

**Teaching Controversial Issues during a Presidential Election: Exploring How Teachers Navigated Polarized Politics in 2020**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Auburn University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama  
August 7, 2021

Keywords: controversial political issues, 2020 presidential election,

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## Abstract

American politics today is the culmination of historical, political, social, geographic, and economic events that have significantly impacted this country. Over the last year, America and the world have been tested to political, social, and economic extremes not seen in over a century because of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Both the 2020 Presidential election and the storming of the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 are just two of the events that challenged teachers and educators across all levels of schooling to change and adapt teaching practices. It has forced citizens to have difficult conversations about democracy, equality, health, and safety. Educators tasked with teaching government and civics are required to teach political parties and the functions of government. However, in this current socially distant and polarized political climate, doing so was tremendously difficult. For some high school students and teachers, teaching secondary government is only a nine-week crash course into the functions of the government and rights outlined to students. Nine weeks to teach the functions of government, Constitution, rights of citizens, powers of the president, courts, and how federalism and states interact. Furthermore, only a small minority of students who take government courses do so during a presidential election cycle. This reality underscores the importance of understanding how teachers help students navigate such an important function of government. In this polarized political climate post-2016, it is of interest to study how teachers have prepared to teach the election and document their experience navigating campaign issues. This study hopes to shed light on the educational strategies and expectations of secondary government and civics teachers teaching controversial political topics surrounding the 2020 election.

## Acknowledgments

When reflecting on this project and the educational journey that I have been on for the last four years, there are so many to thank. I would like to say thank you to Auburn University and all the people who I was able to work with during this chapter in my career. Thank you to the four teachers who opened their classrooms and time for me to conduct this research. Without you, this work could not be possible. I am especially appreciative of Dr. Jada Kohlmeier who gave me the opportunity to learn and teach alongside her for the last four years. The educational opportunities of the World Affairs Youth Seminar (WAYS) summer camp, supervision of interns, the Alabama Justice project, and teaching multiple courses, have instilled a confidence in me to help prepare future educators. Thank you for all the conversations, faith, and patience that my research could get done.

Thank you, Dr. Tirado, for working alongside me these last two years supervising interns and working on the WAYS camp. Your guidance and support have been crucial in helping me improve as a supervisor and teacher educator. Thank you, Dr. Andrzejewski for helping me better understand and appreciate qualitative research. My ERMA 8120 class in the fall of 2018 stands out as one of my most memorable classes for the meaningful conversations and activities related to teaching. Thank you, Dr. Brooks for allowing me to be the “education major” in your history classes. My knowledge and interests in the history of the South and Southern Labor History has greatly expanded because of your courses and our conversations.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my family and friends who motivated and encouraged me during this 12-year extended stay in college. Your support and

encouragement have sustained me. Without you, I would not be here. “What a run...Go  
DAWGS! and War Eagle!”

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### Statement of Problem

In the fall of 2015, I had the privilege of taking a social studies education research class taught by Dr. Todd Dinkelman who challenged the class weekly to think about aspects and problems of social studies education from two perspectives, teacher, and researcher. With only three years of teaching experience, reading research was a struggle as I navigated the numerous “camps” of social studies as defined by Evans (2004) and tried to understand where authors stood on subjects of citizenship, democracy, history and how best to teach it. The following fall, I was consumed by finishing up my master’s degree, and the 2016 presidential election that I largely avoided political discussions in my U.S. History classes. I used my content and focus on historical events as an excuse to avoid discussion of the current election and then most of President Trump’s policies once elected out of fears that it would become uncivil and waste class time. At the time, I felt I was doing a disservice not talking about a historical and controversial moment in American history, but I felt largely unprepared to do so while also teaching content. It was the following spring 2017, that I decided to continue my education at Auburn University to learn how to better approach teaching controversial political issues.

Since arriving, I have had the opportunity to think deeply and research about significant problems of democracy, including the constitutionality of the PATRIOT Act and how gerrymandering impacts elections. My avoidance of discussing current events and controversial political issues as a classroom teacher motivated me to research teachers, in hopes of learning how to better prepare students for the demands of citizenship. This research is focused on the experiences of teachers and their decisions and actions in the classroom, during a presidential year, at a time of heightened political polarization. Extensive research of social studies teachers teaching controversial political issues and its purpose of citizenship exist (Oliver & Shaver, 1966; Parker, McDaniel, & Valencia, 1989; Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996). However, only a

little of the research focuses on how teachers navigate teaching elections, particularly presidential elections. Journell's research has focused previously on the 2008, 2012, and 2016 presidential election cycles following teachers' thoughts and instructional decisions and serve as a framework for looking at teachers in the 2020 presidential election (Journell 2011, 2017).

Elections are distinctive events that while occurring every two, four, and six-year cycles for representatives, presidents, and senators, each is uniquely different based on the candidates, and social-economic conditions of the time. Consequently, for democracy to be successful, understanding its challenges and participation is vital to ensuring President Lincoln's words at Gettysburg "government of the people, by the people, for the people" continue (Lincoln, 1863). By taking a multiple case-study approach as described by Stake (1995) this research will be able to capture and contextualize what teaching experiences were like for those involved and share potential insight into what others around the country have also experienced. This research is not intended to generalize or critique the actions of the educators in the study, rather it is intended to start a conversation on how teachers can be supported to do the difficult work of teaching government functions and politics, discussion of controversial political issues, and preparation of engaged, reflective citizens. By studying government classes during a presidential election, the likelihood of a teacher discussing these topics was increased.

At the intersection of this study are the current political climate and the instructional choices teachers made about including political issues in their government or civics course. The challenge and difficulties that face teachers are laid out in the PBS Frontline documentary *America's Great Divide* (2019) that examines how we got to the current, heightened political polarization. The documentary uses a multitude of diverse perspectives across the political spectrum in a bipartisan manner chronicling the last fifteen years of the political chaos. From elections to domestic policy, and foreign intervention, the clear challenge of keeping up with the news while staying non-partisan in the classroom has become increasingly difficult. From the

Great Recession to the Presidencies of both Barrack Obama and Donald Trump, the last fifteen years have given teachers significant time for pause and consideration in how best to teach in a climate of such a tremendous cultural divide.

By examining the 2020 election cycle, its aftermath, and analyzing how social studies teachers teach civics and government during a documented period of heightened political tension, this study has the potential to build on election research and how teachers approach teaching controversial political topics. In an era where citizens largely avoid political discussion (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Fay & Levinson, 2017) out of disdain for politics, or fears of uncivil discourse, understanding how teachers bridge students' disinterest of government and politics is important in improving best practices and encouraging preservice and in-service teachers to engage their students in examining our political system and controversial political topics.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

*Gatekeeper* is a term defined by Thornton (1989) to describe the role of the educator and the tremendous influence and responsibility they have when it comes to implementing the curriculum. Due to their unique role and effect on students, understanding the philosophy and rationale of educators and their instructional decisions for teaching politics better enables researchers to help future educators navigate their role as “gatekeepers” of the curriculum. Knowledge of why teachers chose to engage in certain topics while avoiding others is fundamental in determining what kind of gatekeeper each participant was in this study.

*Controversial Political Issue (CPI)* is a policy question that challenges legal, ethical, moral, or economic problems and seeks to narrow the type of problem to one that confronts a voter or the government regarding a specific policy. It is not hypothetical. This kind of problem surrounds a public or shared dilemma that has multiple legitimate answers or solutions. Hess

(2009) claims that the use of “political” in the term underscores the democratic nature of the problem and the role of the citizen in helping participate and shape governmental policy.

*Authentic Intellectual Work (AIW)* was a concept researched by Newmann, King, and Carmichael (2007) to better understand the intellectual rigor teachers were asking students to perform through their questioning and assessments. Authentic intellectual work requires complex work that challenges students to think critically and apply learned knowledge using the tools of the appropriate discipline to solve authentic problems with meaning beyond school.

*Citizenship* a highly debated and aspirational goal of social studies that encompasses numerous aspects of civic responsibility. Westheimer (2015) and Westheimer and Kahne (2004) outlined the competing goals of civic education by asking the question “What kind of citizen?” They layout three visions of good citizenship: the personally responsible citizen; the participatory citizen; and the social justice-oriented citizen. In describing the differences among the three, they use the analogy “if Participatory Citizens organize the food drive and Personally Responsible Citizens donate food, the Social Justice Oriented Citizens...ask why people are hungry, then act on what they discover” (Westheimer and Kahne, p.41). This notion of three visions of citizenship is shared by Banks (2017) who also describes three similar visions of citizenship Recognized, Participatory, and Transformative while also adding a fourth version he labels “Failed Citizenship”. Under this failed citizenship, he argues individuals for a variety of reasons including assimilation, marginalization of minority voices, and perspectives. To combat this concept, Banks advocates for schools to adopt curriculum and programs to focus on multicultural citizenship that recognizes the global migration of people and promotes civic equality for all. A critique of this preparatory citizenship comes from Ho and Barton (2020) which contends that civic education has largely avoided preparing students for civic action. This is significant because often teachers and curriculum often focus on the role of government rather

than how to engage with government through the various organizations outside of government institutions.

Rubin (2012) argues that making effective democratic citizens begins with intentional teaching that includes multiple perspectives and discussing current events while discussing solutions to problems. Stitzlein (2014) takes this further by encouraging teachers to teach for dissent because citizen education needs students to analyze political activism and the protections it provides under American democracy. While citizenship can be as simple as paying taxes, following the law, voting, attending town hall meetings, it can be greater in encouraging active participation in a global cause for social justice or running for political office. This is outlined in *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness* (2005), where several social studies educators argue the importance of preparing students for the global world by showing them where they are and the global impact they have on the planet. Teachers who hope to educate students to be better citizens must continually confront the questions, what can I do to prepare my students for citizenship? And what kind of citizens are we preparing?

***Persistent Issues in History (PIH)*** is a collaboration between Auburn University and Indiana University, where a community of teachers uses an online database of lessons centered on Problem-based Historical Inquiry. Lessons focus on developing students' skills where critical analysis of weighing evidence, historical claims, content knowledge, are prioritized to help students make informed decisions and actions on persistent social problems. The network encourages social studies units to be centered on an ethical question that persist over time and have a specific policy choice related to the topic being taught. Policies are analyzed by clarifying facts, definitions, and values citizens would use in searching for the public good. This network provides models of practice and allows teacher members to build and share lessons to improve their teaching practices.



*Alabama Course of Study (ACOS)*--- adopted standards by the state in 2010 for social studies, this is the guiding curriculum across the state for Alabama public schools, “designed to promote competence in the areas of economics, geography, history, and civics and government. With an emphasis on responsible citizenship, these content areas serve as the four organizational strands for the Grades K-12 social studies program.” 7<sup>th</sup> grade social studies are organized into two semesters, with Fall focusing on Civics and the Spring semester focusing on Geography. For 12 grade social studies, the semester is broken up into two nine-week courses, with the first nine weeks focusing on United States Government and the second nine weeks focused on Economics.

*Schoology* is an online learning platform that allows for teachers and students to have a virtual platform in which teachers can upload documents, scaffolds, and lesson plans while also being able to receive student work. This online education platform was purchased by that state for all public schools prior to the 2020-2021 academic school year to assist with the teaching demands and challenges posed by COVID-19.

*Document Based Question (DBQ)*- is a educational curriculum developed by the DBQ project which provides students with primary and secondary documents from multiple perspectives, and scaffolds to help students, weigh evidence and write critically.

### **Research questions**

At the heart of this study, I wanted to explore the pedagogical and curricular decisions of teachers during the 2020 election. Below are the four questions that guided this research study.

1. What decisions were teachers making about including & excluding current political issues as they teach a curriculum related to or during the 2020 Presidential election?
2. What materials and resources did teachers use to help students critically examine the 2020 election?
3. What reasons did teachers give to explain their curricular and topic choices?

4. How and to what extent did teachers' own political beliefs influence curricular decisions regarding political issues while teaching government/civics?

This research study sought to investigate the abovementioned questions by using a multiple case study. By using classroom observations and lesson materials, teacher journaling, researcher journaling, and interviews, a rich contextualization of U.S. Government and Civics teachers' experiences of classroom instruction and navigating the 2020 election emerged. As data was being collected, I began to understand more clearly the factors that influenced the teacher's professional judgement, including the role of their own political beliefs, the school and community environments, and the age of the students.

By exploring these research questions, I provide a detailed description of several teachers in different school settings navigating how to teach government and civics during the 2020 election. Using different schools, grade levels, and districts allowed for greater understanding regarding how teachers in different settings grappled with teaching controversial political issues. In documenting the teacher's experiences throughout the semester, through observations, weekly reflections, and bi-monthly check-ins, I was able to capture the progression of teacher's feelings and experiences teaching the 2020 election from August 2020 through January 2021.

### **Overview of the Study**

This study used qualitative methods to understand the experiences and decisions secondary social studies teachers make when teaching 7<sup>th</sup> grade Civics and 12<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. Government during a semester in which a presidential election is held. These grades were chosen because of the explicit curriculum both courses have regarding teaching elections and politics. Examining the pressures and factors that influence a teacher's professional judgment and decision-making surrounding the 2020 election was my focus with attention being paid to the topics surrounding the election that teachers choose to include and exclude. Additionally,

examining to what degree did teacher's own political beliefs come out in their classroom teaching and their hopes for students as citizens was also of interest. Using a combination of teacher interviews, videoed classroom observations, and weekly teacher reflections, I triangulated the data to provide a robust snapshot of the experiences and decision-making of teachers during a polarized political moment. This was important because I was attempting to capture the political and pedagogical lives of teachers in a contested moment, so I attempted to catch the participants shifting political identities in a consistently changing political in a dynamic educational setting.

Limitations to this multiple case study include not being able to physically attend the lessons in the classroom. I was limited to 3-4 observations which meant there was a lot of classroom decisions I missed from each teacher. Additionally, a lot of my data is self-reported from each teacher. All the teachers were white. By following the teachers for only one semester, it is impossible to observe all the teacher's actions. A significant strength of this research was the opportunity to record, and review collected transcripts of each interview and re-watch lessons multiple times. In a normal classroom setting, a videoed lesson may be possible but the recording and transcribing of conversations in the classroom would have been much more time intensive.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Curricular Debates and Purpose of Social Studies

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term social studies have been a part of the American lexicon and associated with schools. The term serves as an interdisciplinary exploration of public problems using the social sciences and humanities. While most often associated with history classes, social studies encompass much more, including civics, government, economics, geography, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. As of 2021, The National Council for The Social Studies website defines social studies as,

the *integrated study* of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provide a coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of the social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.

Within the social studies, there are “camps” of educators who are pulling the social studies in various directions. This tug-of-war is best described in Evans (2004) *The Social Studies Wars*, where he traces the origins of the different social studies camps to key moments including the 1894 Committee of Ten founded by the National Education Association (NEA), the American History Association’s (AHA) 1896 Committee of Seven, and the founding of the National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS) in 1921. At the core of these three events was determining the direction social studies should take, which Evans asks, “to what extent should education aim for socialization, passing on social traditions, or counter-socialization, encouraging

questioning?” (p.23). Not surprisingly, the questions these groups began debating over 100 years ago are still many of the same questions we ask today.

John Dewey, George Counts, and Harold Rugg are a few of the early educational philosophers who guided the direction of Social Studies. Dewey’s *Experience & Education* (1938) emphasizes the role and importance of teachers fostering a classroom environment that enables students to grow through meaningful learning experiences. He argues that continuity and interaction coupled with discussing the problems of the present can help students understand that education should be an “ever-present process” (p.50). George Counts’ *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (1932) highlights the critical role that schools and teachers play in “the task of reconstituting the democratic tradition and of thus working positively toward a new society” (p. 56). Rugg’s impact on social studies was prominent, his social studies textbooks were commonly found in American schools during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, where they integrated the social sciences and created a curriculum for the consolidated subject. However, as America entered the Cold War, his textbooks became increasingly controversial due to his "pro-socialist ideas" that appeared to challenge the strength of America. His books discussed the strengths and weaknesses of American society while discussing the role school could play in solving society’s problems. At a time when national strength was being challenged by the Soviet Union around the world, such questioning and attempts at social change often went unsupported by parents and administration (Lynd, 1953; Urban & Wagoner, 2000).

From the 1960s through the present day, significant tension has existed around schools and the increased emphasis on testing students and the arguments between the types of the curriculum being developed and how that curriculum lined up with citizenship. Since the creation of an independent federal cabinet position under President Carter and the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, education has been at the forefront of presidential policy ever since. As

the friction among how to assess students learning increased, as did the different approaches to helping students learn and the purpose of social studies. As America entered the last decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, disciplinary literacy and disciplined inquiry emerged as competing methods in the teaching of the social studies. All this took place as politicians and stakeholders develop lower-order, multiple-choice accountability tests that measure students learning and hold accountability to teachers and schools (Evans, 2004).

### **The Curricular Camps of Social Studies**

Choosing not to teach controversial issues or the mediums in which the news is transmitted, fails our students in preparing them to think critically of the media. McGrew, Ortega, Breakstone, and Wineburg (2017) have found sobering evidence that students of all grade levels including university students across the country struggle when it comes to determining the credibility of news. From their research, students across grade levels and academic achievement did not use lateral reading skills when it came to finding trustworthy news sources. Teaching students how to fact-check and examine the credibility of sources is vital in the age of 24/7 news cycles and the growth of social media. This reality makes it imperative for teachers to incorporate and discuss authentic, controversial issues with their students to help develop their abilities to analyze the factual, definitional, and value claims of arguments (Oliver & Shaver, 1966). However, the questions teachers ask, the methods and goals to prepare students for citizenship are scattered among various “camps” of social studies educators.

### ***Citizenship***

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century social studies educators and philosophers have grappled with the question, “how to prepare students for citizenship and life beyond formalized education?” John Dewey (1938) argued that progressive education offers teachers the chance to provide students with learning opportunities that go beyond traditional absorption of knowledge and

instead learn through guided experiences. Considering students' place and giving them meaningful learning experiences, Dewey contends, is the best way for students to retain and apply knowledge to everyday life. This ideology gave birth to the idea that learning is unique to the individual and that the teacher plays a critical role in fostering positive, measurable growth in students to help them become better citizens.

The question that dominates social studies classrooms today is what kind of citizens are we and should we be producing? With the pressures of standardized testing and curriculum standards, it becomes easy for teachers to lose sight of the implications of their teaching style and overall goals for student outcomes. Westheimer's *What Kind of Citizen?* (2015) makes the argument that there are three kinds of "good" citizens: personally responsible citizens; participatory citizens; and social justice-oriented citizens. All three have important qualities of citizenship yet, understanding what separates a personally responsible citizen, from a participatory citizen, versus a social justice-oriented citizen and the intent teachers have in their lessons and goals for students is worth exploring. In an age of social media and digital news, preparing students with media literacy skills to navigate the demands of citizenship has only grown in importance.

Rubin (2012) argues that for citizenship to be instilled in students, the activities of the classroom must be meaningful and authentic to students. An open discussion where the teacher can facilitate rather than dictate is important. Banks, McGee Banks, and Clegg Jr. (1999) outline the role of social studies in building students' knowledge for them to become reflective decision-makers, to progress to reflective citizen action where students can "promote or realize the values end". They argue that an emphasis on an interdisciplinary curriculum with opportunities for students to engage in social inquiry is vital to helping students see their roles as citizens in society.

Barton and Levstik (2004) expand on these ideas by outlining their vision for social studies education and its role in schools in helping create a participatory democracy. They contend that for students to feel connected to the curriculum and want to participate in democracy, a classroom environment “must allow people to bring their differences into the open, discuss them, and move forward with mutually acceptable actions whenever possible” (p.35). Parker (2003) shares this vision and outlines the importance of educators adopting an approach to teaching where differences and individuals’ multiple identities can be both recognized and celebrated rather than ignored and ostracized.

Often when discussing how to prepare students for citizenship, the notion of patriotism frequently arises. Following the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, attacks on the United States, educators were forced to reconsider the concept of patriotism and the role it plays in their classrooms. Subsequent actions including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq challenged teachers to consider the role they play in supporting or opposing actions of the government and how their beliefs impact their instructional decisions. *Pledging allegiance: the politics of patriotism in America’s schools* (Westheimer, 2007) is a collection of essays from social studies scholars who unpack the competing and at times controversial role patriotism holds in schools. Noguera and Cohen (2007) highlighted the complex responsibilities and competing interests’ teachers have in discussing the why, with whom, and what is at stake when it comes to discussing America at war. They argued that teachers must foster critical thinking skills with their students so that they are informed and understand why individuals may support and oppose America’s involvement in a war while also forming their own opinion. Similar to teaching war, elections offer teachers the opportunity to discuss and evaluate the reasons candidates are supported or opposed.

### ***Disciplinary Literacy***

Social studies are most often associated with history and this is no accident. The 1894 Committee of Ten founded by the National Education Association (NEA), the American History



Association's (AHA) 1896 Committee of Seven, and the founding of the National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS) were dominated by educational philosophers and historians (Evans,2004). Due to this a large focus of the social studies curriculum has been devoted to studying, memorizing, and critically analyzing documents as historians do.

The disciplinary literacy camp of social studies educators encourages practicing teachers to help students think as the experts in the field do. In the case of history classes, that involves getting students to think as historians do. Weinberg, Martin, and Monte-Sano (2011) proposed an alternative for teachers teaching history, instead of teaching the facts of history, they encourage teachers to present students with documents, competing claims, and have students debate the questions of how and why historical events took place. By examining primary and secondary documents with different perspectives, students can learn important literacy skills that come with analyzing and validating information, forming opinions, and backing up those opinions with evidence just as historians do. Teaching history in this manner allows for the content to become much more nuanced and less certain of the outcome, whereas traditional history is often “drill and kill”, fact memorization. By posing students questions such as “Was Abraham Lincoln a racist? How should we judge and look at the past? And Was World War Three prevented because the other guy blinked?” shakes up the traditional narrative and allows for history to become more interpretive. This non-traditional approach to teaching was shared by Van Sledright (2011) who also encouraged teachers to rethink how history was both taught and assessed by educators. He argued that history instruction needed to encourage “deep knowledge” that goes beyond the simple fact-based identification and challenged students to use critical thinking skills when evaluating both the past and present. Another approach to engaging students in history is by shaping history as a mystery. Gerwin and Zevin (2003) outlined that by teaching history as a mystery, teachers can help enable students in developing critical thinking skills while also an appreciation for history. By having students re-examine evidence, consider context,

motivations, and understand that historians are writing on an aspect of history at a moment in time, students' epistemology of history is changed. Social studies are a contested field with researchers and teacher educators placing different values and expectations for what should be taught and how.

### ***Critical Studies***

In the field of social studies, critical studies serve as an umbrella term for several strands of research including but not limited to Critical Race Theory, Multicultural education, and gender studies. Ladson-Billings (2003) points out that the field of "social studies educators continue to debate the definition of social studies" which she argues prevents a more important focus on diversity and social justice in the curriculum and classroom (p.5). Without a more inclusive curriculum that addresses race, systemic racism, and issues of equity social studies will continue to have a disconnect between the "artificial" classroom and students' lives outside the classroom. Au (2021) calls for teachers to adopt a "pedagogy of insurgency" for racial justice that places value on the standing against standardized testing and the militarization of schools. Au advocates for ethnic studies in all schools, replacing zero-tolerance discipline with restorative justice practices, and de-tracking classes within the schools to undo the racial segregation that accompanies tracking. In preparing pre-service teachers and in my study, it is important to understand the factors that influence teacher pedagogy and professional judgment in the classroom.

Teachers face a tremendous decision when teaching social studies and selecting the content to fill, the level of depth and coverage to supplement their curriculum. Current research has expanded beyond traditional questions of citizenship and inquiry and expanded into a social justice-oriented approach. In their book *Teaching toward democracy* (2017), Ayers, Kumashiro, Meiners, Quinn, and Stovall, collaboratively outline the challenges, contradictions, and obstacles that teachers have and continue to face when adopting a teaching philosophy centered around

justice-centered teaching for democracy. By examining issues of race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, and regional differences the field of social studies is becoming a more inclusive field than has historically been the case. The benefits of taking a social justice approach to teaching social studies include the ability to make current events relevant and connect current movements for social justice with historical examples.

Salinas and Blevins (2014) qualitative research study of preservice teachers explored the question “What are pre-service teachers’ understandings of the master or dominant narratives and how are those sustained or altered through the use more critical uses of historical inquiry?” Using classroom observations from their methods course, a course project, and interviews they found that students were surprised when learning more about counter narratives in United States of which they were previously unaware. Utilizing Loewen’s (2007) *Lies My Teacher Told Me* among other critical inquiry work to help students unpack counter narratives including the NAACP training of Rosa Parks, Hellen Keller’s alignment with socialism, and the overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani in Hawaii, they found that once students were exposed to this “critical consciousness” and new knowledge, the participants began to develop a sense of how to challenge the official curriculum through the pedagogical practice of historical inquiry. The actions teachers take in the classroom when it comes including and excluding topics, materials used, as well as how they frame discussions has a enormous impact on depth and understand students have of topics and issues.

Social studies are a contested subject matter where non agreement on the aims of teaching exists even within these camps of social studies. Even though this camp of critical studies did not play a major role in the self-identity of my participants, it does play a role in how we think about and define social studies.

## *Disciplined Inquiry*

The disciplined inquiry camp of social studies educators encourages teachers to teach content that will allow students to think critically about social problems, weigh evidence, and applying learned interdisciplinary knowledge to real-life situations and questions. Instead of preparing students to be experts in a discipline, this approach focuses on preparing students to be expert citizens. Oliver and Shaver's (1966) *Teaching Public Issues in the High School* made the case that students needed to learn to clarify public issues through discussion, a skill essential for democratic citizens of pluralistic democracy. Written during the midst of the Civil Rights movement, integration of schools, and the Vietnam War, the authors stressed the important role teachers play in asking questions and posing ill-structured problems to students in which no clear "right" answer exists. Additionally, they highlighted the significance of giving students opportunities to discuss and evaluate real-world issues because it was engaging and prepared students for civic life. Newmann and Oliver (1970) expanded on these ideas by highlighting that all complex issues facing society include questions of moral and democratic values, definitions, and facts. They argued teaching students to analyze public issues with these components was a useful framework to organize investigations and discussions. Their goal was to develop students' reasoning skills as well as helping them empathize with the rational reasons fellow citizens may disagree with their position on a public issue.

To prepare students for the challenges of democratic citizenship, they must be presented with opportunities to engage in authentic intellectual work (AIW) (Newmann, et al, 2007). Unfortunately, Saye, Stoddard, Gerwin, Libresco, & Maddox's (2018) research indicates that most students are not being given enough opportunities to engage in learning connected to real-world problems. In their large, multi-state study, with a final sample size of 55 high school and seven eighth grade teachers were purposely selected based on recommendations of teachers and administrators that these teachers had the potential to score high on AIW rubrics. Recognizing

that previous research indicated authentic instruction was uncommon, researchers hoped that using a purposeful sampling strategy would allow for greater opportunities to observe authentic pedagogy. Researchers asked all participating teachers to select their “most intellectually challenging lessons for observation” (p.868). To collect data, 34 researchers observed 62 teachers from 21 school sites located in diverse settings, using two AIW rubrics that focused on Higher Order Thinking (HOT), Deep Knowledge, Substantive Conversation, and Connectedness to the Real World to evaluate educators teaching. Using classroom observations, assessment tasks, and teacher interviews researchers found that only 5% (3 teachers) of the teacher’s lessons scored in the substantial quartile of AIW and all three of those teachers taught in schools that had gotten permission to opt out of the state’s high stakes testing for the purpose of engaging in AIW instruction. 55% (34 teachers) scored in the limited quartile and 15% (9 teachers) demonstrated minimal levels of authentic pedagogy. 26% of the study teachers scored above the midpoint in their index of possible AIW scores (18.5). The average AIW composite score was 16.11 out of 30. This sobering reality confirmed previous research that few students experience instruction that involved deep thinking, sustained conversation, disciplinary knowledge, or connection to authentic problems. Going into the 2020 presidential election, attention was given to if and how teachers authentically engaged students in the events surrounding the election.

Due to these numerous views of democracy, patriotism and the purpose of social studies, teachers face a tremendous challenge in deciding when and how to incorporate discussion of controversial issues effectively. Teachers usually express commitment to discussion, inquiry, citizenship, and critical thinking but often hold a wide range of views on what those terms mean to them, their course, and their context. Teachers often reflect the various “camps” of social studies educators, but also often do not teach the way they describe themselves teaching. This in part due to the limited time given to teach subjects and the competing values teachers have in the pedagogical decisions. My research examined the philosophy and practice of four social studies

teachers to examine how their day-to-day instructional decisions were consistent or in conflict with their stated goals. I also wanted to examine the specific challenges they faced while teaching a presidential election during a highly polarized period.

All government and civics teachers talk about preparing students for democracy by understanding the values they hold and how they frame topics is something I wanted to study. Using the Electoral College as a common topic, a social studies educator could ask any number of different questions that hold different values. For example, a citizenship minded educator may ask “is the Electoral College fair for all citizens?” A disciplinary literacy educator may ask “what does a politician need to do to win the Electoral College? A critical studies focused social studies educator may ask “does the electoral college maintain white supremacy?” And a disciplined inquiry minded educator may ask “should the Electoral College be abolished?” All four questions require higher order thinking and demand that students know and understand the function of the Electoral College.

### **Political Polarization’s Effect on Teaching**

Political polarization has always been an aspect of American society, but it has become more prevalent in recent decades due to the advent of social media. In their analysis of American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys from 1988 to 2012, Lupton, Smallpage, & Enders, (2017) indicated that the increased correlation between citizens’ ideological and partisan identifications observed in recent decades is lopsided across general value orientations. They found that conservative teachers have increasingly become more partisan. Although the association between ideology and partisanship is statistically and substantively significant every year, the evidence did not change drastically over time for individuals who maintain liberal value orientations. In other words, conservatives becoming more conservative. Teachers are feeling the brunt of this political polarization as they confront daunting questions as they go about their work. Fay and Levinson argue that teachers are caught balancing the topics of identifying,

weighing, and balancing ethical and political values while also navigating the democratic institution of school. Teachers have increasingly had to ask questions regarding “what are school leaders’ responsibilities when political officials express viewpoints or take actions that violate fundamental civic norms or that potentially demonize and threaten the physical safety of a specific group of people?” (Fay & Levinson, 2017). This is because as teachers, they are on the frontlines of helping students interpret and understand the actions of political officials. Community context and administrative support are just two critical factors that influence how and if a teacher will discuss a controversial political issue.

Over the last 25 years, American politics has seen a tremendous amount of political controversy. From the Clinton impeachment, the reactions of 9/11, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, social issues of gay marriage and marijuana legalization, to the 2016 presidential election, and the Trump Presidency, teachers have been challenged to make instructional choices when deciding how to teach political issues. Journell (2017) writes in *Teaching Politics in Secondary Education* that teachers fall into three categories when it comes to teaching politics, curriculum-first educators, disciplined-conclusion educators, and opportunity-first educators. Having conducted three different qualitative studies on teachers’ approaches to teaching politics and the executive branch, Journell summarized what he learned from researching teachers teach both the 2008 and 2012 Presidential elections and what he called the West Wing study. His 2008 study focused on six high school teachers at three different high schools examining how teachers taught the election, while his West Wing study followed one teacher who taught the executive branch using the television show *The West Wing* and political discussion. His 2012 presidential election research focused on how two teachers approached teaching politics during that election. To collect his data he observed teachers weekly, sometimes multiple times per week throughout the semester to capture teacher’s instruction and use of discussion. He argued that opportunity-first educators integrated politics into their lessons in such a way that allowed for political

discussion to become the norm and commonplace. These educators used current events to teach and guide curriculum in government classes, rather than standards. Journell then described curriculum-first educators as the least likely to engage students in political discussion beyond the curriculum. Disciplined-inclusion educators balanced including current political issues and content standards including end-of-course assessments. Both, curriculum-first, and disciplined-inclusion educators fell short of the needed incorporation of political discussion and ended up using the curriculum to ground their teaching, thus avoiding, or limiting current controversial issues into the classroom.

The need for teachers to be incorporating enduring questions that challenge societies across cultures to adequately prepare students for the demands of citizenship is shared by many (Oliver & Shaver, 1966; Saye & Brush, 2004). Elections are “persistent issue” events that occur regularly and are worth examining when considering context and place. Examining how government and civics teachers approach the teaching of government during a presidential election allows for a better understanding of the goals and types of citizens educators are hoping to produce. With political polarization comes entrenched viewpoints and a desire for “my” view to be “right” and “your” view to be “wrong.” As educators, it is critical to help students see the multiple perspectives that exist on political issues and help them understand why someone may hold the position they do. Stitzlein’s (2014) *Teaching for Dissent* highlights the history of political dissent in the United States and encourages teachers to incorporate discussion and debate into the classroom to help students be prepared for the demands of citizenship. Helping students examine “past and current practices, leaders, and policies of a state” is critical to helping students form their own opinions (p.93). Shying away from controversial topics, muting dissent, and pushing a single viewpoint narrative does a disservice to civic education and the future of democracy in our country. In a diverse country, where citizens have diverse backgrounds and hold multiple perspectives on issues, schools should serve as a place for students to analyze and



learn about the differences that exist in the world. Research suggests that when students are exposed to current political issues that have authentic meaning to students, students are more likely to engage in democratic values that include tolerance, greater content knowledge, and a greater desire to participate in the political world (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

### **Teachers as Curricular Gatekeepers**

Thornton (1989) argues that as curricular gatekeepers, the teacher plays a critical role in determining the “decisions concerning content, sequence, and instructional strategy that determine the social studies experiences of students.” The resources and materials used to help students interpret the curriculum are a consequence of his or her frame of reference. Curricular-instructional gatekeeping is a decision-making process that has numerous factors influencing teacher’s classroom decisions. Some of these factors include the context of the class, resources used or not used, and the philosophical aims of the teacher. This is especially important when government and civics teachers are tasked with teaching, government functions, political parties, and constitutional rights.

Teaching current political topics in social studies classrooms, particularly government classrooms is both necessary and challenging. Discussing political issues is necessary because students need to be exposed to the problems and questions that impact our democracy to be prepared for citizenship, but also difficult because of the sensitive nature that comes with teaching politically divisive topics. The school community, administration support, and teacher knowledge on topics are just three of the crucial factors that influence curricular decisions and classroom presentation. Boys, Walsh, and Khaja’s (2018) research centered around the questions of “How can we establish guidelines, therefore, to facilitate dialogue about current political issues in classrooms that so easily divide us in society? Should social policy instructors remain neutral on controversial political topics? Is it even possible or ethical to do so?” In their mixed-methods pilot study of college students in social work, they found that students had several

recommendations for approaching political discussions in the classroom. Suggestions included setting rules for civility, role modeling, opting out, and stressing the complexity of the policy issues. This research provides an interesting framework for comparing how practicing social studies teachers prepare their classes for discussion and if they invoke any of the suggestions above. Both Parker (2010) and Hess & McAvoy (2015) highlight the importance of teachers incorporating discussion into the classroom setting for the benefits it provides students.

Unfortunately, for all the benefits discussion offers classrooms, very rarely does it take place on a consistent or meaningful basis when it comes to controversial issues in the classroom.

Several factors influence a teacher's decision to discuss a political event or not. Dunn, Sondel, and Baggett's (2018) research on the experiences of teachers in the days following the 2016 election is one example of researchers looking at how teachers navigated this controversial event in the classroom. Their research suggests that three outside factors influenced teachers' decisions to discuss the election in their classroom including the school, district, and state pressures. With these factors, came perceptions teachers felt towards their students when it came to discussing the election and their perceived support from their school or district. (Dunn, Sondel, & Baggett, 2018). Dunn et al. highlighted the significant differences that can exist in classrooms based on the location and student demographics. However, their research excludes the topics that teachers engaged or avoided in their classrooms and did not mention any of the pedagogical strategies teachers used to discuss the post-election results. More research is needed on the specific topics and strategies teachers are using when discussing the Trump presidency in the classroom as well as the topics they are avoiding and why.

Social studies teachers have a unique role in helping teach students critical thinking skills while not projecting their political views onto students. As McWilliam (2017) noted, an educational divide is growing among university educated and those without a university education, with the latter feeling skeptical of potential liberal indoctrination by the former. At the

secondary level, teachers are “at risk of being clobbered from both sides, either for producing ‘elites’ or for failing to produce them” by parents and community members (p.371). This pressure coupled with the increasing standardization that accompanies standardized testing can paralyze a teacher’s creativity in the classroom and replace it with anxiety and stress when teaching current political issues. They also receive criticisms from those who feel opening controversial issue discussions can further marginalize vulnerable students and impose the powerful discourse patterns perpetuated by society. This is important because how teachers perceive the community and context in which they teach, greatly influence the topics they chose to teach or avoid.

Teachers feel vulnerable when it comes to teaching controversial political issues because, for many, their job depends on them not being controversial (Hess and McAvoy, 2015). The community in which teachers teach plays a large role in the discussions teachers are and are not willing to have. Patterson’s (2010) research on censorship and teacher autonomy in the classroom provides some insight into teacher perceptions of teaching controversial issues. In her survey of six schools’ social studies teachers across four districts in the Midwest, she found a large majority of teachers felt teaching controversial issues in the classroom was a life skill that needed to be practiced. However, this same group of teachers felt they were underprepared when it came to having the training to teach controversial issues. This is interesting because while teachers report being underprepared, it does not appear to stop them from discussing and incorporating controversial issues in their lessons.

### **Historical examples of Teaching Presidents**

When it comes to teaching the Presidency and actions of Presidents there is a limited amount of research into the topics and issues teachers choose to frame with their students when it comes to controversial political current events. Now that President Trump has been impeached by the House, three Presidents, two in modern time can provide some political comparison to the

current controversies that surround President Trump and those of President Nixon with the Watergate scandal and President Clinton and his impeachment. The downside to these two examples is that little research exists on the conversation's teachers had with their students regarding these scandals. Currently, the President of the United States is under investigation from multiple different government agencies and virtually no research exists on the conversations or instructional decisions teachers are making when choosing to include or ignore this in their social studies curriculum.

The Watergate scandal forced both teachers and students to come to terms with a political reality that was not the romanticized version they were accustomed to from the textbook and classroom conversations about democracy. Chauncey (1975) interviewed 35 teachers and 35 school principals or administrators in 22 schools in Northeast Ohio regarding the politics of teaching Watergate. Additionally, he collected 544 student questionnaires to understand the students' perspectives on President Nixon and the scandal. Overwhelmingly, teachers viewed their students as becoming cynical of the government and felt that "a serious underestimation, a downgrading of the importance of the subject" of social studies could be attributed to social problems of the day. Unfortunately, in the decades since Watergate, this lack of trust in the American government has persisted with a recent Pew Research poll finding that "nearly six-in-ten (58%) say they trust what Trump says less than previous presidents" (Pew, 2019). The numbers are even worse for the job approval of Congress, with only 22% having a positive approval (Gallup, 2020).

Greco (1997) developed a curriculum for grades 7-9 to help teachers approach teaching the 1996 Presidential election. This curriculum provides a framework for teachers, breaking up the election into an eight-lesson unit on presidential election politics. The unit included an introduction that had students examine the election year of 1996, the history behind the vote, the nominating process, examining the electoral vs. popular vote, key campaign issues, factors that

influenced the election process, evaluating the qualifications of Presidential candidates, and evaluating the impact of the election. The unit included instructional scaffolds, important teacher questions and five assignments for students to complete. The assignments totaled 100 points, 20 points per assignment. The assignments included writing four article responses to articles read on the election, writing an opinion essay on if the electoral college should be abolished or not, watching a debate with follow up comprehension questions, conducting a community survey of at least two people to examine voter trends and preferences, and a creating your own Presidential candidate where students created a fictional presidential candidate with the biography and qualifications that most appealed to them. Weaknesses of this curriculum was a lack of specific timing to each lesson and an absence of differentiation for students. However, this curriculum demonstrated a potential framework for how teachers could engage students in learning about a presidential election.

Wilson, Sunal, Haas, & Laughlin (1999) conducted a valuable study into the experiences of teachers and their instructional decisions on whether they discussed the Clinton Impeachment. To collect their data, 468 surveys were mailed to middle and secondary social studies teachers in 48 states. The survey's goals included identifying teachers who had taught about the Clinton impeachment proceedings for at least two class periods. Teachers who had done so were asked to respond to six open-ended, short answer questions describing their decision making. The teachers who chose not to teach the impeachment were asked to explain why they had not addressed this topic in their classes. Teachers reported avoiding the discussion of impeachment for various reasons including lack of space in the curriculum and discomfort with discussing the sexual misconduct of the president. The sexual nature of Clinton's testimony and perjury charges provides an analogous case to the current president who has also faced allegations of sexual misconduct and had political opponents raise the issue of impeachment. However, there are differences as well in that President Trump's impeachments rested on abuse of power in foreign

policy, and inciting a riot at the Capitol, not sexual relations. Wilson et. al.'s research provides a precedent for examining many teachers' instructional choices in teaching a rare aspect of democracy. One limitation that exists with this research is the lack of classroom observations that often allows for greater contextualization and understanding of teacher decision-making.

The current authority in social studies education on studying presidential elections is Journell. Over the last three presidential elections (2008, 2012, 2016), he has conducted multiple studies on social studies educators, interviewing them, observing their classroom lessons, taking detailed field notes of classroom dialogue, and examining teachers' approaches to teaching controversial issues. His book *Teaching Politics in Secondary Education* (2017) serves as both a guide to educators in understanding how the political climate came to be in classrooms as well as how to navigate the polarization. In his analysis of teacher's decision making and disclosure, he identified three types of teachers when it comes to incorporating politics into social studies instruction, and they are curriculum-first, disciplined-inclusion, and opportunity first. Curriculum-first educators according to Journell, use the curriculum as an all or nothing when it comes to incorporating political issues, if it is not in the curriculum, it will not be taught. Disciplined-inclusion educators will incorporate current political issues, in their curriculum when appropriate, meaning they may wait until it aligns with a particular unit or aspect of the curriculum before teaching the subject. While opportunity-first educators have the propensity to engage students in issues as they come up, including altering lessons and plans to discuss an issue. Journell goes on to say that teaching is "innately a political endeavor" where "any number of routine actions that teachers undertake on a daily basis could be considered political acts" (Journell, 2017, p.112).

## **Studies about Teaching Controversial Issues**

Diana Hess's (2002) study of expert teachers who used discussion of Controversial Public Issues (CPI) provides critical insights into how teachers incorporated controversial issues into the courses. In her study, Hess followed three expert discussion-oriented teachers at the middle and high school level, examining the discussion methods they employed, topics they chose, and the teacher interactions and assessments of the students. She highlighted that the teachers used both historical (Pentagon Papers) and current issues (gun control and local/state affirmative action policy) as examples of topics for discussion. Additionally, she noted the different methods of teaching used (a seminar, discussion and town hall) and the teacher's rationale for choosing those topics and strategies. She carefully described each teacher's role in preparing and scaffolding the information for students. In her findings, she noted that teachers used discussion as both a desired outcome and strategy for teaching critical thinking skills, social skills, and content. Hess argues good facilitators spend significant time planning, to teach *with* and *for* discussion, using their questioning to spur conversation and engage multiple perspectives on content and teach critical skills of listening, analyzing arguments, using evidence to support claims, and clarifying points of disagreement. Highlighting the teacher's decision making is a strength of her work because she contextualizes the teacher's justifications for choosing to discuss or avoiding CPI topics. Using semi-structured and open-ended interviews along with classroom observation notes, and recordings of CPI classroom discussions, Hess articulated the challenges and opportunities these three teachers faced when teaching CPI topics. She found that teachers teach *for* not just *with* discussion and the teacher's role as a facilitator of discussion and what they privilege (authenticity, accuracy, and accountability) matters. Furthermore, she underscored the need for research on the decision-making and topic selection of teachers when teaching CPI for discussion. Hess' study is valuable for my research in helping better understand

the methods and rationale teachers take when exploring CPI topics. Using a presidential election can expand the literature on the CPI topics teachers include and avoid in classroom discussion. In her 2009 book *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*, Hess' shifts her understanding of CPI from Controversial Public Issues to Controversial Political Issues because in her definition, controversial political issues are "questions of public policy that spark disagreement" which require deliberation and discussion framed as "we" in trying to solve the problems of democracy (Hess, 2009, p. 37).

In today's 24/7 news culture and with the growth of social media, understanding how teachers teach topics is important. Mangram's (2008) *Either/or Rules: Social Studies Teachers Talk about Media and Popular Culture*, provides a relevant framework for examining how teachers' interactions with media and popular culture reveal teachers' personalities. Mangram grounded his research in a qualitative methodology using symbolic interactionism theory where he examined the words and descriptions teachers used when discussing topics related to media and culture. His study examined 15 social studies teachers and the language they used to describe media and popular culture in their classrooms. To collect his data, he used teacher interviews as his primary method of data collection and interviewed teachers at least twice getting their thoughts and opinions on media and culture. In his findings, he found teachers to be quite opinionated when discussing with students their views on mass media and popular culture. He found that teachers often used a privileging or moral lens when trying to protect or convey information to students regarding media, with teachers often holding simplistic views on student's comprehension and understanding of mass media and popular culture. This reality has huge consequences when teachers, who are in a position of authority, are telling students how to think about media and its relationship to politics, and mainstream culture including music, art,



and sports. Mangram believes that teachers who simplistically view student's ability to analyze media bias can negatively impact their ability to help students understand the complexities associated with media and popular culture today. His analysis of teacher's rhetoric and views of media can also be applied to examining politics. In an era when much of the media is politicized, understanding the beliefs teachers hold on politics in the classroom is significant. One limitation of this study was the lack of classroom observations and limited sources of data collection being reliant on teacher interviews. My study specifically focuses on the classroom observations and teaching context, teachers' resources and materials used, and the aims of the educators to better understand their professional judgment.

Gibbs's (2019) research on social studies teacher's decision-making when discussing topics of war and patriotism in schools surrounding military bases highlighted the significance of the context of civic agency among teachers and their decisions to include or exclude topics in a classroom setting. His findings suggested that the teachers avoided discussing criticisms of U.S. wars due to a variety of fears. The teachers were concerned with potential parental backlash, lack of administrative support, and the fears that their "careers were on the line" when discussing issues of controversy. He found that curricular and pedagogic choices around teaching about war near a military base, caused teachers to face sociopolitical, district-level, student, parent, and community pressures and tensions. Using interviews and classroom observations he made clear the notion that place and space matter in education. In his study he found that teachers were hesitant and avoided the discussion of war out of concern for possibly upsetting students who had parents actively serving. This insight into the context teachers teach in raises questions about the context teachers teach in and the factors that influence their professional judgement. Teachers also felt a moral obligation to protect their students from feeling like the courses were criticizing the current efforts of their parents, many of whom were deployed overseas and actively serving

in the military. A strength of Gibbs' research was his classroom observations as the source of his teacher interviews, which corroborated his findings about the teachers' decision-making. By focusing on the context teachers are teaching in and their decisions in the classroom through observations as Gibbs does, I focused my study on how teachers taught in a conservative state, approach teaching politics and what were the factors that influenced their pedagogical decisions.

### **Teaching President Trump**

As a candidate and president, Donald Trump challenged the democratic norms of the highest office in the United States. From his campaign rhetoric that included him saying he could "stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody" and not "lose any voters", not releasing his taxes, scandals related to his harassment of women, his continual attacks on journalism and journalists, and his constant use of Twitter have all raised questions about Presidential conduct, unlike any previous presidents (CBS News, 2019; Ford, 2019). As President, he was plagued by low approval ratings, the Mueller Report, and two impeachments for abuse of power in foreign policy and inciting an insurrection against the U.S. Capitol as it certified the election of Joe Biden. With all the controversy that surrounded this president and his administration, understanding what teachers were doing in the classroom to teach the executive branch and how they have navigated the controversy is critical, and a goal of this research.

The 2016 Presidential election was one of the most controversial and politically divisive campaigns in American History. Due to the rhetoric and improbability of candidate Donald Trump, his election on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016, will serve as a clear break from previous Presidential tradition. In the lead up to the election, Anderson and Zyhowski (2018) conducted a case study of two eighth-grade teachers in their planning, delivery, and reflections on their teaching of the 2016 Presidential Election over a six-week unit where they collected data from classroom observations, teacher interviews, and lesson plans. In their findings, the authors emphasized how unprepared the two teachers were for the election result. Going into the unit,

both teachers remained neutral on the election but, after the surprising election of President Trump, one teacher, Ms. Smith, struggled to maintain her neutrality on issues that spurred controversy among students. This article is important for my research because it discussed the teaching strategies used during a controversial presidential election and examined the emotions and reflections of teachers who were “living it” in the classroom. There is a perception among teachers that they should remain neutral when it comes to teaching controversial issues out of fear of indoctrinating their students. As Hess and McAvoy (2015) point out, this is both unrealistic and potentially harmful to students if they do not see their teacher take a stand on a political topic. Teaching is inherently political. The decisions teachers make to include or exclude a topic, and the resources used to do so all can hold political bias. Furthermore, Hess and McAvoy argue that it is in many ways unfair to expect students to consistently provide their opinion on an issue while their teacher remains silent. In my study, I hoped to better understand in what ways teachers’ political views do or do not come out in the classroom.

Shock and disappointment were just two of the emotions held by teachers and students in the aftermath of the 2016 Presidential election. Sondel, Baggett, and Dunn (2018) made the argument that following the election some students exhibited signs of trauma following the election due to fears regarding immigration, deportation, LGBTQ rights, and women’s rights. In their research study, they collected information from 721 teachers in 43 states by conducting a survey using snowball sampling. The data collection took place during the two weeks immediately following the presidential election. In their findings, the researchers noticed teachers increased perception of anxiety among students on the President elect’s political positions and fears of what could happen once in office. Participants also reported instances of bullying, discrimination, and intimidation by students supportive of the new President’s policies. This research provides tremendous insight into the school climate teachers faced following the

election but leaves questions about what has taken place in the four years since President Trump's election.

Shortly after the 2016 election, a large national study was conducted by a team of researchers at UCLA to examine the impact the election had on school climate. In the study, researchers wanted to examine the effects of the election and the new administration's discourse on students and teachers across the country. To collect this information, researchers conducted a national survey in which they received 1535 teacher responses that represented the diversity of the country. In their findings, they found that teachers noticed increased anxiety among students with nearly 1 in 4 teachers describing an increased polarization at their schools (Rogers, Franke, Yun, Ishimoto, Diera, Geller, Brenes, 2017). While this article provides excellent context into the national effects of the 2016 election on teachers and schools, it does not address specific teaching strategies and topics that teachers chose to teach or avoid. Rather, it serves as a call to action for teachers and researchers to better understand the impact President Trump is having on social studies classrooms. Conducting a study where classroom observations investigate the curricular decisions made by teachers could provide a more nuanced understanding of what is occurring in social studies classrooms.

As part of the larger (Rogers et al., 2017) study, Cooper-Geller (2020) conducted two rounds of interviews with teachers between the summer of 2018 and January 2019 to better understand teachers' experiences and the climate of schools. Her participant's political values varied from very liberal to slightly conservative, and while they admitted to dodging topics of current events including immigration, abortion, gun rights, and Confederate monument removal, Geller found that many teachers wanted to "stay neutral" in order to avoid having students know their personal beliefs out of fears of being biased and trying to indoctrinate their students. At points, teachers would disclose their feelings on topics, but typically those opinions came from personal experiences that they felt they could share with students. These findings in with

previous research by Journell (2016) but without classroom observations, it is impossible to know how teachers taught.

Bronstein's (2020) research "*It isn't in the Curriculum*" explores the decision-making of World History teachers during the 2016 election. In her study of nine world history teachers across four Midwestern states, from suburban schools, she used interviews and focus groups after the election to capture how teachers had approached teaching the election. In her study, she did not ask any questions to participants about their political party affiliations or self-identification as liberal/ conservative, and all the participants were experienced educators. In her findings, she noted that "All participants chose not to teach about the 2016 elections during the 2016-2017 academic year" noting that teachers were reluctant to do so over concerns of the heightened divisiveness surrounding politics and curricular constraints with teachers all suggesting that the world history curriculum does not include U.S. elections. This avoidance of controversial political discussion and fears of straying too far from the curriculum are not new and yet it is important in highlighting the pressure social studies teachers face when discussing content versus current events (Hess 2009).

Lebrón's (2018) research into how teachers are approaching teaching President Trump examined using relevant curriculum materials to help students see the critical thinking needed to access the power "in the news.". In her research, she argued that teachers need to help students understand the theory and context surrounding the power to influence while also giving students time to develop their opinions and ask questions. In terms of teaching President Trump, she had students examine the rhetoric and actions during the first 2015 Republican debate, a 2016 Presidential debate with Secretary Clinton, and his 2017 Inaugural speech. She found that showing students political experts disagreeing and giving students the opportunity to discuss issues brought up by politicians with peers increased student engagement. A criticism of this research is the lack of detail and context regarding the demographics of students and teachers

who participated. This work expands into how teachers can incorporate political controversy into the classroom even though it has yet to expand on the specific stories of these teachers.

Across all levels of education, from elementary through post-secondary, the election of Donald Trump both shocked and challenged teachers in how to discuss and teach politics. Sculos (2016) captured these emotions in his article “My Students Are Terrified: Teaching in the Days after Trump”, noting the fears and uncertainty his students in his ECN 1101 class felt in the days following the election. To better understand his student’s emotions, he led an open discussion and had students engage in a free writing exercise for students to flesh out their feelings onto paper. Teaching at the university level, allowed Sculos the comfort and luxury to engage in conversation that not all teachers teaching at the secondary level felt, as noted by other researchers (Dunn, A. H., Sondel, B., & Baggett, H. C (2018), Rogers, J., Franke, M. Yun, J.E., Ishimoto, M., Diera, C., Geller, R., Berryman, A., Brenes, T. (2017). To build off the research centering around the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, my research will highlight classroom observations, teacher interviews, and provide an update on the political climate in classrooms and how teachers have navigated teaching politics during the four years of the Trump administration. By focusing on the classroom context of the teachers, collecting the evidence of their teaching and resources used, as well as their aims for their students, I hope my research adds to the conversation of how teachers navigated teaching politics during a polarized presidential election.

### **Pilot Study**

To inform the dissertation study, I conducted a pilot study in the fall of 2019 to gain insight into the current climate of teaching political issues in social studies classrooms. I developed a purposeful sample of five social studies departments from five schools across the metro-Atlanta area. These schools all employed former colleagues of mine. In total, fifty-five teachers were emailed a survey link which included nineteen Likert-type questions on a 5-point

scale. Three open-ended questions were included to allow teachers an opportunity to expand on their teaching philosophy, goals for their students, and decision-making for classroom topics. An additional eight questions were included to collect information on participant demographics. Furthermore, teachers were encouraged to pass the survey on to any teachers whom they felt might be interested in participating. Eighteen respondents began the survey with thirteen completing the entire survey. Six respondents provided their email to be contacted about a follow-up interview and two respondents participated in follow-up interviews.

The survey was constructed to focus on three themes related to teaching controversial political issues: identity, teaching philosophy, and experience. Questions were designed to gain an understanding of educators' teaching environment, their aspirations for and experiences in teaching controversial political issues, their teacher preparation related to discussing controversial topics, and their approaches in doing so. After analyzing the survey data, several noticeable trends appeared from the participant's responses. First, participants unanimously agreed on the question "I believe students should see the connections between classroom material and life outside the classroom" with a large majority strongly agreeing that they use discussion as an activity. 89% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed with enjoying teaching controversial issues and incorporating current events into the classroom. However, 28% responded strongly or somewhat agreed with "I avoid teaching topics that can make students uncomfortable" which begs following up. This information coupled with the response that only three respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that "the current president is a good example for teaching government in my social studies classes" begs for further research into how teachers are discussing and teaching the current president, his administration policies, and the workings of the government. At the time of the survey, the Mueller Report was a dominant political topic, yet a minority of teachers 24% responded that they "discuss the Mueller investigation in my classroom".

After analyzing the survey data, several noticeable trends appeared from the participant's responses. Of the fifty-five teachers contacted, thirteen respondents completed the survey, representing roughly a 23% response rate. Arguably the most interesting finding of the survey was that while most teachers feel prepared to teach controversial issues, a majority (65%) somewhat or strongly disagreed that their teacher education preparation prepared them adequately for doing so. As a result of this omission, further research needs to be done to understand what teachers feel teacher education programs need to do to better prepare future educators.

The two educators who agreed to participate in follow-up interviews were both female and both teach at the same diverse high school. Lindsey was in her 8<sup>th</sup> year of teaching and was currently teaching AP Government and Debate. Caitlin is a veteran with over 20 years of experience at both the middle and high school levels and was teaching both IB history and AP World History. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing, each lasted between 20-30 minutes, and took place during November 2019. Interviewees expressed a desire to discuss current events in the classroom and both had a background as a debate coach. One noticeable difference between the two women was the openness to discuss political issues among colleagues and students. Laura described going to their department head and asking for his thoughts and opinions when framing political issues. She also mentioned that she focused on topics including "abortion or the death penalty or social issues or economic issues, but I have generally stayed away from immigration as much as I can because there are some kids in the class that are immigrants." These discussions would involve talking about how to best navigate a current issue without coming off as partisan, with her playing devil's advocate when necessary. In contrast, Caitlin would talk politics and current events with the department head but would "be willing to bet that he [department head] doesn't realize where I stand" she often held her more conservative views to herself. She acknowledged that there are "big differences between



teaching something that is currently going on that people have very heightened feelings about and seeing something from the past is controversial.” This difference in teachers’ discussions amongst fellow teachers and openness with political issues is worth exploring in future research.

Limitations to this study include a small, non-generalizable sample size, which lack of diversity in the respondents (eleven White, one Black, one Asian) and a lack of diversity in the school setting (twelve teachers in an urban school, one in a rural school) all in the same geographic location. The number of participants who began the survey but did not complete the survey raises questions as to why individuals stopped? It is worth noting that participants started to leave the survey once questions started to ask for written responses. This mixed-methods study surveyed and interviewed high school social studies teachers in a diverse, suburban area to investigate how they were navigating instructional decisions during a heightened period of political polarization. However, with no class observations to verify and investigate the day-to-day decisions made by teachers, this study lacks data about the reasons teachers give for the choices they make

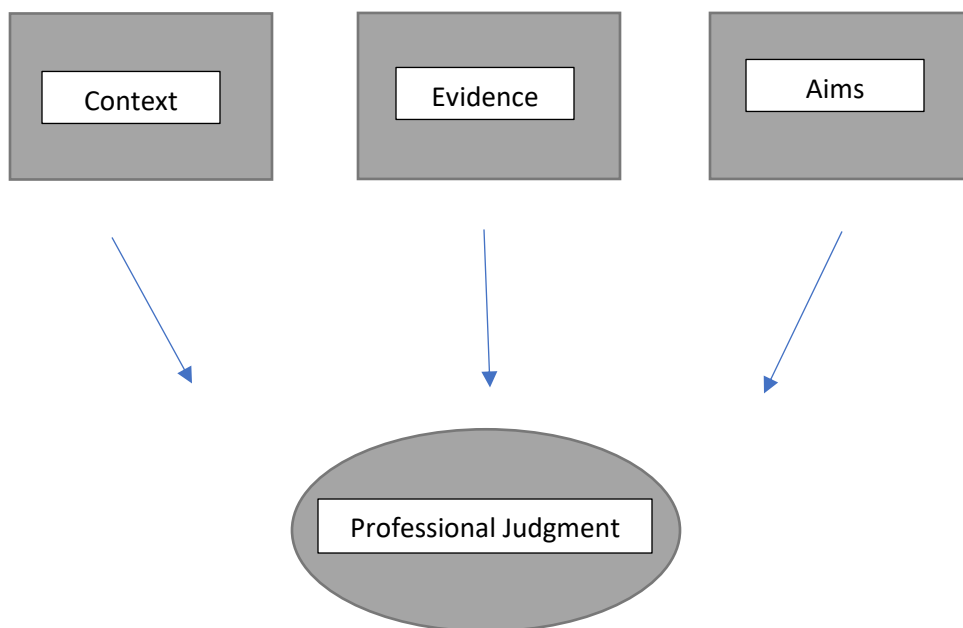
### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Thornton (1989) teachers having a significant influence over the topics, conversations, and critical thinking that takes place in their classrooms due to their role as “gatekeepers.” Hess and McAvoy (2015) proposed a framework of factors that influence teacher decision-making when it comes to deciding to incorporate or exclude CPIs in their teaching. In their study of social studies teachers, they establish three categories that ultimately influence a teacher’s professional judgement. They contend that Context, Evidence, and Aims all have a significant influence on a teacher’s professional judgment when determining what to teach and what topics to discuss. For context, the school climate, students, subject, and community all make up the environment in which a teacher teaches as all have a tremendous impact on

instruction. Under Evidence, they argue that the teacher’s resources, scaffolds, and classroom materials accentuate the student experience in a teacher’s classroom. Equally important are the educational aims of the teacher, the goals, motivations, intentions, and expected outcomes teachers hold for their students greatly affect the instruction they provide. This framework of decision-making is powerful in explaining the factors that influence a teacher professional judgment. By exploring the context in which teachers teach, the evidence seen in classrooms and from teacher interviews, along with their aims for lessons and student outcomes guided my data collection and analysis.

**Figure 1.**

*Framework for Professional Judgment*



These three themes of context, evidence, and aims influencing teacher decision making was clear in several studies previously mentioned (Hess, 2002; Anderson and Zyhowski, 2018; Gibbs, 2019; Bronstein, 2020). In each of the studies the authors stressed the role of the teacher

and the context in which they taught influencing the teacher's classroom pedagogy. By using these three themes it explains the various decisions teachers are making in different situations and the factors that contribute to those decisions.

### **Importance of the Study**

Incorporating current events and controversial political issues into the classroom is not a decision taken lightly by educators. Some critics argue that deliberative democracy as encouraged by Hess (2009) and Hess and McAvoy (2015) is both unrealistic and potentially harmful to students. Levinson (2003) argues that because of the variance of experiences among majority and minority group members, a loss of deliberative equality can take place in the classroom, and thus in a delegitimizing of deliberative democracy itself. She goes on to question the role and impact schools can have on shaping students' identities and the language of power that exists when teaching about civic responsibility and cultural identity. Newman (2017) points out that due to *de facto* segregation, it may not be feasible or desirable to discuss CPI topics given systemic inequalities that exist. While both Levinson and Newman raise valid arguments for avoiding deliberative democracy, they do not present compelling alternatives for teaching citizens to navigate the discussion and analysis of CPI topics, an essential skill for all citizens and an essential component of democracy. Hess & McAvoy (2015) argue there are no simple answers for teachers to decide which topics to teach and how to teach them. Instead, they argue it is important to examine closely the context, evidence, and aims of teachers when researching teacher's decision-making.

The topic choice, the discussion format, the materials provided to students, all these things must be carefully considered, and one teacher's context may lead to a different decision than another. That is why decision-making is so important for us to learn about so we can help teachers make more informed, nuanced, ethical, and brave choices that encourage discussion and hearing multiple viewpoints from the privileged and underprivileged students. Mostly, we know

that democracy and politics are contested, and that history is a curriculum that demands multiple perspectives. I am advocating for a more social justice-oriented curriculum by including the voices of the traditionally marginalized into the curriculum, so the status quo is not taught without critique and an emphasis on an inclusive, multicultural curriculum.

After the pilot study, several implications, trends, and questions were raised to focus the dissertation study. Studying the 2020 Presidential election and the issues that surround it, the discussions, feelings, and actions of teachers in the classroom became important to me when reading research that described the current political environment being more polarized than in previous decades and elections. Diana Hess (2009) makes the argument that Democracy demands discussion of CPI topics if we as educators are to adequately prepare students for the demands of citizenship. She argues that schools are the place for deliberation and political talk because of the opportunity schools present, the diversity that exists in schools, and the training teachers have in helping students. A common theme among pilot study participants was the factors that influenced their pedagogy and decisions to connect controversial political topics and to the curriculum. Many teachers referenced “curriculum, standards, and content” as key factors in determining the integration of current events into classroom discussion as a pedagogical decision. Due to government and civics teachers having a significant obligation to teach and discuss the president, elections, and government functions, I chose them as a group of social studies teachers who would be the least able to avoid current issues involving the President, elections, campaigns, media, and political power.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this research was to examine U.S. government and Civics teachers’ pedagogical and curricular decisions while navigating topics surrounding the 2020 presidential election. Thornton (1989) coined the term “gatekeeper” when describing the role social studies teachers play in teaching curriculum. Teachers often express the need for students to discuss

controversial political issues (CPI) but there is reluctance to do so out of fear of pushing political opinions on students, perceived or explicit directives from the administration or district, and community pressures (Dunn, Sondel, & Baggett, 2018). I endeavored to learn from analyzing four teachers tasked with teaching about the U.S. government and politics during the 2020 election to explore their decisions about what CPI topics they included or excluded and the various influences that impacted their choices. This study analyzed the factors and pressures teachers faced when talking about current political issues. All presidential elections feel significant to the people at the time, but the rhetoric around the 2020 election described it as a critical point in our nation's history and the continuation of our democracy. It was important to understand the pedagogical and curricular decisions teachers made to help their students understand the events of the 2020 presidential campaign, election, and post-election results. Between the global pandemic of the coronavirus, the polarized political climate, social media making misinformation and disinformation readily available, and presidential candidate who calling the election rigged before, during the after the election, spreading the misinformation and disinformation on his Twitter account, and refusing to denounce white supremacist supporters, the teachers in this study faced a daunting challenge of choosing what CPI topics to include or exclude from their course on civics and government. Examining their decisions and the reasons for those decisions proved to be helpful in the research community being better positioned to prepare teachers to enter a profession with so many ethical choices about what and how to teach politics.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Design of Study

This study was a comparative, multiple case study that explored how civics and government teachers incorporated CPI into their teaching during the presidential election semester of 2020. By recruiting teachers who taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade Civics and 12<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. Government in the southeastern United States, where their curriculum was rooted in politics, I intended to capture how these teachers taught and framed a presidential election to their students. Merriam (1998) describes the purpose of looking at multiple cases allows for a more nuanced and complex understanding factors that the teachers practice. Examining several teachers allowed for comparisons among teaching philosophy, school settings, and administrative support amongst the participants. The opportunity to communicate weekly with these teachers through lesson plans, emails, and lengthy interviews as well as observe them each teach four lessons was valuable. I was also not allowed to observe them teach in person because of the coronavirus, but instead had to rely on the participants to film themselves teach. This reliance meant that when each teacher turned the camera was turned on and where the camera was located had great significance on what I saw and heard from students and the teacher. The other limitation was that three of the four teachers were not allowed to have their students work in small groups but had to sit in socially distanced desks always facing the teacher because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, all four teachers did teach students in person and the opportunity to follow four U.S. Government and Civics teachers navigate this presidential election was exciting when considering the historical implications of such a political event. By following these teachers closely for six months, I was able to develop a deep understanding of the context, aims, and goals of these educators.

This research continues the conversation around teaching politics and controversial political issues in school. In this case, I focused on the topics selected by teachers, the

experiences of the teacher participants and their instructional decisions as they navigated teaching the 2020 presidential election in a Civics or U.S. Government course. All elections are unique to the candidates and historical events of the time and as a result, compel researchers to ask how teachers are navigating teaching decisions at that moment in time. By researching a group of teachers tasked with teaching about our national system of government, liberal democracy, free and fair elections, and political campaigning during such a complex time, the opportunity was ripe to conduct a multiple case study of the challenges and opportunities teachers experienced and curricular decisions they made while teaching during and about the 2020 election. This study illuminated the decision-making processes the teachers used while scaffolding students' political understanding. Using multiple qualitative data sources from several teachers provided a rich contextualization of the teachers' experiences. Exploring the context of the communities and schools, the evidence including the students, curriculum requirements, and current events that occurred, and the aims of each teacher provided important insights into the reasons teachers gave for the curricular and pedagogical choices they made. These insights will be important for social studies educators working to prepare teachers to facilitate student learning about politics, the structures and functions of the government, the role of the media in politics, campaigns, and how our elections are designed.

Over the last year, COVID-19 has dramatically changed the way teachers teach and students learn in the public-school setting. At the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, all these participants were forced to teach online, without a plan. This research and data come from the fall 2020 semester, the participants' first planned semester teaching with the virus. Collecting data on teachers using interviews, observations, and weekly reflections allowed for information rich cases that enabled open-code analysis and comparison across cases. The following chapter seeks to provide a detailed and descriptive review of the means of collecting data for this comparative, multiple case study. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What pedagogical and curricular decisions did Civics and Government teachers make about including and excluding current political issues as they taught a curriculum related to the 2020 Presidential election?
2. What materials and resources did teachers use to help students critically examine the 2020 election?
3. What reasons did teachers give to explain their curricular and topic choices?
4. How and to what extent did teachers' own political beliefs influence curricular decisions regarding political issues while teaching government/civics?

These questions were intended to understand the participants' experience teaching civics and government during a presidential election while following their planning, instruction, and reflection. The findings were intended to fill a gap in the existing literature that reveals teachers' voice and decision making in teaching Controversial Political Issues (CPI).

**Table 1**

*Sources and Purposes of Data*

<u>Research Questions</u>	<u>Data Sources</u>
1. What decisions did teachers make about including & excluding current political issues as they taught a curriculum related to and during the 2020 Presidential election?	Pre/Post course interviews, Observation field notes via Swivl, Observation follow-up interviews, Teacher journal reflections
2. What materials and resources are teachers using to help students critically examine the 2020 election?	Post course interviews, Observation field notes via Swivl, Lesson Plans & Materials, Teacher journal reflections
3. What reasons do teachers give to explain their curricular and topic choices?	Post course interview, Observation follow-up interviews, Teacher journaling



- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 4. How and to what extent do teachers' own political beliefs influence curricular decisions regarding political issues while teaching government/civics? | Pre/Post course interviews,<br>Observation field notes via Swivl,<br>Observation Follow-up interviews,<br>Teacher journal reflections |
|--|---|

**Participants**

For this study, a purposeful sample was employed to follow four social studies teachers who are most likely to encounter teaching CPI. Teachers who had a history of discussing CPI topics, working with the local university for professional development, and student supervision were a commonality among participants. Two participants were 12<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. Government teachers and two were 7<sup>th</sup> grade Civics teachers from two different school districts within a 50-mile radius of a land-grant public institution in the southeastern United States. I selected teachers who were most likely to encounter the teaching of government, elections, politics, and current events. Additionally, I wanted to study teachers who had a reputation of incorporating current issues and discussion. I also chose two 12<sup>th</sup> grade and two 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers to investigate whether the ages of their students influenced the teachers' decisions.

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographics*

\*\* all names below are pseudonyms

Teacher	School	Subject Grade	Intern Supervisor	Highest Degree Held	Years of Experience
Mr. Feeney	Milton HS	12 <sup>th</sup> Gov't	Yes	MA in History	9
Mrs. Lawrence	Centennial HS	12 <sup>th</sup> Gov't	No; has been	MAT	11
Mr. Matthews	Centennial MS	7 <sup>th</sup> Civics	No, has been	MEd	24
Mr. Hunter	Centennial MS	7 <sup>th</sup> Civics	No, has been	MEd	12

**Mr. Feeney** was a White cisgender man in his early 30's, a 9-year veteran, who taught AP US History, 12<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. Government & Economics, and served as the department head at

Milton High School. He graduated from Milton High school and went back to teach in his hometown. Mr. Feeney graduated from the social studies education program at the university with which I am affiliated and has supervised student teachers from this university for the past five years. He held a master's degree in History from a different institution. In addition to teaching at Milton, for the last year and a half he has taught History of Western Civilization I as an adjunct at a local community college. Prior to participating in this study, I had previously worked with him as a university supervisor for a student teacher's internship supervision.

*Mrs. Lawrence* was a White cisgender woman in her early 40's, with 10 years classroom experience. She was an AP U.S. Government and "on level" U.S. Government teacher at Centennial High School. She had a bachelor's degree in journalism and a social studies education master's degree from an adjacent program in the same state. Prior to teaching, she worked in journalism and Republican state politics in a neighboring state before leaving and earning her master's in social studies education. During the 2016 election, she was teaching in a different school and a different course. Prior to participation in this study, I worked with her as university supervisor for a student teacher's internship supervision and on a professional development project.

*Mr. Matthews* was a White cisgender man in his mid-40's, with 24 years of classroom teaching experience. He has taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade civics and geography at Centennial Middle School for the last 13 years. Prior to coming to Centennial Middle, he spent the first half of his career teaching high school and 8<sup>th</sup> grade in a neighboring state. He was a graduate of a large, social studies education program in a neighboring state where he earned both his undergraduate and master's degrees. He has supervised at least 10 student teachers in the past. Prior to participating

in this study, I had worked with him as a university supervisor for a student teacher’s internship supervision.

**Mr. Hunter** was a White cisgender man in his mid-30’s who has 11 years classroom experience teaching 7<sup>th</sup> grade civics & geography. He has spent his entire career at Centennial Middle School after graduating from the undergraduate and master’s social studies education program with which I am affiliated. He is well connected to the university having participated in professional development and supervising at least eight student teachers. Prior to participation in this study, I worked with him as university supervisor for a student teacher’s internship supervision and on professional development project.

**School Settings**

Below is an overview detailing the characteristics of the three school settings where research took place.

**Table 3**

*Demographics of participating schools*

District Setting & School	Teachers	Grades Served	Number of Students at each school	Demographics of Student Population	Percent of Students Eligible for Free-reduced lunch
Rural (Milton MS/HS)	Mr. Feeney	7-12 <sup>th</sup>	517	White (52%) Black (45%) Hispanic (2%)	64%
Suburban (Centennial HS)	Mrs. Lawrence	10-12 <sup>th</sup>	1844	White (62%) Black (24%) Asian (10%) Hispanic (4%)	20%

Suburban (Centennial MS)	Mr. Matthews	7 <sup>th</sup>	662	White (62%) Black (24%) Asian (11%) Hispanic (2%)	26%
	Mr. Hunter				

***Milton High School*** is a 7-12<sup>th</sup> school located in rural town, roughly 35 miles outside a major university. The county that this school is in had roughly 20,000 votes in the presidential election, with President Trump winning over 71% of the popular vote (NBC News, *Alabama presidential election results 2020: Live results and polls 2020*).

***Centennial High School*** is a 10-12<sup>th</sup> grade high school located in a suburban college town. The county that this school sits in had roughly 71,000 votes in the presidential election with President Trump receiving 62% of the popular vote. (NBC News, *Alabama presidential election results 2020: Live results and polls 2020*).

***Centennial Middle School*** is a 7<sup>th</sup> grade only school, located in a suburban college town. The county that this school sits in had roughly 71,000 votes in the presidential election with President Trump receiving 62% of the popular vote. (NBC News, *Alabama presidential election results 2020: Live results and polls 2020*).

## **Data Sources**

***Qualitative data*** served as the data sources during for the four cases in this multiple-case study. Due to the coronavirus pandemic and schools limiting visitors, I conducted almost all my data collection through email, Zoom, and phone. An essential aspect of my study were classroom observations of lessons selected by the teacher. When meeting with teachers during the pre-course interview, I told the teachers I was looking to capture topics related to the 2020 election but that it was up to them to decide what topics to choose and when to film the lessons.

***Pre/Post Course Interviews-*** The pre-course interviews took place prior to video observations and the post course interviews occurred after the Inauguration of President Biden. Questions for the pre-course interviews can be found in (Appendix A) while post-course interview questions can be found in (Appendix B). The purpose of these two interviews was to understand the teaching philosophy and intentions of the teachers going into the election and to compare at the end of the study how teachers evolved over the semester. These interviews touched on teachers' backgrounds, goals for students, plans for the semester, and reflections on how they and their students navigated and consumed the events of the 2020 Presidential election.

***Observations-*** took place using an iPad and Swivl device which uploaded classroom lessons once the teacher had finished recording. Lesson observations were filmed from October to January with each teacher uploading four lessons of their choosing. The purpose of the observations was to better understand the classroom climate and context in which they were teaching as well as the instructional resources and materials used to help students learn.

***Lesson Debrief Interviews-*** These interviews took place often a couple days after the lesson was taught by the teacher and served as an opportunity for me to ask teachers questions about their instructional decisions, aims, and the context in which they were teaching. They provided a chance for the teachers to reflect on their teaching and elaborate on the experiences and outcomes of students. Due to the delay between the lesson being taught and the lesson debrief, sometimes multiple lessons from a teacher were debriefed at once.

***Email Correspondence-*** Email correspondence took place with teachers every week to maintain contact and monitor how they were doing and incorporating the political events of the election as they occurred into their classroom. Initially I intended to have teachers fill out a weekly reflection chart see (Appendix B) but I found that teachers were inconsistent in filling it

out while others resorted to just providing an email response. The purpose of this was to capture teacher's thoughts and events that took place outside of the lesson observations and capture otherwise missed events.

**Table 4**

*Teachers contact by week*

Week of	Feeney	Matthews	Hunter	Lawrence
August 24 <sup>th</sup>	Invitation to participate. initial interview, met in-person camera tutorial	Invitation to participate	Invitation to participate	Invitation to participate
August 31 <sup>st</sup>	Email contact	Email contact	Email contact	Email contact
September 7 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact	Email contact	Email contact	X
September 14 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact	Email contact, initial interview	Email contact, initial interview	X
September 21 <sup>st</sup>	Email contact, met in-person	Email contact	Email contact	X
September 28 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact	Email contact, met in-person, camera tutorial	Email contact	X
October 5 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact, Zoom debrief video observation #1	Email contact	Email contact	Email contact, initial interview

October 12 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact, Zoom update, Filmed observation #2	Email contact, met in-person, camera tutorial	Email contact, met in-person, camera tutorial	Email contact, met in-person, camera tutorial
October 19 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact	Email contact, Observation #1	Email contact	Email contact
October 26 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact	Email contact	Email contact	Email contact
November 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Planned Zoom Debrief, observation #2	Planned: Zoom Debrief Observations 2&3, post-Election debrief, Grocery store	Planned Zoom Debrief Observation 1, 2&3, post-Election debrief	Email contact
November 9 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact	Email contact, Zoom, observation #4 debrief	Email contact	Email contact, Observation 1&2 debrief
November 16 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact	Email contact, Zoom, observation debrief	Email contact	Email contact
November 23 <sup>rd</sup>	Thanksgiving	Thanksgiving	Thanksgiving	Thanksgiving
November 30 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact	X	Email contact	Email contact
December 7 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact	X	Email contact	Email Contact Observation 3&4 debrief
December 14 <sup>th</sup>	Observation #3 debrief	X	Email contact,	X

	Observation #4 debrief			
January 4 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact	Email contact	Email contact	Email contact
January 11 <sup>th</sup>	Debrief on DC Capitol Riots	Debrief on DC Capitol Riots	Debrief on DC Capitol Riots	Debrief on DC Capitol Riots
January 18 <sup>th</sup>	Email contact	Email contact	Email contact	Email contact
January 25 <sup>th</sup>	Zoom Final Interview	Zoom Final Interview	Zoom Final Interview	Zoom Final Interview

Following the conclusion of data collection, I had a total of 23 Zoom interview transcriptions representing over 30 hours of conversations with the four teachers. After each interview, I would edit the Zoom generated transcription for accuracy, print each edited conversation, label the date and content of our discussion. The conversations recorded include pre- and post-observation interviews, observation debriefs, and check-ins with teachers. In total, I had five transcriptions from Mrs. Lawrence and Mr. Hunter each, six from Mr. Matthews, and seven from Mr. Feeney. When reviewing each teacher's conversation time, Mrs. Lawrence conversations were by far the longest, with each conversation lasting an average 2 hours and 8 minutes. Mr. Hunter's conversations were the shortest with each conversation lasting an average of 43 minutes. Mr. Matthews and Mr. Feeney split the difference with each having conversations lasting 48 minutes, and 1 hour 11 minutes, respectively. When accounting for the differences in conversations, both Mrs. Lawrence and Mr. Feeney had a set planning period as the last period of the day, resulting in longer more detailed conversations with both educators. Both Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter shared a schedule with a rotating planning period, which resulted in shorter conversations due to both teachers having to teach the next period. On three occasions, I Zoomed with Mr. Matthews on the weekend while he was home, which resulted in longer



conversations closer to the hour time length. All my conversations with the other educators took place with them in the classroom setting. I read these 24 transcripts several times and used a priori coding with context, evidence, and aims as my starting point. The table below shows the codes under each of these larger categories. I then analyzed these codes for duplication or areas in the transcripts I had not accounted for.

### **Data Analysis**

To keep track of dissertation activities I kept two spiral notebooks where I wrote a running log of dissertation activities by date, classifying the teacher, activity, and nature of the interaction. This served as a source of data to reflect on and compare with interview transcripts and lesson artifacts. Both the notebooks and the interview transcripts were meticulously read and re-read to ensure teachers' conversations were captured and understood. After each interview with a teacher, I would print the transcript, read through the transcript, and make corrections where needed. During this first read, I would make notations next to significant quotes and responses that I wanted to highlight. Initially, I planned on using Journell's (2017) codes for teacher behavior in the classroom as curriculum-first, disciplined-inquiry, and opportunity-first. However, as the semester started, and teacher pedagogies were limited, I decided not to use Journell and instead focus on the codes of Hess and McAvoy (2015).

Using the a priori codes of Hess and McAvoy (2015), I coded all 23 Zoom transcripts with a focus on analyzing the Context, Evidence, and Aims of each educator. I labeled each conversation question and answer related to the three categories. Under each category, I made sub-codes that fit teacher's actions and intentions. The criteria and codes (see Table 5) focused on the Context of the lesson, the Evidence found in lesson observations, teacher interviews, and email correspondence, and the Aims of educators which explored their goals for students and

themselves. From these codes, I established sub-codes (Table 5) to better categorize the conversations and themes across the teachers. As a result, I was able to better understand the similarities and differences among the educators, as well as notice trends among the teacher’s professional judgement. For clarity, I have provided an example of the codes, sub-codes, and a quote from three of the four teachers to show how I coded teacher responses.

**Table 5**

*Characteristics of the Codes and Sub-codes*

Codes	Sub-Codes	Quotes
Context	School Administration, Central Office, COVID-19, Politics, Candidates Trump & Biden, Current Events, Fake News, Polarization,	“Social media is supposed to connect us. But the way that we use it actually creates more polarization and division in politics” – Mr. Feeney (Polarization)
Evidence	Student interest, Students raised a question, Students resisting topic. Coverage, Pacing guide, Experience	“I paid attention to how the kids consumed that video [Capitol Jan. 6 <sup>th</sup> ] and even among my partisans I thought there was a significant amount of discomfort and concern because of the rawness of it. The fact that it had just happened. The fact that it happened so quickly”- Mrs. Lawrence (Student Interest)

Aims	Factual knowledge, Civic Preparation, Critical Thinking Skills, Political engagement, Civil Discourse, Media Literacy, Tolerance, Discussion,	“One thing that I try to do is just talk about how our democracy is not finished. The debates the federalists and the anti-federalists had, the whole federalism debate, that’s still happening! Mr. Matthews (Critical Thinking)
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**Researcher positionality**

My interviews and analyses were informed by my identities as a middle class, heterosexual, cisgender, White male and my experiences as a scholar and former public-school teacher. I taught five years at two, public high schools outside the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia where I taught a diverse student body made up of White, Black, and Asian students who largely came from a middle, upper middle-class communities. I taught them during the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, and my classroom experience helped me appreciate the obstacles and challenges faced by teachers when it comes to teaching political issues. Politically, I identify as a left-leaning moderate who did vote for then Vice-President Biden. Based on my previous classroom experience, I was motivated to better understand the factors and pressures facing teachers as well as how to better incorporate CPI into my teaching and help pre-service and in-service teachers navigate the complex landscape informing their decisions.

To safeguard from misinterpreting the words and actions of the teachers my goal was to have data saturation and conduct member checking. During interviews with teachers, I would restate their answers to make sure that I was understanding their viewpoint. Between interviews, lesson observations, lesson artifacts, and teacher journal reflections, I had 23 transcribed Zoom

interviews representing over 30 hours and 1200 pages of conversations. I was careful to be clear and upfront in my personal biases and used my field notes, teacher interviews, teacher journals, teacher emails with lesson materials, and lesson observations to triangulate my data. I kept detailed notes on each lesson observation, carefully reviewed interview transcripts, and member-checked with participants my impressions of what I was seeing and interpreting. I also consulted with my major professor to discuss what I was observing and hearing from my participants to

Additional security threats included the discovery of participant identity and matching their responses to one another. To prevent any such violation of confidentiality, I gave participants pseudonyms and kept all interview transcripts on a password-protected, duo-secure server endorsed by the university. I kept the code list in a separate file from the data. I kept hard copy data in a locked filing cabinet in my university office. The conclusions gained from this study are specific to the time, place, and the individuals that lived the events. Still, to assure that my findings were trustworthy to both myself and those who share an interest in this study, I was as transparent as possible with the processes I took and the factors that existed.

Twenty-one years into the new millennium, America was in the middle of tremendous social, political, and economic change with the central narrative of our democracy being political polarization and divisiveness. As social studies teachers faced their responsibility of preparing citizens for citizenship, critical questions about “What decisions did teachers make about including and excluding current political issues as they taught a curriculum related to and during the 2020 Presidential election?” My study sheds important light on how teachers navigated incorporating CPI topics with their students during this time while also providing insight on how to best help prepare preservice teachers to teach CPI topics.

## **Theoretical Framework: Context, Evidence, & Aims**

In this section, I explore the findings, similarities and trends found following four social studies teachers from August 2020 to January 2021. Using interviews, classroom observations, and a combination of reflections and classroom resources, I was able to follow four teachers closely, as they taught, and reflected upon the political events confronting the nation in the fall of 2020. Structurally, I have organized this chapter into two sections, beginning with the Context, Evidence, & Aims described by Hess & McAvoy (2015) which follows an ethical framework aligned with John Dewey's ideas surrounding the complex factors that influence teachers' professional judgment. In this first section, I present the context of the political climate in the nation and state, the impact of COVID-19, and the use of media. In section two, I focus on the communities, schools, and teacher profiles. Under each teacher profile, I examine the Evidence and Aims of each teacher by describing each course standards, the students grade level, student demographics, the resources each used in teaching those topics, and their reasoning for their instructional decisions. In chapter four, I explore in detail the lessons taught by each teacher while chapter five looks at the common exemplar lessons. The purpose of this study was to better understand:

- 1). What decisions did teachers make about including & excluding current political issues as they teach a curriculum related to or during the 2020 Presidential election?
- 2). What materials and resources did teachers use to help students critically examine the 2020 election?
- 3). What reasons did teachers give to explain their curricular and topic choices?

4). How and to what extent did teachers' own political beliefs influence curricular decisions regarding political issues while teaching government/civics?

### **Context: National and State Political Climate**

At the national level, the political climate going into the 2020 Presidential election was polarized. Dimock and Wike's (2020) article *America is exceptional in the nature of its political divide*, for Pew Research, underscored the variety of issues that Democrats and Republicans differed on, including "mask-wearing, contact tracing, how well public health officials are dealing with the crisis, whether to get a vaccine once one is available, and whether life will remain changed in a major way after the pandemic." These authors argued that while partisan media, social media, and cultural and historical differences play a role in the increasing polarization, it is not anything unique when considering the structure of the two-party system. Limiting the parties to two choices forces a wide range of political, economic, and social beliefs to fall onto two sides, which the authors contend "competition becomes cutthroat, and politics begins to feel zero-sum, where one side's gain is inherently the other's loss" (para. 6).

At the state level where this study is taking place, politics is more one-sided, with Republicans having a large majority at both the state and federal representation. This is important because as noted by Gibbs (2019) context and space matter in teaching. At the beginning of the study, the state had one Senator from each party representing the state in Washington D.C. The Democrat Senator lost his seat to a Republican in the 2020 election. In the U.S. House of Representatives, the state had seven representatives, six Republicans, and Democrat. The representative for the district including both Milton and Centennial was an eleven-term Republican. In the state House of Representatives, 105 members made up the body, with 76 Republicans, 26 Democrats, and two vacancies. This resulted in districts being largely

gerrymandered to favor Republican candidates as noted by Li and Lau (2021). Below is a key set of national political events that occurred during data collection to provide greater political context as data was being collected.

**Table 6.**

*Timeline of Key Events during Data Collection*

2020-21 Timeline of Key Political Events During the Study

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August-Month begins with 4.6 million COVID-19 cases in the U.S.

- August 11<sup>th</sup> Kamala Harris picked as Joe Biden’s VP
- August 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Democratic National Convention
- August 20-24<sup>th</sup> Republican National Convention

September- Month begins with 6 million COVID-19 cases in the U.S.

- September 18<sup>th</sup> Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg Passes Away
- September 26<sup>th</sup> Justice Amy Coney Barrett was nominated for Supreme Court.
- September 29<sup>th</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Presidential Debate

October—Month begins with 7.3 million COVID-19 cases in the U.S.

- October 2<sup>nd</sup> President Trump tests positive for Coronavirus
- October 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> President Trump at Walter Reed Medical Center
- October 7<sup>th</sup> Vice-Presidential Debate
- October 12<sup>th</sup> Hearings for Justice Amy Coney Barrett begin
- October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Presidential Debate
- October 27<sup>th</sup> Justice Amy Coney Barrett takes Oath for Supreme Court.

November--- Month begins with 9.3 million COVID-19 cases in the U.S.

- November 3<sup>rd</sup> Election Day
- November 4<sup>th</sup> President Trump declares victory early morning in the White House.
- November 7<sup>th</sup> Joe Biden declared the winner Saturday.
- November 7<sup>th</sup>-onward, President Trump refuses to concede.
- November 13<sup>th</sup>, first of over 50 lawsuits filed by Trump Team

December—Month begins with 13.7 million COVID-19 cases in the U.S.

- December 14<sup>th</sup> Electoral College Elects Biden
- December 15<sup>th</sup> Senate Majority Leader McConnell Congratulates Joe Biden

January--- Month Begins with 20 million COVID-19 cases in the U.S.

- January 5<sup>th</sup> Georgia Senate Runoff Elections
- January 6<sup>th</sup> Georgia flips Senate to Democrats, U.S. Capitol Insurrection
- January 7<sup>th</sup> President Trump decides to skip the inauguration.
- January 13<sup>th</sup> President Trump Impeached for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time.
- January 20<sup>th</sup> President Biden Sworn in as 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States
- January 25<sup>th</sup> President Trump 2<sup>nd</sup> Impeachment Trial set to begin February 9<sup>th</sup>.

## **COVID-19 Impact**

The four teachers in this study represent teachers from the 2020-2021 school year who taught in person beginning in August 2020. All four teachers in the study had been forced to conduct school virtually from mid-March-May 2020 at the beginning of the Coronavirus outbreak. The teachers in this study described and demonstrated tremendous resilience among students, teachers, and administrators for pushing forward with in-person school during a time



when it was both unpopular and uncertain. Once open, all three schools stayed open. Mrs. Lawrence believed the central office of Centennial H.S. and Centennial M.S. “made a calculated decision... that they’re not going back to distance learning.... They were careful at the beginning of the year not to publicize a threshold of positivity” that would trigger the schools to shift back online. For this set of educators, while there were concerns and an acknowledgment of the risk associated with COVID-19, these teachers favored teaching in-person compared to the virtual alternative.

The impact on the classroom for teachers was both evident and persistent from the start. The extra spacing between desks, consistent mask-use, temperature checks, and cleaning of desks after each class, were just some of the physical protocols in place for teachers and students. The adoption of COVID-19 protocols meant the sacrificing of some inquiry and collaborative pedagogical methods for teachers. For three of the four educators teaching in the same school district, group work among students was restricted, with desks facing forward, limiting student contact. A lack of group work translated to classroom settings with a focus on discussion and teacher-centered teaching. Lecture, video clips, and independent work dominated the observations. The exception to this was Mr. Feeney at Milton High School, who while following protocols, determined that if students were in-person, group work could be done with precautions. He told me, “Just being in this building is a risk. But the way the room is designed and as much room as we don't have in our school and my classroom. We are not able to properly social distance them even when they are just sitting there” but acknowledged that his district was “pushing pretty hard” the 6-15 rule where students would be counted as exposed if they were closer than 6 feet for more than 15 minutes to a positive case.

Due to the pandemic, all four teachers experienced a revolving door of student absences related to contracting the virus or being exposed, forcing a two-week quarantine. Both Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter described a Halloween party held by a family that “knocked out a significant number of students” in early November. Late in the first semester, Mrs. Lawrence’s daughter who is a student in the school system was forced to quarantine during the study due to contact tracing. Teaching students in-person while students logged in online to stream the class virtually, was normal for Mr. Feeney and Mrs. Lawrence. Both highlighted the “awkwardness” and “reflectance” from virtual students to participate in class. The impression I was under from my conversations with the teachers was that many of the students did not take advantage of re-watching lectures. I believe it stands out as one of the more impressive adaptations to the classroom experience that teachers faced to help students quarantining and for the students who decided to opt-out of in-person learning.

### **Use of Media**

The reliance and use of media and technology among the participants was significant. Mr. Feeney and Mrs. Lawrence spent significant amounts of time during the semester teaching students virtually while simultaneously teaching students in-person in the classroom. Common across all four teachers was the extensive use and reliance on media to engage and discuss current political topics with students. News sources presented to students included a wide variety of newsclips, videos, news articles, and social media posts from a wide variety of news outlets. From all four teachers, a clear understanding of the importance of media literacy existed in both exposing students to the news and current events, but also how to navigate media bias, validity, and the practice of consuming news from multiple sources.

At various moments during the study, all four teachers volunteered that they had a presence on social media either through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube. The teachers described using social media to be informed on what is being said on social media to help their students navigate that source of media information. Both 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers showed CNN10 to their students regularly because they believed the news was presented in a format appropriate for their students and was impartial. In addition to CNN10, all four teachers used YouTube to show highlights of debates and news clips from the United States and around the world. The two 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers also used YouTube to show news clips and spark discussion on political topics. Both teachers highlighted a media bias spectrum for their students to better understand the media organizations ranging from liberal to conservative. Both teachers heavily utilized media organizations such as the AP and Reuters because they ranked in the middle of the spectrum and were known for reporting facts and being impartial. For video clips, Mr. Feeney showed clips of NBC and would at times show Fox News to juxtapose the bias. Mrs. Lawrence used YouTube clips from Vox when having students look at a specific political issue.

### **Video Observations**

An invaluable workaround due to COVID-19 protocols, video observations provided a useful data source to analyze teachers teaching and classroom dynamics. Each lesson was video recorded by the teacher using an iPad and Swivl device that equipped a teacher with a microphone, capturing their sound and movements. Each teacher filmed themselves teaching at least three different lessons, which were then uploaded to the Swivl cloud, where they were later watched and debriefed with participants. Videoed observations from Mr. Matthews, Mr. Hunter, and Mrs. Lawrence were largely lecture-based and oriented to teacher-facilitated discussion while students sat in rows or spaced out socially distant from peers and the teacher. Protocols

prevented traditional group work. Mr. Feeney is the only educator of the four to have video observation footage of students working and discussing activities in groups. From my conversations with Mr. Feeney the impression I received was that safety was be taken into consideration, but that students who came to in-person school understood the risks and needed to do traditional group work.

Video observations enabled a glimpse into the classroom during a time when there was no other way to see in. One downfall to the video observations is the reliance on technology, in Mrs. Lawrence's last lesson on the Electoral College the sound went out on her Swivl microphone, so her lecture is visible, and she is close enough to the camera to capture her animated movements when lecturing, but no sound. As a result, that lesson debrief focused a lot on conversations she recalls. Fortunately, this only occurred once in the study, and all the other lessons' sound was captured from other lessons.

### **Communities, Schools, and Teacher Profiles**

Based on my conversations with the four social studies teachers in this study, it was clear they were informed citizens when it comes to current events and political engagement. Each held differing political views and offered unique perspectives when it came to their instructional decisions. These were four experienced "master" teachers who hold graduate degrees, mentored student teachers, and had nine or more years of teaching experience. The three courses being covered in this study were a split 12<sup>th</sup> grade nine-week government and nine-week economic course, a 12<sup>th</sup> grade AP government course, and two 7<sup>th</sup> grade civics courses Both Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter each teach a fall semester of 7<sup>th</sup> grade civics that lasts 18 weeks followed by a Spring semester teaching geography. The ages of students in Mr. Feeney and Mrs. Lawrence's class range from ages 16-18 years of age while Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter's students range

from ages 10-12 years old. As a result of this age gap, a difference exists in the depth of conversations and expectations for students to understand and be willing to participate and consider themselves as citizens and part of the system and solution. Each classroom fell under the Alabama Course of Study for Social Studies which was adopted in 2010. Under these standards, teachers are expected to teach students about the branches of government, political parties, and vast participants and functions of democracy. During my pre-semester interviews, weekly reflections, and post-election observation debrief with teachers, I was able to have teachers be open about their thoughts on the election and their viewpoints on candidates. All four teachers voted during the 2020 elections however, each held unique political views and perspectives on the state of the country. The following paragraphs detail and outline each participant's community, background, political ideology, and teaching philosophy. I follow up with information and context on the school setting and classroom environment in which they teach. During my first interview with teachers, I made an emphasis to ask questions that allowed for teachers to express their goals for students and pedagogical aims when teaching social studies, but specifically government and civics (Appendix A).

***Town of Milton***--- Founded in the 1830s the town of Milton, as of the 2010 census, had over 3,200 people, 1,200 households, and 800 families living in the city. The racial makeup of the city was 50.2% White, 47.5% Black or African American, 0.3% Native American, 0.6% Asian, 0.3% from other races, and 1.1% from two or more races. 0.9% of the population were Hispanic or Latino of any race. Of the 1,217 households, 27.6% had children under the age of 18 living with them, 38.5% were married couples living together, 23.3% had a female householder with no husband present, and 33.7% were non-families. 30.6% of households were one person and 13.2% were one person aged 65 or older. The average household size was 2.45 and the average family

size was 3.05. The age distribution was 22.9% under the age of 18, 9.6% from 18 to 24, 23.9% from 25 to 44, 27.0% from 45 to 64, and 16.6% 65 or older. The median age was 39.9 years. The median household income was \$35,319 and the median family income was \$38,824. Males had a median income of \$32,031 versus \$24,965 for females. The per capita income for the city was \$15,923. About 16.9% of families and 19.4% of the population were below the poverty line, including 27.9% of those under age 18 and 15.2% of those age 65 or over. The education attainment of residents in Milton included, 80.7% of people over the age of 25 being a high school graduate or higher, while 18.4% over the age of 25 hold a bachelor's degree. According to the 2020 Presidential Election results, the county that Milton is in had roughly 20,000 votes in the presidential election, with President Trump winning over 71% of the popular vote (NBC News, *Alabama presidential election results 2020: Live results and polls 2020*)

***Milton High School***—is the smallest school in the study, with just over 500 students from grades 7-12 being taught. The school was built in the early 1950s, and Milton High School is located about 35 miles north of the town of Centennial in a more rural part of the state. Milton's social studies department is small with only five teachers spread across all the subjects, leaving teachers to largely plan courses individually. The principal of Milton is a former social studies teacher whom Mr. Feeney often consulted with about politics and reported feeling supported when teaching CPI's. According to Mr. Feeney, the senior class for 2021 was made up of less than 100 students

***Mr. Feeney***— was a nine-year veteran teacher, teaching AP US History, as well as 12<sup>th</sup> grade government and economics. Mr. Feeney, who himself is a graduate of Milton, had taught all nine years at Milton High School. He served as the school's Social Studies department chair 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade and has served as a clinical educator for student teachers on multiple occasions, including

this semester. His classroom was painted bright yellow, with a large American Flag hanging in the back and other American history-themed posters on the walls. The desks were arranged in a semicircle, in a socially distant design. When articulating his political leanings in an interview, he described himself as a moderate independent who is a Christian. When discussing the election results and how he voted, he admitted to split ticketing his ballot and leaving his vote for president blank because he was “sick of the toxicity”. He said he voted for the Democrat senator [who ultimately lost] on the ballot because as he “had a good record with farmers, nurses, teachers, and the military.” He acknowledged that in 2016 he voted for President Trump due to his outsider persona, but that he could not stand his divisiveness, and his unwillingness to not denounce white supremacy and would rather divide than unite the country. On issues of economic theory, Mr. Feeney described “coming down hard” on his personal views on the differences between capitalism and socialism, arguing that one of the two systems failed, and students need to know that. For his participation in the study, Mr. Feeney chose to film teaching lessons on political ideologies, the role of media, election analysis of how Biden won, and a clip on President elect-Biden’s platform for the country.

***Mr. Feeney’s Evidence---*** Mr. Feeney taught the 12<sup>th</sup> grade ALCOS traditional nine-week government course that is followed by a nine-week economics course. Due to Milton being on a 90-minute period schedule, Mr. Feeney’s schedule consisted of two Government/Economics classes, an AP US History, and a Response to Intervention (RTI) class which met at the end of the day, followed by his planning period. Due to the late COVID-19 semester start, teachers had an extra two weeks of preplanning to prepare for students and safety protocols. As a result, his nine-week government course was cut down to seven weeks. Due to the shortening of his semester Mr. Feeney mentioned that some topics would not get the normal depth that would

otherwise occur. Due to the election and the events associated with it, Mr. Feeney described this being a “vehicle” that can be used to tie in other aspects of the curriculum, including the three branches of government and powers of Congress.

Due to the small size of the senior class at Milton, Mr. Feeney’s government class numbered only 15 students when attendance was full. However, due to the virus, Mr. Feeney had students rotating in and out of quarantine either due to contracting the virus or due to exposure. This resulted in him teaching in-person while streamed his class via YouTube for students to watch live or at their own convenience. When discussing his administration, Mr. Feeney described openly having a good relationship with his principal, who was a fellow social studies teacher prior to becoming an administrator. As a result of being the only 12<sup>th</sup> grade government teacher in the school, Mr. Feeney detailed using his principal as a resource for him to discuss politics and discuss what he was planning to do in his classroom when talking about the election and the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

***Mr. Feeney’s Aims***--- Mr. Feeney described his role and social studies as a discipline “our end goal is to make better human beings...help them be more tolerant and empowered people.” Mr. Feeney described his purpose for social studies:

Our end goal is to make better human beings. It is to build perspective to enlighten our students on their civic duties to help them be more tolerant and more empowered people in a civic climate. To have some sense of where they've come from through learning our past so that they understand what their role is and their own generation and in their future.

One of Mr. Feeney’s key goals was for his students to learn to listen openly and deeply. To this end, he created an assignment on civic discourse where students went out into the



community to interview a parent, friend or relative, and engage in a political conversation. The assignment goal was for students “to engage in civilized discourse with another person on controversial issues and to better understand their perspective and to also communicate yours.” Mr. Feeney provided a list of topics for students to consider when interviewing a family member, coworker, or friend. The topics suggested included social equality, race relations, the economy, government response to COVID-19, or the Presidential election. Below is the script provided to help students conduct this Civil Discourse Experiment assignment:

1. Tell me your story. What is most important to you in life?

*You also tell them what is important in life to you and why.*

2. Could you explain the issues in our country that you feel the most strongly about?

*You should also tell them the issues that you feel strongly towards and why.*

3. Do you identify with a political party and, if so, which one? Who will you be voting for this election and why?

*You will also share with them your political convictions and who you might be voting for (if you can vote).*

4. Could you explain whether you feel that our country is moving in a positive direction?

*You will also share your thoughts on the direction of our country.*

When asked about the goals and aims for this assignment, Mr. Feeney described wanting students to be able to communicate and listen to others while also being able to have a conversation with someone who may hold different beliefs. In his opinion, he said, “social media [has] ruined their social skills so they hate talking on the phone.” This was a brand-new

assignment for Mr. Feeney that he had been thinking about since the summer. Based on my conversations with Mr. Feeney and his comments regarding the political divide and events students saw over the summer, he wanted to emphasis dialogue and conversation amongst his students. Along with the interview that students had to conduct, he had students answer some reflection questions that asked students to consider to what extent they agreed with the person they were talking with and on what topics. He also had students consider any disagreements they may have had, how well each person listened to the other, to what extent the conversation was driven by facts versus emotion, and what was the most difficult and surprising aspect of the assignment, which he expected students to answer in a written form. When asked about how his students did, he thought his students did well with the assignment, reporting that many students felt the person they interviewed was not always listening to them, which he found interesting. He described many students talking with people they worked with and family members. This assignment was done alongside an online Political Typology Quiz organized by PewReserch.org to have students get a better understanding of where they fall on the political spectrum. Mr. Feeney felt that students often repeat or say what their parents or those around them believe without having developed a real understanding of the topic or event and not knowing how conservative or liberal they are.

***Town of Centennial***---Founded in the late 1830s, the town of Centennial as of the 2010 census, had 53,380 people, 22,111 households, and 9,939 families residing in the city. Historically, a college town, the racial makeup of the city was 75.1% White, 16.5% Black or African American, 0.3% Native American, 5.3% Asian, 0.00% Pacific Islander, 1.10% from other races, and 1.6% from two or more races. 2.9% of the population were Hispanic or Latino of any race. Of the 22,111 households, out of which 22.1% had children under the age of 18 living

with them, 32.4% were married couples living together, 8.8% had a female householder with no husband present, and 55.2% were non-families. 33.8% of all households were made up of individuals, and 11.5% had someone living alone who was 65 years of age or older. The average household size was 2.24 and the average family size was 2.99. In the city, the population was spread out, with 17.5% under the age of 18, 38.0% from 18 to 24, 23.1% from 25 to 44, 14.6% from 45 to 64, and 6.9% who were 65 years of age or older. The median income for a household in the city was \$35,857, and the median income for a family was \$72,771. Males had a median income of \$51,644 versus \$36,898 for females. The per capita income for the city was \$24,656. About 9.2% of families and 25.2% of the population were below the poverty line, including 15.0% of those under age 18 and 3.6% of those age 65 or over. An explanation for this enormous inequality between households and families is a direct result of the large number of students living in the area. The education attainment of residents in Centennial included, 94.2% of people over the age of 25 being a high school graduate or higher, while 58.0% over the age of 25 hold a bachelor's degree. According to the 2020 Presidential results, the county that Centennial belongs to had roughly 71,000 votes in the presidential election with President Trump receiving 62% of the popular vote. (NBC News, *Alabama presidential election results 2020: Live results and polls 2020*).

***Centennial High School***—is the largest school in the study, with 1800 students being served in 10-12<sup>th</sup> grade classes being offered in a four-year-old school. Centennial High School boasts a large social studies staff of 17 teachers, with many teachers having colleagues teaching the same subject. While the overall area is considered rural, Centennial High School enjoys the advantage of being in a college town that provides a more urban setting. COVID-19 protocols were enforced stringently with Mrs. Lawrence having to socially distance her students' desks across

the classroom. Both Centennial High School and Centennial Middle School were in the same district, about two miles apart. The senior class at Centennial High School had over 600 students.

*Mrs. Lawrence*— Mrs. Lawrence was a ten-year veteran teacher who taught 12<sup>th</sup> grade Government and for the first time this year, two sections of AP Government. Before becoming a social studies teacher, Mrs. Lawrence spent several years working in journalism and Republican state politics in a neighboring state. These experiences and passion for democracy encourage her willingness to engage her students in the study and discussion of controversial political issues. During the 2016 election, she was in the classroom but was not teaching government and she admitted to “missing” the controversy that surrounded that election. Her classroom was the largest of the four teachers, with windows on both sides and a large smartboard projector at the front of the room. Desks were arranged in socially distant rows facing the front of the room. When talking about President Trump in interviews, she expressed concern and dismay for his willingness to challenge democratic and presidential norms. In discussing election results, she said that “I’m 43 years old, and last Tuesday was the first time I voted Democrat in my life” when acknowledging her vote for Joe Biden. She filmed lessons on campaigns and elections, political parties, and the Electoral College.

*Mrs. Lawrence Evidence*---Mrs. Lawrence highlighted her AP government course in her observation videos, which was her first-time teaching government at the AP level. The course was a year-long course on a 90-minute block, meeting the class every other day. Teaching on the block schedule meant that she saw three classes a day with planning being her last period of the day. Her highlighted AP Government class was made up of roughly 15 students who were about half young men and half young women which included students who were White, Black, and

Asian. When asked about administration support when it came to teaching CPI's Mrs. Lawrence discussed feeling supported by her current administration.

*Mrs. Lawrence's Aims*--- Mrs. Lawrence described one of her roles in the classroom as helping students become "critical thinkers"; having an understanding and desire for their students to participate in American Democracy; and for students to be able to listen to and respect multiple perspectives. To do this, she challenged her students to be critical consumers of news and evidence while also understanding the role media plays in society. Mrs. Lawrence shared this view and added that "our role must be to create well-rounded [citizens]" who are both knowledgeable of our freedoms "but also the responsibilities for self-government" and our country's history. Mrs. Lawrence acknowledged that for students today it is a "challenging environment in terms of information" because they "have more information available to them than anyone else in the history of mankind." This reality informed her teaching of wanting to hit the standards but also make sure that her students get what they need to be prepared for life once they leave her classroom. Helping her students navigate Fake News and realize that "engaging in conversation with people who have different ideas is a productive activity" is important and another way to gather information were also aims of her teaching.

*Centennial Middle School*—Centennial Middle school was a 7<sup>th</sup> grade only, feeder school about two miles down the road from Centennial High School with over 660 students. Centennial Middle School is a unique in-between from the other schools in that while it only has five social studies teachers, they all teach the same subjects and curriculum. Additionally, this is the only school in the study with two participants, Mr. Matthews, and Mr. Hunter who both were aware of the other person's participation. While they do teach in the same building, they are separated by

floor and did not share a common planning period. Centennial Middle School feeds into Centennial High School.

*Mr. Matthews*--- Mr. Matthews was a 24-year veteran teacher who has taught multiple grade and social studies topics across 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grades. For the last thirteen years, he has taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade civics and geography at Centennial Middle School. During the first interview, within the first ten minutes of talking, he volunteered that I have voted liberal since 1992, referencing President Clinton. In conversations about President Trump, Mr. Matthews expressed significant concerns about the health of democracy and the threat the current president posed. When reflecting on his discussion of politics in his classes, he felt that he “always been able to talk politics and the kids not really know where I was [on issues] ...I’ve been able to be very even and nonpartisan, talk about the issues, not the candidates.” He did feel that his stances on environmentalism with a “Tree Hugger sticker” in his room for over a decade would be a clue to students where he leans but that “it doesn’t seem to tip anyone off...they don’t know that means oh, he’s a liberal.” His classroom had desks in rows facing the front of the room where the smartboard is located. While the desks are not socially distant, they were arranged to minimize any potential spread from positive students. In continuing to reflect on his discussion of politics in the classroom, he did reflect on his teaching of the 2016 Republican primaries and how both he and others did not take Donald Trump seriously as a candidate. He described an incident in 2016 where he admitted that he had told a student in one of his classes he would “give them his car if Donald Trump were nominated for the Republican Party at the time, it just seemed so absurd it could happen” when considering the mood of traditional Republicans at the time and the more moderate candidates. He mentioned being completely shocked that Mr. Trump won the nomination back in 2016 and was horrified when he won the election in 2016. He filmed lessons working with students a

document-based question (DBQ) *Should the Electoral College be Abolished*, analyzing the vice-presidential debate, and going over election results the day after the election.

**Mr. Matthews Evidence**--- Mr. Matthews taught on the top floor of Centennial Middle School, above and down the hall from Mr. Hunter. This distance meant that according to the Mr. Matthews, he did not see “Mr. Hunter all the time” because he taught on the floor below. Class sizes for Mr. Matthews averaged around 20 students per class. Due to Centennial Middle’s bell schedule, his planning period rotated daily, so that some days it was in the morning, other days it was in the afternoon. Mr. Matthews mentioned that he felt supported by the administration but also felt the tension from parents regarding teaching in the current political climate. When asked about teaching the upcoming election, Mr. Matthews admitted that he had some apprehension to teaching because of an interaction he had already had with a parent back in August. He described doing a Nearpod activity and having students read an article on Black Lives Matter:

The article is from Junior Scholastic which is about as non-controversial as you can get, it’s written for middle school kids. It is very down the middle. But I had a dad, who did not email me or my principal, but email the superintendent, the second week of school.

He described him “complaining about us talking about Black Lives Matter.” As a result, “I got an email from the assistant superintendent just asking what the lesson was about” and he sent a copy of what he taught. When explaining his reasoning behind the instructional choices behind the Black Lives Matter lesson he said:

We have never talked about civil rights, really, it's not quite in our curriculum, so like the black lives matter. I mean, I just kind of chose to do that. So that was, not really related to the election, but just like this is what you need to know, they've all they've all seen the protests

over the summer. They all know George Floyd. You know, most of them did not know Trayvon Martin, you know that this started seven years ago after that event. So yeah, I mean that is definitely different.

When hearing Mr. Matthews describe this interaction, my interpretation was that having taught in the area for a long time, he was not surprised that he upset a parent, but that he was more taken back that they would not address him, and instead would go all the way to the Superintendent. Mr. Matthews was the most liberal of the four teachers in the study and teaching in a conservative area meant to him that he always wanted to make sure he was presenting multiple perspectives, while concealing his political beliefs. During an interview debriefs, after his students had completed the “should the Electoral College be abolished?” essay, he reflected that maybe he concealed his views too well and argued harder to “keep the Electoral College” which is not something he supports, because many of his students wrote essays arguing to keep the Electoral College. I interpreted this as a moment where Mr. Matthews desire to be neutral and present multiple perspectives went against how he personally feels which I found to be interesting when teachers are often accused of trying to indoctrinate students.

***Mr. Matthews Aims***--- Mr. Matthews hoped that his students would leave his class having a better understanding of “how politics work and how our government works” knowing that “our democracy is not finished” it is a work and progress, and we all have a role to play. In my first interview with Mr. Matthews, he said “I just want them to be able to listen to each other and listen to what the candidates are actually saying and not about what they heard from someone else.” When describing his fears related to parents is that he described being worried:

How parents are going to view things that we talk about in class or maybe things I am saying...I have been teaching since 1997, and I think it’s fair to say that in the three or four



years since I've started teaching, our politics have diverged, and news media is much more one sided. I mean, I don't watch Fox, but even CNN to me which I've always watched. I've always been a CNN, NBC guy, but CNN sometimes seems unwatchable because it's not just the news.

This desire to have students engage with the news was evident in his instructional choices by consistently showing CNN10 and having students watch and discuss debate highlights, specifically the vice-presidential debate. On the day after the November 3<sup>rd</sup> election, he had his students follow and track election results with an emphasis on looking at multiple sources, which included the Associated Press, NBC, and CNN.

**Mr. Hunter**---was a 12-year veteran who has spent almost his entire career at Centennial Middle School teaching 7<sup>th</sup> grade Civics and Geography. Like Mr. Matthews, his classroom desks are arranged in rows with students facing the front of the room where the smartboard and projector are located. In an early weekly reflection, when asked about conversations he has possibly had with students or colleagues, he mentioned in conversation with another teacher, where he told her that he identifies as a traditional conservative, but that he could not stand the rhetoric of the president. He aligned himself with the Lincoln Project, an organization of Republicans determined to prevent Donald Trump from winning a second term, saying "I have voted mostly conservative my whole life" but acknowledged in both 2016 and 2020 he voted for the Democratic candidate for president. As a social studies teacher, Mr. Hunter described his role in the classroom to be unbiased when teaching, not divulging his personal beliefs. The lessons he chose to film were lessons on the *Should the Electoral College be abolished?* DBQ and discussing the election results after the Electoral College was certified in December.

**Mr. Hunter Evidence**--- Mr. Hunter taught in the same building as Mr. Matthews, just separated by a floor, with him occupying the lower level. The teachers while teaching the same content, held significant autonomy in the pacing and individual lessons. His class sizes were roughly 20 students in each class when students were fully present. Mr. Hunter mentioned that he felt he was supported by administration but often described wanting the perception of neutrality so that it would be difficult for a student or parent to reach out to administration. He mentioned not having any complaints from parents about the election to that point which seemed to relieve him. During our first interview, when asked about what he felt the primary purpose of social studies was he said “we should be creating citizens that think critically” but quickly added the new challenges fake news poses when he teaches. He said at the time of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 fake news “wasn’t really an issue...there was no social media” but due to the prevalence of social media and fake news, citizens “not only need to be a citizen who can think critically, but also be able to discern what’s truth, what’s not, and “I’m a big believe in students trying to understand both sides of a topic before making their opinion.” His desire to be appear impartial and not appear as trying to “indoctrinate” his students was reflected in his teaching by choosing to do the Should the Electoral College be Abolished? lesson where students were presented with evidence on both sides and asked to interpret the arguments and make a stand. His ability to remain neutral was tested as he taught on the certification of the Electoral College and read aloud to his students an article titled *Supreme Court rejects Texas' effort to overturn election in fatal blow to Trump legal blitz to stop Biden* by NBC’s Pete Williams.

**Mr. Hunter’s Aims**--- When asked about the purpose of social studies, Mr. Hunter said “we should be creating citizens that think critically” who can evaluate news sources and spot fake news. He talked about teaching critical thinking skills and hoped his students would be able

to do that when they left their classroom. In practice, this meant having students analyze documents, read news articles, and engage with questions and resources that would invoke critical thought and discussion with multiple perspectives.

Across the four teachers there were several themes across the Context, Evidence, and Aims of the educators that influenced their instructional decisions. The most notable similarity for the Context was the impact COVID-19 had on teachers' ability to teach. Social distancing, everyone wearing masks, and a pedagogy of teacher-centered lecture were common. The Aim of having students be "critical thinkers" and consumers of news media was also a similarity among the teachers. An emphasis on teaching the Electoral College and discussing its function and Constitutionality were popular choices among three of the four educators. In the next chapter, I will explore the Evidence and Aims of teachers by focusing on their professional judgment and the lessons they chose to teach on.

## Chapter Four: Teacher Profiles

### Introduction

While following the four teachers during the fall 2020 semester, it was clear to me that all four teachers wanted their students to be aware of and interested in the political events surrounding the election. However, the differences between teacher's and grade levels highlighted lessons are worth noting and unpacking due to the variation in activity demands and expectations. In this section, I outline the differences I observed in the lesson clips from the individual cases while also highlighting the variations among the 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. In addition, I provide some common themes among the teacher reflections that took place during the final interviews.

### Individual Cases

*Mr. Feeney.* As discussed in Chapter 4, Mr. Feeney was quite committed to having students work in groups in the traditional classroom setting. When compared to the other three teachers he was an outlier. The context of him having more autonomy in his teaching pedagogy was a noticeable difference. Students worked in groups, conversations among students were more prevalent, and there was less time spent on lecture. He justified his decision by describing the circumstances of in-person already being a “risk” and that his students and parents expect a more traditional learning environment where students are working together. He also described his teaching strategies as “formulaic” with students getting some lecture, followed by group work, and a debrief discussion where he could get an idea of how his students did understanding the material, before getting into a discussion about the material and how students feel about the issues. This was evident in his instructional choices because in all four lesson observations, student group work and discussions took place. Having a principal who supported his aims of

using group work and discussing current controversial issues to teach curriculum enabled Mr. Feeney to have confidence in his pedagogical decisions that was not seen in the other teachers.

**Table 7**

*Overview of lessons observed in Mr. Feeney’s Classroom*

Observation	Date	Lesson	Lesson Tasks
Mr. Feeney #1	10/7/20	Political Ideology	Lecture, Group work, Discussion
Mr. Feeney #2	10/21/20	Media & Politics	Lecture, Group work, Discussion
Mr. Feeney #3	11/27/20	How Biden Won	Article Analysis, Discussion, Group Work, Debrief
Mr. Feeney #4	1/20/21	Joe Biden’s Platforms	Scavenger Hunt, Debrief

The first and second recorded lessons, Mr. Feeney spent significant time having students discuss and analyze the political beliefs of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. During observation one, he strategically placed white boards around the room, with questions for students to comment on before moving to the next board. Questions included “*Why are people afraid to talk about politics?*”, “*Where do our political beliefs come from?*” and “*What makes people a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?*” Students responded to these questions by bringing up the reasons why people do not discuss politics including “feeling judged for beliefs” and “not wanting to offend others” as top reasons for why politics are not discussed. This then

transitioned into a larger group discussion led by Mr. Feeney, where he asked students to discuss and expand on their answers. In this discussion he stressed the different “morals and values” that help shape people’s opinions and how they influence how people answer these questions differently. I interpreted this activity as an icebreaker to help students understand that his classroom is a safe space to discuss political issues, knowing that it is okay to disagree and that it is beneficial to discuss different perspectives.

Due to the shortened government course from nine weeks to seven weeks and having a presidential campaign taking place, I believe Mr. Feeney felt the pressure to help his students navigate this highly polarized political climate. The Civil Discourse assignment was an authentic attempt for his students to take this political discussion out into the community which aligned with his philosophical aim of fostering discussion. The lack of student evidence on this assignment and hearing their perspectives is something I wish I could have captured. Due to the assignment being a take home assessment and my lack of access to the classroom prevented me from capturing students’ impressions of the assignment. Capturing this data would have given me a better understanding and insight into their impressions of the assignment and the people they interviewed. However, in my debrief with Mr. Feeney, he did describe his aim of having students engage in a conversation with someone else about politics with an emphasis on listening “went well for the first time trying this assignment.” He noted that some of his students felt that while they listened and engaged in the interview, listening to their participant, but that the same level of engagement was not always reciprocated by the interviewee.

Mr. Feeney’s third and fourth lessons endeavored to help his students better understand the factors that enabled then Vice-President Biden to capture the White House, defeating Donald Trump, and the policies and platforms he was hoping to bring to the American people. In lesson

three he had students read an article from NPR titled, *How Biden Won: Ramping Up The Base And Expanding Margins In The Suburbs* to anchor the discussion. Knowing that he teaches in a conservative area, where some students and parents questioned the legitimacy of the election, was a factor in Mr. Feeney taking his time before going over the election results. It influenced why he broke down with students the factors that led to Joe Biden's victory over Donald Trump to make sure they understood that the result was valid and there was no election fraud. Following the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> at the Capitol, Feeney's choices of open questions and lesson focus on Joe Biden's platforms in observation four indicates his goal was to decision to was to help students learn about and ask questions about the pros and cons regarding Biden's polices in a setting that could cut out the half-truths that exist in media. To do this, Mr. Feeney printed of information from Joe Biden's campaign website and placed the different policy platforms around the school for students to find during their scavenger hunt. Both lessons required students to be critical readers and use discussion to flesh-out students' feelings and understanding which I understood to be an aim of his teaching. It is noteworthy that in both lessons the question was not "whether Joe Biden was elected" but how he was elected and what his policies will be, and the pros/cons of the policies. The choice of what questions were open and closed were based on the fact that Biden won and there was no debating that fact.

All four of Mr. Feeney's lessons featured episodes of student-focused inquiry and analysis of materials followed by a debrief. Often, Mr. Feeney would sit on top of a desk while students were in a socially distant semi-circle around the room which allowed for more laid-back class discussion than a traditional teacher-centered lecture. In each lesson, I felt higher-order thinking took place with Mr. Feeney often asking his students to explain and discuss their own personal experiences when it came to how they are consuming and thinking about politics. He

consistently talked with me about wanting his students to be engaged with the current political events happening around them. This I believe was his way of building a relationship with his students by showing he is interested and cares, while also helping him better understand how his students think and consume politics.

*Mrs. Lawrence.* As described in Chapter 4, due to the COVID-19 protocols, Mrs. Lawrence described at length how different this school year was, lessons that she altered or abandoned and how the Covid protocols limited her pedagogical decisions. This resulted in Mrs. Lawrence’s classroom observations being largely centered around lecture, where Mrs. Lawrence would use PowerPoints to lecture, supplemented by article analysis, which would lead to a teacher-centered discussion probing student comprehension with questions. In the first two lessons, students read common articles at the beginning of the lesson to ground their knowledge and conversation. An aim of Mrs. Lawrence’s teaching was to foster discussion and conversations among students, which she admitted “didn’t happen as much” as she would have liked, but due to COVID-19, she was making the best of it.

**Table 8**

*Overview of lessons observed in Mrs. Lawrence’s classroom*

Observation	Date	Lesson	Lesson Tasks
Mrs. Lawrence #1	10/30/20	Political Participation	Article Analysis, Lecture
Mrs. Lawrence #2	11/2/20	Electoral College— Battleground States	Article Analysis, Lecture



Mrs. Lawrence #3	11/23/20	Political Party Functions	Lecture
Mrs. Lawrence #4	12/4/20	Electoral College--- Campaigns and Elections	Lecture

In all four of Mrs. Lawrence’s lessons, her passion for the content was evident as she circulated the room, consistently asking probing questions of her students, while presenting current and historical political examples. For her first lesson on the Electoral College, one of the articles she used for her teaching on the Electoral College was from Vox titled *Who the Electoral College really benefits: Why some Americans’ votes count more than others* as a way to establish common understanding of why there is a movement of people wanting to reform the system. It was clear to me that Mrs. Lawrence viewed herself as not only a teacher, but someone who wanted her students to be politically aware and engaged long after leaving her classroom. During our post-course interview when talking about the difference between teaching regular government and Advanced Placement she said that “my basic intention is the same, and that is to facilitate productive citizenship.” I believe this is in no small part due to her previous work experience in state politics. She described more than once feeling comfortable with “the law” and “Constitution” because both are legally accepted safe spaces.

During our interviews and lesson debriefs with Mrs. Lawrence, we spoke at length discussing the COVID-19 protocols, the current polarization of politics, lesson planning, aims, and teaching philosophy. On more than one occasion, she stressed that the curriculum and society do a good job of stressing “our freedoms... But not so much the responsibilities that

come with those freedoms” which I found to be a profound statement. She often talked about her role as a teacher is not to give opinions, but instead help students have a strong foundation in history, while also “equipping them to develop their own political opinions.” This was abundantly clear when she described having her students develop the mild to spicy spectrum regarding how to define the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> at the Capitol. Having students read the legally accepted definitions of Riot, Insurrection, Terrorism, and Anarchy according to her really challenged her students to critically consider the events of the previous day and how they will and should be remembered. Mrs. Lawrence’s decision to do a concept lesson on insurrection meant that she engaged students to examine what happened while secondarily discussed its justification. This discussion of whether that protest was justified was unique among the participants because Mr. Feeney and the others treated the event as a closed question by ignoring it or saying it was wrong. By having the students do an inquiry-based concept lesson, she did more than just talk about the events, she engaged students with the question of how to characterize the activities of Jan. 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

While all four of her lessons were predominantly lecture, she still tried to get students involved in discussion and dialogue with her and classmates. This was evident in her lessons on the Electoral College and Political Parties, where she had students look at both the purpose, function, and historical examples of Electoral College and Political Parties. Her goal of helping students be critical consumers of politics and history was even more difficult because of “fake news and the idea that all media is biased.” To help her students have greater trust in the media, she used an analogy of a fight taking place at school and how if you were to ask three different students about the fight, you would get three different stories. She went on to say “that doesn’t mean that anyone has an agenda. Maybe they do, but just because you have a different kind of

telling of the facts doesn't necessarily mean that the person is trying to mislead you." In preparing her students, she stressed her hope that helping them detecting bias and instilling a desire to continue to educate yourself comes across to her students. This attention to media literacy and continuing education after students leave her room was a commendable goal and aim to hold for her students.

When discussing how she deals with students who present her with misinformation, she outlined a strategy she uses. Instead of "arguing with the kid" she tried to model for her students "lateral reading" where she would "suspend judgment long enough" to do some reading, from multiple sources. During the election, she kept a running list on her smartboard of viral misinformation that was trending on social media from fact checking organizations so that she would be informed and be able to talk about it with her students when they came into class and mentioned it. She felt that the "best strategy is modeling open discussion" if students have questions or comments, "let us get it out in the open and investigate it." According to her, her worst-case scenario as a social studies teacher would be where a student hears something, but "they don't feel they can speak to investigate or that they feel like they don't want to investigate" the topic which is why she strived to create "an environment where let's be curious." I found this to be quite remarkable that she was willing to let student questions and current events drive her professional judgment in the classroom.

Watching Mrs. Lawrence teach it was clear she loved political discussion, even when the discussion went against her own political beliefs. During the second lesson observation, while having an open discussion on politics, she had a conservative student challenge her on a policy of the Democrats and Joe Biden. At one point the student claimed that "Kamala Harris is further left than the Bolsheviks" to which, Mrs. Lawrence, asked the student why he felt that way and

where he was getting the information from. In my debrief with her, I asked about the conversation, and she admitted that the student who made the comment was one of her more outspoken conservatives who liked to challenge her. However, she described appreciating his contributions to the class because it is a different perspective and to her “it showed me that he is still engaged, and he feels comfortable enough to express his opinion versus the alternative of not talking and being disengaged.”

**Mr. Hunter.** Three of the four observed lessons from Mr. Hunter centered around having students analyze primary and secondary source documents to answer the DBQ question, *should the Electoral College be abolished?* In each lesson, Mr. Hunter had the documents pulled up on the smartboard projector so that he could easily move between the documents and the accompanying questions. In a normal, non-COVID-19 semester, Mr. Hunter would have put students in groups of 3 or 4 students to analyze the documents and answer the questions as a group before going over. However, due to COVID-19 protocols, students were in rows, largely analyzing and answering the questions independently in rows, before going over the documents and answers as a class. Mr. Hunter shortened the assignment to making students write a thesis statement that was supported by at least two reasons for why the Electoral College should or should not be abolished while also citing the accompanying documents that would support their claim. When initially told this, I was a little taken back and under the impression that students were “getting off easy” when compared to the work Mr. Matthews was having his students do. However, when talking with Mr. Hunter he described not being overly concerned with having students write, and rather was more focused on having students make a claim and supporting it with evidence. Knowing that the students he works with are in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and when he mentioned the change in student motivation and the difficulty in getting work from students since the

pandemic, it made sense to me that he reduced the length of the assignment in order to focus on his goal of teaching his students to support a claim with evidence.

Often, the class agenda had students analyzing documents, reading an article, or watching a video clip followed by a discussion over what students had finished working on. While students were encouraged to talk with the students around them about the documents, Mr. Hunter lamented that discussion among students was down when compared to a normal semester because of the Covid safety measures in place. Outside of the observed lessons, Mr. Hunter discussed using CNN10 as a resource to discuss the political campaigns with his students because he felt it did a good job of providing students a “balanced view” of both political parties. Mr. Hunter reported on multiple occasions feeling “anxious” and “nervous” in the leadup to and following the election because of how polarized the country had become and the direction of the Republican party. This apprehension I believe influenced both how he presented and discussed the election with his students. The open question he chose of should the Electoral College be abolished was not directly related to President Trump. For Mr. Hunter it felt less “partisan” than talking directly about a candidate and the Electoral College is connected to the course standards. Due to this context, he was on safe ground. The aims of teaching the Electoral College’s function rather than any diving into more controversial aspects of the campaign was by design.

When discussing the president with his students he tried to emphasize that regardless of who holds the White House “local government affects you more than the president.” In our conversations, he often spoke of trying to remain “neutral” in the classroom when it came to discussing politics but admitted that since the summer “it’s been pretty hard” with the actions and rhetoric of President Trump. While he identified as a traditional conservative, he volunteered that he never supported the Trump administration and voted for Biden because in his views the

Republican party was moving away from what it stood for which he described being low taxes, law and order, and the Constitution.

**Table 9**

*Overview of lessons observed in Mr. Hunter’s classroom*

Observation	Date	Lesson	Lesson Tasks
Mr. Hunter #1	10/27/20	Electoral College DBQ	Introduction to DBQ documents
Mr. Hunter #2	10/28/20	Electoral College DBQ	Lecture, Document Analysis
Mr. Hunter #3	10/29/20	Electoral College DBQ	Lecture, Document Analysis
Mr. Hunter #4	12/17/20	Election Results	Article Analysis, Video Clip

Like Mr. Feeney, Mr. Hunter waited several weeks before jumping into Election Results. When talking with his students, he was very candid in why he waited to continue talking about the election after the winner was declared because “the results were being challenged” and that he thought “it would be best to wait until the electors had cast their votes” which then led to Mr. Hunter reading aloud, the article *Supreme Court rejects Texas' effort to overturn election in fatal blow to Trump legal blitz to stop Biden* by NBC’s Pete Williams, while students followed along. Once done, Mr. Hunter asked several questions related to the article to gauge student comprehension. Questions included, what states election results were being challenged by the

Trump team, how many lawsuits were filed, and to what point. He also highlighted to his students the Supreme Court's rejection of President Trump's appeal to hear the case and the significance considering that President Trump had nominated three of the justices to the court. When watching Mr. Hunter teach, it was evident to me that he was using a news article demonstrating the lack of legal evidence of election fraud to make the point to his students, rather than being the source of this information himself. When going over the article he asked students about the states where election results were being challenged, which states flipped blue compared to 2016, and he highlighted to students that all three Supreme Court justices appointed by President Trump refused to hear the case. After going over the article and asking students comprehension questions, he showed a news clip from the BBC showing Republican majority leader Mitch McConnell congratulating Joe Biden and Kamala Harris on their victory in the Electoral College to show students that prominent Republicans in Congress are accepting the election results. His instructional aim of showing a foreign news agency was meant to eliminate any partisan bias while also showing his students that Republicans are beginning to move on from the election results. This aligned with his goal of helping students see that the election was not rigged, and that no fraud took place.

*Mr. Matthews.* Of the four teachers in the study, Mr. Matthews was both the most experienced and liberal. Across all four lesson observations, Mr. Matthews showed a consistent effort to engage students with current political events. This was most evident in his lesson where students watched and discussed highlights from the vice-presidential debate and when he had students analyze election results as they were coming in the day after the election. For Mr. Matthews, knowing that this was likely the first presidential election that his students were paying attention to in their lives, he seemed to take great care in how he presented the

information. This was clear to me when he emailed me after the first presidential debate, which he had initially planned to film, but changed his mind, saying that he had to “ditch my plan to watch the debate today. It was too ridiculous to show, and I felt like the students would have learned very little” and instead he showed short “highlights” rather than full segments. Due to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade students just beginning to have an emerging interest in politics and the possible negative impression the debate would have on his students, Matthews changed his lesson and aims. This concern for student understanding was also apparent when having students analyze the Electoral College Map on the Wednesday after the Election. Due to Fox News being the only organization at the time who had called the state of Arizona for the vice-president, Mr. Matthews expressed caution to his students and some skepticism about why they were the first to call the state for Biden. As the only liberal educator of the four participants, his skepticism of Fox News and his willingness to move on from the election once Joe Biden was declared the winner made sense to me, while more conservative educators Mr. Feeney and Mr. Hunter waited until weeks after the election to dive deep into the election results. It made sense because after four years of the Trump administration and the realization that he lost and was no longer going to be president, seemed to be the impetus for Mr. Matthews to move on as well. The decision to move on was indicative of what he considered an “open” or “closed” question and that he did not want to open the election results with his students.

**Table 10**

*Overview of lessons observed in Mr. Matthews’s classroom*

Observation	Date	Lesson	Lesson Tasks
Mr. Matthews #1	10/14/20	Electoral College DBQ	Lecture, Document Analysis



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Mr. Matthews #2	10/20/20	Electoral College DBQ	Lecture, Document Analysis
Mr. Matthews #3	10/23/20	Vice Presidential Debate Analysis	Watched debate clips, Debrief
Mr. Matthews #4	11/4/20	Election Results	Lecture, Election Results Analysis

While the *should the Electoral College be abolished?* DBQ was made up of documents and quotes from prior elections, Mr. Matthews went out of his way to try and connect the material the students were learning and apply it to the current election. He did this by asking questions about the current election and forecasted his plans for the upcoming election to his students so that they understood why he was making them do the assignments and activities that he was. From my perspective, this decision to focus on the Electoral College before jumping into debates and election results worked well because it helped students have some context in how the process works before being exposed to the current election candidates and issues. This lesson was taught by both Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter because both men liked the activity and its alignment with the curriculum standards. The evidence suggested that the course curriculum had a significant influencing on the aims and decisions of both teachers.

### **7<sup>th</sup> Grade and 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Variations**

When teaching students who are 17 and 18 years old versus students who are 11 and 12 years old, evidence showed that the differences in students led to differing teaching and expectations for students' outcomes. Notably, teachers' conversations with students, the depth of

knowledge, and as well as the aims and purpose of the class is different. For Mr. Feeney and Mrs. Lawrence, this was evident in the questions they asked of students and the expectations they held. As teachers of seniors who were voting age, the intentionality of “why does this matter” and “why this is important” comes across. Both teachers expected students to be paying attention to the news and following the transition in ways not held by Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter for the 7<sup>th</sup> grade students. For the two 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, having their students understand the process and function of the government seemed to be their goals from my perspective. The teachers showed evidence they were aware that 7<sup>th</sup> graders are more impressionable, unlike 12<sup>th</sup> graders who for some are already 18 and eligible to vote. This was most apparent in the conversations teachers had with students and the expectations held by the teachers. In the case of Mr. Feeney, his Civil Discourse assignment encouraged students to get into meaningful conversations with someone outside of class and dive into political topics and thoughts about the election and direction of the country. In class, he would often ask students about their feelings towards the current political events and encouraged them to stay on top of the election and transition. Mrs. Lawrence’s use of social media to stay on top of political events and keeping a running list of conspiracy theories on social media to engage with students stood out as differences not seen in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers.

Based on the evidence, all four of these educators confronted teaching the election head-on, rather than avoid it. This was in part because their curriculum requires that elections be taught, but also because each of these teachers were passionate about politics. Against all the stress that comes with teaching politics during a polarized time, these four teachers engaged students in the election. Three of the four educators openly expressed feelings of enjoyment in teaching their content., based on evidence and conversations with the four teachers, it was

apparent to me that Mr. Hunter was the most concerned and “stressed” educator of the group. In reflecting on the election cycle, he said “I’ve been really stressed internally, not so much in the classroom, but pretty stressed overall” going on to add “just the direction things have been going...like I’ve voted Republican and the direction that the party is headed is concerning” pointing out Republican politicians like Liz Cheney being censured for voting her conscious and supporting the rule of law. It is notable that in a red state, where three of the four participants identify or previously voted Republican, all voted for Joe Biden with Mr. Feeney abstaining to vote for president, while voting Democrat for Senator. This information tells me that social studies educators are complex citizens who in this instance, felt compelled to vote for country over party loyalty.

### **Common Themes**

Final interviews with each participant took place between January 24<sup>th</sup>-January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021, after the inauguration of Joe Biden were over. At the time, the time discussions and the ultimate impeachment of President Trump was taking place, but in terms of the election results, the 2020 election and data collection was over. In planning my final interviews with each teacher, I consulted with my major professor Dr. Jada Kohlmeier to discuss the themes of what I was seeing in the data and to revisit the research questions. In doing so, we came up with ten themes that we felt covered teachers’ experience, pedagogy, and aims for students (Appendix B). In conducting these interviews, a collective reflection took place on the journey from August 2020 to January 2021. Below are the common emotions and sentiments I was able to gather from talking with all four teachers.

***Resiliency***- This was by far the most common theme among the four teachers who participated in my study. Back in August as schools were beginning to open, there was real

uncertainty and an expectation that students and teachers would be forced online. In reflecting on these feelings, Mrs. Lawrence put it simply “once we started, we didn’t look back” referring to going back to virtual learning. This notion of not looking back was shared by the other three teachers who expressed similar sentiments and amazement that they had made it this far without being forced back to virtual school. Mr. Matthews described the semester as “challenging” considering all the safety protocols and having to adapt lessons, but that it beat the alternative of being forced back online. At no point in the study did any of my participants miss a day of school due to the virus and all expressed a similar sentiment of being proud that they have been able to keep going while other parts of the country stayed teaching online.

*Goal of political conversation* – Each teacher valued political conversation and engagement with their students. For the 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, there was a great emphasis on helping students understand the function and importance of how the government operates. This was in large part due to the age of the students being 11-12 years old and the curriculum standards for the course only requiring teachers to focus on the function of government systems. The 12<sup>th</sup> grade government teachers placed a greater emphasis on getting their students prepared for the roles and responsibilities of citizenship and to ask questions regarding more complex aspects of democracy such as campaign strategy, political parties, representation and fairness, and media literacy. There was more emphasis on political power in the U.S. Government course because it was not just the formal structures of gov but the informal political power efforts. Those differences emerged with greater prevalence in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers’ lessons. An explanation for this was because their students were already voting or close to voting age, there was a larger emphasis on authentic relevance to their students.

***Goal of impartiality*** – For all four teachers there was a sense among each teacher of valuing a goal of impartiality because they felt it was important in helping students establish their own opinions through critical analysis. The fear of “indoctrination” and “telling students what to believe” was not an aim of any educator in the study. However, as the election cycle continued it became more difficult to remain impartial when the democratic institutions that all four teachers believed in were being attacked by President Trump. Mr. Feeney, who voted for Mr. Trump in 2016 because he was “an outsider” admitted to me that his “rhetoric and divisiveness” was not good for the country. Additionally, all four teachers forcefully said to their students that the election was not stolen by Biden and they explicitly all called the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol an insurrection. This goal of impartiality while understandable was unquestionably challenged by the context in which they were all teaching.

***Challenges of impartiality*** – The political polarization of the country at the time of the 2020 election and the rhetoric of President Trump in particular, made being impartial challenging. The lack of a concession speech from President Trump and the events at the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup> put stress on teachers being able to remain impartial. For Mr. Matthews, he prided himself on not disclosing his viewpoints to students but after January 6<sup>th</sup>, he felt the need to share with his students in first block that he did not support the actions and rhetoric of President Trump. Mrs. Lawrence mentioned that “she hoped her views came across to students” when it came to her displeasure regarding the events the previous day. Mr. Hunter stressed to his students that “there was no fraud.” Prior to January 6<sup>th</sup>, these teachers stressed their philosophy of remaining neutral and impartial when it came to discussing politics because they felt it was not their place to share their views. The polarization of the political spectrum has led to members of the political parties being unable or unwilling to challenge members and leaders of their own party when they violate

constitutional principles or democratic norms. Teachers are living this. Teachers are feeling this. How do we prepare teachers to enter a classroom where even democracy or democratic principles have now become partisan?

*Challenges to the Truth*—In a world of 24/7 news and social media that proliferates in our phone notifications, the concepts of “what is a fact”, “post truth” and “fake news” were all concerns of the teachers. Teachers discussed with their students the importance of using multiple sources when reading the news. However, more time could have been devoted to helping students what makes a news source more credible and how to differentiate fact from opinion. One challenge for teachers in this regard is how they select their news resources and what that decision says about any possible political intentions. To combat this possible perception, my participants showed news sources and clips from across the political spectrum, with an emphasis on trying to find sources that presented both the liberal and conservative viewpoint. One notable exception to this was the events after January 6<sup>th</sup>, when the teachers overwhelmingly focused on showing Republican politicians condemn the actions and events of the President and the rioters. Their rationale was that in order to show how unprecedented and unacceptable the events and actions were, it was important to show Republicans condemning the actions of Republicans in order to preserve the democratic institutions under attack. Fortunately, all four teachers in this study were experienced, veteran, “master” teachers who had the knowledge and support to engage in such curricular decisions. Moving forward, it is critical that teacher education programs focus on equipping students with the knowledge and skills to effectively discuss CPI topics in a polarized climate. I wish I had been able to capture observations on the instructional decisions of January 7<sup>th</sup> addressing the events at the Capitol and more of teachers’ discussions with students regarding political polarization.

*Concern for Democracy*- At the time of my final interviews with educators, we were only about two and a half weeks removed from the riot at the Capitol. As a result, those events and the newly elected Biden administration were fresh on the minds of all of us. Mr. Hunter described receiving an email from the district that told teachers “Kindergarten through seventh grade not to air the inauguration live” out of fears of something bad occurring and students being exposed to those events live. Fortunately, nothing occurred, and he described showing his students highlights of President Biden’s speech. However, because there was over 100 members of Congress who voted to overturn the election, teachers expressed concern for both the country and how to reconcile that reality with their students. Mrs. Lawrence highlighted a Twitter post she viewed that essentially said “everyone thinks the government sucks, nobody trusts the government, nobody trusts each other, and everybody thinks the other side is ignorant” which is a scary reality. She added that “only a third of Americans say they have a good or very great deal of trust and confidence of the wisdom of the people to make political decisions” which was something she planned on incorporating in a future lesson to hook students on the importance of paying attention and being engaged with current political issues. This passion and concern for her students to be involved was something I found to be quite admirable and apparent when observing her animated lectures. Mr. Feeney shared similar sentiments which is why when planning his lessons, he made a concerted effort to ask students about their feelings and stressed the importance of political engagement and participation.

*Enjoyment*- During each of my final interviews I asked the teachers how did participating in this research study influence the way they thought about teaching and their course. Across the participants, there was a reflective enjoyment of being able to talk and discuss their teaching with another person. Mr. Matthews said he “enjoyed having these conversations”

and that he felt as a profession, teachers should spend more time “talking about how things went and what you would do differently next time” when teaching. Mr. Feeney said that he felt “validated and honored” to be a part of the study that explored teaching government during the 2021 election. Mr. Hunter felt that because so many of my questions focused on the “why and why are you doing this” that it made him think more “about why I’m doing certain things and I think that’s important” in the context of teaching about elections and citizenship. Mrs. Lawrence shared a similar sentiment saying, “you asked a lot of questions...it’s given me a chance to check myself and whether what I’m doing actually lines up with what I think I want to do or what I intend to do.” Hearing the four teachers share such positive sentiments about participating in a study about politics and how they approached teaching CPI topics felt good as a researcher. It was clear to me as they study progressed that each teacher enjoyed teaching about politics and viewed their role in the classroom as important in helping shape future citizens. With each teacher I was able to build a level of rapport and trust that I am truly appreciative of. Our conversations about pedagogy and aims for students allowed for a rich understanding of their practice. All four teachers allowed me into their classroom, during a semester of great uncertainty, while navigating a “volatile” election and trusted me to document it and for that, I will be forever grateful.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I provided an overview of the teachers lessons and the context, evidence, and aims in which they were teaching while exploring the variations and common themes I saw emerge. In Chapter 5, I will go into depth on the exemplar lessons that teachers focused on. These lessons included teaching on Presidential Debate, the Electoral College, Election Results, and the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> at the Capitol.



## Chapter Five: Professional Judgement-Exemplar Lessons

### Introduction

As the study began, it was evident that all four teachers agreed that the current political climate was polarized. With it being a Presidential election year, I discussed with teachers my desire to capture lessons related to content tied to the election. My thinking was that the Presidential and Vice-Presidential debates and election results would be good entry points for teachers, with the Inauguration as a wrap-up point, but I did not have any set expectations for the lesson topics teachers chose. Commonly discussed topics among the participants included analysis of the 1<sup>st</sup> Presidential Debate, the Electoral College, Election Results, and the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> at the Capitol. Of course, the first three lessons in that list were planned, and accordingly have lesson observations to accompany those lessons. The events on January 6<sup>th</sup> were not planned, in part as Mrs. Lawrence described this part of the Electoral College process is “mundane most of the time. No one ever pays attention to it, but this year it was going to be ground zero.” As a result, I emailed all four teachers the morning of January 7<sup>th</sup> to better understand their decision-making and set up interviews to discuss their instructional decisions. The following sections outline the commonly taught lesson topics among teachers including the presidential debates, the Electoral College, election results, and the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>.

Across all four participants, the Presidential debates, the Electoral College, analyzing the election results, and discussing the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> were all common topics. Teacher aims and philosophy largely centered on disciplined inquiry with variations among the educators that I will discuss. Additionally, school setting and variance in COVID-19 protocols played a significant factor in the method of instruction and disparity in activities. As a result, lessons observed are largely teacher oriented, lecture-based, with student interaction and discussion

facilitated by the teacher, rather than group work. The exception to this is Mr. Feeney. The most significant of the findings include an evolution in teacher disclosure on political topics and issues as the 2020 election season occurred and the notion that all four teachers engaged in teaching the difficult aspects of this election, during a time when political events were most polarized.

### **Presidential Debates**

The first presidential debate of 2020 took place on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020, at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. It was a highly anticipated political event amid the Coronavirus pandemic. In initial interviews with participants, three of the four teachers expressed a plan to discuss and watch highlights of the debate with their students. I was anxious to capture how teachers decided to discuss the debate as this was a milestone in the campaign and for data collection, and I watched with 73 million Americans, stunned with what I was watching (Abbruzzese & Byers, 2020). CNN's Jake Tapper quickly concluded after the debate "that was a hot mess inside a dumpster fire, inside a train wreck," adding "That was the worst debate I have ever seen. In fact, it wasn't even a debate. It was a disgrace and it's primarily because of President Trump" (CNN, 2020).

Mr. Matthews had expressed a desire to film himself discuss and watch key highlights of the first debate with students. However, in an email the next day Mr. Matthews wrote, "I'm sorry, but I had to ditch my plan to watch the debate today. It was too ridiculous to show, and I felt like the students would have learned very little. We watched a very short highlights video so they could see a piece of it, but that was it." He went on to elaborate that he had been excited about watching the debate" with his 7<sup>th</sup> grade students after having discussed previous debates including Kennedy-Nixon in 1960 and what had been on CNN10. However, because he "didn't want their first experience to a presidential debate be so negative [he] showed them a six-minute

video-clip of the “highlights,” had students write what they heard, then they discussed their impressions as a class. He acknowledged that “middle schoolers think that insults and one-liners are hilarious” so he did have to deal with that response from students. He found it “interesting to hear how many watched at home with their parents and how almost all his students had a negative reaction to it.”

Mr. Hunter discussed his feelings and actions in an email about what he did for the 1<sup>st</sup> presidential debate. He wrote that he felt “a little bit of stress” when deciding how to address the debate. He mentioned using CNN10’s coverage of the debate because in his opinion “it is very good at showing both sides equally.” He addressed discussing with students the overall perception of the debate and avoided discussion about candidates. From my perspective, these decisions aligned with his teaching philosophy of wanting to remain non-partisan and present multiple perspectives while avoiding the specific actions of candidates. I found this to be understandable in the context of teaching 7<sup>th</sup> graders who are young, and impressionable. Mr. Hunter went on to say that he believed most students “recognized that [the debate] was mostly personal attacks by both sides with continual interruptions” which was not supposed to be the norm. He mentioned that he brought up high school debate to the students and highlighted the procedures that are expected to be followed and how a judge deducts points for interruptions that take place. He also emphasized to students that CNN10 mentioned that of the people polled who would watch the debate, “only 3% said it could change their vote” which is low considering how debate are typically a factor in swaying public opinion. My impression of Mr. Hunter’s decisions was that he wanted his students to be aware of the current political events while underscoring how unique they were in terms of historical context and being non-partisan.

The evidence of the ages of Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter's students, and the likelihood that many were watching with their parents stood out as significant factors that influenced both teachers' decision making. By showing and analyzing the processes of elections without seeming partisan was a clear aim for both teachers. They each seemed quite cognizant of their students' parents and the reality that this was likely their first debate and conversations about elections. In addition, this was also the same moment where students were becoming aware that other people might not see things the way their parents do. As a result, both teachers mentioned being aware how their decisions in the classroom maybe talked about at home and wanting to appear nonpartisan. This differed from Mr. Feeney and Mrs. Lawrence who did not express concerns for if or how students were talking about their teaching of politics at home with parents.

Mr. Feeney described using the first debate as an opportunity to highlight with his seniors the importance of civil discourse. He had already assigned a homework assignment for students to engage in a civil discourse exercise with someone they knew and used the first debate as a chance to show students "what civil discourse does not look like." Using a YouTube clip of compiled highlights from NBC, Mr. Feeney had students analyze what they saw. When reflecting on how the lesson went, he mentioned that one student claimed that the footage was cut in such a way that it seemed to be "propping up Biden" which then led Mr. Feeney to engage students in with how media frames stories He stressed to students that it's critical "to get your information from multiple sources." During this lesson, Mr. Feeney had students look at a media spectrum chart that identified the liberal and conservative biases that exist in the news, as well as the news organizations seen as non-partisan. He would refer to this chart in multiple lessons, encouraging students to think about how news is framed. Based on the evidence gathered, all four teachers encouraged critical analysis of media sources, however Mr. Feeney spent more

time and energy than the other participants helping students evaluate the biases that exist among media sources. When asked about his intentions for the lesson he mentioned that in today's world "the quantity of media has increased but the quality of the information has decreased" so he wanted to "pick their brains" and get an idea for how the students felt "to what degree does social media play in our biases?" He added that many of his students "agreed that they live in this echo chamber" where if you only get news from a singular source and don't seek out different sources, confirmation bias occurs. In our conversations, Mr. Feeney stressed that his choices and his aims revolved around understanding his students "not what they think, but how they think." As a result, evidence showed voter-aged students working in groups and being asked to consider the role of the media in presenting information and its influences on politics.

Mrs. Lawrence advised students not to watch the debate, saying "don't bother" and that instead, it would be better to read the transcripts tomorrow. She also showed me a Remind 101 message she sent to her as the debate which read:

Hey y'all, the first event they're calling a "debate" begins now. If you want a more useful version of what the candidates will say tonight, my suggestion is don't watch, wait, and read the annotated transcripts that will be released tomorrow. You will have their claims, but they will have been fact-checked by third parties, so you can distinguish among fact, distortions, and fiction, all of which show up in every candidate forum. This is especially important as this will be your first time observing a national political event in real-time. If you are going to watch tonight, I encourage you to at least pull up a resource that will provide real-time fact-checking as you watch and allow it to supplement your understanding of what you see in here, consume information responsibly.

Mrs. Lawrence did not watch the debate. When asked about her rationale for why she didn't watch or encourage her students to watch, she described anticipating that in "no way that was going to be in any way a productive use of 90 minutes" and referred to herself as an "outlier" when compared to most social studies teachers she knows and those she keeps up within her on-line professional learning communities (PLC's) who did plan to talk about the debate. The next morning, she described wishing that she had been wrong about the debate, but that the main discussion the next day among her students was "has it always been this way?" when presidential debates occur. Unequivocally her answer was "No" and Mrs. Lawrence said, "as a citizen, I don't want these kids to get the idea that this is normal or acceptable behavior" and that had this taken place in her classroom "those two guys would have been in so much trouble" for their conduct, name-calling, and disrespectful attacks. From my interpretation of the conversation, it was clear that Mrs. Lawrence wanted her students to be critical consumers of politics, but in a way that is meaningful and productive. The presidential debate was not one of these events that would allow for substantive political engagement. In email to me on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, after the first debate, she wrote that for herself, and her colleagues "I think most of us sense the reality that we're in perilous waters. The debate now is over how – and even whether – to openly acknowledge it." This comment revealed to me that her aims for the course are being challenged by the tone of the campaign. When broadened beyond the debate, this a real challenge and problematic for democratic education considering the importance and function debates and presidential elections have on our country. If teachers do not believe that it is productive to show debate footage or engage students with the activities of the campaign, democratic education is in trouble.

For the four teachers in the study, the 1<sup>st</sup> presidential debate served as the first challenging, controversial political moment of the election cycle. A common trend among the four teachers was to discuss and show highlights of the debate to foster discussion and analysis on the topics discussed and candidates' responses. I inferred this choice to engage students even when the content was difficult to discuss a sign of each teachers' willingness to ensure that the election was not ignored and that students had context to what they were seeing and hearing on the news and on social media. Mrs. Lawrence was the only teacher among the group who openly discouraged her students from watching the debate live. This choice I believe is in large part to her background in politics and her knowing the candidates well enough to believe that it was not going to be a productive debate. For both 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, there was a noticeable level of carefulness and intention when it came to showing and discussing the candidates and I believe this was due to students being 11-and 12-years old versus 17- and 18-year-old seniors in high school. A trend among both high school teachers was an expressed desire to engage in discussion with students and let their students' questions drive discussion.

### **Electoral College**

The Electoral College and having students explore its function and constitutionality as the mechanism to determine Presidential elections was taught and discussed in an explicit focus by three teachers in the study. Both Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter chose to teach a Document Based Question (DBQ) that provided students several documents with competing positions to analyze over the course of several days with students deciding the focus question: "*Should the Electoral College be Abolished?*" When asked about the thought process in deciding to do a DBQ, both teachers described how it taught students the electoral process without focusing on the candidates. It was political without being partisan. To me this meant that the teachers wanted to

engage students in the function of how the election system works, rather than the politics of the election. Mrs. Lawrence took a similar approach in having her students examine the history of Electoral College reform attempts during America's history and grapple with the question "*Can the Electoral College be improved upon?*" To compare the instructional choices of the three educators, I have grouped both Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter because they used the same instructional materials.

The first video lesson observation took place with Mr. Matthews on October 20<sup>th</sup>, exactly two weeks from election day, which he pointed out to students. At the front of the room is a bulletin board titled citizenship, with a Bill of Rights Poster, flanked by laminated copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. On the other side of his room, is a second bulletin board with decorated maps and locations. Students are in rows, to improve social distancing and unfortunately, they are rarely in full view of the camera. The Swivl device only moves when and where the instructor holding the microphone goes and due to COVID-19 protocols Mr. Matthews spends most of the time at the front of the room. He is in the middle of recapping a Quick Write activity on the 2020 election and previewing the next nine weeks of the semester with students. During this exchange, a student asked, "What if there is a tie in the House of Representatives?" Mr. Matthews recognized the student was referring to the scenario if no candidate hit the 270 threshold. Mr. Matthews explained the House of Representatives would select the President, "unlikely, but a good question." He then had a follow-up question and explanation that centered around the origin of the electoral college when the President and Vice-President were on a separate ticket, saying that the "House chooses President, Senate chooses Vice President, kind of messed up." It was apparent that students had been given time in previous class sessions to analyze the documents before the filming began.



Students had been working with documents to answer the essay focus question “*Should the Electoral College be Abolished?*” This activity which was produced by The DBQ project (*Mini-Qs in Civics*) has students examine seven primary and secondary source documents to answer the question while weighing the evidence. In a normal year, both Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter would group students to work on the document analysis together. However, due to COVID-19 protocols, no group work took place, and instead, students were left to analyze the documents at their desks. Both teachers allowed students to discuss documents with people around them, but video footage and teacher reflections suggest that students mostly worked on this alone at their desks. The seven documents were (1) an electoral vote by state map, (2) charts on the 1980 and 1992 Presidential election results, (3) quotes from a politician and political scientist supporting the electoral college, (4) a population and electoral college vote breakdown by state, (5) quotes from a historian and political pundit opposing the electoral college, (6) electoral college vote totals from 1824, 1876, 1888 and 2000, and (7) a document that broke down ties in the electoral college. The documents focused on elections that were one-sided, differing political viewpoints, and elections with controversial outcomes. Mr. Matthews explicitly skipped the document related to ties due to the unlikelihood that it would occur and to reduce the number of documents the students had to analyze.

Each document was accompanied by four to six questions to help students analyze and understand the argument of each document. In the video, both Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter asked students the accompanying document questions to gauge understanding. Due to it being day two of the assignment for Mr. Matthews’s class, he told students “Get out your Electoral College Answer Sheet” adding that students should be “starting the essay tomorrow, [you] will submit to Schoology by Sunday at 10 pm.” Students spent the period finishing the documents

beginning with reviewing Document D. This document included a quote from George C. Edwards excerpted from *Why the Electoral College is Bad for America* and a table that compared state populations for electoral votes. Unlike previous years, where students wrote a five-paragraph essay, Mr. Matthews only required students to do three paragraphs this year. My impression of this decision was that there was some coronavirus fatigue amongst students related to workload and as a teacher, he did not want to negatively overwhelm students with work. When asked about the change, Mr. Matthews said, he “dialed it back this year to three paragraphs” that in the past, he has also had students write “a five, paragraph essay...every year. I feel like, I like doing [the essay assignment]. I love the topic. I think it is exciting. But I also feel like there are a lot of kids just sitting there staring at me for all the whole class period.” He described not knowing if students did not understand the assignment or if they just did not have anything to say when referencing quiet students in the class. He said, “you know, [the Electoral College] is sort of abstract and I think a lot of them, maybe just don't get it.” Going on to add that:

There are a lot of kids who were very, very vocal and engaged and ask questions. I mean, I do not feel like there has been any class period, where I felt like nobody has had anything to say...[but] You know, if anything, I feel like I do not ever get to the end of where I am trying to get to because people submit questions. So, I guess that is good.

I was impressed with the engagement and questions put forth by the students when discussing the documents. At no point in the lesson did Mr. Matthews ask a question and not receive hands in the air from students ready to answer or follow with an additional question. It showed me that he had developed a positive rapport with his students where they felt comfortable sharing their opinion and feelings on political topics. While students were not placed in groups due to

COVID-19 protocols to analyze the documents as there normally would, there was still some discussion amongst students about documents. However, Mr. Matthews did concede that he wished there were more discussion between students discussing the documents but felt unable to structure the activity differently. I got the impression from Mr. Matthews and the other teachers at Centennial that the challenge of giving students the information that would normally be done in a group assignment setting but had to be done in a more individualized assignment was a challenge.

Mr. Hunter also filmed himself teaching the Electoral College DBQ the week following Mr. Matthews' implementation of the same lesson. The lesson began with the camera positioned near the front of the room, next to the smartboard. A chart displaying the electoral College totals from 1980 and 1992 were displayed on the smart board. Mr. Hunter asked students to compare the two maps. Mr. Hunter only expected the students to write one paragraph answering the question and provide a reason for their decision with a citation for a document that supported their argument. When I asked why he shortened the assignment, Mr. Hunter said that his students "have a hard time writing, I figured if I could get one body paragraph and guide them through it" that would be enough for them to grasp the concept, which was to make an evidenced based answer on "*Should the Electoral College be abolished or kept?*" When asked how his students did, Mr. Hunter admitted that he had made a mistake and left a T-chart on the board listing reasons for abolishing and keeping the Electoral College that resulted in some kids copying the chart, without providing an evidence-based opinion. As a result, he took off points from students and had some redo the assignment to meet his expectations.

Both Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter's classrooms had students in socially distant rows facing the front of the classroom. According to Mr. Matthews teaching the Electoral College

DBQ takes days of his time teaching, and he wondered if it could be done more efficiently. He liked the assignment, but with the soft scaffolding of helping students and consistently repeating himself on the meaning and discussion of the documents, he wondered if he did too much? From watching the lesson observation, I could see why he felt this way because students were not in groups, he felt more responsible in ensuring students understood all the document questions as he talked to students from the front of the room. He spoke to me personally about believing the Electoral College should be abolished but, in an effort, to avoid revealing his opinion to students he ended up possibly arguing for keeping it too well because many of his students in their writing response think it should stay.

Based on conversations with both teachers, each described a pedagogical inclination that they struggled to come up with “pros” for the Electoral College. Mr. Hunter said, “I think it should be abolished, I think every election we do is a popular vote, so why not make the presidential election the same way.” This belief was echoed by Mr. Matthews who lamented that in presenting multiple perspectives and hiding his true feelings, he sometimes thinks he argues harder for keeping the Electoral College because he often receives more essays from students arguing to keep the Electoral College rather than abolishing it. Both men also highlighted that this assignment is something they have done for “many years” and that it helps students understand the process and function of the government without being overly partisan and getting into specific candidates. My interpretation of this instructional choice was that it was both an informative and non-partisan activity for the teachers to teach the Electoral College, which is in the standards. Instead of focusing on a candidate, which can be polarizing, they chose to focus on the process of how the system works and critique it. Knowing that they both work with 7<sup>th</sup> grade students who are just beginning to encounter and question the constitutional framework of

country, this activity was good for showing them how the system works through an authentic problem.

Unlike Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter who chose to teach the Electoral College before the election, Mrs. Lawrence did not approach the subject until after the election occurred. She reasoned that in the lead-up to the election students could get an understanding of how the system worked as it unfolded, once it concluded she could have students grapple with the question “Can the Electoral College be improved?” Filmed during the first week of December, Mrs. Lawrence led an interactive lecture on the Electoral College and its function. In this lecture, she was noticeably enthusiastic about the topic. This was apparent in the tone of her voice in conversations with students and her animated hand gestures from the front of the room when pointing out information. In her PowerPoint she began with a bulleted wording of the Constitution highlighting Article II, the 12<sup>th</sup> Amendment, and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, outlining that voters do not cast ballots directly for the president, instead, the vote for state electors pledged to vote for a nominee, and those electors are chosen by party leaders and activists. She then explained the rules of the Electoral College, 270 to win out of 538 electors, it is a winner take all system in every state except Maine and Nebraska. She then posed the question, knowing this is the system, “how does this affect campaign strategy?” To drive the point home, she pulled up two maps the 2020 Biden/Trump swing states and concentration of voters and the 2016 Clinton/Trump map. Throughout the PowerPoint, Mrs. Lawrence would inject questions slides titled “Think about it” where she would ask students to consider a policy or procedure related to the Electoral College and consider it. She explained that students had been working on argumentative essays for AP Exam questions, specifically thesis construction. During the PowerPoint, she had students write a thesis statement for the questions below:

*How does the winner take all system create the chance that the results of the election may not reflect the popular vote?*

*What is the difference between the majority and plurality systems of awarding delegates?*

*What adjustments to the Electoral College system would best balance the constitutional principles of federalism and popular sovereignty?*

*What are the advantages and disadvantages of selecting the President through the Electoral College rather than a popular vote?*

Due to the lesson being structured as a PowerPoint lecture, student questions and discussion was limited. The lack of discussion among students she attributed to the reality of students being stuck in rows and not in groups. However, the questions and comments students did have focused on the previous attempts to reform the Electoral College, which according to Mrs. Lawrence “most students were not aware of that” and that “the perceived advantage of the Electoral College creates has not always been for one party.” She discussed with me how in an ideal setting, this lesson would have taken two days where on the second day students are in a mock congressional hearing debating and discussing what would be the appropriate response for adjusting the Electoral College system, knowing that there is no perfect response, just the best policy among the consensus which would come with tradeoffs. This lesson was placed after students had already discussed different forms of political participation, the role state and federal laws play on voter turnout, and the methods of voter behavior. Following this lesson, Mrs. Lawrence planned to teach on the rules governing political campaigns.

As part of her teaching on the Electoral College, she had students learn both the history and function of the Electoral College, with one of the focuses being the attempted reforms of the

system. In a lesson debrief, Mrs. Lawrence, described her intent was wanting her students to question the fairness of the Electoral College and determine for themselves if it is the best system, we have or if it can be improved upon. She believed that one of the more powerful aspects of the lesson was showing students that there have been many historical challenges to the Electoral College and that the complaints and criticisms of today those students see in the news and on social media are not new. She felt that that really “blew kids’ minds” and made them think more deeply about the issue.

From my perspective, it was difficult to tell how engaged students were due to the angle of the camera being in front of the students. The Swivl device was not tracking Mrs. Lawrence so she moved the camera to the front of the room near the whiteboard. However, students were asking thoughtful questions about the history of superdelegates. There was an exchange about their influence on the 2016 Democratic primary and Bernie Sanders and how reforms took place after that election. Mrs. Lawrence, mentioned to me that on a few of her more “sophisticated” students understood the concept of superdelegates and that she went through the history of them, starting with it being as a “response to the chaos of what happened in Chicago in 1968.” She went on to recommend to her students the podcast [American Elections: Wicked Game](#) which breaks down every Presidential Election in American History as a source to better understand the superdelegate concept. This recommendation was one of several attempts by her to engage her students with a media resource that goes beyond the textbook and is more accessible to her technology savvy students. When asked about her aims, she felt that while the history is important, knowing the function and processes of elections was more critical. Holding this aim for her students made sense to me when considering the context of preparing students for the Advanced Placement exam where students are more likely to need to know function over history

of when it comes to a concept. This lesson was full of factual, conceptual, and value questions that required a deep level of thinking from her students which I found to be a strength of the lesson. She noted that she liked to break-up her lectures with these questions to keep students thinking critically about the material. Consistently, Mrs. Lawrence used her lectures to incorporate multiple perspectives and provide students with statistics, facts, and the law. One example of this during the lesson occurred when she highlighted to students that “16% of Americans live in competitive districts” when it comes to Congressional representation. When I asked about how her students reacted to that, she felt that “there was some surprise, but maybe not as much as you’d think because the students themselves don’t live in a competitive district, and they know it.” As a result, she did use the state of Georgia as a case-study to come back to with her students, highlighting their two Senate run-off elections, the changing demographics, increased voter registration. This stood out to me because it underscored the depth of knowledge, she has both of her students and the current political climate and events of when and how to incorporate current issues.

Mr. Feeney chose not to spend much time on the Electoral College. When his course was shortened by two weeks, he felt this was a topic he needed to “skim” to do his civic discourse project and other lessons he deemed more important.

All three teachers who taught on the Electoral College shared a common goal of having their students critique the systems fairness. With the context of the classes taking place during an election year, there was an added layer of relevance and authenticity for the students that is not found in non-election years. By using primary and secondary source documents all three teachers used the historical critiques of the Electoral College as an opportunity to have students substantively question about the structure of the election system without being directly partisan



in relation to one candidate or the other. Evidence showed students making connections the 2020 campaign from historical examples provided. By making this pedagogical choice, each teacher was able to cover the curriculum while having students grapple with an authentic problem in a highly relevant political moment.

## **Election Results**

In the days and weeks following the 2020 Presidential election, the lack of a Presidential concession from President Trump weighed on both my mind and the minds of the teachers in the study. Due to previous research (Sondel, Baggett, and Dunn; 2018; Rodgers, etc., 2017), I would capture teachers' curricular and pedagogical decision making in the aftermath of the election. With President Trump making an early Wednesday morning speech in the East Room of the White House that was anything but a concession, he said, "This is a fraud on the American public, this is an embarrassment to our country, we were getting ready to win this election, frankly we did win this election" (Bianchini, 2020). This bewildering affront to election results and the democratic process was a key focus when speaking with each teacher.

*Mr. Matthews*--Mr. Matthews's Quick Write for his students the day after the election was to answer two of the following three prompts below as they came into class.

- 1). *Watching the election results has been \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.*
- 2). *So far, I feel \_\_\_\_\_ about the election results because \_\_\_\_\_.*
- 3). *I do not enjoy talking about politics because \_\_\_\_\_.*

After allowing some time to answer, students raised their hands and shared their feelings. During this exercise, Mr. Matthews would restate students' answers and provide some of his

thoughts and answers to the questions. One feeling he shared with students was his passion for politics and the process, but that he does not like arguments. He told his students he sees himself as more of a “peacemaker.” After about 10 minutes of going over the quick write and seeing how his students were feeling about the election, he then had students look at results as they were changing telling the students, “I’m using news sources that I trust.” When a few students pointed out that Arizona had been called for Biden by Fox News but not by other networks to that point, Mr. Matthews said he found that “kind of surprising.” During the lesson, he had students working on a scaffold to draw in the Electoral map. Prior to the election, both Mrs. Lawrence and Mr. Matthews had students individually try and predict the Electoral College results based on historical election trends and current “battleground states” and close races. The decision to have students analyze both the historical and current results I viewed as an opportunity for students to learn more about the process rather than the political polarization. Coincidentally, Mr. Matthews son was in Mrs. Lawrence’s AP class and when he noticed his son working on the assignment which had students predict each state’s results, he liked the assignment, so he emailed her and adapted it to his class. The largest difference between the two teacher’s assignment was that Mrs. Lawrence had students work on an additional assignment that preceded projecting Electoral College results, that had students’ profile “battleground states” which included (Georgia, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Texas). These state profiles had to include prior Presidential election results of the state back to 2000, important ballot issues, and important House and Senate races. Once completed the profiles than hung in the hallway outside her classroom for other students in the school to be more informed on the election. My interpretations from this assignment were that educators in Centennial felt comfortable to both collaborate across schools while sharing a desire to engage students in the

broader, election. Because the results were still being updated, students' focus was on the results coming in and teachers used that knowledge to focus their teaching accordingly.

While all four teachers discussed the election with students, Mr. Matthews was the only teacher who expressed feelings of finality after the election was called, saying "honestly, I've moved on...I just need to do other things." As a result, he did not spend extensive time analyzing the results after the election was called or entertaining the lawsuits brought by President Trump to challenge the results. Instead, he shifted to teaching the different branches of government which showed the influence the curriculum standards had on his instructional decision making. When asked what he was doing and why, he described needing to move on to teach "the three branches of government" because he had wanted to focus on teaching the Electoral College before the election. His curriculum also switches to Geography in the spring, so he did not have the luxury of devoting more time to the election results. From my perspective, I believe his political affiliation played a role in wanting to move on. In our post-election conversations, he mentioned the need to move on from the election with it now being "over" adding that he did not really want to entertain the claims of "The Big Lie" that the election was stolen from President Trump.

*Mrs. Lawrence*--In the lead-up to the election, Mrs. Lawrence had her Advanced Placement students learning about the history of campaigning and elections. She assigned students a project where they were tasked with researching the historical and current races taking place in battleground states. Students were responsible for creating informational posters that would hang in the hallway to inform the school of the elections. Their posters should include the voting record of each state over the last five presidential elections, any close Senate or House of Representative races, and any significant issues on the ballot in that state. This assignment was

paired with an Electoral College prediction map where students used the research that students had done on the states to predict who would win the election in each state. In reflecting on the assignment, Mrs. Lawrence described the students as “being really into it” as they compared maps in the days leading up to and following the election. When asked what the goal and purpose of the assignment was, Mrs. Lawrence said “the point of this is to get them thinking about how the Electoral College works.” She went on to say that her hopes for her students doing this lead “to reflecting on what we are trying to accomplish through the Electoral College...what is its purpose...why is it a thing?”

My impression of this lesson was that her previous experience in politics influenced her pedagogical decision to focus on political strategy, teaching her students practical politics – how do you win? How do you get the votes you need in the Electoral College from the key battleground states to win? Like the other teachers, she described students frequently checking and refreshing their iPads to check the results the Wednesday following the election. Mrs. Lawrence commented on how due to the election being called on the Saturday, it made things easier, describing the Monday after as “uneventful” with most of the kids not even mentioning the results. My impression from this conversation and those with Mr. Matthews were that some students were over the election and ready for teachers to move on to other topics. I found this to be significant when compared to the 2016 election which was a much more surprising result and emotional because it was decided the by the Wednesday morning when students were in school. This election was also unusual in that it created a dynamic of Republicans refusing to accept the results. President Trump did not concede and many of his supporters in Congress refused to accept the results. As a result, these four government teachers were stuck having to navigate how to talk about this breach of democratic norms and values when it seemed partisan to do so.

**Mr. Hunter**--Mr. Hunter was much more cautious in his decision-making about determining when to get into the results with students. Mr. Hunter did discuss election results the day after the election by using CNN10 and keeping updates but wanted to wait until after the Electoral College was certified on December 14<sup>th</sup> before going into greater detail. This meant that he waited until after the final test of the semester had been given, which turned out to be the final Thursday before winter break. In his email correspondence and weekly reflections, Mr. Hunter candidly shared the apprehension he held, writing that he was “a little bit nervous about addressing the topic since so many of those that I teach, support the party trying to overturn the will of the citizens. I plan on discussing it next week after the electors cast their votes. I hope to have students go over the map and identify the basic questions like how many states supported each candidate? What was the popular vote?”

The lesson Mr. Hunter filmed had students reading an article, watching news footage of the Electoral College certification, and discussing after each activity. He started the lesson by saying to students that “we haven’t discussed the election much since it happened, because it’s been challenged” and wanted students to understand why there were challenges, and to compare the maps from 2016 and 2020. The article he used was titled *Supreme Court rejects Texas' effort to overturn election in fatal blow to Trump legal blitz to stop Biden* by Pete Williams of NBC News published on December 11, 2021. He read the article aloud to students and had students follow along. This article outlined both the argument made by President Trump’s lawyers and the reasons for rejection by the justices. Following the article read aloud, Mr. Hunter asked the class some questions including “How many Republicans in the House of Representatives lawmakers signed on to the Texas Lawsuit?” A student answered correctly that 126 supported out of 190 Republican lawmakers supported it. Mr. Hunter then followed up that this could be a

problem for the election challenge because not all Republicans supported the challenge, while Democrats are unified on the topic. Question two was “Did any of the Supreme Court Justices nominated by President Trump vote to hear the case?” A student quickly said no, and Mr. Hunter pointed out that only two justices [Alito and Thomas] were willing to hear the case but that none of the three justices put on the court by Trump did. Question three was “The lawsuit from Texas was trying to delay the electors from which four states?” The answer was given by a student “Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Wisconsin” Question number four for students was “According to most conservative experts, what fatal flaw did the lawsuit have?” which he went on to describe was the lack of damage people in Texas could prove took place because of another state’s election. Question five for the students was, “Why did the governor of Wyoming not sign onto the lawsuit?” a student pointed out state sovereignty and the consequences of one state. The last question was “How many lawsuits were filed by the Trump administration” which a student pointed out was almost sixty lawsuits, with only two of fifty-nine going for President Trump.

Students then did a comparison of the 2016 and 2020 electoral maps. Mr. Hunter had students analyze the vote totals from 2016 and 2020, pointing out the increasing vote totals. He highlighted possible reasons for the large increase in turnout including the economy, coronavirus, early voting, vote by mail, and mobilizing people to vote. He also had students look at the five states that flipped, Wisconsin, Michigan, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Georgia. He then highlighted the history of those states including, Wisconsin and Michigan being normally safe states for Democrats and Arizona and Georgia being historically safe for Republicans and pointed to possible reasons for why Arizona flipped, mentioning John McCain and the role his widow Cindy McCain played in supporting Joe Biden as well as the criticisms President Trump has said about McCain and his military service including the attacks on his service in Vietnam.

When explaining the Georgia results, he talked about the work of Stacey Abrams helping register in “historically democratic areas with low voter turnout, encouraging early voting and mail-in voting” to help flip the state.

When talking with Mr. Hunter after he described having to “set some things straight with some students” when they repeated or brought up false claims about the election. He then showed news footage from the BBC which highlighted Senate Majority Mitch McConnell congratulating Joe Biden and Kamala Harris on their victory. In explaining why, he chose this news clip, he mentioned the importance of seeing how nations around the world report on the United States, pointing out that foreign news sources tend to have less of a political bias, instead just focusing on the facts. When reflecting on his questions and analysis with students, Mr. Hunter described “wanting to make sure to make a point with my questions” and let students know there is no precedent for this and that he liked using this article because it highlighted a Republican from Wyoming who understood that states “get to hold our own elections and you know that’s something we hold dear.”

The pedagogical decision by Mr. Hunter to wait until after the Electoral College to discuss the election results was purposeful. First, he wanted the election challenges to be decided and thrown out before he felt comfortable discussing them with students. Second, he wanted the Electoral College to be certified so that the results would be seen as legitimate. When showing his students, a clip of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, he stressed to students that the defeated party is accepting the results. From my lesson debrief conversation with Mr. Hunter regarding the election results, I interpreted his decisions as his attempt at being non-partisan by showing Republicans opposed to overturning the election. During this interview, he also expressed some anxiety that Republicans may still challenge the election results in January,

saying that “hopefully it does not get challenged. I don’t even know how I would even teach about that. What are they challenging over? There’s nothing to challenge over...they’re just idiots.” Unfortunately, for Mr. Hunter and the rest of the teachers, many of the Republicans did challenge the results and the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> took place.

**Mr. Feeney**-- Mr. Feeney also decided to wait until the election was certified by the Electoral College in December before going into detail about the electoral college results and how President Biden won. Part of his justification for doing so was that he wanted to do some research on the voting trends among demographic turnouts. Like Mr. Hunter, he also mentioned wanting the legal process of President Trump’s election challenges to pass and having the results become official before engaging the students in a discussion of the election results. Mr. Feeney detailed his intentions of wanting to know more about the results, demographic changes, and battleground states before diving into the results. His aim was for students to understand what enabled Biden to get elected.

For Mr. Feeney, his goal was to help students understand “why Biden won?” and avoid the question of “whether he won?” This was purposeful attempt to keep the discussion away from “the Big Lie” and on the practical politics how Biden won, focusing on the battleground states, increased voter turnout as a result of mail-in ballots, and changing demographics in states like Georgia and Florida. To do this he engaged students with an NPR article titled “*How Biden won: Ramping up the Base and Expanding margins in the suburbs*” coupled with a discussion where he led students in questions about what they had read, the trends among voters, and swing states that made the difference for Biden. The decision to talk with students about why Biden won while giving students an article titled how he won are two different ideas, the distinction between the two was not openly discussed with students. He had students discuss the trends and



analyze why there is polarization. He asked the students, “Do you think it's a North/South, Black/White, or Rural/Suburb divide? Students suggested that it was a combination. One student asked Mr. Feeney, what he thought, and Mr. Feeney shared that he felt that the divide among Americans is an “ideological and cultural polarization fueled by social media.” He then proceeded to discuss the levels of college education in the suburbs compared to rural areas, the increase in voter turnout, and led the students in an Electoral College map analysis. When I asked about his “ideological and cultural polarization fueled by social media” quote he elaborated that he believes social media for all its good in connecting people, does more harm in polarizing people over political perspectives.

During the map analysis, one student asked Mr. Feeney and the class, “Do you think Trump would have done better in the election if Covid didn't happen?” Mr. Feeney said, “that's a great question.” Mr. Feeney mentioned President Trump's approval ratings were the highest he had ever had before the pandemic but could not recall the actual approval rating. He went on to say that “Presidents often get too much credit and too much blame for things but, at the time, before COVID-19, the economy was booming, and unemployment rates were low.” He gave students an analogy of a car [the economy] moving down the interstate at 75 miles an hour and having to slam on the breaks. He said, “The car wasn't broken like in 2008 but having to stop slowed things down, and that was because of Covid.” Mr. Feeney directed the students to compare the Electoral College maps from 2016 and 2020, analyzing what changed and where those changes took place. Like that of Mr. Hunter, Mr. Feeney focused on the states that flipped: Georgia, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan. He posed the question to students “Do you think {referring to the map} that it was something Trump did or something Biden did?” Most students in the class pointed to President Trump's focus on the economy whereas Biden

tended to focus on the people. Mr. Feeney tended to agree with his students saying during the lesson that “depending on what side you are on, and if you lost a family member from Covid, Trump’s message maybe came off as insensitive,” which students seemed to agree with by nodding their head in agreement.

As the students discussed the electoral map and trends, one student in Mr. Feeney’s class made an insightful observation about the media that changed the direction of the conversation. The female student made the statement “a lot of Republicans I know have stopped watching Fox News and switched over to Newsmax and they said it was because of Fox News’s response to the election” which led to an in-depth discussion on the student’s habits and consumption of news. Mr. Feeney said, “that’s interesting” and proceeded to ask about how much news students watch and “one a scale of one to ten, ten being the most trustworthy, how would you rate mainstream media?” Two students quickly said “a three or four” with no student in the class putting the trustworthiness above a five. Mr. Feeney then quickly asked, “why do you rank it so low?” with students responding “bias” in the news. Mr. Feeney then referenced a previous lesson where students had analyzed the biases within media using a spectrum and asked about students feeling towards bias in the news, with students wishing that more news coverage was “in the middle” giving perspectives of a story from both sides [liberal and conservative]. Mr. Feeney then asked his students “do you feel you would watch the news more if it was more trustworthy, less arguing” which students overwhelmingly responded “yes”. In transitioning to a group activity, Mr. Feeney encouraged his students “to watch the news, and keep up with the transition. This classroom interaction was just one example of Mr. Feeney probing his students about how they felt about a certain topic. Throughout his lessons, Mr. Feeney consistently asked his students to discuss how they felt about topics, which I believe reflects a genuine interest in his

students. This interest in student feelings could be considered a possibly missed opportunity because he did not actually have his students analyze and compare the news media. He also did not help his students differentiate between straight news programs and opinion programs. I believe his intentions were good, and it is important to talk about students' feelings as the process information, Mr. Feeney missed opportunities to help students analyze media more scientifically.

After having students work in groups discussing the election results, Mr. Feeney's exit slip for students was "I will make my country great by...???" He told students that "you have talked about the problems in the country, discussed possible solutions, what can you do to make this country a better place, as a citizen, as a human, what can you do?" When asked why that was his exit slip, Mr. Feeney expressed a desire for his students to understand and realize that their voices, opinions, and actions matter. As future voters, he felt strongly that they have a responsibility to be engaged and think about what they can do to make this nation better. I found this exit slip activity to be aligned with Mr. Feeney's goals and philosophy that he mentioned in our first interview, which was a desire of wanting his students to be both engaged in the current political events while also seeing a role for themselves within the political system. As a 12<sup>th</sup> grade Government teacher, teaching during a presidential election, I could see the importance and obligation Mr. Feeney felt in engaging students in preparation for citizenship.

Among the four educators, each expressed some level of shock and discomfort with the actions of President Trump and his resistance to conceding the election. Due to his actions and the context of the schools in which both Mr. Feeney and Mr. Hunter taught, they chose to take some time for the legal process to occur before engaging students in how President-elect Biden was able to win the election, while denouncing the notion that fraud took place. For Mrs.

Lawrence, she bemoaned about the damage President Trump was causing to the democratic institutions and elections of the country by not acknowledging Joe Biden's Electoral College victory. For Mr. Matthews, the lone liberal, he chose to avoid the controversy as much as possible and instead move on to other curricular standards rather than spend more time discussing the election. These decisions I believe reflect the influence of teacher's personal political views influencing how they taught, with the more conservative teachers waiting and spending more time looking at election results while the only liberal teacher seemed to move on after the election results were official. Prior to January 6<sup>th</sup>, each teacher had spent time in the classroom discussing results while trying to do so in a non-partisan manner.

### **January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

All four teachers expressed a desire and showed commitment to remaining impartial in teaching the structure of the government and practical politics. However, the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, that led to an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, killing six people, both shocked and challenged educators when it came to being impartial in the classroom. As the events were unfolding, I emailed all my participants to capture the emotions and instructional decisions they were making. All four participants described being shocked and thankful that they did not have the news on and students in their rooms as the events unfolded. For Mr. Feeney and Mrs. Lawrence, they were already on their afternoon planning period as the events were taking place. For Mr. Matthews he did not pay attention to the events until Mr. Hunter and another teacher told him to check the news on his computer. All four teachers began immediately planning for how they were going to approach teaching this event, even as the events were still unfolding. When the election results were contested, only three of the teachers taught those events in real time and that teacher (Mr. Matthews) only spent one day because he felt the "outcome was

determined.” In this case, all four teachers decided they had to teach the events as they unfolded. In this section, I outline the decisions and actions of each teacher as they reported their decisions to me. because the events were unplanned and the teachers were making and implementing swift decisions about lessons, none of them filmed themselves. However, their answers emphasized the stress and real-time professional judgements they were making.

*Mrs. Lawrence*—I interviewed Mrs. Lawrence on 1/11/21, the Monday afternoon following the events at the Capitol. When corresponding with her to set up the interview, she described the teaching day as “unlike any other.” The events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 took place on the first week of the new semester for all the participants. Mrs. Lawrence’s grade level Government courses lasted 9 weeks so those students were brand new to her. In our debrief, she highlighted that she lacked a shared experience from the fall with this group of students, and she had not had an opportunity to develop relationships with these classes of students.

Mrs. Lawrence went head-on in analyzing and discussing with her students the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>. She viewed the events at the Capitol as an attack on the institutions that uphold our democracy. She described wanting to filter emotions from facts, and have her students examine the timeline of events from January 6. She began with why Congress was convened in the House and Senate chambers and moved to the process behind the election and transition of power. She laid out the certification period of events following the November 3<sup>rd</sup> election, including the Electoral College certification dates and the wording of the Constitution. She described to me asking students “what were the trespassers, the people coming into the chamber trying to accomplish?” She wanted her students to come up with the answers, which according to her, her students said, “disrupt the process, and stop the steal.” She then said that she wanted her students to come to these conclusions on their own based on the sequence of events. To gauge students

understanding of the events, she showed a video clip of British ITV's Robert Moore's footage from inside the Capitol as events unfolded, focusing on her student's reactions to the events. She described "a significant amount of discomfort and concern because of the rawness of it, the fact that it just happened. The fact that it happened so quickly." She thought her students' understanding that it was a combined session of Congress with the vice president there as president of the Senate to certify the Electoral College votes helped her students understand the gravity of the situation. When asked about her intent and aims for students she said, "This was not just another political rally." She wanted to drive home to students that these events were:

Something radically different...these are teenagers who are really paying attention to their first presidential campaign. I do not want them to walk away from this with the idea that this is how things go. That this is normal. It cannot be! It cannot be excused. It can't be rationalized, it cannot be made to be normal. It has not been in the past, and it cannot be in the future. So, everything I tried to do was geared toward helping them understand that.

She then showed a CNN compilation of how the foreign press covered the events because even though we may not be able to understand the language, "you didn't really have to be able to read the language to understand what was being communicated." She then moved into a conversation about the Associated Press storyboard and the decisions the media made when framing these events. She had students begin by coming up with headlines, as if they were the media, and how they would frame these events. She drew a vertical line on the board, creating a spectrum, and began with the word protests. She described this spectrum as a mild to spicy spectrum, with mild at the bottom, spicy at the top. Students then had to come up with words to describe what they witnessed. In her first class, one of her students called it a "gathering," a gathering "is even

milder than protest, you know, assembly is pretty mild, especially when paired with you know peaceful.”

From there, students began to “climb the ladder adding terms like, mob, riot. “The AP story Tweet introduced students to the word insurrection, which Mrs. Lawrence acknowledged most of her kids had not yet encountered. She said some of her students were “a little bit of you know it wasn’t an insurrection. These people are trying to save the government blah blah blah.” She then pointed the students to the federal definition of insurrection and let them decide whether to put it on the board. “If we are going to put the word insurrection, if we agree it’s an appropriate use, where does it fit on our mild to spicy scale? I let them put it on the board and tell me where they said to put it, we then looked back for other words.” As the class progressed through the ranking activity, the students added sedition either next to or above insurrection and they all had terrorism above that. Mrs. Lawrence said, “The students decided that the definition of terrorism absolutely fit.” By the end of the spectrum activity, the students began to see how far up the spicy scale the events were, with the only word above terrorism, being anarchy. As Mrs. Lawrence continued recounting events, she described her Advanced Placement class drawing comparisons of the Capitol events with that of Shay’s Rebellion and that the “recognition or reckoning with the understanding of the instability that we face right now” politically. She stated:

That was the bottom line. I wanted them to take away. I did not want to get into a whole, Trump did this Biden that, and I told them, what happened yesterday is so far beyond ideological differences. I will not dignify it by calling it a dispute of ideological differences. It is not about ideology. This is about some people follow the rules, about how the system works.

In this statement, I believe Mrs. Lawrence stayed true to her initial intentions and teaching philosophy by standing up for democratic norms. The context of the events, the role President Trump played in instigating the events, and his lack of a concession to the elected winner Joe Biden, I believed served as catalysts to highlight to her students how dangerous and unprecedented these political events were. In our email exchange, she sent me her concept lesson plan that was created overnight with her pedagogical focus on having students define the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> while also making sure that they understood the historic nature of the events and moment in American History. Her attention to detail and aims to have students grapple with what just took place left me impressed with how quickly she came up with the lesson.

*Mr. Feeney*-- I spoke with Mr. Feeney after school on January 12, 2021, to capture his thoughts and experiences from the last week. His first words were “heartbreaking” when describing how he felt. When discussing President Trump and his use of Twitter, he said

We’ll it’s like, ‘How literal do you take what he says, you know?’ He’s said a lot of these off the wall things, both in public and on Twitter and then I think the general rule that has been adopted by a lot of people is just, well, he doesn’t really mean that you know, and you know it’s like, well, how much did he mean this, did he mean to disrupt the democratic process in this, I don’t know.

As the insurrection was occurring, he did not have students in the room and immediately began writing an email to his principal, saying,

When it was going down, I was going to email my principal, me and him talk politics a lot, but right as I was about to send him the email, I get a knock at my door, and it’s him. He said are you watching the news, and I told him to come on in and you know at that



point, they had reported gunshots fired at the Capitol. It was just so, I felt like the closest thing I can remember to 9/11 that feeling when you have doubt of and I'm not messing up, being theatrical or overdramatic when 9/11 you start to wonder, well, like is this where you know, our beloved country is? ... It was depressing.

When students came in Thursday morning, Mr. Feeney had students asking about it as they came into class, asking questions about the events the day before. He decided to have students watch the first 15 minutes of The Today Show on NBC for context. Mr. Feeney thought they did a fair job representing the events, acknowledging that they are a little bit left leaning. But for the most part, he felt, they were “fairly balanced portrayal of what went down. So, then the next thing I did was I told them, I said, I want you all on your own. Think about why this is such a big deal? Why is this so significant?” He then let them think about it on their own, mentioning that “We’ve had a lot of things happen in 2020, and since the election, a lot of political drama. Why is this different, why is this event maybe different from the Black Lives Matter movement? So that is how I framed the question.” After students thought about it on their own for a few minutes, he then had them talk about it in groups, so that they could talk amongst themselves first, before bringing it back to a class discussion.” He went on to say that his model of teaching seems at times “overly repetitive, but that’s how I do things and I mean, I was kind of going on the fly, too. I was still trying to figure it out, we were getting information about what went down” regarding the events at the Capitol. When describing his overall intent for the lesson, he said:

What I wanted them to say was that you know our democratic processes is trying to be, be someone who’s trying to hijack the process, our democracy. It operates on a set of rules and consent by the people. You know that was I was wanting their answers to revolve around. And I would say about a quarter of the students did say something related

to that. Most of the answers were a critique of the behavior. They saw through, they knew that is not how anything productive is accomplished. So, there was a lot of conversation about protest...it was a resolved type of issue. You know there was not a whole lot of perspective differences on that, it was like, how did we let this happen? Why is this behavior unacceptable? So, they were it seemed like everybody in the class was under the belief that this was absolutely unacceptable and should not be tolerated.

From my conversations with Mr. Feeney, I was left with the impression that his students were critical of the process but not necessarily the beliefs of the protestors. Prior to the lesson, Mr. Feeney had not spent much time discussing the election challenges and court cases, instead waiting for those to run their course before discussing them. Mr. Feeney described his students being evenly split among support for Democrats and Republicans. Because he was teaching in a more conservative area and his own political beliefs as a “moderate” who voted for Trump in 2016 but left his ballot blank for President in 2020, I believe influenced his decision to focus on students’ feelings.

*Mr. Matthews*--After the Capitol Riots on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Mr. Matthews responded to my email asking about how he taught the events with his students by reporting that for the first time in his teaching career he shared with his students how he felt about a political candidate. He told his students that he did not vote for President Trump and that he did not support him. He said that he spent most of the day talking through the events of January 6 with his students. “I’ve shown clips of McConnell, Romney, and Graham refuting the violence and promoting our democracy” and denouncing the riots. During his first-period class, which was a group of students he identified in previous meetings as leaning more conservative, he told his students (for the first time as a teacher) that, “I did not and do not support this president. I told them that he

(the President) doesn't believe in our democracy, which I think is pretty clear." I was able to do a Zoom with Mr. Matthews on 1/13/21 to have him provide more context on his experience talking about the Capitol events with students. He explained that he had students with him at the time, but that he was not completely aware of what was happening until a colleague across the hall told him. "I didn't turn it on, we didn't see it live, we kind of kept going." He went on to describe how "then [Mr. Hunter] actually came up the last period. So, I guess it was happening, you know, around two or so, and Mr. Hunter had been watching the news on his planning. He was just, you know, kind of emotional about it and he pulled me out and we talked a little bit about it. I was not very aware of how I guess just how violent it was, how many people were involved, I just looked at the news, as I had no concept of how massive, how large scale the situation was."

In preparing for the next day, Mr. Matthews described a night full of watching the news and spending a lot of time "processing what I was going to talk about, what was I going to say. So yeah, the next day we spent most of the class talking about it. Just talking about how undemocratic it was." He went on to explain that he spoke with a local judge whom he went to high school with and has had Zoom into his classes to discuss how the judicial branch works. He said this judge has posted some "great stuff on Facebook about several post-election events, what our democracy is dealing with, political defeats, and all that stuff. So, I texted with him the night before and was like, hey, do you mind if I read some of the stuff out to the kids, they know you, they respect you as a person." When talking about his instructional aims, he said "I did not show anything from Joe Biden, Nancy Pelosi, or Schumer, no Democrats. I was just like, "This is what the Republican Party is saying about this whole situation, and this is bigger than one person." He then went on to tell his students, "You know, I've never had to say this to a class before, but this

is not a President that I support. It has nothing to do with policy. It is not about being a Republican or Democrat. It is about valuing our Constitution, our traditions, and elections. You know, he [Trump] has attacked this election as being unfair, which is not true. And you know, all the legal proceedings that ran their course, there was no evidence of any kind, no fraud or any of that stuff he alleged and about how he attacks Republican Governors, Secretaries of State, and the election officials of Georgia. This isn't how democracy is supposed to work.”

In summing up what his intentions for the student that day was, he responded “basically, the message was that this is unprecedented and that this is not normal. This is not how a President, a representative of what Republicans believe, that kind of thing.” When reflecting on the students, Mr. Matthews went on to say:

Nobody really argued with me. There are a lot of kids I expected some pushback from that were very quiet. And I think you know; their parents are Trump supporters and they have been put in that position. I even said Republicans have been put in a position of choosing this person whom they might agree with policy-wise, but you know, does it represent American values when it comes to respecting institutions and traditions, and all that?

In reminiscing on his planning, I asked Mr. Matthews if he had planned to disclose with students his feelings, and he said not really, and that he was inspired from talking with his colleague, Mr. Hunter, whom Mr. Matthews described as “pretty non-political, I mean I know how he feels, but outwardly he's pretty impartial” when around students. He said that Mr. Hunter admitted to him that “I'm not going to be able to stay impartial, so I was like, ‘Oh Nice! If he is not impartial, let's go!’” Mr. Matthews went on to say, “You know, I never said that I voted for Biden or Hillary, or I didn't say that I didn't support Trump because of his antics and the way he

demonizes people and system.” When asked about his feelings and what he was thinking, he said:

I was pretty anxious going into it, but my most outspoken conservative class was first, and they were very subdued, and I was like okay, I’ve got this. By the end of the day, my last class was the opposite. They are the outspoken liberal group, so I never even had to say or felt the need to say to them, I do not support this President like the conversation was so the other side. It felt unnecessary. But anyway, it’s been an interesting event.

It became evident that the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> were a line in the sand for Mr. Matthews and he felt the need to be transparent with his students. Unlike the other three teachers who have voted Republican or identify as more conservative, Mr. Matthews was the most liberal teacher in the study and the only one who received any parental push back during the semester, which was only one parent. His professional judgement to disclose his personal views on the January 6 insurrection and President Trump came from the importance in his mind, for his students, particularly the class he felt was most conservative, to know that the events of the prior day were not tolerable for democracy. This evolution in teacher disclosure was something self-reported by all four participants to various degrees, with Mr. Matthews being the most explicit.

**Mr. Hunter**--Before the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, in my debriefing of election results, Mr. Hunter and I had discussed the possibility of Congress challenging the election results. At the time, Mr. Hunter said “They may challenge it in Congress. So that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard...hopefully, it does not get challenged.” In a prophetic thought he said “I don’t even know how I’m like, how do you teach about what they’re challenging over, they’re not happy that the guy won? There’s nothing to challenge over, they’re just being angry.” In responding to my email about what he was doing to discuss the events at the Capitol, he wrote:

Well, I am playing CNN10 News which is updating the events up to right when Congress reconvened and then I am telling them what happened throughout the rest of the night in Congress with the challenges and certification of the votes. I am choosing my words very carefully and have made sure students see that what may have started as a protest ended as a riot or as some say domestic terrorism. I had one student ask how it is terrorism, so we discussed what the definition of terrorism was? We talked about how it is using fear, force, or intimidation for political or religious gain and then I asked, do you think the members of congress were afraid? Many in the room said yes. So, I explained that this is how it can be called domestic terrorism. I also made sure to convey how many Republicans in the Senate and House backed away from their challenges after seeing the dangers caused yesterday and led to senators withdrawing challenges for certain states. Lastly, I talked with them about how the riots only delayed the inevitable and that all of the votes were counted by the next morning and Joe Biden was declared the winner.

I was able to follow up with Mr. Hunter on Friday, January 15, 2021, eight days after the events at the Capitol to get a further understanding of his experience and instructional choices. My first question focused on his reflections of choosing his words carefully, which he replied with “Yeah, I just wanted to make sure they know it’s not okay what happened, and that there’s now real justifying it.” He used of the term “domestic terrorism” which “in my classroom only had one kid kind of question that terrorists and I just kind of looked up the definition of terrorism, we need to question that kind of use.” He went on to praise the coverage of CNN10 saying that the network was doing a “very good job of being neutral, neutral as possible” when describing the possibility of a second impeachment, and why some Republicans are starting to support it, while also mentioning those opposed. He then said:

But for myself, I was stressed to the max last Wednesday, like I was almost shaking during one of my classes, I was so freaked out by what was happening. And my kids had no clue what was happening, but I had seen a little bit on my computer screen about it so, I was really nervous that whole afternoon and I don't know how to talk about it the next day but I kind of made sure as we explained, this is not a game.

For Mr. Hunter, the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> forced him to be more opinionated in the classroom than he typically would be. When asked how he talked with his students, he mentioned that he did not reveal who he voted for, but he emphasized to his students repeatedly that “there was no fraud” in the election. He highlighted the Supreme Court’s decision not to hear the case and the numerous court cases at the state level that had been dismissed.

The context for teaching the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> to students the next day meant that all four teachers’ feelings regarding the attack at the Capitol were fresh from processing the events and having to immediately decide how to teach it. This event served as a moment where each teachers personal viewpoints and their aims were explicit, on display for their students. Each teacher openly condemned the actions of the rioters and expressed to their students how undemocratic and wrong the events and actions of the people who stormed the Capitol were. Mr. Matthews willingness to admit to one of his classes that he “doesn’t support this President [Trump] because he doesn’t believe he believes in democracy” was a significant evolution of his personal political disclosure with students. The aims of Mrs. Lawrence to have her students unpack and define the events through her “mild to spicy scale” showed incredible thought into a concept lesson on short notice. The decisions of all four teachers to divert from their planned teaching activities to engage students in discussion and activities related to the events at the

Capitol highlighted a significant opportunity-first moment of teaching where current political events drove teacher pedagogy.

### **The Peaceful Transfer of Power**

At the time of the inauguration, Capitol security was increased significantly and there was a real concern another attack might take place. This fear was described by Mr. Hunter, who said teachers were told by district administration that “K through 7<sup>th</sup> Grade was not to air the inauguration live just in case something happened out of fear for the damage and mental stress that could cause students.” As a result, both Mr. Hunter and Mr. Matthews, showed their students highlights of the inauguration using CNN10 later in the day, after the inauguration had concluded. When asked about what they focused on, Mr. Hunter highlighted President Biden’s speech where he mentioned being a President “for all Americans” whether you supported me or not. I got the impression from Mr. Hunter that it was important to show students that our democracy continues. In my last conversation with Mrs. Lawrence, we did not discuss if or what she did for teaching the inauguration. However, she did say in future courses, she planned to “spend more time” on the peaceful transfer of power because after 2020 “it is something we’ve taken for granted because it has always occurred.”

The only educator who filmed an observation on the inauguration was Mr. Feeney, who instead of focusing on the news coverage of the event, decided that he wanted to unpack President Biden’s platform and plans for the first 100 days with students before watching so that students understood Biden’s inaugural speech. He explained his reasoning to his students and promised them that they would watch his inaugural address the next day. He disclosed with his students, “It is happening as we speak, J-lo was singing as I walked past a teacher’s classroom but we’re going to watch the important parts tomorrow, the parts that matter, but today were



going to do some discussion/research in a scavenger hunt around the school.” Mr. Feeney had strategically placed eight “platforms” of Joe Biden’s plans in the hallways around the school to add a “kinesthetic dynamic.” Students traveled throughout the school to read and take summary notes on the eight topics. The platforms were a couple of paragraphs in length that included topics on immigration, gun control, education, taxes, COVID-19 response, dealing with President Trump’s executive orders, the environment, and racial justice. Students were tasked with going to each platform, reading, taking notes on President Biden’s plans, and then determining how they felt about the plan on a spectrum of “fully disagree, disagree with reservations, agree with reservations, and fully agree” while also explaining why they felt that way before rotating to the next platform.

In describing his goals for the activity, he wanted to educate beyond the classroom. He said he wanted students to be “fully private” when discussing topics with their group so that students could be “honest with themselves” when discussing these important issues. My impression of what “fully private” meant was just working closely with group members while in the hallway. He stressed the importance of getting students up and moving, and how changing up the scenery from the classroom can be good occasionally. Mr. Feeney also felt that as the social studies department chair, putting the platforms around the school would be good for his students, but also start conversations among students and teachers around the school. He stressed to his students the importance of the first 100 days in office and how this is historically a time when presidents have momentum and, in this circumstance, “there’s more cohesion in Congress because the Democrats have Congress.” Due to time constraints, Mr. Feeney mentioned that he was not able to debrief with his students on every platform, but had his students vote on which topics they wanted to discuss after the scavenger hunt. He described these conversations as

“pretty good discussions” that allowed for him an opportunity to provide more context when talking about Biden’s stance on the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement. The next day, he described watching the inauguration and “periodically pause it and discuss certain parts”. This decision by Mr. Feeney to have students discuss the topics before watching the inauguration falls in line with his earlier stated aims of wanting students to be informed on issues before making a judgement and doing so based on their own morals and values rather than some else. His decision to focus on students analyzing primary sources, secondary sources, along with news media followed by discussion is trend I noticed across his lessons.

In this chapter, I highlighted the common lesson topics among teachers during the 2020 election cycle, which included teaching on the Presidential Debates, the Electoral College, the Election Results, the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, and for some, the Inauguration of President Biden and peaceful transfer of power. These lessons and conversations with the teachers provided insight into their thought process and actions in the classroom. In chapter six, I will analyze the teachers as individual cases and provide greater detail on the variations and trends I noticed among the teachers.

## **Chapter Six: Summary, Limitations, Implications**

### **Introduction**

The opportunity to follow and capture four teachers teach during and about the 2020 presidential election while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic was truly a unique, historic event. The teachers enjoyed talking about social studies with me and were passionate about helping their students understand the complexities of our democracy. Due to the unprecedented circumstances and the uncertainty about whether the semester's class instruction would stay in-person for the semester, I was unsure of what I would capture from the participants. Fortunately for my study, the administrators in the two systems decided to provide in-person learning as an option for students and their families for the entire year. The four teachers, while anxious about teaching in person with students due to the risks of catching the virus, were all surprisingly upbeat. Each teacher discussed a sense of appreciation for being in-person compared to the “nightmare” of teaching entirely online from the previous spring 2020 semester. All four teachers went above and beyond their typical responsibilities: cleaning, preparing, and teaching day after day and persisting during challenging circumstances. Their resiliency and commitment to teaching students the current political issues and events of the 2020 election, their role and function in the community, and their willingness to participate in this time-consuming study was inspiring and made this study possible. In this chapter I synthesize my study into three sections: discussion and implications, limitations, and a conclusion.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study was organized around the question: *What decisions did teachers make about including & excluding current political issues as they teach a curriculum related to or during the 2020 Presidential election?* In addition to this, I wanted to know: *What materials and resources*

*did teachers use to help students critically examine the 2020 election? What reasons did teachers give to explain their curricular and topic choices? And how and to what extent did teachers' own political beliefs influence curricular decisions regarding political issues while teaching government and civics?* These questions controlled the methodological framework of my study and the first two questions are utilized here to organize my findings.

Findings suggested that several factors influenced a teacher's decision to include or exclude political issues related to the Presidential election. Some of these factors included the community in which the teacher teaches, the years of experience teaching the subject, and the time available to teach the curriculum. When talking with teachers, the COVID-19 virus limited the time for curriculum to be taught and the available pedagogy strategies for teachers. In the case of Mr. Feeney, his nine-week government course was shortened by two weeks, which required him to cut and shorten the time he would spend on topics. For Mrs. Lawrence, Mr. Matthews, and Mr. Hunter, COVID-19 protocols forced teachers into a teacher-centered pedagogy that restricted students working in groups and thus reduced the amount of student discussion, which resulted in more lecturing and teacher-centered discussion.

The 2020 presidential election and the transition period to January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, was an unprecedented challenge to a peaceful transfer of power in American history. The events and actions of 2020 have had a significant impact on teacher pedagogy and methods of instruction. Moving forward, examining the educational changes and impacts of 2020 on the curriculum from a social, political, and economic standpoint will be worth researching. In a year that saw a presidential impeachment, a global pandemic, the largest economic stimulus package passed in U.S. History, protests for Civil Rights and racial justice, a Supreme Court vacancy, a presidential election, a riot at the Capitol, and the second impeachment of a President after leaving office, made

2020-2021 a year for the social studies teacher. As a result, there will be numerous areas for research to include the impact of COVID-19 on schools, how teachers plan to teach the upcoming 2022 midterm elections, and ultimately the next presidential election in 2024.

*Teachers teaching Controversial Political Issues.* Research suggests that it is both critical and difficult to teach political issues in a heightened period of polarization. However, my study suggests that when teachers are trained for and feel supported by the administration and community, the ability and opportunity to engage in CPI is high (Byford, Lennon, & Russell; 2009; Dunn, Sondel, & Baggett; 2018; Journell, W. 2017; Oliver & Shaver; 1966). In speaking with all four teachers, they each described a positive experience being prepared to teach controversial issues. Mr. Feeney and Mr. Hunter both graduated from the same university social studies education program and referenced their undergraduate teaching program's emphasis on Persistent Issues in History (PIH) teaching. Mr. Feeney felt "my time in 1414 [his college classroom]" prepared him well to facilitate authentic discussions and ask relevant, societal questions to his students. Mr. Hunter also shared similar sentiments regarding preparation to teach, pointing out that his instructors "expected" him to teach outside their comfort zone and engage students in authentic lessons.

The challenging of Presidential norms had been a topic of conversation before the election and the president's rhetoric after the election via his tweets and news conferences sowed discord and doubt when he had been defeated. The teachers were in an unusually challenging position when the CPIs of the semester regarded the President challenging and violating the norms of democracy itself. The leading news stories were not about public policy but were instead focused on whether President Trump was seeking Russian assistance in the election, President Trump actively undermining public health officials' advice and guidelines for addressing the coronavirus

pandemic, and whether or not President Trump would concede once he lost the election. The teachers chose not to directly teach any of these issues. They also chose not to teach issues related to racial justice or policing policies of African Americans. They seemed to adhere closely to the curriculum of their course and focus on aspects of the election directly related to their curricular standards. When the election itself began becoming partisan, the teachers all chose to explicitly support the election process. President Trump's legal team challenged the election results in several states, delaying many Republicans from acknowledging the outcome of the election results until December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020, when state electors cast their votes. Every lawsuit was dismissed by courts because they lacked any evidence of election fraud that would have changed the outcome on election in any state or county. The Supreme Court refused to hear the suit from Texas challenging the results in December.

As a result, Mr. Feeney and Mr. Hunter were slower to engage in election results, in part due to the numerous lawsuits filed by President Trump and his lack of a concession. While both discussed the results and analyzed results with students, both expressed a desire to wait until the election results became official in mid-December before diving into the results with students to analyze results.

Each teacher took a different approach when discussing the election results with Mr. Feeney, Mr. Hunter, and Mrs. Lawrence going into depth after the Election. All four teachers taught in conservative leaning cities and districts, so it is noteworthy that they spent more time going into depth the election results, while Mr. Matthews, the most liberal of the four teachers was ready to move on after Joe Biden was declared the winner on Saturday, November 7<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Feeney's principal being a former social studies teacher gave him the greenlight to engage students in these discussions while I got the impression that Mr. Hunter and Mrs. Lawrence wanted to

ensure their students realized there was “no fraud” in the election. The desire to remain impartial persisted, but it was clear they did not want their students to leave their class under the impression that the election was stolen or that they could not talk about the results.

The four teachers were conscious of their role and influence in the classroom and made extensive efforts to include multiple perspectives from both political parties. Research has suggested that teachers avoid teaching CPI topics (Hess & McAvoy; 2015), yet this group of teachers did not fall into that category. However, it is noteworthy that the 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers engaged their students in CPI’s more often than 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. Mr. Hunter seemed avoid them when possible. He filmed three lessons on the same topic (electoral college reform) instead of three separate topics. Teaching on the Electoral College is one issue but its “safer” than an issue like gun control, mask mandates or police reform. Due to only observing teachers teach four times, it is possible they may have taught CPI issues not directly related to the election that I did not capture. The teachers mentioned discussing with their students’ issues of racial justice, but it was not filmed. A controversial Supreme Court nomination of Justice Amy Coney Barrett took place during the study, but that was not captured by teachers either. Instead, teachers largely focused on teaching curriculum related to the process of presidential elections, political party identification, and labels like conservative or liberal. While the teachers did not bring up the ALCOS standards, it was clear to me that the standards did have a heavy influence their choice of topics.

***Teachers’ Use of Media.*** In an era of social media and the 24/7 news cycle, education, and training for teachers and students in identifying credible news sources and spotting Fake News is imperative (McGrew, Ortega, Breakstone, & Wineburg; 2017). My findings suggest that these teachers were attempting to do this work by presenting students with multiple sources and perspectives, however, more work could have been done in helping students navigate and evaluate

source credibility. As Mr. Hunter noted in an interview, “when 9/11 took place, fake news wasn’t really a thing” which means that many veteran teachers who have been in the classroom long before the rise of fake news and social media could benefit from professional development on media literacy.

When examining what resources and reasons teachers chose for their curricular choices, observations of teacher’s practices showed that teachers included a bevy of resources to teach the election that included online news articles, video clips from news outlets, as well as primary and secondary sources related to the Electoral College and Constitution. Across all four teachers, the reliance on news media and technology to teach and engage students with the election was evident. By using YouTube and the internet teachers were able to stream news media and pick articles from the Associated Press, CNN10, NBC, NPR, Vox, ITV, the BBC, and FOX to engage students in current events. Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter (7<sup>th</sup> Grade) were consistently showing CNN10 for students to get an understanding of “both political parties.” On more than one occasion, Mrs. Lawrence used Vox to engage students in an article or video while Mr. Feeney often presented students with NBC, FOX, and NPR to show students “multiple media perspectives.” After the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, Mr. Hunter and Mrs. Lawrence highlighted using international coverage from the BBC and ITV respectively to show students how people around the world were viewing the events at the Capitol. I was struck how intentional each educator was with their selection of media and how they would often discuss with their students why they picked the source. For Mr. Matthews, when going over the election results, he emphasized “sources that he trusted” with his students. When he showed CNN10, he highlighted how they “try to be balanced” when discussing an issue. After the events at the Capitol, he “only showed Republicans” talking because he wanted his students to understand that not all Republicans supported the President or the events that took



place. The teachers from my understanding did not spend much or any time with their students exploring the difference between opinion shows and articles versus news reporting. With the nature of social media and 24/7 news cycle having teachers spend more time helping students differentiate between the two is vital. However, for that to occur, teachers need professional development in knowing how to scaffold students distinguishing between the two. I believe more research and professional development with teachers in the areas of media literacy would benefit students as they navigate news media.

***Teachers use of Technology.*** All four teachers had significant technological resources at their disposal. Each classroom had a projector and smartboard at the front of their classrooms which enabled participants to present PowerPoints and show video clips with relative ease. Students in the Centennial district all had access to iPads while students in the Milton district had access to Google Chromebooks. This 1-to-1 device setup coupled with the state buying the education platform Schoology for all districts in the state meant that teachers and students were consistently using and implementing technology. Teachers commented how this was quite beneficial for students both in having access to resources and for when students having to quarantine could keep up with material. The only downside according to the teachers was the lack of internet access for some students, particularly from Mr. Feeney, who's students lived in a more rural area, with less access to reliable internet.

***Political Polarization.*** Future research on how teachers have and continue to teach politics and controversial political issues will be important and relevant to pre-service and in-service teachers, along with teacher educators. In many ways, it will serve as an updated barometer for the climate of civics and political discourse in schools (Anderson & Zyhowski; 2018; Fay & Levinson; 2017; McAvoy & Hess; 2013). In pre-semester interviews, teachers describe their enjoyment of

the topic but also the difficulties and at times apprehension to teaching and discussing President Trump which aligned with previous research (Rodgers, etc. 2017, Sondel, Baggett, & Dunn, 2018). When it came to President Trump, I was under the notion that the teachers avoided his headline making behavior. From his clearing of protestors across the street from the White House to go stand in front of St. John's Church with the Bible to his dismissive behavior of Dr. Anthony Fauci's advice regarding the CDC and Covid protocols, teachers avoided discussing his actions. Even after the election ended and the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> took place, I was left with the impression from teachers that they were avoiding discussion on whether President Trump should be impeached for a second time. As social studies teachers, there is a balance between teaching the curriculum and current events, but I found it interesting that teachers avoided, when possible, the controversial actions of President Trump and instead focused almost exclusively on the election process.

Political polarization indicates that members of a political party have highly negative feelings towards members of the opposite party. This trend encourages loyalty to a party and a reluctance to criticize anyone within their chosen party. Pew Research (2020) found that 89% of Trump supporters believed Biden would be harmful for the country while 90% felt the same about a Trump victory. However, three of my four teacher participants, demonstrated an openness to consider a candidate of the other party when democratic principles were at stake. Mr. Feeney, Mr. Hunter, and Mrs. Lawrence were Republicans but voted for Biden in the 2020 election. For Mr. Matthews, who identifies as a Democrat, the 2020 election was the first time he openly told a class of students his personal political views when it came to the President. The day following the Capitol Insurrection, during his first-period class, whom he described as "more conservative" than his other classes, he told his students that he, "Does not support this President (Trump) and that he doesn't believe he [Trump] believes in Democracy." Both Mrs. Lawrence and Mr. Hunter

identified as traditional conservatives and reported to me they voted for President Biden. For Mr. Feeney who identified as more of a moderate, independent, he chose not to vote for President, leaving that section of the ballot blank. All four teachers expressed disgust for the rhetoric of President Trump and his consistent willingness to divide rather than unify the people of the country. The events of January 6<sup>th</sup> and the role that then-President Trump played in encouraging supporters to storm the Capitol stood out as a significant turning point in the study. This attack on democratic institutions appeared to be the point at where teachers felt the need to stand against partisan attacks and defend democracy for their students.

***Teaching Experience.*** Teacher's judgment was influenced by their years of experience teaching the subject. For Mrs. Lawrence, she was an experienced government teacher, however, this was the first year she taught Advanced Placement sections which require a greater level of depth in content knowledge and preparation for a national exam taken in May. In our conversations she would talk about what planning she was doing and how "she hoped" that everything she was doing was preparing her kids to pass the exam. Coupled with Covid, this meant that activities she would want students to work on in groups, often ended up being done individually. To help her plan she mentioned being a part of a few online professional learning communities that would post about what teachers are doing and sharing resources. I found this to be insightful that while she was teaching a brand-new course, she was also deeply invested in knowing what other teachers are doing. Years of experience also influenced the decisions of Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter, specifically on their lesson selection of the DBQ assignment. Both teachers mentioned that it was an assignment they had "done for years" because it posed students with a persistent constitutional question while also informing students about the function of the Electoral College while avoiding the partisan discussion of candidates.

***Teacher Collaboration.*** Across the four participants there was a limited amount of coloration taking place with other teachers. Mr. Matthews and Mr. Hunter while working in the same school, did not collaborate much. From my conversations with both men, I was left with the impression that they had taught together for so long that they had a strong understanding of the curriculum and a good idea of what the other teacher was already doing. The addition of COVID-19 protocols according to Mr. Matthews meant that “no professional development or collaboration amongst the different 7<sup>th</sup> grade teams” at Centennial Middle took place. While he did reach out to Mrs. Lawrence to get her lesson materials regarding the Electoral College predictions, this was the most notable event of collaboration across all four participants. Mrs. Lawrence was teaching Advanced Placement for the first time and often relied on her on-line professional learning communities and not the teachers in her building. On more than one occasion when speaking with Mr. Feeney he highlighted how much he enjoyed our conversations because he didn’t have a teacher colleague to talk about the political issues with. He did have a supportive principal with a social studies background, but according to him that was it. When I asked the teachers about if they would prefer more collaboration with peers, I got a receptive sentiment that they would. However, also shared their contentment with having the autonomy to teach and plan their own ideas. These mixed emotions left me wondering if they had more scheduled collaboration with other teachers what kinds of benefits and implications would result in their classroom teaching.

***Community and Administration.*** An additional factor influencing teacher’s professional judgment was their perception of administrative and community support. All four teachers expressed a sentiment of feeling supported by their administration when it came to teaching politics and CPI’s. Three of the four teachers noted that they had not received any critical emails from parents regarding their teaching of politics or the election. The exception was Mr. Matthews,

who had one parent complain at the beginning of the school year about his decision to teach students about the Black Lives Matter movement and the summer protests for racial justice. However, even in that instance, he said he felt he was supported by his administration. I found this level of administrative support both encouraging and necessary for teachers to feel comfortable engaging students in CPI's. Often research suggests that teachers do not feel supported (Byford, Lennon, & Russell; 2009 Haas & Laughlin; 2000) but in this study that was not the case.

*Teaching with discussion.* How to best prepare social studies teachers is a continuous process that will always be improving and evolving. In the preparation of teachers, it is important to develop teachers who are skilled and willing to engage students in the demands of citizenship. Too often there is an emphasis on rights of citizenship without discussion of the responsibilities of citizenship (Ho & Barton; 2020; Totten; 2015). This study suggests that teachers who do pursue higher education and professional development opportunities are likely to be concerned about incorporating multiple perspectives in their teaching and engaging students with discussion. My study indicates that we need to help teachers prepare to teach controversial issues in this hyper-partisan climate more carefully. Teachers need to learn to facilitate discussions on controversial issues with a framework that leads to careful analysis for the factual, conceptual, and ethical claims (Saye & Brush, 2004). Teacher education courses needed to be taught “with and for discussion” (Hess, 2009) so that future social studies teachers are exposed to the various discussion formats and facilitation techniques that generates deep analysis of an issue. This includes explicit instruction in thoughtfully selecting “open” questions (Hess & McAvoy, 2015) and using issue analysis structures (factual, definitional, and value claims) that might create room to clarify and analyze a complex issue without falling into partisan camps (Saye & Brush, 2004).

***Teacher Education.*** How to best prepare social studies teachers is a continuous process that will always be improving and evolving. In the preparation of teachers, it is important to develop teachers who are skilled and willing to engage students in the demands of citizenship. Too often there is an emphasis on rights of citizenship without discussion of the responsibilities of citizenship (Ho & Barton; 2020; Totten; 2015). This study suggests that teachers who do pursue higher education and professional development opportunities are likely to be concerned about incorporating multiple perspectives in their teaching and engaging students with discussion. My study indicates that we need to help teachers prepare to teach controversial issues in this hyper-partisan climate more carefully. Teachers need to learn to facilitate discussions on controversial issues with a framework that leads to careful analysis for the factual, conceptual, and ethical claims (Saye & Brush, 2004). Teacher education courses needed to be taught “with and for discussion” (Hess, 2009) so that future social studies teachers are exposed to the various discussion formats and facilitation techniques that generates deep analysis of an issue. This includes explicit instruction in thoughtfully selecting “open” questions (Hess & McAvoy, 2015) and using issue analysis structures (factual, definitional, and value claims) that might create room to clarify and analyze a complex issue without falling into partisan camps (Saye & Brush, 2004).

***Future Presidential Elections.*** Presidential Elections are unique, once in every four-year teaching opportunity for social studies teachers to impact and hook students on political engagement. Furthermore, federal elections happen every two, four, and six years, which means both parties are already looking at 2022 and 2024. It will be important for researchers to see how teachers approach discussing the Biden Administration. This study captured a unique presidential election that occurred when the teachers were strictly limited on pedagogical practices. Repeating

this study in 2024 would be interesting to see if the teachers make different choices and would open opportunities to observe in person and gather student data.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations to the study exist, and the findings from the study cannot be generalized beyond the teachers and classes in which they taught. The inability to observe teachers in the classroom while they taught and having to instead rely on teachers self-recording themselves teach was not ideal. If I had been able to be in the classroom for each teacher's lessons, students' voices and experiences would be more prevalent. The sample size consisted of four, White, experienced teachers with master's degrees from a similar geographic location who all felt supported by their administration and community to teach CPI's. This study does not address the racial justice protests that have taken place since the murder of George Floyd and largely absent from this study is the experience of the students. This study would have looked different if the study focused on pre-service teachers, first-year teachers or was conducted in a more urban setting. Although the study findings may not be generalized to the larger population, findings indicated teachers holding varied strategies and philosophies when teaching controversial political issues.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to better understand the experiences and professional judgment of secondary social studies teachers as they taught civics and government during a presidential election at a time of heightened political polarization. Using the framework outlined by Hess and McAvoy (2015) of Context, Evidence, and Aims allowed me to better understand the factors influencing teachers' decision making. At the secondary level, the findings from this study suggest that social teachers who are experienced, with support from their administration and community may be able to engage students in controversial political issues during a Presidential

election while navigating the climate of political polarization. The events of January 6<sup>th</sup> and the actions of President Trump refusing to concede and accept the election results as legitimate regarding President Joe Biden's victory in the Electoral College was stunning and challenged social studies teachers to ensure that students understand the significance and importance of elections and the peaceful transfer of power. The Republican party's loyalty to former President Trump and his unwillingness to accept the outcome of the 2020 election likely means that political polarization between the two political parties is here to stay for some time to come.

As educators and school districts move forward from this event and creep towards the 2022 midterms, 2024 presidential election, and beyond it is critical that a commitment and reinvestment into civic education. My hope is that my next study will be able to be conducted in classrooms with teachers, exploring the political polarization of the 2024 presidential election. I would like to have a greater focus on student outcomes and look at how they consume and internalize current political events. Media literacy will also be a emphasis of my research, looking at the methods and strategies teachers are using to help students navigate the credibility and trustworthiness of news sources.

When compared to science and mathematics, social studies are often marginalized and overlooked in terms of importance, however, in a year of social, economic, and political upheaval and change my study revealed the critical role social studies teachers play in preparing our citizens to maintain and improve our pluralistic democracy. The legacy of COVID-19 on education has yet to be determined, but there is no doubt that the growth and implementation of online learning across all levels of learning is here to stay, to what degree becomes the question. The reliance and use of media and technology among educators over the 2020-2021 school year is unlike any school year before and deserves further research.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Pre-Observation Interview Questions**

1. What do you feel is the primary purpose of social studies at the 7-12 grade level?
2. How should students be different as a result of a social studies program?
3. Please describe your teaching philosophy when it comes to discussing and incorporating controversial political issues into your curriculum.
4. Do you use examples of issues related to President Trump's administration in your curriculum? Why or why not?
5. Please describe any topics that you avoid teaching and the rationale for doing so.
6. Are you open to disclosing your personal views on controversial and/or political issues? Why or why not?
7. Do your political views influence your decision on whether you incorporate current examples from the Trump Administration into your teaching? Explain.
8. How would you describe your training and preparation for teaching controversial issues in the classroom?
9. Is there any topics or current issues you feel you will spend more time on this year compared to previous years?
10. How do your students respond to discussion of current political issues?

## Appendix B

### Post Semester Interview Questions

1. Describe your experience this year coming to teach in-person and the adjustments made to instruction back in August and going through the year to January?
2. Reflecting on this political season and election cycle, how has it impacted your classroom instruction?
3. Describe your feelings and emotions of teaching politics and civics during this politically polarizing time.
4. How did your instructional decisions align with your pedagogical aims?
5. You decided to the (Electoral College, Election Results, Political Parties/Ideology,) this way, based on how things went, Covid, how did things go?
6. Did your political beliefs influence how you approached teaching or discussing the election with your students, if so, how?
7. Media literacy was a focus or emphasis in your lesson \_\_\_\_\_. You described
8. After the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020, how do see yourself teaching President Trump and his administrative policies now that he is no longer president?



9. This last year has seen two impeachments, a global pandemic, demands for racial justice, economic intervention by the government, and along with a Presidential election and it's aftermath, how have these events impacted you as an educator.
  
10. Going forward, how do see yourself teaching about elections, political parties, Covid, Racial Injustice, the Capital Riots, personal disclosure.

## Appendix C

### Weekly Classroom Reflection on 2020 Presidential Election/Government Topics

Week of \_\_\_\_\_

Topic(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Lesson/Activity/Central Questions

Learning Tasks given to students

Reflect on students understanding of the tasks on these topics

Documents/Scaffolds/Organization of Students

Reflect on students experience & understanding of content during the lesson

Describe any feelings (excitement, happiness, stress, anxiety, frustration, etc.) you had this week related to teaching your content.

Describe any planned or unplanned political conversations of note with students, colleagues, or administrators.

## **Appendix D**

### **Model of Field Notes**

#### **Column One:**

Observations of classroom activity

#### **Column Two:**

Questions for teacher, side thoughts

## **Appendix E**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about how you thought the lesson went? What went well, what would you alter or change?
2. I would ask two or three lesson specific questions. Tell me about why you did...?
3. How you think students feel walking out after that lesson? Did they get to where you were hoping for?
4. How has the current news and political events come up in your class?
5. What is planned next for your students?
6. How has COVID-19 impacted your teaching recently?

### **Bi-monthly Check in Semi-Structured Zoom Interview Questions**

1. How have the last two weeks gone teaching civics and/or government?
2. I noticed from your weekly reflections you have been teaching \_\_\_\_\_, tell more about that lesson and how students responded.
3. I noticed you have been using \_\_\_\_\_, in your classroom lessons, tell me about the pedagogy behind using that method.
4. How have you been incorporating current events related to the election into your classroom?
5. Are there topics in the news currently that relate to your curriculum that you have avoided bringing into the classroom? If so why?
6. How have you discussed or addressed the concept of citizenship in your teaching?