

# Should Teachers Help Students Develop Partisan Identities?

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Five years ago, one of us (Diana) was teaching a graduate seminar called “Democratic Education.” The purpose of the seminar was to critically analyze two seemingly simple, but actually very complex, questions: What is democracy? What is democratic education? Both are contested concepts, and the seminar was designed to help students understand and grapple with their multiple meanings in the context of political and educational practices in the U.S. and in other nations.

The “Democratic Education” course was not, of course, about the U.S. Democratic Party. Yet, about mid-semester, the course name caused some confusion during a routine medical visit. A nurse, who asked Diana what she taught, was flabbergasted by the course title. The nurse blurted out, “You’re kidding me, right? Are you telling me that the university is actually teaching students to be Democrats now? Is that even legal?” After Diana explained the purpose of the course, the nurse calmed down, but when leaving the examining room, she muttered (somewhat) under her breath: “That damn university.”

If the seminar had aimed to promote a particular partisan identity—Democratic or otherwise—the nurse would have been right to be alarmed. For one thing, we believe it is a violation of students’ autonomy for a professor or teacher to create courses or lessons with the aim of shaping students’ political views toward a *particular* partisan affiliation.

Yet we have recently noticed an interesting puzzle involving the aims of democratic education and partisanship. In the highly polarized political climate in which young people are currently being

raised, political science research is finding that the most engaged Americans are those who have strong partisan identities. Given that many social studies teachers want to encourage young people to be politically engaged, does it follow that one aim of democratic education should be to help students know where their own views stand with respect to those of contemporary political parties *and*, if aligned, feel an affiliation toward a political party? In short, should teachers help students develop their own partisan identities? To address this question, we begin with an explanation of the political science research investigating the relationships among partisanship, polarization, and political engagement.

## The Power of Partisanship

In current public discourse, there is much discussion about, and frustration with, how dysfunctional politics and governance are in Washington, D.C., and in many statehouses. Partisan gridlock is often identified as the problem, but political science research sees gridlock as one aspect of the larger phenomenon of polarization. In this literature, polarization is defined as the extent to

which the two major parties have ideologically purified, so that the Democrats are viewed as the “liberal” party, and the Republicans are the “conservative” party—a trend that began in the 1960s and solidified in the 1980s. As polarization occurs, the middle ground between the two parties, which is generally where compromise happens, dissolves. Elected officials feel more pressure to cast votes with their party and not to “reach across the aisle.”

To what extent is a similar type of partisan polarization happening among the American public? This question can be answered by examining trends among members of the public who are most politically engaged. In *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy*, Alan Abramowitz identifies members of the “engaged public” as “citizens who care about government and politics, pay attention to what political leaders are saying and doing, and participate actively in the political process.”<sup>1</sup> They are, in other words, the type of citizens that many social studies teachers typically hope to develop. Using data from the American National Election Studies, Abramowitz finds that, as each of the two parties become more ideologically consistent, so do the views of the engaged public. In other words, the views of the people who participate have become more ideologically consistent (solidly conservative or solidly liberal), and they

feel more affinity for their party.<sup>2</sup>

However, we are seeing not merely increasing polarization of the engaged public—i.e., those who are engaged are more likely than before to hold polarized views—but also an association of polarization with increased *overall* engagement. Abramowitz shows that the percentage of the U.S. public that is “engaged” has increased steadily during the recent period of increasing polarization.<sup>3</sup> Further, while there are other predictors of political engagement, such as age (with older people being more likely to vote) and educational attainment, Abramowitz finds that two predictors of being “highly engaged”—identifying as a “strong partisan” and possessing a “strong” ideological orientation (liberal to conservative)—matter more.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding the potential benefits of polarization for engagement, many scholars have warned against the dangers of partisanship within the American public.<sup>5</sup> In particular, there is reason to worry about “affective” polarization, which is the tendency of people who say that they are Republicans or Democrats to view their rivals as irrational or having evil intentions.<sup>6</sup> For example, one study found that 54% of Republicans and 46% of Democrats who had recently contributed money to a political campaign described the other party as “a threat to the nation.” Research also shows that those who are the most hostile toward the opposing party are the most likely to participate politically, which in turn causes them to be more politically influential than those who are less hostile.<sup>7</sup>

### The Pedagogical Problem of Partisanship

Given that many social studies educators aim to prepare students to become politically engaged, and given that ideological partisans are more likely to be politically engaged, there may be value in teachers helping their students to develop partisan identities. On the other hand, given that polarization also results in political dysfunction, partisan gridlock, and distrust among citizens, encouraging the

development of a partisan identity may reinforce the worst features of the political climate.

Our purpose is not to solve this dilemma. Instead, we intend to show why teaching toward a partisan identity is a controversial pedagogical issue and to identify the competing values and evidence that teachers may want to consider when reflecting on their own aims. We begin by defining “partisan identity” and explain how it is different from “ideological identity,” and also different from being “politically engaged.” In the text box, we describe these three different aims of democratic education. While each of these aims is worthy of extended analysis, our focus is on the aim of devel-

oping a partisan identity, because it is the one that we believe is most controversial for schools.

We then present the case of Adams High, whose social studies department has as one of its aims that students should develop a partisan identity. Finally, we explain reasons why some might oppose the idea that teachers ought to encourage students to develop partisan identities and we discuss the counter-arguments for why such practices might be justified.

The political science literature discussed in the previous section finds that there is a relationship among these aims. Those who are most engaged have views that align with one side of the political spectrum, and they strongly identify

#### Politically Engaged

Someone who is politically engaged participates in public decision-making and political change. This person votes, stays informed about issues, and engages in political campaigns or political movements. A teacher who aims toward this normative conception of “the good citizen” would teach basic knowledge about the political system, but might also give students experiences in which they can practice participation (both in and out of school) and might explicitly encourage them to be engaged now and in the future. A teacher who has this aim would want students to leave the course with the skills needed to participate and with the desire to be someone who does participate.

#### Ideological Identity

A person with an ideological identity has reasoned through her own political views and can fit them onto the contemporary political spectrum. A teacher with this aim would want students to leave the class with a better understanding of their views and more able to describe themselves in ideological terms—students might, for example, describe themselves as “liberal, leaning libertarian,” or as “a strong conservative.” In pursuit of this aim, a teacher might teach students about the contemporary ideological spectrum in the United States and ask students to study current issues, discuss them in class, and write essays in which they explain their own ideological identity.

#### Partisan Identity

This person typically feels some affiliation with a political party. We include in this aim seeing oneself as a “political independent,” but only after carefully reflecting on one’s views and the platforms of the parties. In other words, a teacher who aims toward a partisan identity would want students to leave the class with an understanding of their views on public issues and where the major political parties stand on those issues, and having made a decision about whether they want to identify as a party supporter or as someone who makes a reasoned choice to remain non-aligned. An activity that might teach toward the partisan identity could include a mock election in which students debate issues as party members, register to vote as party members (or as independents), and then cast ballots.

with a party.

However, when we interviewed 35 teachers about their course aims, there was almost no mention of forming ideological or partisan identities in students (see endnote 8). Teachers often noted that students *had* ideological and partisan leanings, making observations such as, “The majority [of the students] are very liberal on social issues” and “We have a lot of Rush Limbaugh-types,” but these teachers did not discuss aiming toward the development of a partisan identity. Further, we often observed teachers introducing issues to students and having them debate or discuss them, but rarely did we observe teachers or students discussing how the views fit ideologically onto the political spectrum, or how the competing viewpoints align with political party platforms.

### The Case of Adams High

The one exception to this rule was a program we observed at Adams High, an economically and ethnically diverse school about 40 miles outside of a major Midwestern city. (Adams High is a pseudonym.) All seniors at Adams are required to take one semester of American Government, a non-tracked course structured around an extensive legislative simulation.<sup>8</sup> The legislative simulation we describe has been adopted by a growing number of other schools in the region.

The semester begins with two weeks of in-class debates on current issues using parliamentary procedure. One purpose of these debates is to help students develop their ideological-partisan identities by learning about key issues and assessing the extent to which their views align with the platforms of the major political parties.

Once the students have become accustomed to the norms of civil discourse and have had the opportunity to think about and discuss issues and party platforms, they participate in “Declaration Day.” On this day, two to three weeks into the semester, all students declare *publicly* whether they will be allied with one of

the two major political parties or declare their independence. Each student pins an index card containing his or her name, an explanation of views on social and economic issues, and party affiliation (or Independent) on a political spectrum arrayed on a wall of the library. As is the case in real legislatures in the United States, the Independents often choose to caucus with one of the parties, although they are not required to do so.

Students also write a “political profile” that is published on the simulation website. The profile includes a brief biography and an explanation of the “big ideas”—on the role of government, the rights of individuals, distribution of power, and related issues—that shape their ideological identity and explain their party choice. These biographies are read by their peers during the leadership nomination and election process. They are also used to discern who might be good secondary sponsors for bills. Once students have declared their affiliations, the majority and minority parties elect their House leadership from among all 200 students taking the course that semester.

In no other school did we observe a curriculum that was so dependent on students articulating and sharing their political views and affiliations with one another. Not only must students express their views in the online discussion forum, they must also post their political affiliation and opinions on particular issues in full view of the “school public.” The teachers are aware that they are asking students to take a risk. As Mr. Hempstead put it, “I feel like this class has to be a class for seniors, because we all ask them to make some big personal statements and big personal commitments.”

Once students have declared party membership and elected the leadership, students spend weeks researching and authoring bills that move through committees; the most successful bills are eventually debated in a “Full Session” of the student legislature. During Full Sessions, all students taking Government

that semester gather in the auditorium to deliberate and vote on the issues. In these sessions, students sit with their political parties and work with their leadership to move bills. Partisan politics can come into play when leaders apply pressure on their members to vote a certain way, but students more often vote based on their true beliefs.

When we interviewed students at the end of the semester, it was clear that many were developing a partisan identity. Students who did not understand what the political parties stood for before the simulation could now identify themselves as “moderate Democrats” or “strict Republicans.” Occasionally, students sounded as if they had had political conversion experiences. One “turned Republican,” and another was surprised to learn that he was “actually a Democrat.”

One possible critique of the simulation is that it normalizes, and therefore promotes, the partisan “winner take all” practices of American politics. Better, some might argue, would be to teach young people to be critical of this system. However, Kate Arnold, a teacher at another school who has used the simulation with 10th graders, argues that it is important for young people to understand the system:

If we are going to prepare students to be effective citizens they have to understand both how the two-party system works and where it may fail to bring about the “best” outcomes. Fundamentally, students are going to have to decide if they want to participate from within the two-party system, or work for change from outside in a more activist role, but either way they would need to fully understand how their own views do or do not fit into the system we have.

To help students reflect upon the positives and negatives of partisanship, the semester ends with an extended

debriefing. Once the Full Session is over, students return to their original card placements on the political spectrum and decide if they want to “put the record straight” by moving their card to reflect the views they now hold. Teachers at Adams High and Ms. Arnold both report that about 30% of students move their cards—and the cards often, but not always, move toward the middle. Deliberating across their own partisan differences, in other words, appears not to exacerbate affective polarization. Ms. Arnold reflects:

While our goal was for students to more clearly refine their own political ideology, we continued to emphasize the importance of listening to both sides of an argument in forming an opinion, rather than simply following their party. In fact, when our students acted in an overly partisan way they were often criticized by their peers for failing to think for themselves and not listening to others.

### **The Controversial Issue of Aiming Toward a Partisan Identity**

While the legislative simulation used at Adams and other high schools is a particularly elaborate approach to teaching toward the development of students’ partisan identities, it is clearly not the only way that this aim could be put into practice. Mock elections, discussions of controversial political issues in which students share their views and then map them onto ideological spectrums and party platforms, or lessons in which students use various ideological or party tools (such as *Isidewith.com*) could all help students form a better understanding of their partisan identities.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of which approach teachers use to help students develop partisan identities, there is an important question about whether this aim is justified in the first place, especially since our research shows that relatively few teachers have this as an aim. Given that partisans are

more likely to be politically engaged, we return to the question: Should social studies teachers help students develop partisan identities? In order to help teachers think about this issue, we present some reasons to be concerned about teaching toward a partisan identity, followed by some reasons why this aim may deserve support.

### **Reasons to Be Concerned about Aiming to Develop a Partisan Identity**

#### **1. Reifies Polarization**

While it may be true that political polarization between Democrats and Republicans has resulted in a more engaged public, it is also a troubling phenomenon for those interested in establishing a healthy and functional democracy. Teaching students to identify as partisans supports this troubling trend by encouraging them to join the game of winner-take-all. For this reason, it might be better to teach *about* partisan politics, while developing in students a deeper understanding of how party strategies have contributed to Washington and statehouse stalemates and negatively affect the functioning of the system as a whole.

#### **2. Reinforces a Narrow Conception of the Political System**

Helping students to identify with one of the two major parties reifies the control that the Democratic and Republican parties have over the political system. Instead of reinforcing this view, teachers should help students develop an *ideological* identity and understand how the two-party system crowds out and/or subsumes minority political views. For example, the teachers at Adams could encourage students to form parties that may more accurately represent the ideological views of some students, such as a Green Party or a Libertarian Party. Further, teachers could help students identify alternative forms of political engagement that more accurately reflect their ideological positions.

### **3. Is Inappropriate for a Public School**

Most agree that teachers ought to prepare students for democratic life by developing knowledge and encouraging participation, but there are limits to what teachers (as representatives of the state) should do to meet these aims. A teacher, for example, should not *require* students to engage in a political protest, though she may teach about movements that effectively brought about social change. Encouraging students to adopt a partisan identity goes beyond generally promoting engagement and uses the school to establish commitments to political parties. To some degree, *encouraging* a partisan identity comes into tension with a student’s autonomy, because it implicitly advocates a particular stance on a controversial issue (being partisan is a good thing) that should be left for the student to decide. A teacher can teach about partisan politics, but should not try to promote partisan lives over non-partisan lives.

### **Reasons to Support Aiming to Develop Partisan Identity**

#### **1. Promotes Political Tolerance**

One reality of polarization is that people rarely discuss politics with people who disagree with them, a trend that tends to reinforce political distrust. Teachers who are able to establish a classroom in which students respectfully discuss their ideological and partisan differences could help students see that those who disagree also have good reasons for their views. At Adams High, the teachers created an environment in which students first studied competing views, then took positions and, for the most part, engaged civilly with other students, in their “own party” and in the “other party,” who had different views. Our evidence shows that the aim of political tolerance was being developed alongside a partisan identity.

#### **2. Prepares Students to Participate**

We have an obligation to help students understand the ideological and political

spectrums and the party platforms if we want them to be able to make rational decisions about how best to exert their own views in the political process. It is also important for students to understand the differences that exist within a party and how past differences led the parties to change in significant ways. If students understand which issues are most important to them and why, they are more likely to make pragmatic choices about which candidates to support, even when they do not consider themselves a good fit for either party. While it is true that focusing students' attention on the two-party system can be construed as reifying a system that has many flaws, not knowing how it works or how their views fit into this system means that they will likely be disengaged.

### 3. Is Appropriate for a Public School

There is widespread agreement that it is the responsibility of schools to prepare students to participate politically.<sup>10</sup> It is highly unlikely that schools can do their job of political education without emphasizing the importance of both understanding the ideological spectrum and how parties map onto it, and taking the critical extra step of helping young people form and understand their own views and where that puts them on the spectrum. Moreover, while the job of political education is given to institutions other than schools in many other democracies (in Canada for example, it is the local electoral authority that is in charge of political education), this is not the case in the United States. Fortunately, schools are well situated to educate students for a partisan identity in a way that does not violate the important prohibition against political indoctrination by the state. Of course, an important limit to partisanship education is that the teacher ought to present partisan identification as a choice that is open to students.

### Conclusion

These two lists demonstrate that underneath the question of whether schools should promote the development of stu-

dents' partisan identities lie competing demands within democratic education. Our study of the legislative simulation at Adams High School demonstrated to us that it is possible to teach with the aim of developing students' partisan identities without simultaneously encouraging them to engage in the behaviors that are detrimental to democracy. This was because the teachers intentionally balanced the aim of partisan identity development with other aims that counteract the undesirable effects of partisanship. The Adams High teachers taught and modeled the importance of understanding views that differed from one's own, reinforced that it is respectable to change one's mind about an issue when confronted with good evidence and reasons, and explicitly taught and reinforced the norms of civil discourse. Ms. Arnold also stressed to us that the goal of the legislative simulation was not to be authentic to the kind of political debate that exists in the world outside of school, but to aim higher by valuing both the kind of engagement that a partisan identity can promote and developing tolerance for differing views.

As with all controversial pedagogical issues, we think the question of whether schools should aim to develop students' political identities is far from settled. As such, we encourage teachers to deliberate the question. We personally believe that it is unlikely that a young person will be prepared to interpret the current polarized climate without a solid understanding of the ideological divisions and motivations of the two major parties. Further, refining their own political views and seeing how they fit within (or fall outside) these ideological camps is likely necessary if educators want to motivate young people to participate politically. We think that such an aim is only justified if it can be balanced by other, equally important aims, such as tolerance for competing perspectives and civility. Finally, students should learn that they are coming of age in a polarized time, and as a result, they need to view the political climate with a criti-

cal eye and resist succumbing to its worst attributes. ●

### Notes

1. Alan Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 4.
2. Also see Diana Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Nancy L. Rosenblum, *On the Other Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008). Noam Lupu "Party Polarization and Mass Partisanship: A Comparative Perspective," *Political Behavior* (Forthcoming).
3. *Ibid.*, 19.
4. Abramowitz, *Disappearing Center*, 24.
5. See Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *The Spirit of Compromise: Why Government Demands it and Campaigning Undermines It* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012); Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).
6. Jonathan Haidt and Marc J. Hetherington, "Look How Far We've Come Apart," *The New York Times* (September 17, 2012), [http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/17/look-how-far-weve-come-apart/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&r=0](http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/17/look-how-far-weve-come-apart/?_php=true&_type=blogs&r=0).
7. For information about the relationship between political polarization and participation, go to [www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/](http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/).
8. An extended discussion about the Adams High simulation appears in Hess and McAvoy, *The Political Classroom Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (New York: Routledge Press, 2015). Adams High is a pseudonym. This school was one of 21 that participated in a longitudinal study that included 35 teachers and 1,001 students.
9. *Isidewith.com* is an online survey tool to ascertain the relationship between one's views on contemporary political issues and political parties and candidates for elective office.
10. See Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, *All Together Now*; Daniel K. Lautzenheiser, Andrew P. Kelly, and Cheryl Miller, "Contested Curriculum."

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