbent office holder is for the presidency, vice presidency, speaker of the house, house minority, senate majority and senate minority leaders, among others. But the unconventional way that Donald Trump conducted himself in office opened up so many more "what if" questions from students, soaking up the time for discussion and learning in the classroom, than I can imagine any president in recent memory would.

As part of the interview protocol, I, the researcher, never mentioned the name Donald Trump or brought up the former president in any way in questioning the 10 participants, as can be seen in the Interview Protocol [Appendix I]. However, as can be seen from the table below, a conversation about how one teaches a secondary government and/or history course over the past five years is pretty difficult to have without mentioning Trump. The table below shows the number of times the name "Trump" was said by participants, 63 in total, but does not include "45<sup>th</sup>" or "president" or "administration" or other words that could allude to the former president.

Pseudonym	Twyla	Ted	Stevie	Jocelyn	Alexis	Roland	Moirra	David	Patrick	Johnny	Total
Number of times Trump's name was said by participant	6	7	4	1	11	0	9	5	15	5	63

Table 4. *Number of Mentions of “Trump” by Name by Participants in Interview*

Only one participant interview, with self-described “Texas conservative” Roland, was conducted where Trump’s name never came up.

Donald Trump’s 2016 election, policies, tweets, divisive rhetoric and the implications of his words in various events including the January 6<sup>th</sup> Insurrection of the United States Capitol, participant teachers’ opinions on him, and general teacher reflections of how he impacted their ability to teach in a welcome environment for all students were all ways that the former president’s name came up in interview conversations about the teachers’ experience teaching politics in the age of Trump.

### Summary of Themes

The six themes that emerged from the interview data allow us to make sense of the American high school government and history teacher experience of the last decade. The **first** theme, The Trump Impact on the Student Body and Faculty, described how the larger school community is impacted by outside political and cultural change, predominantly through actions, rhetoric and policies of President Donald Trump. Furthermore, this theme explained that school political climates have moved politically left, which can alienate politically conservative students and their families, and potentially leading to a decline in high school student and faculty populations that hold politically conservative opinions. With school communities’ push to the political left, the number “out” Republican students are in retreat. School’s leftward lurch to counter Trumpism has opened the door to an increase in student and school political activism for

liberal political policies. At the same time, in an effort to make classrooms as inclusive as possible, participant teachers try to appeal to perhaps outnumbered or singled out Republican students and to show tolerance of all viewpoints by making a point to bring up stories of conservative family members and loved ones and explain that those people are loved regardless of different viewpoints or misplaced derogative labels that other students might affix to them in anger. Meanwhile, a generational difference emerges in that parents seem to be consistently to the political right of their children.

The **second** theme, The Trump Impact in the classroom, described how individual teacher's classrooms have been impacted by outside political and cultural change, predominantly through actions, rhetoric and policies of President Donald Trump. Furthermore, all major events and actions that disrupted participants' curriculum and planned lessons can be linked back to Trump's policies or rhetoric, including the January 6th Insurrection of the United States Capitol building, the day after the 2016 election (Nov. 9, 2016), his tweets, comments, and behavior, police brutality and the national 2020 George Floyd protests, the Black Lives Matter movement causing schools to develop anti-racism agendas, and navigating the divisive times that followed those events and other actions by the former president.

A **third** theme emerged with how participant teachers aim to demonstrate civility and democracy in classrooms, with issues of conflict, concepts of patriotism, and commonalities of setting ground rules with students early on in the school year about how to treat others with respect even if one doesn't agree with another's viewpoints. Participant teachers emphasize that they want their students to think, but they don't want to teach them what to think.

A **fourth** theme emerged with participant teachers' decisions to keep their political views private from their students, even though they all admit there have been times when they've broken that rule whether deliberately or subconsciously.

A **fifth** theme addressed the rise of misinformation and disinformation in the classroom, spurred by social media and many ways to get news and challenges with knowing who or what sources to trust.

Finally, a **sixth** theme emerged that while President Donald Trump was never mentioned by me, the researcher, in any questioning, the 45th president's name did come up in answers by all participants but one. These six themes, along with the corresponding subthemes, allowed me to make connections to the central research question of this study. The connections supported the main goal of this study, which was to more deeply examine high school teachers' experiences teaching politics in an era of cultural and political change.

### **Revisiting the Research Question and Sub-questions**

The aim of this study was to give voice to how American high school government and history teachers teach potentially controversial curriculum in a period of hyperpolarization and cultural change while aiming to create an inclusive atmosphere for all viewpoints. By conducting the study with a narrative inquiry methodology, I was able to gather first-hand accounts from 10 teachers, explaining how their teaching styles, school communities and experiences were impacted during a period of cultural and political change. The participants provided ample data to answer the overarching research question, which was: What are the perceptions and experiences of high school government and history teachers regarding curriculum and instruction in the age of Trump? The interview questions (see Appendix I for full protocol) were designed to explore the following more specific sub-questions:

***a) How has the age of Trump impacted how teachers perceive their decisions about what content to present to the class as a controversial political issue?***

Teachers interviewed often cited how they are cognizant in trying to bring in unsung heroes and voices and stories from communities that have not traditionally been heard from in history and government classes. Teachers interviewed are also aware that not everyone shares the same political viewpoint, nor background, and make efforts where they can to be as inclusive to all students and beliefs.

***b) How has the age of Trump impacted how teachers perceive balancing the tensions between engaging students in authentic political controversies and creating a classroom climate that is fair and welcoming to all students?***

Teachers interviewed often said that they start their courses with a “contracting” session where students all come up with how they feel the culture and what the rules should be in the classroom. The teacher guides them, if needed, toward the goal of respecting one another’s viewpoints even if one does not agree with them. “Debate the issue, not the person,” was often said in the interviews, and teachers model that they can do that in their own lives by giving examples of friends or loved ones who think, vote, or view things differently from themselves. When major events come up or students ask to discuss current events, teachers interviewed are more likely to respond to what the issue is with caution but aim to create a safe space in their classes for any and all viewpoints.

***c) How has the age of Trump impacted how teachers reflect on withholding and/or disclosing their views about the issues they introduce as controversial?***

All teachers interviewed said that they do not disclose their personal political viewpoints to their classes. Some teachers even said that they do not disclose their personal political viewpoints to

their colleagues if they feel that their colleagues will be angry with them or disapprove of their beliefs. That said, the teachers interviewed all said that even though they do not explicitly come out and share their direct viewpoints whether as a personal or, in the case of one participant, a “soft” school policy, their students can probably decipher the teacher’s political viewpoints based on reading material sources, facial expression, and general tone and dialogue.

***d) How do teachers perceive how their school’s political climate might have changed in the past five years in light of the age of Trump?***

All participant teachers, whether they are in favor of it, against it, or didn’t seem to express an opinion either way on it, said that their school’s political climate has moved leftward in the liberal direction. More liberal policy activism is common, whether it be a bigger demonstration like a walk-out, or a small sticker supporting a liberal cause stuck on a laptop. Conservative students, families, and student clubs are dwindling in numbers, and some schools have adopted liberal policies and viewpoints into their own school policies and agendas.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter Four presented the findings from this narrative inquiry study on teaching politics in the age of Trump. The findings examined how 10 American high school government and history teachers teach their curriculum content in a period of hyper polarization and cultural change while aiming to create an inclusive atmosphere for all viewpoints. The findings show teachers interviewed grapple with explaining the political actions and rhetoric of an unconventional presidential administration—one that even attempted to subvert democracy itself in an attempt to stay in power. Participant teachers found themselves adjusting to cultural changes received in different ways by different schools, readjusting through a pandemic, both of



which were magnified by misinformation and disinformation and the political hyperpolarization in the United States in the age of Trump.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The aim of this study was to find out how American high school government and history teachers across the country teach a curriculum that can often open itself up to debate and curious questioning by adolescent minds in a period of hyperpolarization and cultural change while aiming to create an inclusive atmosphere for all viewpoints. By doing so, the study aims to help other government and history teachers potentially answer their own thoughts about how to teach and create the best learning environment possible in a politically divisive era. Interest in this topic emerged as a result of reviewing relevant literature on the topic and making note of the subsequent gaps in the literature. Together with my prior experiences and knowledge on the topic, this study continued the conversation on how to teach politics in an era where many political norms seem to be out the window. The study was executed in such a way that allowed for the lived experiences of 10 high school government and history teachers to be shared in thoughtful, personal, and transparent ways. Through 10 one-on-one interviews over Zoom, I discovered six central emergent themes (the Trump impact on the student body and faculty, the Trump impact in the classroom, how participant teachers aim to demonstrate civility and democracy in classrooms, teacher's decisions to keep their political views private from their students, the rise of misinformation and disinformation in the classroom, and that while President Donald Trump was never mentioned by me in any questioning, the 45th president's name did come up in answers by all participants but one).

### **Connection to Literature**

While scholars have studied political polarization in the United States, how to treat the American classroom as a microcosm of society and how to create a climate that is fair and welcoming to all students, there is little research about the lived experience of government and

history teachers in the past 10 years, a period marked by significant cultural and political change. If secondary social studies educators want to gain a better sense of how to meet the needs of their students, more ought to be examined as to the specific experiences of teachers and their students. Many authors contribute meaningful, thought-provoking concepts in order to build awareness of teaching politics at various educational levels. These concepts are incorporated below as I outline the connections made from the qualitative study to the literature on the topic.

### ***Connection to Theme One***

Similar to the work of Dewey (1916), Journell (2011), Hess and McAvoy (2014), this study paralleled much of what scholars have mentioned are the key elements to teaching. These authors shared that teaching is often a multifaceted art which brings like-minded people together toward shared goals of preparing students for the world beyond their school and to be properly equipped citizens. It is important to note that while each lived experience of the 10 participants was reported differently, each was multidimensional, shedding light on how the teaching experience is specific to each person. To this point, the first emergent theme of **The Trump Impact on the Student Body and Faculty** opened up dialogue referencing how the teaching experience is constructed based on one's own experience. However, the experiences of the 10 participants yielded similar results regardless of their school's location, size, or demographics, and regardless of the teacher's own background, beliefs, or years of teaching experience.

The idea that the school is a microcosm of society as a whole held true as political polarization yielded heightened political tensions in teacher participants' high schools across America. The candidacy of, presidency of, and end of Donald Trump's single term as President of the United States did not make people actually feel united, but rather divided, and that was true in the participants' schools across the country.

As Knott (2017) wrote about the College Republicans at the University of Kansas facing constant obstacles on the campus, such as their campus chalking (advertisements) being washed away purposefully, conservatives at high schools in this study saw similar actions occur, directed at their political clubs.

Whereas Steinmetz (2017) wrote that politically conservative students complain that they are not free to exchange ideas in what feel like liberal echo chambers, the teachers interviewed stressed how important it was to them that all viewpoints be comfortable to be shared in the classroom. Patrick blames the hyperpolarization that has siloed more Americans into echo chambers, with blinders on to how the other half the population thinks. If some of his supporters had not felt bullied into silence, Trump's win might not have been such a shock to everyone had more of his voters felt they could tell the truth to pollsters (Steinmetz, 2017).

When Donald Trump initially announced his candidacy for the presidency on June 16, 2015, the Republican party establishment did not welcome him with open arms. It would be many months before even the first Republican senator would endorse him. Trump was shunned, and now, many of his supporters feel the same. As Jacobson (2017) wrote, he never gained the support or endorsement of any living Republican presidential nominee. They rejected his personality, character and "unorthodox positions on the economy...and foreign policy..., and dubious devotion to social conservatism" (p. 11).

Some teachers interviewed said they had an easier time explaining the rise of Trump to their students, saying to their student the same as Tankersly (2016) wrote, that some felt left out of the economic recovery that took place during Obama's administration, and some felt that a regular, establishment Republican would be more of the same. David said it was easier to explain about Americans in flyover territory who felt "forgotten," but that as the administration

continued, climaxing in the January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 insurrection of the Capitol, it became much harder to do so. It is interesting how even in the sample size of just 10 teachers from across the country, two identify as moderate (or establishment) Republican currently, but are vehemently opposed to Trump and voted against him.

Especially in schools, where some students are competing to outsmart their peers academically and in terms of their GPAs and standardized test scores, Jacobson's (2017) finding that Trump supporters were "less educated, more likely to have blue-collar jobs, older, more religious, disproportionally male, and overwhelmingly white" (p. 21) could play a role in the heavy student rejection of Trump and Trumpism in the participant teachers' schools.

The hyperpolarized rhetoric that came from Trump, and from his supporters, divided a country that sometimes is actually not that far apart on some issues. This caused a tendency for people to think of their own party or position as "good" and the other as "bad" (Jacobson, 2007). This same thought process plays out in classrooms around the country. The classroom as a microcosm of society is still alive and well.

As Milner (2017) wrote, it's not just partisan politics and Trump, it is also the culture wars taking place that is dividing the country in two. Black Lives Matter and the George Floyd protests are just the latest movements in the long Civil Rights movement, which has been going for centuries, but at certain times, gains more speed than others. It was not long ago, or perhaps it has not ended, that the debate raged about NFL players kneeling during the national anthem, or the Charlottesville white supremacist rally where marchers shouted, "Jews will not replace us." We just move on to the next attention-grabbing episode in the ongoing and divisive culture wars. Those wars do take place inside participants' school walls, although at this time, it appears that the Conservative or Republican side is in a bit of a retreat or rebuilding phase. At Twyla's

school, she said that what used to be robust debates between the student Democrat and Republican clubs no longer happens and she does not “know exactly why that is, but that is something that has always bothered me is that that group has a much smaller voice than when I first started teaching.”

But with these controversial episodes, the teachers interviewed are, for the most part, not running away from the issues. Rather, they are finding ways to dive into the event in their classes, and allow discussion in an appropriate manner, heeding Milner’s (2017) call for opportunities for students to critically think, engage, learn and develop thoughts on topics they might not know both sides about. Moira said her students “expect” conversations to address the cultural and political issues of the day, like police brutality, anti-Asian crimes, and more. Government teachers, as participants noted, tend to be more likely to welcome controversy in their classrooms than history; this resonates with Milner’s (2017) assertion that teachers should keep controversial topics at the center of classroom instruction. For Johnny, who teaches both government and history, he said that it is easier to bring the concepts and curricula to life with current examples in his government class. He added that the discipline of history “helps” that he doesn’t have to dive into the intricacies of current politicians, their politics, and the current culture wars.

While the American Government classroom is a critical piece in the political socialization of an informed citizenry, Achen (2002) wrote that a person is most likely first exposed to political beliefs and opinions through family. Teachers interviewed indicated that even if a student is unsure of their own personal political opinions, it can be hurtful to hear negative things about their parents’ politics.

After family for most students, interactions at school are often their primary sources for developing their political socialization (Sapiro, 2004). Forrest and Weseley (2007) agreed that high school students especially appear to be swayed by the political opinions of their peers, even if that only shows through the silence, or absence, of a political school of thought. Participants know that politically conservative students exist in their schools, but they might choose to just stay silent just to not deal with the potential loss of friends or have to defend their views often. Ted said he thinks politically conservative students feel they cannot have much of a voice. He said that while his class on political polarization does allow for various viewpoints, his more politically “conservative students don’t express their views anymore.” Instead, Ted finds himself coming to represent the political right in a political argument by playing devil’s advocate since no students step up to do so.

### ***Connection to Theme Two***

Where some of the teachers interviewed said it was not difficult to explain the appeal in the emergence of Trump onto the political stage in 2015 and 2016, those same teachers said it was perhaps more as his presidency continued and “went off the rails” that **The Trump Impact on the Classroom** was really felt. That is where the teachers interviewed really had a hard time keeping their own thoughts and biases totally out of the classroom.

Jacobson (2017) found that those on the left were in disbelief that Trump won in 2016, and that some on the right claimed they knew he would win. The result highlighted the ideological fault lines of America that Trump divided, dog-whistled and played into the fears of a polarized base to win the White House. As Ted said, the same can be said on the microcosm of society level in the American high school and the echo chambers of student social cliques. He said it is scary to think that society could be getting to a place where, because we don’t listen to

each other, two people can't even agree to disagree on something and live in "that mutual disagreement. I think we're getting to a challenging place where it's almost we can't even occupy the same physical space, as others who don't agree with all of our thinking."

As Christensen (2016) said, "some of the behavior exhibited during the election is a challenge for teachers to navigate and places them in uncomfortable situations when discussing Trump and his attention-grabbing techniques" (para. 1). This is clearly true for the teachers interviewed, as evidenced by their shared lived realities found in this research. Eight out of the 10 participants mentioned how difficult it was to discuss or answer students' questions about Trump's actions. For Christensen (2016), it became increasingly difficult when Trump's tweets "seemed to promote fear of an entire religion." While there might be able to be a political debate on the Trump's Muslim ban, as much of a dog whistle to xenophobic fears it was, teachers interviewed grappled explaining the White House's actions most with when democracy itself was in danger on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021. As Alexis said, the claim of "election fraud" by Trump and his supporters made it hard to teach both sides of the argument when there wasn't any wide-spread voting fraud in the first place. When there is general consensus that there is no "both sides," in events and actions, that can be tricky if there are supporters on each side. However, any support of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, or Trump's Muslim ban for that matter, was never mentioned by anyone interviewed, so there are still issues, like those, where it is agreed that something is just "wrong" and there is nothing "right" about the opposition, in a classroom or anywhere.

For events where there could very well be various viewpoints, the teachers interviewed did mirror Christensen's (2016) suggestion to require their students to use facts in their reasoning and discussion. Teachers interviewed also help guide their student-decided classroom behavioral



expectations for how people are to talk to each another, conduct research and develop informed opinions. Teachers must enforce their classroom expectations, even if a president breaks those same rules.

### ***Connection to Theme Three***

Dewey (1899) put his trust in the communication and interaction of actual groups working together for both improved education and improved society. Collaboration and cooperation are hallmarks of getting things done and accomplished in many societies, including, historically, politics. However, the breakdown in communication and retreat to comfort zones, thanks to the internet, identity politics, and echo chambers, is hurting our discourse and sharing of ideas. That is taking place in our school communities as well, according to teachers interviewed in this study. David said the very tense political culture at his school, where he said “you apparently cannot be liberal enough,” is not accepting of views or policies beyond the far left.

It is with that fact in mind that **teachers interviewed in this study aim to demonstrate civility and democracy in classrooms**. Alexis and Moira demonstrated that they can have different views from family and friends and still love them. Twyla models to students how to show empathy for all and realize that “No one is perfect.” She adds, “we are better off with more knowledge about our history – where we’ve come from and the faults of our ancestors – we are human!” All participants interviewed showed that they can bring democracy into the classroom by having students draft and vote on classroom norms at the beginning of their courses.

As Steinmetz (2017) wrote, the constant changing political climate, and even knowing that certain topics “are no longer open for discussion” (para. 27), participant teachers are forced to re-think what topics are appropriate to allow in the classroom as generations change. Twyla

said students are ready to make change, but parents, she said, are not. “Students are always ready for activism and debate,” it’s the adults that she feels aren’t prepared. “Students are pushing and parents are further behind.”

Teachers interviewed zeroed in on what Journell (2011) and Castro (2011) stress—that the idyllic political instruction would present political issues in a way that harnesses the interest of the students by making the concepts relevant to them. It is clear based on interviews for this study that relevancy is key to sparking student interest. While it might be easier for a government and politics teacher to bring current, relevant examples into class, those teaching history courses are also trying to make their content more relevant through telling stories through different lenses—including those that appeal to minority communities and traditionally oppressed or marginalized groups. Recently, David has moved to focus on having more views heard in his classes with more positive contributions from unsung groups. He said, “Students [are] tired of hearing about the terrible things that happened to Blacks, and responded to their asking to “hear about their contributions.” Twyla also uses news and authors and voices of communities that aren’t normally heard from. She makes a point to do this and lets students know more about unsung voices in her effort to have them engaged and respond to the material and curriculum.

Dewey’s (1916) ideal of being open and willing to engage in dialogue with others who may disagree has proven to be elusive in the schools of teachers interviewed in this study. Participants emulate what Noddings (2013) suggested: i.e., that friends or peers with different persuasions must open their eyes, ears, and hearts, and hear each other out. In addition, Noddings (2013) wrote that we cannot be so defensive that we think that everything our country’s leaders do is correct. As Twyla said, we should know the “faults of our ancestors – we are human! No

one is perfect. But knowing our history and how far we've come should cause patriotism – not shame.”

Hess (2009) said the “quality of political talk declines” during a bitter election. Bitter elections in 2016 or 2020 caused participants to feel pressure to engage students in dialogue, especially given Thayer’s (2016) claim that “students might not get a good example of quality political discourse from [the] presidential debates [but] they can learn it from their teachers” (para. 29). Twyla said she teaches her students to, “Don’t personally attack [each other or a person or policy], but question policy.” The teachers interviewed here, for the most part, try to make time for the issues that students want to hear more about or yearn for clarity about, and of course, issues that the instructor thinks deserves class time as well. David said he places more emphasis on understanding racial dynamics in history and more unsung voices of the time period. He doesn’t just focus on the presidencies of the time, but the culture of the time and contributions of various groups.

#### ***Connection to Theme Four***

Milner (2017) emphasized that the teacher’s goal in the classroom is not to indoctrinate students or embrace a specific point of view. That is something that every teacher interviewed in this study unanimously agrees on. The goal should never be for the teacher to push their own agenda, but offer all views, including counter views to students’ comments. Roland, like the other participants, intentionally tries to keep his views to himself. He said he “jabs both sides” and makes a cognizant effort to make sure he does, gives equal voice to opposing sides of the political spectrum. The goal is to get students to think—not agree with him or think like him. Teachers interviewed like Ted offered that they practice that through playing devil’s advocate with their classes, a suggestion that Jones (2017) made as well. The teachers interviewed all said

they strive to meet Milner's (2017) goal of a vibrant classroom discussion where all students hopefully feel comfortable sharing out.

Hess (2004) found most **teachers choose to not disclose their political opinions and viewpoints with their students and classes**, and this study yielded the same results. As Hess (2004) found, teachers aim to strike a balance in their introduction of the issues by presenting both sides of an issue as impartially as possible. In addition, participants in this study share Jones's (2017) view that classroom debate should always be judged on the merits of the arguments made, not necessarily the political position itself. In the case when a classroom is lopsided to one political end of the spectrum, Jones (2017) said playing devil's advocate will help ensure all viewpoints get heard, even if they are not those of the instructor.

#### ***Connection to Theme Five***

The hyperpolarization in the United States is still on full display after the presidency of Donald Trump. Some of the hyperpolarization in the country can be traced to the sources where Americans get their information. **The Rise of Misinformation and Disinformation in the Classroom**, as evidenced by teachers' lived experiences in this study, has only continued to get worse. Alexis considers it the biggest threat to democracy. Because of it, she spends lots of time communicating what is reliable, trustworthy, reputable to her students. David and Jocelyn saw misinformation and disinformation about COVID vaccines infiltrate their classrooms from students using social media platform TikTok. However, Stevie acknowledged that not everything his students learn from TikTok is misleading, untrue or negative as he said it engaged his students with learning about the Tulsa Race Massacre and the history of Juneteenth.

While American political parties have become more polarized, the everyday use of the internet and social media for news and communication has also driven political polarization. This

seeps into students' political socialization, and therefore into the classroom and discussion around the school building, as evidenced by teachers interviewed in this study. As Tewksbury and Riles (2015) found, the regularity with which one consumes news from the internet can broaden discrepancies between Republicans and Democrats on a wide range of political issues or different sides of any story or situation. As David recalled from one of his U.S. History classes, it can cause confusion about almost anything, including the COVID vaccines, where students found themselves on opposing sides as to whether the shots affected women's fertility or that "[they] make your boobs grow bigger."

Participants believe citizens should be equipped to search for the information they can use to form opinions and as the basis for voting and other political behavior. But that might not be as easy to say for those living in echo chambers. Törnberg (2018) found that those in echo chambers have a lower threshold for being convinced by a given narrative because of the trust level they place in their fellow like-minded users. With a never-ending list of sources claiming to be "news," it may be hard to determine the legitimacy of a source or story, and that actual "fake news" can lead to real life violence. Roland said more sources of information should be a great thing – but he sees it becoming a not great thing with disinformation and misinformation tainting the trustworthiness of what we hear since he sees more of his students are doubting "any and all" news sources and their family members as well.

Rainie (2017) found that today's media options leave consistent liberals and conservatives to live in separate media worlds that and little overlap of sources for their political information and news. In addition, Rainie (2017) wrote that the more "news" consumed, the further one can be politically polarized. Rainie (2017) and Törnberg (2018) place emphasis on the importance the teacher plays in exposing students to other viewpoints with what they select

to bring into the classroom curriculum. The teachers interviewed in this study rise to meet the moment of misinformation and disinformation by teaching students about news and media literacy and how to determine what is a credible source, and how to spot bias in today's vastly opinionated news landscape.

### *Connection to Theme Six*

People naturally want to talk, think, and process when something is not the norm, or not the usual way something is done. Donald Trump won the White House in 2016 by saying outlandish things that were never uttered in the modern era, not by a presidential candidate at least. He was an outsider, applying for a job held by a long-standing tradition of insiders, claiming he would “drain the swamp.” But he spoke in terms and advocated policy that alienated one of the world's largest religions, proclaimed those who cross the southern border to be “rapists and murderers,” and said there were “very fine people on both sides” when it came to white supremacists and their opponents. He advocated for the overturning of the 2020 election through the courts, through his own words, and actions. When all other plans had failed him, he urged his supporters to fight for the country they wanted before they invaded the United States Capitol building in an attempt to stop Congress' certification of the Electoral College votes. So, it comes with little surprise that even **while the I never once said the name “Donald Trump” in his interview protocol questioning to the teacher participants, that the name “Trump” came up 63 times over the course of 10 interviews, with only one teacher participant not mentioning the 45<sup>th</sup> president.** One teaching a high school government or history class during the age of Trump has been put in a unique position—to walk the line of trying to foster an atmosphere that is fair and welcoming to all political and cultural viewpoints but knowing when to call out a wrong from the highest office in the country.

### **Implications for Practice: Teachers**

High school government and history teachers will be able to learn from the lived experiences of the 10 teachers interviewed how to teach in divided times. Furthermore, readers of this study will be encouraged to reflect on their own practices. Teachers should take away the idea to set ground rules for behavioral and academic expectations at the beginning of a course. Teachers should let students have a role in determining the rules and behavioral expectations in the classroom, mimicking the role they should play in an actual representation of democracy by doing so. Teachers shouldn't indoctrinate, but, at the same time, they should be honest and real with their students, being careful not to make any student feel alienated, alone, shunned, or not part of the group. Teachers should embrace controversial discussion by reminding students to respect classroom norms and to debate the policy topic, not the person. Their students should understand that everyone comes to the classroom from different backgrounds, stories and sets of beliefs, and that we shall listen to one another even if we don't agree on policies. Students should try to understand at least why someone thinks the way that they do. Teachers can learn from this study the importance of opening students' eyes to another way of thinking without imposing adults' beliefs on students. This courtesy can extend also to peer to peer interactions outside of the classroom.

### **Implications for Practice: School Leaders**

High school leaders and administrators can also learn from this study how to lead a school or school district in a time of cultural and political change. Advice from frustrated teachers interviewed in this study would be to also try to keep their political views out of the school, or, at least don't preach them to the faculty. At the same time, some teachers interviewed also don't want administrators to sit back and avoid rocking the boat—with an expressed desire

for a school to have direction and vision from the top. While there might not be agreement on developed policies, teachers interviewed said that a strong vision from school leadership would clarify what the expectations from faculty are, and school families and students would know what to expect as well.

### **Limitations of the Research**

While the study yielded significant data, and truly can be an asset to government and history teachers in the future, limitations of the research do exist. Ideally, a researcher would be able to devote full-time research to interview dozens more teachers. While I conscientiously attempted to recruit as diverse a pool of backgrounds as possible, the sample could have been more diverse. Interviewing more participants from across a broader swath of the country—including more regions and more types of schools, perhaps bringing in religious institutions and those separated by sex—might have yielded a more complete look at government and history teachers' lived experiences during this era of cultural and political change. The COVID-19 pandemic also led to challenges in this research. While the study was originally planned to involve in-person interviews, COVID-19 protocols and precautions necessitated a switch to Zoom interviews with all 10 participants. While Zoom was certainly an excellent alternative to in-person interviews, nothing beats an in-person interview, especially if it could have been conducted in the teacher's classroom, where they could be comfortable and reminded of classroom and school memories tied to the interview questions, perhaps revealing more contextual experiences.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The interviews for this study were conducted in the summer of 2021. In the fast-paced news cycle, media landscape, and political timeline that we live in, the political and potentially



controversial and contentious issues that could come up in our society and in its microcosms, such as the American high school, can change focus rapidly. The idea for this study came to me during the first year of the Trump presidency. I went from feeling that I did such a great job of keeping my political views out of the classroom that students actually said that they “couldn’t figure [me] out,” to having a hard time not letting my political opinions of the day show through, even if in the most subtle ways. At that time, there was no COVID-19 pandemic or remote learning. Zoom was virtually unknown. Vaccines, face-masks, school closures and school boards weren’t political issues that caused violence in various places of the country. The Black Lives Matter movement had not gone from an overall net-negative opinion that it had in 2018, to a majority of Americans supporting the effort in 2019, 2020, and 2021, partly spurred by the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020. The country was used to the loser of a presidential election, no matter how hard fought or how bitter it might have been, conceding the election when it was over and honoring the tradition of a peaceful transfer of power and the usual imagery that goes along with such a process. American citizens, unhappy with the outcome of the election, egged on by a president who wouldn’t concede and continuously lied about the results, had never assaulted the United States Capitol building in an effort to stop the certification and overturn the election. For the benefit of government and history teachers, this type of a study should be conducted often, as the political and controversial issues of our time are constantly changing. While my study ends here, teaching politics in the age of Trump, as he is still a major fixture in the Republican Party, continues. Time will tell what happens to the future of Trump, Trumpism, the Republican Party, and this country’s democratic values and institutions depending on whether Trump runs for president again in 2024, and if he does, win or lose, the implications for the future of the republic and its institutions, including trust in our elections. If

Trump doesn't run, perhaps the age of Trump comes to a close. However, with many elected Republicans in congress still bowing to pressure from the now Mar-a-Lago-based ex-president, even if Trump never holds an elected office again, there are many newcomers to the Republican political scene, made in the mold of Trump, who will aim to carry forth the banner of Trumpism, espousing and mimicking the views and rhetoric of the 45<sup>th</sup> president from their own elected offices. Whom the Republican party will nominate in 2024, the success of that candidate and whether they subscribe to Trumpism and "The Big Lie" will determine the path forward into 2026, 2028 and beyond for conservatives.

What happens to the Republican Party going forward will determine how the Democrat Party evolves and where our politics, government, and future will go as well, including the impact on schools and classrooms around the country. Research like this study, on a bigger scale, should be continued throughout the next few years and beyond to further help government and history teachers navigate the potentially controversial conversations and lessons that could occur.

Future research should include the impact of the Critical Race Theory (CRT) debate on school classrooms, school boards, and state legislatures' education policies. As the CRT debate is a new one, it was not at the forefront of the research and study here, although one participant did passionately bring up his issues with the concept.

I am satisfied with how the interviews were conducted and does not believe that observing a classroom would help much in the focus of this research topic. Being in a classroom for one or two days or even a full week or month might not yield the richness of the lived experiences shared by teachers in this study. The way the study was conducted allowed me to gather data as many different teachers or schools as possible to get the most accurate portrayal of what is going on around our diverse country.

## **Conclusion**

While five years have passed since that night in 2016 when the secretly conservative high school class officer pleaded with school newspaper editors not to print that she favored a Republican candidate for president, and while much of our culture and politics have changed today changed, there are elements that have not. That student body president would probably still today be pleading with editors not to print that she favored a conservative for office for fear of being ridiculed, called derogatory terms, and perhaps blacklisted by her peers. However, perhaps she might not even be favoring a candidate from the political right anymore. Over the past five years, with mental health also taking a forefront of focus because of the pandemic and political stressors, I would come to the same conclusion to not print her on-the-record pull quote about why she favored who she voted for in the school mock election, but I would probably come to that conclusion more quickly. Politics have become so hyperpolarized and divisive that it is not worth the mental anguish that publishing such a seemingly harmless quote could cause an adolescent student.

These 10 government and history teachers from around the United States have shown how the Trump era has made them adjust their teaching, their lessons, their materials, and their timing. To make their classes as relevant as possible to their students, they bring in documents and materials that connect to their desire for their voices to be heard, whether that is in opposition to the current administration and its policies or giving support or a voice to those who feel they aren't being heard in their own school. While political divisions exist in the school, they try to make their classrooms places where all voices and opinions can be heard and listened to, and healthy debate can exist. They prepare as best they can for potential student questions around controversial issues, but sometimes simply cannot find the time to prepare for an appropriate

response when an event happens with no time to plan. While all of the participants keep their political viewpoints to themselves, for some that is a newer personal policy developed in the age of Trump. Whereas David shared his opinion the day after the 2016 election, he now keeps his opinions closer to himself.

When people learn that I teach AP Government and Politics, people always ask, how does one teach that in this day in age? While there is no singular answer to that, it is my goal that this study did shine a light onto how politics is being taught in a variety of schools and regions during a period of cultural and political change and it is my hope that other social science teachers and school leaders will be able to take some guidance away from this, or at least know that others are having similar situations and discussions occur in their classrooms and schools around the country.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: Newspaper column where high school senior “comes out” as conservative

Kyle Stewart\*'s “I’m coming out: Senior says conservatives at [redacted] ridiculed, bullied for views” opinion column in his high school’s student-run newspaper, June 4, 2016.

#### “I’m coming out”

Senior says conservatives at [redacted] ridiculed, bullied for views

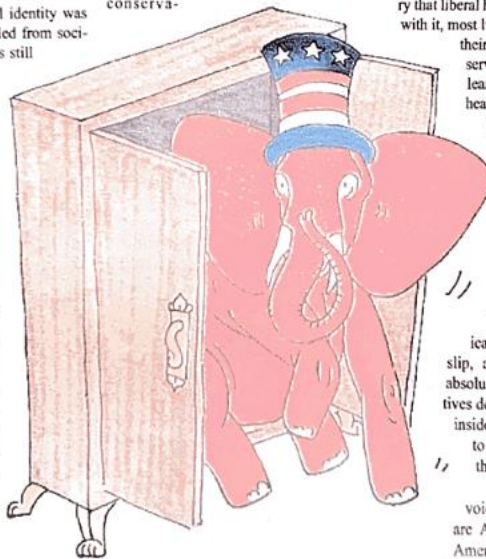
##### MY VIEW

In the 1970s and ‘80s, homosexuals began to come out of what is referred to as “the closet.” That their sexual identity was no longer going to be concealed from society, was, and in many cases is still seen as, a courageous step in a society that was still split in terms of acceptance of a person’s natural identity. In 1854, the Republican party was formed. Where these two correlate is in that both homosexuals and members of the GOP have, depending on region and situation, been refined to “the closet.” Where they differ is that in 2015, the Supreme Court has allowed same sex marriage, but the social scrutiny of conservatives in some environments is as accepted as homosexuality was in the 1980s.

The silent majority, who do not speak openly about their identity, are frustrated with the many boisterous openly liberal citizens and noncitizens who control most of the dialogue in media, school, and the workplace. The closet conservatives tend to not want to get involved in an argument or receive backlash where they are targeted and judged based on their political ideology.

At [redacted], the vibe is openly liberal, as

it would be for any school in the middle of a city. However, as those who control the discourse of the school, whether in the hallways, classrooms, or in the class Facebook pages, the closet conserva-



taught to be. Closet conservatives were forced to sit in those classrooms, walk through those hallways, or saw as they scrolled through their feed. Closet conservatives know the other side of the story, the story that liberal has to tell. They may not agree with it, most likely they will absolutely hate

their ideology, but the closet conservatives hear them out. They’ve learn to respect it. It’s time they hear you out and learn to respect what you have to say.

And the liberals call the conservatives “racist,” or “misogynist,” or to female conservatives out there, they are a “sellout.” But keep in mind words don’t hurt the closet conservatives, words hurt them, the liberals.

They do not believe in political correctness, because words slip, and sometimes words mean absolutely nothing. Closet conservatives don’t look for hidden meanings inside of words as if we are trying to decode Davinci, they speak, they listen, they move on.

Conservatives have a voice, and they have ears. They are American, everyone has First Amendment rights. Do not let the discourse of this nation’s future be controlled by those who dominated classroom discussion. If you want to make America great again, get out of that closet. Stand up strong and say what needs to be said.

tives are always present but never get involved and express their opposing views.

The closet conservative is objective. They were not born that way nor were they

\*Pseudonym used for privacy. School name redacted from headline and column.

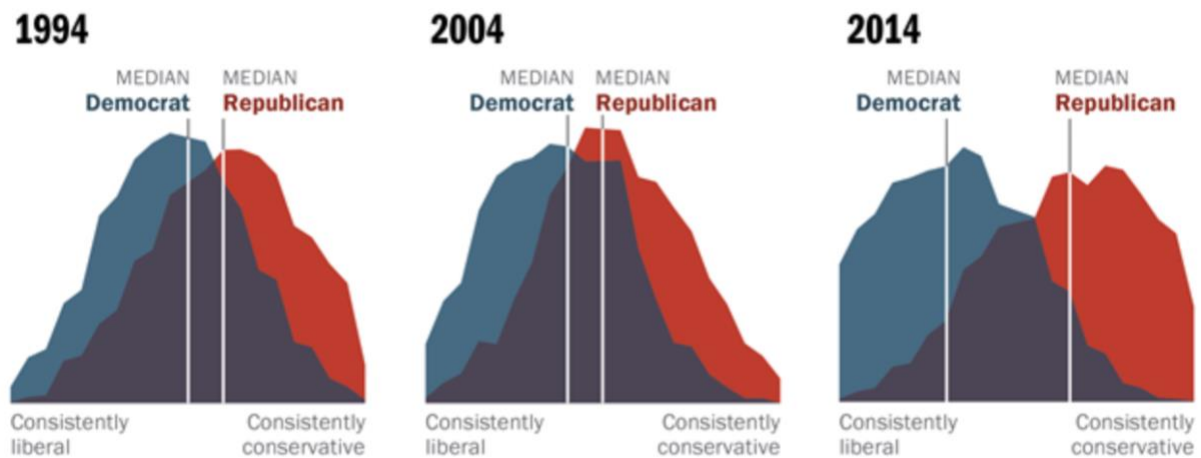


## APPENDIX B: Graphic: Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past

Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past, Pew Research Center, 2014, June 12. Political Polarization in the American Public.

### Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past

*Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values*



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats; the red area of Republicans. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple. Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## **APPENDIX C: Recruitment Letter**

*Adapted from University of Oregon, Research Compliance Services*

[date]

Hello [potential participant name]:

My name is John and I am a doctoral student from the College of Education at DePaul University in Chicago. I am connecting with you to invite you to participate in my research study, which explores your experience teaching as a secondary social science, government, civics, and/or history teacher. You are eligible to participate in this study if you identify as a secondary social science, government, civics, and/or history teacher. [I obtained your contact information from (description of source).]

If you decide to participate in this study, I will interview you and ask you to share your experiences as a secondary social science, government, civics, and/or history teacher, your content and curriculum choices, and how you navigate classroom discussions and questions. I will record the approximately 60-minute interview, conducted either over Zoom, or socially distanced in person, so that I may review our conversation when analyzing the content. I will seek to not reveal your identity both in the interview and in writing my analysis. Furthermore, it is my goal to provide a space for you which is safe, open, transparent, and inviting.

Please remember that this is voluntary. If you'd like to participate or have questions about the study or process, please contact me at [contact information].

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

John

## **APPENDIX D: Email Script for Response to Recruitment Email**

[date]

Hello [participant name]:

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study.

When would be a time that is most convenient for you to spend an hour of your time participating in the study?

The interview, to ask you to share your experiences as a secondary social science, government, civics, and/or history teacher, your content and curriculum choices, and how you navigate classroom discussions and questions, will be conducted over Zoom, or socially distanced in person, and I am flexible to meet you when timing works best for you. As mentioned in my previous email, it is my goal is provide a space for you which is safe, open, transparent, and inviting.

Also, in order to participate, I would need you to please complete the Informed Consent Form. This form is attached to this email. In order to complete it, please print, sign, scan and email the form back to me.

If you have questions about the study or process, please contact me at [contact information].

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

John

## **APPENDIX E: Email Script for Confirmation Email**

[date]

Hello [participant name]:

Thank you for your continued interest in participating in the research study.

This email is to confirm our scheduled conversation on [DATE and TIME] about your experiences as a secondary social science, government, civics, and/or history teacher, your content and curriculum choices, and how you navigate classroom discussions and questions. The conversation should last approximately one hour.

This email also confirms that I received your signed Informed Consent Form.

If you have questions about the study or process, please contact me at [contact information].

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

John

## **APPENDIX F: Email Script for Reminder Email**

[date]

Hello [participant name]:

Thank you for your continued interest in participating in the research study. This is courtesy reminder that we have our 60-minute conversation scheduled for tomorrow, [DATE] at [TIME] about your experiences as a secondary social science, government, civics, and/or history teacher, your content and curriculum choices, and how you navigate classroom discussions and questions. The conversation should last approximately one hour.

If you have questions about the study or process, please contact me at [contact information].

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

John

## **APPENDIX G: Thank You Letter**

[date]

Hello [participant name]:

Thank you for participating in this study regarding teaching politics, government, and social movements in the past decade.

I appreciate your frankness in answering what can sometimes be dense and detailed questions. Your contribution to this important research is instrumental for supporting secondary social science, government, civics, and / or history teachers in the future.

I am hopeful that this research will help provide high school communities additional insight into the experiences of navigating these sometimes tricky waters. It is with your support in which the field continues to thrive.

Thank you so much for your time.

Sincerely,

John

## **APPENDIX H: Informed Consent Process**

Informed Consent Form

*Adapted from DePaul University*

### **ADULT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

#### **Teaching secondary social studies in an era of political and cultural change**

**Researcher:** John G. Lund, PhD Candidate

**Institution:** DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, USA

**Department (School, College):** DePaul University School of Education

**Faculty Advisor:** Andrea Kayne, J.D.

#### **What is the purpose of this research?**

We are asking you to be in a research study because we are trying to learn more about the experiences of secondary social science, government, civics, and/or history teachers. This study is being conducted by John Lund, a graduate student in the College of Education at DePaul University as a requirement to obtain his PhD. This research is being supervised by his faculty advisor, Andrea Kayne, J.D.

We hope to include about 10 people in the research.

#### **Why are you being asked to be in the research?**

You are invited to participate in this study because you are identified as a secondary social science, government, civics, and/or history teacher.

#### **What is involved in being in the research study?**

If you agree to be in this study, being in the research involves being interviewed by the researcher, John Lund.

The subject matter of the interview will involve questions around your experiences teaching secondary social science, government, civics, and/or history classes, your content and curriculum choices, and how you navigate classroom discussions and questions.

The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed into written notes later in order to get an accurate record of what you said.

#### **Are there any risks involved in participating in this study?**

Being in this study does not involve any risks other than what a secondary teacher would encounter in conversation with colleagues in daily life. You may feel uncomfortable or

embarrassed about answering certain questions. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to.

**Are there any benefits to participating in this study?**

We hope that what we learn will support secondary social science, government, civics, and/or history teachers with their goals of facilitating rich and meaningful classroom experiences.

**How much time will this take?**

This study will take about one hour of your time.

**Is there any kind of payment, reimbursement or credit for being in this study?**

You will not be paid for being in the research.

**Are there any costs to me for being in the research?**

There is no cost to you for being in the research.

**Can you decide not to participate?**

Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose not to participate. There will be no negative consequences, penalties, or loss of benefits if you decide not to participate or change your mind later and withdraw from the research after you begin participating.

Your decision whether or not to be in the research will not affect your relationship, or your employment.

**Who will see my study information and how will the confidentiality of the information collected for the research be protected?**

The research records will be kept and stored securely. Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When I write about the study or publish a paper to share the research with other researchers, I will write about the combined information I have gathered. I will not include your name or any information that will directly identify you. I will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. However, some people might review or copy our records that may identify you in order to make sure we are following the required rules, laws, and regulations. For example, the DePaul University Institutional Review Board, and/or the Data and Safety Monitoring Board may review your information. If they look at our records, they will keep your information confidential.

To prevent others from accessing our records or identifying you should they gain access to our records, I have put some protections in place. These protections include using a code (a fake name or a study ID number) for you and other participants in the study and keeping the records in a safe and secure place (using a password protected computer and file folder).

I will remove the direct identifiers, like name or record number, from your information and replace it with a random code that cannot be linked back to you. This means I have de-identified your information. I will not use the information collected for this study for any future research of our own or share your information with other researchers.



The audio recordings will be kept until accurate written notes have been made, then they will be destroyed.

You should know that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court or to tell authorities if you report information about a child being abused or neglected or if you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

Please be aware that disclosing experiences with sexual or relationship violence during the course of research does not constitute a formal report to the University and will not begin the process of DePaul providing a response. If you are seeking to report an incident of sexual or relationship violence to DePaul, you should contact Public Safety (Lincoln Park: 773-325-7777; Loop: 312-362-8400) or the Dean of Students and Title IX Coordinator (Lincoln Park: 773-325-7290; Loop: 312-362-8066 or [titleixcoordinator@depaul.edu](mailto:titleixcoordinator@depaul.edu)). Individuals seeking to speak confidentially about issues related to sexual and relationship violence should contact a Survivor Support Advocate in the Office of Health Promotion & Wellness for information and resources (773-325-7129 or [hpw@depaul.edu](mailto:hpw@depaul.edu)). More information is available at <http://studentaffairs.depaul.edu/hpw/shvp.html>. Individuals are encouraged to take advantage of these services and to seek help around sexual and relationship violence for themselves as well as their peers who may be in need of support. If you do disclose an experience with sexual or relationship violence, we will also provide you with a resource sheet containing this information at the end of the study.

**Who should be contacted for more information about the research?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study or you want to get additional information or provide input about this research, you can contact the researcher, John Lund, [john.g.lund@gmail.com](mailto:john.g.lund@gmail.com).

This research has been reviewed and approved by the DePaul Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have questions about your rights as a research subject you may contact Jessica Bloom, DePaul University's Director of Research Compliance, in the Office of Research Services at 312-362-6168 or by email at [jbloom8@depaul.edu](mailto:jbloom8@depaul.edu).

You may also contact DePaul's Office of Research Services if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

***You may keep or print a copy of this information to keep for your records.***

**Statement of Consent from the Subject:**

I have read the above information. I have had all my questions and concerns answered. By signing below, I indicate my consent to be in the research.

Signature:

Printed name:

Date:

## APPENDIX I: Interview Protocol

APPENDIX I: Interview Protocol		
<p>Before beginning the interview, the researcher will read the following Illinois wiretapping law mandatory language for recording:</p> <p>“This interview is being audio-recorded for research purposes. If you would like the recording to stop at any point, please let me know and I will stop the recording. Do you consent to being audio-recorded? Recording starts now.”</p>		
Section of Interview	Explanation of Questions	Questions
<b>Introductory Questions</b>	<p>Seeking demographic information and following up from initial contact</p> <p>Non-intrusive and non-threatening</p> <p>Neutral approach to question structure</p>	<p><i>How would you describe yourself as a teacher?</i></p> <p><i>How would you describe the (political) culture at the school you work at?</i></p> <p><i>Describe your on-campus involvement – courses you teach, clubs you might lead, events you attend, etc..</i></p>
<b>Transition Questions</b>	<p>Linking introduction to key questions forthcoming</p>	<p><i>(When lesson planning,) How do you make your content, material, and curriculum choices (reading, content, images, sources, tone) for lessons?</i></p> <p><i>When you reflect and revise lessons, or tweak them for future classes, what is your thought process? How often do you revise or alter lessons, and how or why might you go about doing so?</i></p> <p><i>Does the course one teaches effect how discussions and issues come up? How do you feel the specific course(s) you teach change the direction of discourse perhaps from a different course?</i></p>
<b>Key Questions</b>	<p>Questions which are best related to the research questions and study</p>	<p><i>How do you teach about politics, history, or societal norms when they could lead to discussions or lessons on controversial issues?</i></p> <p><i>Were there any moments of note for you where you felt you had to quickly change, adjust, or adapt your lesson plans based on current events? If so, after which events? How did you respond or modify? How did the class respond?</i></p>

		<p><b><i>How do you balance between engaging students in authentic political controversies and creating a classroom climate that is fair and welcoming to all students?</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Were any classroom discussions on topics of political controversies particularly unique, memorable or difficult? How so?</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Does an increase in sources of information, and misinformation, ever impact discussions or questions from students? How so?</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Have you seen any change in levels of student engagement and/or involvement in political and/or social movements outside of school that you know of? Has your school community's political climate or level of engagement and/or involvement changed since you've worked there? In what ways?</i></b></p> <p><b><i>What is your policy on withholding and/or disclosing your personal views about politics, current issues, or current events? Is that your personal policy or a school policy?</i></b></p> <p><b><i>If it is a personal policy, has that always been your stance? If not, what caused you to change your mind?</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Do you ever find yourself challenged with your own policy if a controversial topic comes up in a classroom discussion?</i></b></p> <p><b><i>Have you ever noticed any change in treatment, attitude, or demeanor toward a student or demographic of students based on a controversial issue or political views?</i></b></p>
	<p>Easy to answer</p> <p>Providing closure</p>	<p><b><i>What kind of voice do you feel you have as a social science, government, civics, and/or history teacher today?</i></b></p>

<b>Closing Questions</b>	Allowing for summarization of reports	<p><i>If you could give advice to future secondary social science, government, civics, and/or history teachers, what would you tell them?</i></p> <p><i>What should I have asked about that I didn't?</i></p>
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