Teaching politics in secondary education: Analyzing instructional methods from the 2008 Presidential Election.

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Abstract:

This article describes the instructional methods of four high school government teachers during their coverage of the 2008 presidential election. By analyzing the ways in which these teachers attempted to generate interest in the election and further their students' conceptualization of politics, the author seeks to better understand political instruction at the secondary level. Overall, the author observed that the teachers were successful in capturing student interest in both politics and the election; however, the teachers often missed opportunities to foster this interest into a nuanced understanding of politics.

Keywords: political instruction | political education | civics | government | presidential elections | secondary education | social studies

Article:

Over the past two decades, political scientists have offered a bleak assessment of Americans' political knowledge, interest, and dispositions. Research has shown that Americans, as a whole, know little about political processes, institutions, and people (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), have become increasingly disinterested and disengaged with the American political system (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), and are less civically active than they were a half-century ago (Putnam 2000). Political scientists have long associated levels of educational attainment with individuals' willingness and ability to be politically active and informed (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Berry 1996), but recent scholarship has questioned whether the type of political instruction that students receive in school is contributing to this decline in political awareness. Specifically, Stephen Macedo and his colleagues (2005, 33; emphasis in original) assert that social studies courses often "teach about citizenship and government without teaching students the skills that are necessary to become active citizens themselves" and argue that teachers should place more emphasis on politics and current events within the curriculum.

Unfortunately, few studies have attempted to explore how teachers broach politics and current political events in their classrooms, at least in comparison to the amount of research that has been done on historical representation and students' historical understanding. In this article, I

seek to better understand the ways in which high school teachers provide political instruction by analyzing the practices of four U.S. government teachers during the 2008 presidential election. By conducting this research during a presidential election, an event that Mary Haas and Margaret Laughlin (2002, 20) describe as "the quintessential example of teaching social studies," I was able to observe a variety of different instructional methods during a period of heightened political interest. It is my hope that through an analysis of these teachers' practices, current social studies teachers can better refine their own methods of teaching politics by incorporating strategies that appeared to work and learning from the instructional shortcomings that seemed to exist in these classes.

Teaching Politics in Secondary Education

Virginia Sapiro (2004, 5) defines political socialization as the question of "how people develop their basic sets of political skills, orientations, and practices, and how their experiences shape their politics." Research suggests that this process occurs primarily through familial ties (e.g., Achen 2002) or through interactions at school. Within an educational context, previous research has shown that political socialization starts in the primary grades and continues throughout students' educational life (Easton and Dennis 1967; Sapiro 2004). Furthermore, recent research suggests that what students learn in primary and secondary grades is the most significant educational factor affecting individuals' civic and political dispositions, even when controlling for those who attain higher education (Kam and Palmer 2008). Therefore, even when approaching political socialization from a developmental perspective (Merelman 1971), studying the role of schooling on the formation of students' political identities seems apt given that maturation of political thought corresponds with the time students spend within the confines of public education.

Yet, there is evidence that secondary students know relatively little about politics. In their analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress data, Richard Niemi and Jane Junn (1998) report that 40 percent of students are unaware that political parties establish nominees for federal elections, including the presidency. Additionally, they observe that students cannot identify basic beliefs of the two major political parties or the role of political parties in common governmental processes, such as passing laws. Students also display limited understanding of what constitutes lobbying and the influence it has on elected officials and governmental policy.

Moreover, research on students from all grade levels suggests that they appear unsure about their role in the political process even though they often express clear attitudes toward politics and political issues. Although students acknowledge that citizens can influence public policy, most do not attribute that power to themselves or their immediate families. These findings raise the question of whether students view politics as something that merely influences their lives or as part of a democratic process in which common citizens, such as themselves, can participate for their own benefit (Hahn 1998).

Given the emphasis on institutional processes and characteristics of "good" citizens that often define civics and government curricula (Avery and Simmons 2000; Journell 2010a), it is not surprising that studies on students' perceptions of citizenship have found that most students define citizenship through character traits, such as helping others and obeying laws, rather than political aspects of citizenship. Even the idea of voting as a responsibility of citizenship, often considered the most basic act of political participation, appears far from universal among students (Chiodo and Martin 2005; Cooks and Epstein 2000; Hickey 2002; Martin and Chiodo 2007; Torney-Purta, Barber, and Wilkenfeld 2007). Research has also shown that students of minority groups and immigrant families often fail to identify with the American political process because of a lingering sense of loyalty to their homeland or a perception that the government does not represent all groups in society equally (Abu El-Haj 2007; Cooks and Epstein 2000; Torney-Purta, Barber, and Wilkenfeld 2007).

This is not to say, however, that students are politically ambivalent. Research on secondary students has shown that they often hold negative views about partisan politics and politicians, although they concede that not all politicians are corrupt (Hahn 1998). Yet, in a study on the political efficacy of high school students, Andrew Forrest and Allyson Weseley (2007) exposed students to a number of campaign materials and found that students responded most favorably to negative advertisements, which correlated with a rise in students' feelings of efficacy and willingness to vote. Secondary students, in particular, also appear to be influenced by the political beliefs of their peers. David Campbell (2005) discovered that schools with homogeneous political compositions fostered shared attitudes on political participation and other civic norms. Students in schools with heterogeneous populations often experience increases of tolerance for diverse opinions but fail to acquire strong political beliefs and behaviors, a phenomenon that has also been observed in the general population (Mutz 2006).

Finally, Diana Hess (2009) has found that students appear to enjoy discussing controversial political issues in their social studies classes. Inclusion of political issues appears to improve students' opinions of their social studies classes as well as to make the curriculum more relevant to students' lives. Perhaps most important, Hess has found that discussing controversial political issues in school refines students' political identities by exposing them to divergent political beliefs. Even in seemingly politically homogenous classes, students report that they are more likely to recognize and appreciate ideological diversity if they are given the opportunity to discuss political issues on a regular basis.

Teaching politics in secondary classrooms

Given what we know about the political socialization of adolescents, what, then, should political instruction in secondary education look like? Pamela Conover and Stanley Feldman (1984) argue that individuals develop their political identities and understanding of the political world through a schematic model that allows for the processing of new information into existing political beliefs and understandings. Using this model, teachers would want to first evaluate what students

already know about politics from their lived experiences within a democratic society and discussions of political issues among family, friends, and peers. Then, teachers should provide relevant instruction that furthers students' understanding of politics and corrects any preconceived misconceptions they might have.

In addition, ideal political instruction would introduce students to politics and current political events in a way that grabs students' interests and makes politics appear relevant to them. As multiple studies have shown, eighteen to twenty-five year olds annually represent the most politically apathetic voting bloc in the United States, and part of the reason for this disengagement is often presumed to be a lack of interest in politics among young people and their failure to appreciate the importance of active political participation (Campbell 2005; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Lopez, Kirby, and Sagoff 2005). Recent scholarship has suggested that digital technologies and the Internet have the potential to change the way teachers approach civic education and engage students in discussions of politics and political agency, particularly as computer technology continues to revolutionize democratic practices in the United States (Crowe 2006; Friedman 2006; Glenn and Kaviani 2006; Hicks et al. 2002; VanFossen and Berson 2008). However, research has yet to determine how teachers actually use the Internet as a tool for teaching politics or current political events.

Table 1 is omitted from this formatted document.

In fact, little is known about political instruction in secondary education. While research suggests that government teachers incorporate current events within their classroom instruction on a regular basis (Hahn 1998; Niemi and Junn 1998), few studies detail how teachers go about teaching politics or current political events in their classrooms. In her work on controversial political issues, Hess (2004) has found that many teachers avoid these types of issues entirely, either out of fears of indoctrination, beliefs that students may not be mature enough to engage in discussions of controversial issues, or concerns that they may disrupt the political climate of their school or local community. A study of New York social studies teachers by Nancy Niemi and Richard Niemi (2007) supports Hess's observations. The teachers all emphasized the importance of voting and making well-informed political decisions, but they did not attempt to cultivate their students' political ideologies, stating that students' political beliefs were personal and therefore not appropriate for classroom instruction. Of the teachers who do engage students in discussions of controversial issues, Hess has found that the majority attempt to strike an ideological balance in their instruction by presenting both sides of a political issue without advocating a certain ideological position.

Outside of teacher disclosure and the decision of whether to engage students in discussions of controversial political issues, there exists little empirical research on how teachers foster interest and increase student understanding of politics and political events. The majority of literature in this area consists of theoretical suggestions for teachers (e.g., Cousins 1984; Eaton 2004; Risinger 2007); and of the empirical research on teaching political events, most rely on surveys

of teachers after the fact (e.g., Haas and Laughlin 2000, 2002). However, this type of survey research is potentially problematic, given studies chronicling how teachers often set lofty instructional goals and subsequently believe they achieve those goals in practice, although observational research suggests otherwise (Evans 2006). Therefore, a qualitative approach to studying political instruction may provide a better representation of what secondary teachers are actually doing in their classrooms. The remainder of this article will describe the results of a study in which I observed the practices of four high school government teachers during their coverage of the 2008 presidential election in an effort to better understand current methods of teaching politics in secondary education.

Method

As part of a larger study on teaching politics in secondary education (Journell 2009a), I observed the instruction of four high school government teachers in the months leading up to the presidential election. Three of the teachers, Ms. Wilkinson, Mr. Harrison, and Ms. Jackson, worked at Roosevelt High School, a demographically diverse school located in a major urban area in the southwest Chicago suburbs. The fourth teacher, Mr. Ryan, was the lone government teacher at Armstrong High School, a small, predominately white school located in a rural area approximately twenty miles away from Roosevelt High School. The four teachers were chosen for in-depth analysis because they all indicated a desire to teach about politics and the election, they regularly incorporated technology into their daily lessons, and they taught regular or lower-level classes that contained students who did not enter their government classes with much knowledge about politics or the election. As table 1 shows, all of the teachers had less than ten years teaching experience, and only Ms. Jackson and Mr. Ryan had taught a presidential election prior to the 2008 contest.

On average, I observed each of these four classes three to four times per week from the beginning of school in August through the election in November. I acted as a participant-observer (Merriam 1998) at both schools, dividing my time between taking field notes and helping students with their assignments. I also formally interviewed each teacher twice, once at the beginning of the study and again after the election. In addition, I interviewed any students from each class who volunteered to take part in the study. All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for accuracy.

Finally, I gauged initial student interest in politics by administering a short survey to each of the four classes at the beginning of the study. The first part of the survey asked students to respond to ten Likert scale statements that provided a self-assessment of students' interest and knowledge of politics and the election. The second part of the survey required students answer two open-ended questions that asked them to list what they knew about both major party candidates in the election. For a copy of the survey, refer to Wayne Journell (2011b).

Findings

The student surveys indicated that the majority of students in the classes started the semester uninterested in politics and largely uninformed about the election (to view the quantitative results of the survey, refer to Journell 2011b). While the surveys did suggest that many of the students appeared to have a clear preference with respect to which candidate they wanted to win the election, students' answers on the open-ended questions indicated that most of them had made that decision primarily on the candidates' personalities and demographic information. Few of the students listed information beyond the fact that Barack Obama was a young, African American senator from Illinois and John McCain was an older, white senator from Arizona. Only a handful of students in these four classes articulated policy stances of either candidate, and many of the non-demographic answers dealt with tabloid commentary from the primary campaigns, such as Obama's lack of bowling prowess or the fact that McCain received a biopsy during a routine medical exam. Occasionally, students gave inaccurate information, such as associating a candidate with the wrong political party or stating that Obama was a Muslim.

In addition, the survey results also suggested that the students lacked a nuanced understanding of the differences between Democrats and Republicans. When the survey asked students to describe their own political affiliation, "unsure" was the answer given most often in each class, even when students indicated a preference for either Obama or McCain. My interviews with students suggested that even the students who believed they affiliated with one of the two major parties did not have a clear understanding of the policies of either party, as my conversation with Marcus, a student in Ms. Wilkinson's class, shows:

Journell: Who would you have voted for in the 2008 presidential election if you could have voted?

Marcus: Obama.

Journell: Why is that?

Marcus: He is a Democrat.

Journell: What about him being a Democrat do you like?

Marcus: I don't know. My family is Democrat.

Moreover, I found evidence to suggest that the information students did ascertain about politics or the election often came from dubious sources. For example, when I asked Curtis, a student in Mr. Ryan's class, whether he paid attention to the election outside of class, he responded by saying, "I see it on the news and stuff. I watch The Daily Show and The Colbert Report." Curtis did say that he liked those programs because they made the news entertaining, which suggests he realized the shows' satiric content. However, the following conversation from Mr. Harrison's class suggests that some students may take what is said in jest on a comedy show to heart:

Gwen(to me): Is it true that he is going to legalize marijuana?

Journell: Who?

Gwen: Barack Obama.

Journell: Well, Democrats tend to be friendlier to that idea than Republicans, but no, I don't think either candidate is proposing that.

Eduardo(sitting nearby): That is a shame!

Gwen: Then, what is he going to do?

Journell: What do you mean?

Gwen: Well, I saw on Mind of Mencia that Obama, if he gets elected president, he will make all of the white people slaves to make up for slavery.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the teachers in this study, for the most part, had the opportunity to work with students largely free of formal political education. Yet, they also faced the challenge of educating individuals who collectively appeared uninformed about the election and relatively disengaged with the political process. The rest of this section will focus on the methods these teachers used to increase students' interest and understanding of politics and the election.

Gaining student interest

All of the teachers seemed to realize that many of their students came to their classes politically uninformed or disinterested, and they saw themselves as having a responsibility to change their students' views on the political process. As Mr. Harrison said,

I think it is up to me. I think the burden is on my shoulders, and I do think that the opportunity is there. I have had classes before where if this election was during their class I don't think it would have happened. They just did not care. But this [current] group, I think I can generate enough excitement where they can carry some things home and make it stick.

For most of the teachers, informal classroom discussion dominated their political instruction. However, the teachers would occasionally develop activities and strategies geared toward engaging students with the election. The most frequently used methods were Internet visuals, references to popular culture, and formal assignments.

Internet visuals. For these teachers, the Internet was a popular way of bringing the election into their classrooms. In particular, many of the teachers chose to show clips of major events in the campaign to keep their students apprised of real-life events and occasionally spark discussion. For example, Ms. Wilkinson used clips from the online edition of the Washington Post to show her classes abridged versions of several of the candidate acceptance speeches in class. The clips highlighted poignant moments from the speeches and cut repetitive moments of applause,

shortening a typically forty-minute speech into a ten-minute version that would act as the class opener on that particular day. Ms. Wilkinson would ask her students to think about certain questions as they watched a speech, and then they would compose a journal entry detailing their reactions.

In addition, all of the teachers used the Internet during their respective propaganda units. The teachers used various Web sites to find campaign advertisements that reflected the various examples of propaganda mentioned in the textbook, which provides an authentic approach to discussing election propaganda (Journell 2009b). All of the teachers showed a variety of Obama and McCain advertisements that portrayed each candidate both positively and negatively. The most frequently shown clips were the McCain advertisement that linked Obama's celebrity status to that of Paris Hilton and Britney Spears and the Obama advertisement that contained footage of McCain stating that he had voted with President Bush's agenda 90 percent of the time.

However, it is important to note that the teachers used the advertisements primarily as examples of propaganda and not as commentary on the state of the election. Therefore, after each advertisement was shown, discussions often centered on the type of propaganda used and whether students thought it was effective. In most cases, the political content consisted of the teacher explaining the background of the advertisement. The one exception to this pattern was Mr. Ryan, who tried to choose advertisements that would generate issue discussions among his students. For example, his propaganda unit occurred at the end of the semester, so one of his clips showed Obama's conversation with the man who would eventually become known as "Joe the Plumber." The ensuing conversation not only discussed the advertisement itself, but also the negative stigma of socialism in the United States and the link between socialism and the massive government bailout of the banking industry supported by both candidates.

Regardless of the Internet videos' purposes, nearly all of the students interviewed cited them as one of their favorite aspects of class. When asked to assess Ms. Wilkinson's handling of the election, Amy stated, "I think she did a good job. Just all of that, making us watch the videos, too. Those are cool. I like when she puts on the videos from YouTube and stuff." Similarly, one of Mr. Ryan's students, Charlotte, felt that the news recaps helped clarify issues within the campaign, stating, "When I would watch [the debates] I didn't know what they were talking about half of the time because it was like stuff that I don't know the issues; but when we watch those it is the most important things, so it just like cuts it down." However, one of the comments made by a student in Mr. Ryan's class suggests that some students did not view the videos as educational but rather simply for entertainment value. When asked if he would have preferred to watch more of the presidential debates in class, Patrick said, "I would have liked to, but that would have just taken away from the time of learning what we are supposed to be learning. I mean it would have been cool because most of the people [in the class] would be like 'I don't want to learn anything, I just want to watch something on TV or whatever.'" Such statements raise the question of whether students' excitement over the videos came from interest in the

election or the fact that the clips kept them from having to complete more traditional tasks, such as completing worksheets or writing journal entries.

One use of technology that had a clear pedagogical goal was the online electoral maps used by Ms. Wilkinson (http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/calculator) and Mr. Harrison (http://www.270towin.com) that provided a visual method to understanding the complexities of the electoral college. Both Web sites used polling data to shade states that were solidly for Obama or McCain, those leaning in one direction, or those that were too close to call. However, what made the Web sites useful for understanding the electoral college was their ability to be manipulated. By making the map blank and then highlighting individual states until they reached the magic number of 270, the teachers illustrated the disproportionate advantage of densely populated states on the eventual outcome.

However, in both classes, the maps were only used during the one or two days each teacher spent on the electoral college. During that window of instruction, each teacher manipulated a few of the swing states to show which states Obama or McCain needed to win to claim victory, but neither teacher used the maps as a tool for tracking the progress of the election over the course of the semester. Given the number of times students came into class asking their teachers about the status of the election, it seems as though prolonged use of the maps would have been a constructive way of having students monitor polling data and predict the outcome of the race.

References to popular culture. Another method of increasing interest in the election used by several of the teachers was to introduce aspects of it by referencing popular culture. Ms. Wilkinson, in particular, attempted to tie the election to elements of popular culture that were of interest to her students whenever possible. For example, during a discussion of the importance of voting, she referenced a popular song by the group Three 6 Mafia that contains the line, "Barack Obama says it is time for a change." In another class, one of her students commented on how the rapper Lil Wayne was at an awards show "dissin' McCain," and Ms. Wilkinson responded by explaining why Lil Wayne was for Obama and referenced his efforts to increase voter turnout.

However, the attempt at merging popular culture with politics that seemed to have the greatest impact on her students was when Ms. Wilkinson showed the YouTube video of "You Can Vote However You Like" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zj5eWRzDhNI). The video, which was created by educator and author Ron Clark, features one of his classes performing a political parody about the election based on hip-hop artist T.I.'s song "Whatever You Like." The video showed Clark and his students dancing and singing to lyrics such as

McCain's the best candidate

With Palin as his running mate

They'll fight for gun rights, pro-life

The conservative right

Our future is bright

Better economy in sight

And all the world will feel our military might

But McCain and Bush are real close right

They vote alike and keep it tight

Obama's new, he's younger too

The middle class, he will help you

He'll bring change, he's got brains

McCain and Bush are just the same

You are to blame, Iraq's a shame

Four more years would be insane.

Then, each verse ended with a catchy chorus of

Obama on the left

McCain on the right

We can talk politics all night

And you can vote however you like

You can vote however you like, yeah.

Ms. Wilkinson's students instantly loved the video and requested her to replay it. Many asked for the Web site so they could show their parents. Others could be heard singing the chorus throughout the rest of the semester. In addition to showing the video, Ms. Wilkinson printed out the words so her students could follow along, but afterward, she did not attempt to explain any of the lyrics other than the chorus of "Obama on the left" and "McCain on the right." The song contained references to many issues in the 2008 campaign, from the Iraq war to gas prices, but none were discussed by Ms. Wilkinson after showing the video.

The other reference to popular culture that permeated into all of the classrooms in this study was the lampooning of the candidates done by Saturday Night Live, especially the impersonation of Sarah Palin by actress Tina Fey. Although all of the teachers referenced the skits during class

discussions, only Mr. Ryan ever showed a clip from the show. Toward the end of the course, he finally succumbed to repeated requests from his students to see a clip of Fey's portrayal of the Republican vice presidential nominee.

Formal assignments. All of the teachers incorporated formal assignments into their curricula that were designed to stimulate interest about the election and encourage their students to think critically about politics. For example, both Ms. Wilkinson and Mr. Harrison had their students develop a MySpace page for a fictional third party where students expressed their own opinions about personally relevant political issues. Mr. Harrison also had his students complete a similar assignment, which he called a third party brochure, that required students to create a party symbol, platform, and slogan, as well as answer two hypothetical questions about the nature of third parties with respect to the presidential election.

However, the two formal assignments that appeared to have had the greatest impact on students' knowledge of the election had students researching the candidates in a computer lab. First, Mr. Ryan introduced his students to the election by having them compare the candidates' positions on major issues using a Web site sponsored by CNN (http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008). After researching each candidate's position on the issues, Mr. Ryan then had students circle the issues they considered most important, which would aid them in the next section of the assignment. To conclude the activity, Mr. Ryan had his students take an online quiz (http://www.wqad.com/Global/link.asp?L=259460) that asked students to give their opinions on ten political issues and rank each issue on a five-point Likert scale according to its perceived importance to each student. After completion of the quiz, the Web site then provided students with a report detailing which candidate they were most likely to support in the election, along with a listing of ideals they held in common with each of the candidates.

Of the students interviewed from Mr. Ryan's class, several cited this computer lab activity as helping them discern their own political ideologies, as well as come to a decision about which candidate to support in the election. As Patrick stated, "When we went into the computer lab and took those polls on the Internet really helped influence me, and I was also happy to be able to learn about the candidates and stuff because I have never really been into politics too much until now." Similarly, when I asked Cindy what aspect of Mr. Ryan's class helped her decide that she supported Obama, she said, "Doing that one online where we looked up the issues and everything." Although the quiz did not cover all of the issues debated in the election, it did appear to provide students with a basic understanding of their political affiliations, which Mr. Ryan then used as a foundation for future class discussions.

The only lengthy project done in any of the classes occurred in Ms. Jackson's class. Coincidentally, she required her students to visit the same CNN Web site used by Mr. Ryan's class and had them complete a chart detailing the differences between the candidates on major campaign issues. The students researched in the computer lab for two days to prepare for writing a two-page paper on the candidate of their choice. In addition to the issues, students were

required to ascertain biographical information about their candidate as part of the paper. Students were given several days, both in and out of the computer lab, to write their paper. In total, the project took nearly a week and a half.

The quality of the papers varied widely, from those who chose not to take the assignment seriously, such as Julio who wrote, "Senator John McCain is just old and should be a pope instead," to students like Martin who backed their choice of candidate with evidence taken from their research. The following is Martin's paragraph making his case for McCain:

McCain's viewpoint in the issue of Abortion is that he is completely against it. I agree with him because I too believe that every baby or fetus deserves a chance to live and if they have babies and they don't want it or they're not ready there are adoption centers to help them. Secondly, I agree with McCain's viewpoint in having healthcare stay the old way. I agree with him because of the fact that people who work and receive a paycheck every 15 days will have money deducted because people who are lazy and live off the Government will also have healthcare but they don't get money deducted, that's not fair.

However, such informed opinions were the exception and not the rule. The majority of students seemed to take the assignment seriously but simply filled their papers with broad statements supporting their candidate, such as the following example arguing for Obama:

Barack Obama is the best. He will change everything. He will lower taxes, bring the soldiers back, anything you want changed, it probably will. Voting for Barack Obama will be the best thing in the world. Voting for John McCain will be like another George Bush. Nobody wants to be like him.

One possible reason for the lack of specificity found in the student papers could be traced to their poor understanding of the CNN Web site, which was written for an adult audience. Students in both classes that used the Web site expressed difficulty with the technical vocabulary in many of the items. However, the comprehension problems seemed enhanced in Ms. Jackson's lower-level class in which many of the students struggled with reading. During the project in Ms. Jackson's class, I spent most of my time walking around the computer lab helping students decipher the candidates' stances on the issues, often having to paraphrase the technical language used on the Web site. For example, on the first day of research, two students working together called me over, and we had the following conversation:

Juan(pointing to his screen): So, McCain wants to build a wall?

Journell: Yeah, he is tough on immigration, as are most Republicans.

Juan: So he wants to stop immigration?

Journell: Well, not stop it entirely, but he wants to stop the illegal immigration and make sure that everyone coming in is legal.

Manuel: Why do they want to do that?

Journell: That tends to be the Republican position on immigration.

Juan(looking at the screen): What about Obama? It says here he wants to secure the borders.

Journell: Well, part of securing the borders is to make sure that we don't let terrorists into the country.

Manuel : But he isn't trying to build a wall and kick all of the illegal immigrants out is he?

The general lack of understanding also may have contributed to the occasional incorrect facts that permeated through students' papers. In particular, several students appeared confused with the ambiguous way the CNN Web site portrayed Obama's stance on abortion, which stated that he was pro-choice but that he wanted to reduce the number of abortions in the United States. One student paper had Obama opposing abortion and then saying, "He thinks women should be able to do what ever [sic] they want with there [sic] bodies." Another paper stated that Obama "will change the abortion law, he disagrees with abortion and deaths." Although these erroneous statements were corrected by Ms. Jackson before being returned to the students, it is clear that some students were not able to clearly grasp the candidates' platforms from the CNN Web site.

Increasing student understanding of the major parties

As the survey results indicated, the majority of students at both schools appeared unclear about the ideologies of the two major parties. Educating their students about the differences between Democrats and Republicans seemed to be a salient goal for all four teachers, and they all went about this process in strikingly similar ways.

Student self-discovery. All four teachers started their political party units with objective quizzes that required students to articulate their feelings about major political issues. After taking the quizzes, students would tally their responses based on a key provided by the teacher, and depending on their results, the quiz would classify them as leaning either Democratic or Republican. The structure of the quizzes varied slightly from class to class. All asked similar questions, but Ms. Wilkinson's quiz used a Likert scale that allowed her students to signify the degree to which they agreed with a certain issue, whereas the quizzes used in the other classes simply asked students to choose between two dichotomous positions.

The reaction of students to their scores depended on whether their beliefs aligned with their preconceived notions of their political ideologies. The students whose beliefs did correspond with their quiz results viewed the assignment as validating their choice in party and/or candidate. For those who encountered unexpected results, the reactions varied from shock to anger. After taking the quiz in Ms. Wilkinson's class, Darnell, an avid Obama supporter, found himself aligning with many Republican views and blurted out, "What if we come out Republican?" Soon thereafter, another Obama supporter asked Ms. Wilkinson, "Can Republicans vote for

Democrats?" Many of the students at Roosevelt, which was solidly Democratic, were also surprised to discover that Obama supported abortion rights and civil liberties for gay couples, two topics that many of the students at Roosevelt seemed to personally oppose.

For Ms. Wilkinson, the quiz results were the highlight of her students' political education because the quizzes caused them to question, at least temporarily, their previously unshakeable stances on politics. As she said, "I did feel good about the fact that I did let them know what the issues were, and I did love the idea that when we did talk about the issues and they got to find out that maybe they don't necessarily agree with that political party 100 percent." Although there is little evidence to suggest that the quizzes had any significant effect in changing students' attitudes about their political affiliations or choice in the election, they did appear to hint at a deliberative approach to politics rarely articulated by students at Roosevelt (Journell 2010b).

Establishing differences. While the quizzes may have opened students' eyes to their personal political beliefs, they did little to explain the ideological differences between liberals and conservatives. Therefore, all four teachers spent several days of formal instruction on how Democrats and Republicans traditionally view major social and political issues. In each classroom the ideological differences were presented in a lecture format where the teacher methodically went down a list of various issues and presented the liberal and conservative viewpoint of each.

In their formal interviews, many of the students referenced those particular lessons as fundamental to their understanding of political parties. As Amy explained, "At first I didn't know what was the difference between Democrat and Republican, and Ms. Wilkinson really taught me about that, especially with the little sheets we had to fill out." Another student, Curtis from Armstrong, stated that he linked his increased knowledge of political parties to the presidential election, which allowed him to make a more informed opinion on the candidates. As he said, "I mean [the candidates] told us what everything was, but those are only words. I really didn't know what everything meant, and Mr. Ryan just kind of gave us like rough definitions so we could make our own conclusions."

Rarely, however, did the teachers engage students in discussions about any of the issues presented in class, although students would occasionally voice displeasure with a certain ideological position. When students did try to debate issues, the teachers either ignored them or silenced them by stating that everyone was entitled to his or her own opinion. As Mr. Harrison told his class when a couple of students engaged in a minor spat over the merits of abortion, "That is the point; it is a rhetorical question. It has no answer because it is opinion, but that is politics."

In each class, the lists of issues were followed by a description of which groups in society traditionally vote for a respective political party. Even though all of the teachers were quick to note that this demographic information represented voter trends and not absolute fact, comments

made by students in each class suggested that they viewed political affiliation as an either/or proposition with little flexibility for moderate opinions. One way the teachers tried to combat this perception was through the idea of a political spectrum that placed liberal and conservative and Democrat and Republican on a continuum of political thought that showed the differences between extreme positions and more moderate views.

Each of the teachers used the diagrams to show their students how individuals could have liberal views on certain issues, yet think conservatively on other issues. All of the teachers stressed that very few Americans saw themselves on either extreme end of the political spectrum. The visual aid also seemed to clarify for students the distinction between political ideologies and political parties. Once the teachers explained that Democrats tend to have liberal views and Republicans tend to follow conservative ideals, but that few individuals from either party completely fall into their party's official platform, the students seemed to make the connection between the classroom instruction and their previous quiz scores.

However, Ms. Jackson's use of a political spectrum offers a cautionary tale about the pedagogical ramifications of using a poor visual aid. In perhaps an attempt to simplify the party distinctions for her students, Ms. Jackson showed students a modified spectrum that had Democrats on the left, Republicans on the right, and third parties in the middle, insinuating that if one did not align completely with one of the major parties then he or she would be compelled to support a third party candidate. One of her students, Martin, raised his hand and asked, "If we got a five on our quiz [meaning that they had equal scores for Democrat and Republican], does that mean we are a third party?" to which Ms. Jackson replied, "Not necessarily, probably means you are a moderate." Clearly, she did not mean to imply that everyone in the political center belonged to a third party, but Martin's comment suggests that her true intent was unclear. Ms. Jackson attempted to clarify the issue by drawing on the diagram and using herself as an example, but it is unclear if her actions corrected any misconceptions already in place.

Discussion

Teachers are often given little guidance on how to teach politics in secondary education. Even within formal curricula for civics and government courses, there are few guidelines for teaching politics or current political events, in part because the political landscape is constantly changing (Journell 2010a). Based on my own experiences teaching high school government and conversations with teachers over the years, I would posit that the techniques used by the teachers in this study are similar to those used by social studies teachers throughout the United States during the 2008 presidential election. It is my hope that preservice and practicing social studies educators will benefit from this analysis of these teachers' instructional methods and can take away lessons from this study that will ultimately improve their own political instruction.

Overall, I would argue that the teachers in this study did well in generating interest about politics and the election among their students; but too often, they did not capitalize on that interest and

truly educate their students about politics. Particularly if one views political understanding from a cognitive standpoint as Conover and Feldman (1984) describe, the instructional methods used in this study often appeared to lack the necessary depth to facilitate nuanced political understanding. Consider, for example, the liberal/conservative quizzes given in each of the classes. As Ms. Wilkinson observed, those quizzes were an illuminating activity for most of the students in the study as many of them came into the semester having already decided on a candidate in the election, a decision that was often based on race, appearance, or family/peer influence rather than policy. When the quizzes highlighted the disconnect between students' political beliefs and their party preferences, the activity served to combat students' preconceived notions of what constituted liberal and conservative, or more specifically, Democrat and Republican. Yet, none of the teachers used those quizzes as a springboard to discussions of larger social issues or policy arguments being waged in the campaign. Students were eager to discuss these issues after taking the quizzes, but in each instance the teachers fell into the avoidance trap that too often engulfs social studies educators (Hess 2004).

Other attempts at gaining student interest offer the same cautionary tales of missed opportunities. For example, the electoral college maps used by Ms. Wilkinson and Mr. Harrison were an excellent way of explaining a difficult concept that is typically hard for students to understand. Yet, both teachers only used the maps for their lessons on the structure of the electoral college and not as a tool to track the results of the presidential election. One could easily see how introducing the maps at the beginning of the semester and then using them on a weekly basis to discuss the status of the campaigns would have been a great way to educate students about campaign strategies, polling data, and electoral math.

Similarly, many of the teachers were very creative in their methods of getting students interested in the election, but they were rarely able to use those strategies to further their students' understanding of the politics surrounding the election. For example, Ms. Wilkinson did a great job of making the election relevant for her students by integrating technology and infusing references to popular culture into her lessons. In particular, the Ron Clark video appeared to make an impression on her students, yet Ms. Wilkinson never attempted to deconstruct the lyrics of the song, all of which pertained to major themes and issues in the campaign.

Given the popularity of the Clark video and the Saturday Night Live skits among their students, it seems as though all of the teachers missed a golden opportunity by not including analyses of popular culture in their instruction. As the vignettes at the beginning of the previous section show, many of the students were receiving their information from sources outside of the mainstream media. Programs like The Daily Show and The Colbert Report represent a new wave of news media that has become increasingly popular with younger audiences. On the one hand, the satiric nature of these types of shows tends to blur facts in favor of comedy; on the other, the topics at the center of these programs revolve around pertinent political issues, and oftentimes these issues receive a sustained focus that exceeds what is typically found in a mainstream newscast (Baym 2005, 2007). The same can be said for the political sketches on Saturday Night

Live, which due to the Internet, became almost unavoidable during the 2008 contest. If students are watching such programs on their own, deconstructing them in class would seemingly serve a valuable educational function, from analyzing the role of media on the political process to addressing the stereotypes and depictions of race, gender, and culture that were so prominent in this particular election (Journell 2011a).

A final lesson to take from this study is that conceptualizing politics is difficult for students because, for the most part, they have had little exposure to politics outside of their formal education. Therefore, teachers can take nothing for granted. As Ms. Jackson's students' struggles with the CNN Web site show, simply exposing them to political information may not provide enough scaffolding for students to really understand the often ambiguous nature of politics. Similarly, as Martin's response to Ms. Jackson's poorly drawn political spectrum suggests, students often lack a nuanced understanding of the American political system, and they may not be able to correctly infer when items are unclear. I would argue that the third party activities used by Mr. Harrison and Ms. Wilkinson posed a similar type of problem for students. By allowing students to create a fictional third party that blended characteristics of the two major parties, these teachers did nothing to genuinely educate their students on actual third parties in our current system. Creating activities that are authentic rather than abstract seems essential to ensuring that students can make connections between the political instruction described in class and the real-life politics they will encounter as adults.

Conclusion

Although I have found much to critique about the political instruction that occurred in these four classes, I should reiterate that these teachers, like most social studies teachers in the United States, never received any formal training on how to teach politics. The teachers should be applauded for recognizing their students' interest in the election and using a variety of strategies to cultivate that interest. Yet, as I have argued in this article, I do not believe they went far enough in their instruction, and as a result, they missed a unique opportunity to develop their students' political understanding. Based on the deficiencies highlighted in this study, I would argue that authentic political education requires teachers to extend their political instruction beyond a cursory introduction to politics to include opportunities for students to discuss social and political issues while deconstructing popular misconceptions and various sources of political information.

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