

# Teaching Democracy in Polarizing Times

*Jacob Fay and Meira Levinson*

**By using case studies to discuss ethical dilemmas with their colleagues, educators can better prepare to address political and civic challenges in their schools.**

Educators have become increasingly stymied by the challenges of teaching both *in* a democracy and *for* democracy, thanks to the breakdown of commonly held civic and democratic norms. Whether during the 2016 presidential primaries, when a number of candidates made racist, misogynistic, and xenophobic claims, or during the opening days of school this fall after President Trump rolled back his condemnation of those marching with neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, many educators are grappling with the shifting bounds of acceptable political speech in the classroom—regardless of their own party affiliation.

While educators should feel confident in condemning white supremacists and neo-Nazis, they understandably find it harder to respond to students who echo other worries about and mistrust of particular groups, such as immigrants, Muslims, refugees, or Hispanics. Depending on how students express their concerns, they may directly violate district and state anti-bullying policies. Their comments may also violate civic democratic norms that schools have been committed to teaching for decades: norms of mutual respect, anti-racism, civic equality, and religious freedom. As educators and school leaders consider challenging these students' statements, however, they may face the risk of backlash for seeming to take partisan stands. After all, how can students be redirected or punished when they are merely reiterating language that national political leaders have used at campaign rallies and in debates?

Such questions were at the heart of the difficulties teachers experienced in teaching the 2016 presidential election, according to a report by The Southern Poverty Law Center (Costello, 2016). More than 50 percent of teachers surveyed said they saw an "increase in uncivil political discourse" during the year, and more than 40 percent said they were hesitant to teach the election at all. The decision not to examine the political process may have protected teachers from charges of partisanship, but it did not support students' civic learning.

The challenges of discussing current events—or even talking with one another about basic civic norms—have further multiplied since President Trump's inauguration, as both conservatives and liberals seem to see each other's worlds through a set of distorted fun-house mirrors. What those on the left interpret as Trump's evisceration of previously inviolable civic norms, those on the right interpret as refreshing refusals to bow down to elite political fictions. What even counts as truth has become essentially contested. For educators and school leaders, it can be hard to expose students to alternative perspectives that seem to "normalize" beliefs, attitudes, or actions that they feel should not be treated as normal.

## A Troubling Juxtaposition for Civic Education

For decades, partisanship and political polarization in the United States have been on the rise (Bishop, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2014). At the same time, educators, scholars, and policymakers have emphasized the importance of civic education (Levine, 2013; Levinson, 2012). These two trends suggest a troubling juxtaposition. On the one hand, Americans believe that their schools can and should do more to prepare children for democratic citizenship. On the other hand, the political climate both outside of and inside schools is characterized by sharper lines of difference between political ideals that have become, at least in the past few years, potentially toxic.

In the face of this political climate, educators have begun to confront daunting questions as they go about their work. 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? Relatedly, how do we create educational spaces that promote inclusive civic values when some of those values may feel exclusive or demeaning to others?

## The Challenges of Democratic Education

There are two different kinds of challenges that educators and school and district leaders face in educating for democracy in these polarized and civically unstable times.

The first is that of identifying, weighing, and balancing *ethical and political values*. When students organize a walkout to protest school budget cuts or to demonstrate solidarity with undocumented students, school and district leaders must quickly decide how to balance values such as student safety, freedom of speech, academic achievement, respect for rule of law, civic engagement, social-emotional learning, and fairness. Similar tensions arise when school personnel struggle to foster a positive school culture in the midst of a partisan divide. How should they weigh a student's emotional well-being against academic freedom, or the value of mutual respect against the value of standing up for what one believes in? Depending on the circumstances, multiple competing values may be at stake that cannot all be fully satisfied no matter what actions school leaders take, and that is often a hard bullet to bite.

The second challenge stems from the democratic nature of public schools. Schools are simultaneously institutions *in a democracy* and institutions that prepare students *for democracy* (Levinson, 2012). In other words, public schools—as well as teachers, administrators, and policymakers—are under democratic control *and* responsible for instilling civic and democratic virtues in every new generation. Hence, those who attend to ethical dilemmas of democratic education must be both present-minded and future-minded. They must account for both the values reflected in the current will of the people as well as the values that strengthen and invigorate democracy over time.

Educating in and for democracy do not always fit together easily. For example, take the case of David Roberts, a substitute teacher in Clovis, California, who was banned from substituting at Clovis West High after he wore a Black Lives Matter pin on the job. Clovis has a clear policy (Clovis Unified, 2012) that prohibits district employees from "political activities" during the school day. Certainly, public monies should not fund public employees' engagement in partisan politics, and public school teachers should not impose their partisan viewpoints on students whose attendance is compulsory and whose grades and disciplinary school record are on the line. To the extent that Black Lives Matter is a political movement, it may make sense to interpret Mr. Roberts' wearing a button supporting the movement as a form of political activity.

On the other hand, supporting Black Lives Matter arguably reflects a commitment to shared civic values of equity and democracy. From his perspective, Mr. Roberts explained, "A pin that reads 'Black Lives Matter' is not a political button. It is a peaceful request to end this violence. It is not a protest. It is not intended to be anti-police and does not imply that black lives matter more than other lives. It simply says they matter, too," (Mays, 2016). Furthermore, Mr. Roberts wore the pin as a sign of solidarity with black students, who constitute a small minority (only five percent) of Clovis students.

In this respect, Mr. Roberts' eagerness to teach civic values of mutual respect, peace, and equality seems perfectly compatible with his remaining politically neutral—but only if we look ahead to the imagined fully inclusive democratic future and ignore the present-day partisan divides that surround Black Lives Matter. Mr. Roberts may have believed he was helping to provide an education *for* democracy by making a statement that would help all students feel valued and empowered. But he failed to account for his position as a teacher *within* a democracy that controls the schools, and that may well view a #BLM button as partisan political speech, rather than nonpartisan civic education.

So what can educators do in the face of such dilemmas?

## Reasoning Together

In our experiences as classroom teachers, we have both faced conflicts like these. Whether it was deciding if a student could proceed with a citizenship project that argued against same-sex marriage on Talmudic grounds or making potentially explosive choices about what to include and exclude from a history curriculum, we have felt both the weight

of sensitive decisions in front of us and the sting of the consequences that inevitably followed from whatever decisions we made.

What was important, we realized, was to not weigh these difficult dilemmas alone. By engaging our colleagues in these issues, we found that many different courses of action can surface, that reasons one educator discounts may be the reasons another emphasizes, and that values one educator may overlook are brought to the surface by another.

But like any complex skills, collaboration and deliberation take practice to get right. Reasoning together about politically and ethically charged issues can cause tension to build quickly, to the point that collaboration seems counterproductive.

We recommend, therefore, that educators and school communities start by discussing *normative case studies*—or "richly described, realistic accounts of complex ethical dilemmas that arise within practice or policy contexts, in which protagonists must decide among courses of action, none of which is self-evidently the right one to take" (Levinson & Fay, 2016)—rather than real-time dilemmas that are currently roiling faculty, staff, parents, or students. By working through realistic but not immediately challenging dilemmas, school faculty, staff, and even parents can learn communication skills that will be helpful when politically charged real-life situations emerge.

The key is to use cases that match the intensity and complexity of the decisions that teachers actually make. We are not talking about the "You find a wallet on the street; what should you do with it?" variety of challenge. The dilemmas that educators encounter are more complex and intricately shaped by context. People's identities matter. The age of the student matters. The past history of a student's behavior, or of the school itself, matters. Connections to social and political context matters.

This is why we recommend normative case studies as a powerful tool to delve into the kind of complex and intense decisions that teachers actually make. They draw readers into difficult decisions of education policy and practice, while also illuminating both the intricacies of the decision and the values at stake.

We have made a number of [normative case studies](#) freely available on our website. These include cases about teaching the 2016 election, addressing divisive political rhetoric among students, fostering inclusive classroom and school communities, and meeting the challenges presented by recent student activism. Further case studies, as well as commentaries by philosophers, researchers, and education leaders, can be found in our book, *Dilemmas of Educational Ethics* (Levinson & Fay, 2016).

We have been inspired to learn how schools and districts are using these cases to meet local needs. Just before the 2016–2017 school year began, a social studies director in North Carolina used our "Holding the Trump Card" case to foster proactive discussions with all social studies teachers in her district about how they would address the election in an engaged but nonpartisan fashion.

This summer, a group of first and second year teachers from urban districts around the country grappled with a case about whether it was appropriate for high school students to debate legislation about transgender students' bathroom access. Although they all personally believed that students should be guaranteed the right to use the bathroom associated with their gender identification, they were intrigued to find they passionately disagreed about whether it was an appropriate topic for classroom debate. The educators discussed whether the demographics of the school and surrounding community should make a difference, how to distinguish between partisan and nonpartisan human rights claims, and whether their judgments would or *should* be different in Texas (where legislation limiting students' bathroom access was on the docket) than in states that have not taken up this issue. They never reached full consensus about many of these questions, but agreed that the process of discussing them helped them understand and empathize with others' perspectives—and in some cases, even inspired them to change their minds.

As these examples demonstrate, while normative case studies provide the content, the discussion about that content is equally important. Thus, when we lead case study discussions with educators, we use [a protocol to guide conversation](#). The protocol helps train people to look for values and for tensions among those values, and to be open to others' perspectives.

Once educators become familiar with it, the protocol also becomes a way to direct discussion about the particular dilemmas that school communities face. When a parent complains that pro-diversity posters on school walls are too

political (Moyer, 2017) or a grade-level teaching team breaks down over how to teach a unit on immigration, educators can turn their own ethical dilemmas into a case for group discussion, as well as draw upon insights from prior case discussions about ethical dilemmas in democratic education.

The aim of normative case study discussions is to encourage and develop collaboration—or at least deliberation—across lines of difference. By engaging in this sort of discussion, educators will learn how to more clearly give voice to the values that drive their work, identify where and why disagreements exist, and even find those necessary small—and sometimes substantial—instances of common ground. Doing so does not mean that the dilemmas of democratic education teachers face will disappear or dissipate in difficulty. These are perennial challenges that every generation of educators needs to address. But with the right tools and opportunities, educators will feel better prepared to face these challenges—and that is certainly better than the inertia that comes with being perplexed, stymied, and conflicted.

## EL Online

For a discussion on guiding students to converse thoughtfully, see the online article "[Critical Dialogue: A Key Skill for Citizenship](#)" by Dana Mitra, Stephanie Serriere, and Michael Burroughs.

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**Jacob Fay** is a doctoral student and **Meira Levinson** is a professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. They are the editors of *Dilemmas of Educational Ethics: Cases and Commentaries* (Harvard Education Press, 2016). Follow them on Twitter [@EduLosopher](#) and [@meiralevinson](#).