

CHAPTER 23

Should Teachers Share Their Political Views in the Classroom?

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One morning in August 2015, I was starting to lead a professional development session for high school teachers working for Chicago Public Schools. My focus that day was to help teachers learn strategies to engage students in discussions of controversial political issues during polarized times. I barely had begun introducing the topic before one of the teachers blurted out, “What about Trump?! What are we supposed to do with Trump?!”

The outburst was partly a joke and received a laugh from the audience, which primarily was composed of teachers in Cook County, one of the most Democratic-leaning counties in the country. At the time, Donald Trump was still one of seventeen candidates vying for the Republican nomination and viewed by many on the political left and right as a publicity-seeking long shot. The next year, he was elected the forty-fifth president of the United States.

Beyond the joke, the question, “What about Trump?” articulated a real concern among these educators working in Chicago, the US city with the fifth-largest Latino population. Trump already had made xenophobic comments about Mexico sending rapists across the border, had announced his intention to deport 11 million immigrants, and was making headlines for promising to force Mexico to build a wall across the US border.

These teachers were not sure how to treat candidate Trump in the classroom and had important decisions to make. Should they remain impartial to what many perceived as hateful, jingoistic speech so that students could decide for themselves what they thought about Trump, his policies, and his rhetoric? Or, should they teach their students that some of Trump’s claims were unconstitutional or in violation of international law? Furthermore, if these teachers did not take a moral stand against some of Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric, would their Latino students feel that their teacher was not concerned about their well-being? If they did take a stand, would they silence or offend students who supported Trump? Alternatively, what if a teacher supported Trump and taught in a school with mostly liberal-leaning students? Would it be good for students to know that their teacher disagreed with them but still respected their views? Or would knowing their teacher’s preference create animosity between the students and teacher?

In that moment, I also had a decision to make. As the person leading the professional development, how should I respond to the outburst? I had to assume that in a room of



“Make American Great Again” hat, part of the Donald Trump presidential campaign of 2016.
BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES.

about fifty teachers, some likely identified as Republicans. If I encouraged the joke, did I communicate that I was a Democrat? Would it invite others to make similarly partisan jokes, creating an anti-Republican tone in the workshop? If I gently brushed off the comment, would the teacher feel that I was dismissing his legitimate concerns? Might he conclude that I was a Republican? What I did not want to do was undermine my aims for the day, which were to help teachers create classrooms in which students felt comfortable deliberating about political issues. Wanting to move forward with my plans while also respecting the concern, I replied with a quick, “Yes, that’s a hard one, but we’ll dig deeper into those dilemmas today.”

The 2016 presidential election put into stark relief the ethical challenges associated with introducing contemporary political issues in the classroom. These challenges are not new, but the increasing political polarization in the United States makes them more difficult to address. This chapter looks at one aspect of this challenge: *Should teachers share their political views with their students?*

FRAMING THE ISSUE

One way to approach the issue of teachers sharing their views is to think about it in terms of a professional duty. That is, disclosing one’s political views to students is either always the right thing to do or always the wrong thing to do. This type of thinking is in-line with deontological approaches to ethics, which stress that right actions are those that conform to

certain rules (duties) and that the consequences of actions should not factor into our ethical reasoning. Using this standard, if the parties agreed, then teachers should learn to do the right thing, much in the way that a lawyer learns to respect attorney-client privilege, or civil engineers know that taking a bribe is grounds for losing one's license. Yet, as the opening vignette suggests, a teacher sharing political views is not so clear-cut, because teachers have to weigh multiple and often competing aims in the classroom. Unlike a lawyer or doctor who usually is working with one client at a time, the typical high school teacher stands before a group of twenty to forty students who will have multiple and often competing education needs.

In our book, *The Political Classroom* (2015), Diana Hess and I have argued that a better way to approach this issue is to think about teachers withholding and disclosing their political views as moments that call for professional judgment. That is, teachers ought to make decisions about whether and when to disclose or withhold their views based on the following: (1) their particular classroom contexts, which might include the age of the students, the political makeup of the classroom, and the type of school in which the teacher is working (public or private); (2) what research tells us about teachers, students, and political disclosure in the classroom; and (3) their educational aims.

This chapter presents three examples of teachers making professional judgments. Each case identifies some of the competing ethical considerations and how different aims and contexts might lead a teacher to different conclusions. When appropriate, the cases draw on evidence about how teachers and students feel about the practice of withholding and sharing views. The purpose is not to make an argument for what should be done in each case. Instead, the cases draw out different considerations in each moment. As a set, the cases construct a framework for thinking more clearly about the professional judgments of teachers.

CLARIFYING TERMS

Before considering the cases of teacher practice, it is important to clarify terms. First, the focal question asks whether teachers should share their political views with their students. Political views might include one's ideological orientation (e.g., liberal, conservative, Marxist), one's party affiliation (e.g., Democratic, Republican, Libertarian), one's opinion on a public policy issue (e.g., Should there be a ban on assault rifles?), or one's opinion about candidates running for public office. Political views reflect beliefs and choices that individuals in a democratic society are allowed to make for themselves. In contrast, if a student in a history class wanted to argue that the Holocaust did not happen and a teacher uses evidence and argumentation to try to convince the student that it did happen, the teacher is not sharing a political view. Instead, the teacher is trying to correct the student's factual misconception. Political views are opinions about issues that are open for debate in society, and students ought to be allowed to weigh these options for themselves.

Second, it is necessary to clarify what it means to *share a view* and differentiate that from another type of political disclosure, that is, *advocating a view*. Teachers *share* a view when they make their opinion about a political issue known to the class or a student but do so in a way that communicates this is just one view among many possible views. When teachers *advocate* for a view, they are trying to convince or persuade others to adopt that view.

The lines between sharing and advocacy can be blurry, but these are important distinctions. In *The Political Classroom*, Hess and I share the findings of a study of high school students and their social studies teachers. We found that 79 percent of the 518 students surveyed agreed with the statement, “I think it is fine for social studies teachers to share their opinions about the issues in class.” In this same study, when students were interviewed about their teachers’ practices around disclosure, students who were in favor of teachers *sharing* a view felt strongly that teachers should not cross the line into *pushing* or *preaching* their personal opinions to the class.

Still, advocating may be justified in certain instances. For example, in this same study, teachers often advocated that students should register to vote as soon as they are legally allowed and explicitly tried to convince students that voting is an important civic duty, even though in the United States (and many other democracies) people are allowed to opt out of electoral participation. In other words, teachers felt justified in advocating that students should answer “yes” to the open political question, “Should I vote?”

This chapter discusses a particular type of teacher—that is, a high school teacher working in a public school. As noted earlier, context matters in discussions of whether teachers should share their views. The boundaries of professional judgment may be a bit different for university instructors because their students are adults. Elementary teachers also might have a different set of concerns because their students are much younger. And, teachers in private schools may be given more or less room to make judgments in the classroom, depending on the particular school in which they are working.

MAKING PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENTS

CASE 1: DEMOCRATIC AIMS

It is a chilly day in October 2016 at the height of the presidential election between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Donald Trump. Ms. Vakil parks her car and walks into the school wearing a jacket that has an “I’m with Her” button pinned to the lapel, indicating her support for Democrat Hillary Clinton. When she gets to her room, she takes off her coat and hangs it in the closet.

Some school districts in the United States have made policies that either prohibit or allow teachers to wear political buttons on campus, but, as Julie Underwood points out in “Do You Have the Right to Be an Advocate?” (2013), no consensus has been reached, and many districts are silent on the issue. Setting the legal issues aside, let’s focus on the normative question: Should Ms. Vakil wear her campaign button? You might think that by wearing the button she is not using good judgment. Even though she takes off her coat when she teaches, she still walks through the school on the way to her classroom and perhaps stops to chat with colleagues and students in the hallway. Along the way, she has communicated her political views to the school community. One might think that this is inappropriate for a variety of reasons, but one concern, in particular, might be that students who support Trump will not feel welcome in her classroom. One might also worry that being identified as a Democrat could unduly influence students—if they do not know much about politics, for example, they might assume that her political views are correct merely because she is a teacher.

Alternatively, you might think that Ms. Vakil has behaved appropriately. She takes off her coat while teaching, and insofar as she does make all students feel welcome and respected in her classroom, she is not creating a hostile political climate. You might go a step further and



“I’m with Her” button, part of the Hillary Rodham Clinton presidential campaign of 2016. AP IMAGES/MICHAEL DWYER.

argue that modeling for students someone who is politically engaged is exactly what teachers should be doing if they want to prepare students for democratic life. Or, you might argue that teachers have political rights, and it would be wrong for schools to adopt a policy that excessively limits free speech. It seems wrong, for example, to forbid teachers from placing a political bumper sticker on the car that they park in the school lot. Where is the line?

This situation highlights an important starting point for a discussion about whether teachers should share their political views with their students: somewhere between when teachers leave home in the morning and the beginning of first period, they transition from a citizen with full rights to free speech and political action into a high school teacher. While in that role, teachers have limits on what type of speech is appropriate for the classroom. Teachers may swear at someone in public but not at their students. They may talk about their sex lives at a friend’s house but not in their classrooms. They may proselytize their religious beliefs on social media but not in the school hallways. Yet, teachers are also important mentors for young people, and in that role, they need to be able to share some of their authentic selves with students. They might mention in the course of a lesson something about their passion for music, the museum exhibit they visited over the weekend, or their own struggles with learning a particular math concept.

One way to identify the limits of political speech in the classroom is to consider the tension between the obligation of schools as public institutions and schools as promoters of democratic values. As public institutions, schools are supposed to be nonpartisan. That is, they should not become a vehicle through which one party’s views are promoted and others

are denigrated. The same is true for all other institutions that receive public funding, such as the judicial system, the Internal Revenue Service, or the armed forces, all of which have an obligation to execute their services and duties to the public fairly and (as much as humanly possible) without partisan bias.

Schools are also special institutions because they are (mostly) compulsory and attend to the interests of children. (I say “mostly” here, because acceptance of homeschooling has eroded the public’s ability to make school mandatory.) As a society, we should not compel children to attend school and then use the institution to win hearts and minds for a particular party.

At the same time, schools are charged with preparing young people for democratic life. In her classic book, *Democratic Education* ([1987] 1999), Amy Gutmann argues that democracies are justified in engaging in “conscious social reproduction.” By this she means that a democratic state is allowed to engage in activities that preserve its status as a democracy. Schools are one such important public institution that helps preserve democracy, because it is here that young people learn what democracy is and to value particular principles, such as tolerance for religious difference and freedom of speech. As an institution charged with promoting and preserving democracy, schools are not neutral. Instead, they are, in part, educating young people to value democratic principles and preparing them for democratic life. This means that schools may teach against views, such as racism or sexism, that undermine the basic democratic principle of political equality. Given that political parties can disagree about democratic principles, how can schools be both nonpartisan and appropriately democracy-promoting?

Gutmann argues that the solution is for schools to be guided by (and uphold) the principle of nonrepression. This principle, she reasons, “prevents the state, and any group within it, from using education to restrict rational deliberation of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society” (Gutmann [1987] 1999, 44). The emphasis is on rational deliberation, which she argues requires particular “character traits, such as honesty, religious toleration, and mutual respect for persons” (44). Because rational deliberation is the guiding principle, schools are allowed to educate toward the development of those traits—even if those traits are themselves politically controversial.

In the case of the campaign button, Ms. Vakil is certainly taking a partisan stand on the question, “Who should be the next president of the United States?” The button could be viewed as sharing a political view in a way that invites students to engage in the election and political discussion—an invitation for rational deliberation—or it could be viewed as advocacy and an attempt to convince others to support her candidate. Again, the context matters. If, on the one hand, the school employed teachers who wore a variety of political buttons, while maintaining a culture conducive to rational deliberation, then this teacher’s message is just one of the many that students will encounter. In addition, the pro-Clinton stance would be seen as the teacher’s and not attributed to the school as a whole. On the other hand, if all teachers wore “I’m with Her” buttons, then it could appear as if the school as an institution is taking a political stand and crowding out the “competing conceptions of ... the good society” that non-Clinton-supporting students might hold (Gutmann [1987] 1999, 44).

This case highlights three aspects of the teacher’s role. First, teachers do not shed all of their political rights when they enter the school, but what they can say in the classroom is limited, including their political speech. Second, teachers are public employees and need to maintain schools as institutions that are open to competing political views. Third, teachers are part of an institution that aims to prepare young people for democratic life by teaching

them to value particular principles of democracy and therefore are not neutral to nondemocratic views.

CASE 2: THE AIM OF AUTONOMY

Ms. Wishner teaches an economics course down the hall from Ms. Vakil. On that same chilly day in 2016, she is delivering a lecture about macroeconomics and says as an aside, “All of the economic indicators show that the economy has improved under President Obama. Anyone who says otherwise doesn’t know what they’re talking about.”

The first question to ask about this moment is, “Is it true that ‘all of the economic indicators show that the economy has improved under President Obama?’” The short answer is that it depends on what is meant by “improved.” Recall that when Barack Obama took office in 2009, the US economy had just entered what now is referred to as the Great Recession. Upon taking office, the economy was rapidly contracting, unemployment was increasing, and millions of people were losing their homes to foreclosure. Furthermore, the auto industry and financial markets were on the verge of collapse. From this starting point, it is true that most of the major economic indicators improved under Obama. Economic growth as measured by the gross domestic product (GDP) went up, although modestly; unemployment went down; the inflation rate stayed consistently low; and 10 million jobs were added to the economy (Jackson 2016; Carroll 2016).

If “improved” implies that President Obama’s record is better than that of other recent presidents, then the picture is less clear. Wages for the lowest 40 percent of workers have been flat since the mid-1980s, a trend that continued during Obama’s terms. Income inequality has been increasing steadily since the mid-1980s and continued to do so under Obama (Shoen 2016). In addition, comparing the economic records of past presidents shows that Obama is stronger in some indicators and does comparatively less well on others. If we look at changes in the economy from the beginning to the end of his two terms in office, most (but not all) of the major indicators have improved. If we are comparing economic trends over a longer period, the picture looks more complicated. The point is that we can evaluate the economy in many ways as well as the role a president plays in improving or undermining it.

The question, “Has the economy improved under President Obama?” is complex and open to interpretation, yet Ms. Wishner’s statement makes it sound like a simple fact. Hess and I have labeled moments like these cases of “political seepage” (2015). Ms. Wishner is communicating her view about an open empirical question pertaining to Obama’s role in the economy, but it seeps out as an unintentional aside during the lecture.

It is quite possible that many students do not hear the comment as political disclosure and accept the statement as true. Ms. Wishner is, after all, the economics teacher. Conversely, students who identify as Republican might hear it as political disclosure and an example of biased teaching. Hess and I found that it was quite common for students in the same class to disagree about whether a teacher was sharing views, and this confusion is partially the result of political seepage (2015). Additionally, Nancy and Richard Niemi writing in “Partisanship, Participation, and Political Trust as Taught (or Not) in High School History and Government Classes” (2007) found that teachers who have these slips typically do not recall them, and furthermore, they consider themselves to be teachers who do not share political views with their class. In this case, it is likely that Ms. Wishner believes that she is stating a fact and not an opinion.

How should we evaluate moments like these in the classroom? The first issue is that Ms. Wishner is not being clear about what is and is not an open empirical question. That is,

she is presenting information that reasonably can be disputed as something that is empirically settled. This is a problem because students potentially are being misinformed about the state of the economy and Obama's role in it. Certainly, teachers should want students to become more informed as they progress through the course. The challenge is that Ms. Wishner might be unaware that Obama's record is reasonably open to interpretation. Hess and I have argued that teachers have an obligation to reflect on their practice and to exercise good professional judgment about what should be presented as open and settled (2015).

Ms. Wishner's comment raises a second issue. Even if the case can be made that Obama's overall economic record is strong, especially given that he inherited the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, Ms. Wishner does not show the students any data to support her statement. Instead, she shuts down possible disagreement by suggesting all other thoughts on the matter are wrong. The statement is not quite sharing a view, because it is not clear that it is an opinion at all. It also is not quite advocacy, because she is not trying to convince her students she is right. Instead, the view is imposed on the students; they are expected to accept it as true.

Imposing a view violates an important aim of education in a democratic society: the development of autonomy, or self-government. Educating for autonomy refers to engaging students in experiences that aid them in developing the disposition and capacity to revise their values and commitments and make reasoned decisions about how they want to live. In classroom settings, this requires students to learn how to weigh evidence, reflect on their beliefs (e.g., ethical, political), and come to their own understandings about their political views. Being able to think this way is important for living in a democratic society, because citizens are asked to participate in public decision making, and this requires them to be able to formulate opinions about complex issues. It is also an important aim of education generally, because knowing how to critically examine the world and make informed decisions is an important part of becoming an educated person.

This case illustrates two considerations about sharing political views with students. First, teachers need to be clear about what to present to students as empirically true, or settled, and what to present as open for inquiry and interpretation. Related to this, teachers need to be intentional in the classroom and cautious about allowing their political views to seep into the curriculum in unintended ways. Second, a central aim of a good education is to help young people develop autonomy by teaching the skills to evaluate evidence and reasons, so that they can form their own opinions about the political world. Imposing political views on students without giving them the opportunity to evaluate and question the relevant evidence undermines their ability to think for themselves.

CASE 3: PEDAGOGICAL EFFECTS

Mr. Ford had his twelfth-grade government course engage in a two-week inquiry of the Second Amendment. First, the students engaged in a seminar discussion of their initial thoughts about how they interpreted the meaning of the text. Next, they considered several key Supreme Court cases that address gun ownership and read excerpts from majority and dissenting opinions. Mr. Ford also gave a lecture to the class about how the interpretation of the Second Amendment has changed over time—in the courts and in public opinion. Last, the students read about and discussed different present-day arguments for and against placing restrictions on guns, some of which drew on evidence, such as the number of guns in the United States, rates of gun-related deaths, and numbers of mass shootings over the past

fifty years. During the two-week unit, some students who were sure they had a clear idea about what they believed became more uncertain about what good gun policy should be.

On the last day of the unit, Mr. Ford had the students read about the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act, which prohibited the manufacture and sale of assault rifles and high-capacity magazines. The law passed in 1994 and was in effect for the next ten years, but it was not renewed when it came before Congress for reauthorization in 2004. In class, Mr. Ford engaged students in a deliberation about the question, "Should Congress reinstitute the ban on manufacturing and selling assault rifles and high-capacity magazines?" Midway through the class, the students seemed to be stuck; half supported the ban and half did not. A student turned to Mr. Ford and asked, "Mr. Ford, what do you think?" Mr. Ford, who opposed reinstating the ban, replied, "That's for you to decide. How about someone from each side stand up and state your best argument for the view you disagree with?"

In this moment, Mr. Ford decides to withhold his view and turn the conversation back to the students. This is a fairly common response from teachers opposed to sharing political views, who often say things like, "I'm not here to tell students what to think; my job is to help them decide what they think." This autonomy-promoting attitude is certainly in line with the aim of teaching young people to deliberate rationally. Furthermore, Hess and I have found that just about half of the teachers in our study (out of thirty-five teachers surveyed) worried that sharing a view would influence students (2015). That is, they felt that knowing the teacher's view could cause students to agree with the teacher. In this case, however, the students in Mr. Ford's class were exposed to a number of competing views and pieces of evidence. After two weeks of studying and thinking about the Second Amendment, it is hard to believe that if Mr. Ford answered honestly, students could so easily be convinced to adopt his point of view.

On this day, it seems that Mr. Ford need not be concerned that sharing his opinion will undermine autonomy. He has designed the unit of study such that students have reflected on their values, and at least some students are revising those views in light of new evidence and reasons. Instead, his decision to withhold his view might have reflected a pedagogical concern: What would happen to this discussion if he answered the question honestly? Perhaps sharing his view would have the effect of ending the conversation and turn a discussion in which students were respectfully talking to each other into a back and forth between the class and the teacher.

Then again, if Mr. Ford had shared his opinion in a particular way, it might have reinvigorated a waning discussion. If, for example, he had said,

I think I'm opposed to reinstating the ban for several of the reasons many of you have mentioned. But, what I struggle with is what we see in the 2016 Pew Research Center report, which shows that 54 percent of Americans support bans on assault rifles and ammunition and 83 percent support background checks for all gun sales. Shouldn't lawmakers listen to the majority? What do those of you who agree with me say to that concern?

This moment of disclosure may turn the discussion from a policy question (i.e., Is the ban a good way to respond to gun violence in the country?) into a discussion of the relationship between majority views and the Bill of Rights. Rather than shut down discussion, it might enliven it. In this response, Mr. Ford also communicates that the issue is complex and difficult, and he models for the students respectfully considering other points of view. In this way, he encourages thinking autonomously and upholding democratic values.

Most notable in this case is that when a teacher has created a classroom environment that is open to competing points of views and has designed learning so that students are doing the difficult work of puzzling about what is fair and just, then the teacher's view carries less weight. In fact, our study found that students who attended classes in which the teacher primarily lectured were more in favor of having their teachers share political opinions than were the students in classes that generated a lot of discussion. Our hypothesis is that a lecture might be more entertaining if the teacher is saying something provocative. Conversely, when students feel ownership over the discussion, the teacher's views matter less.

This case illustrates nicely the idea that withholding and disclosing a view requires teachers to use their professional judgment. In this moment, Mr. Ford can justifiably choose to withhold or disclose his view, and his decision depends on his aims and his judgment about which direction he would like the discussion to go at that moment.

Summary

This chapter presented three cases in which teachers made a decision to share or withhold a political view in the classroom.

In the first case, Ms. Vakil's choice to wear an "I'm with Her" button highlighted two sets of values that often are in tension within public schools. On the one hand, a school is a public institution, which requires it to be nonpartisan in its interactions with the public. On the other hand, schools are charged with preparing young people to participate in and eventually help maintain the country as a democracy. To do this well, teachers need to educate young people to adopt a set of values necessary to engage in rational deliberation. Promoting these values at times may appear nonpartisan, especially in our highly polarized political context. Teachers who are considering whether to withhold or disclose a political view need to consider how their role as a public school teacher may limit some speech in the classroom and also keep in mind that they need to teach and promote democratic values necessary for deliberation.

In the second case, Ms. Wishner's comment about Obama's economic policies illustrated two more considerations for evaluating a teacher's political sharing. First, teachers need to be clear about what is and is not empirically settled. If teachers suggest that an issue is settled when it is actually open to interpretation, they risk imposing their political views on students. This practice is problematic, because young people may come to hold false beliefs. Second, teachers ought to structure learning to promote the development of autonomy. That is, students should be engaged in the work of trying to figure out what they believe about open empirical questions (e.g., Did President Obama's policies strengthen the economy?) and open policy questions (e.g., Should there be a ban on assault rifles?).

In the third case, Mr. Ford's decision to withhold his views when the class asked his opinion showed that professional judgment requires teachers to consider their pedagogical aims alongside their educational aims. Mr. Ford had sufficiently designed a unit of study that promoted rational deliberation and autonomy, and so he needed to consider what effect sharing his view would have on the discussion his students were having: Would it inhibit the discussion or enhance it?

These short cases illustrate that deciding whether a teacher is using good judgment about sharing political views is ethically complicated. Teachers not only need to design the

learning that will take place in the classroom but also need to do so with clarity about the normative aims of education (e.g., promoting democracy or autonomy), with attention given to the context in which they are teaching, and while attending to the academic and social needs of their particular students. This is complex work that is made more challenging by political polarization, which has made some teachers leery about bringing contemporary US politics into the classroom.

Some teachers may wish for a single, clear rule about the right thing to do regarding sharing political views. Yet, trying to simplify the complex task of teaching can rob teachers of much of the joy that the profession brings. Teachers, like students, are better served when they are given the opportunity to puzzle about and deliberate complex questions.

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