

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, insure domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Article. I

Section 1. All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

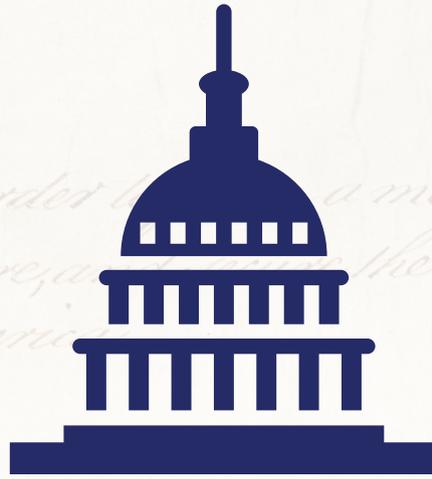


and within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they may direct, not exceeding thirty Thousand, but each State shall have at Least one Representative, and the Electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors in the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

When vacancies happen in the Representation from any State, the Electors in such State shall chuse in the Manner prescribed by the Legislature thereof, one or more Persons, whose Names they shall write on separate Papers, folded over, and the Papers shall be put in a Box, and the Ballots shall be opened, and the Person having the Majority of the Votes shall be chuse.

The House of Representatives shall chuse their Speaker and other Officers; and shall have the sole Power of Impeachment.

Section. 3. The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, chosen by the Electors in each State for six Years, and each Senator shall have one Vote.



CIVICS EDUCATION



Tough questions in the classroom

EVERY FOUR YEARS, U.S. voters go to the polls to elect a president. Politics fills our Facebook feeds, candidates and pundits dominate TV, conversations with friends and family focus on the latest election news.

For high school civics teachers, a presidential election — or any election — ought to be the perfect opportunity to connect what students learn in the classroom with “the real world.”

But Dr. Wayne Journell, whose research is focused on preparing high school social studies teachers, has discovered it’s often a missed opportunity.

Journell’s research reveals that teachers are afraid of teaching politics. “They’re afraid the parents are going to complain,” the associate professor of education explains. “They’re afraid the administration is going to complain. Because when teachers do it badly, it ends up on the news.”

And it’s not just fear. Many young teachers — like the teachers-to-be Journell instructs at UNCG — may not know enough. Many social studies teachers have studied history, not politics. And some haven’t paid much attention to current events.

In the last few years, Journell has studied differences in how politics is taught in schools. He’s also worked with teachers to figure out creative ways to get students more engaged in civics and government, such as using the television series “The West Wing” to dramatize important concepts and prompt discussion.

His message to teachers? Don’t fear the elephant (or donkey) in the room. Teaching politics and using current events in your lessons can help engage kids more deeply in the material and make them better citizens.

WHY TEACH POLITICS



Remember the 1976 Schoolhouse Rock video featuring the plaintive, animated legislation singing “I’m just a bill ... But I know I’ll be a law someday, at least I hope and pray that I will”?

Maybe that’s how you remember high school civics — procedural material on how our government works (probably without songs and animation). Except, the Schoolhouse Rock version of a bill becoming a law — or of any government action — isn’t how government truly works.

“Knowing the nuts and bolts isn’t enough,” Journell says. “You’ve got to know how the process works.”

That process involves politics: lobbying, campaign donations, political coalitions, deals between legislators, and all the other factors that influence which bills become laws and which don’t, which candidates run for office, and much more.

For his dissertation at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Journell studied how government was taught at three high schools just a few miles apart. Two of those schools — a private Catholic school with students mostly from affluent families and a public school where most students lived in low-income households — dramatically illustrated the difference it makes when students learn how politics works.

Students in both schools were studying current events during the 2008 election. By around 9 p.m. on election night, Journell figured Barack Obama had won, based on results in important East Coast swing states. But when he talked to students at the schools the next day, he found they had very different perceptions of election night.

“Many students at the private Catholic school had looked at polling data; they were talking about strategy and getting into the politics of it,” Journell recalls. “Several conservative students came in and said, ‘Once Obama won Pennsylvania, I focused on whether Republicans would take the Senate.’”

It was a different conversation at the other school.

“Many of the students at the less affluent school, they had no idea, because their instruction had not delved deeply into polling data and strategies,” Journell says. Several pro-Obama students told him, “I was scared when McCain started to come back as it got to the Midwest.”

But politically aware people, Journell says, “knew that there’s a big red streak right in the middle of the country that McCain was going to get.”

In fact, Journell and other education researchers say that, broadly, there’s a “democracy divide” between students in wealthier schools, who get more sophisticated instruction about politics, and students in underfunded schools, who don’t.

However, teaching politics is about more than helping students watch the Electoral College map on election night. It’s also a chance for students to practice tolerant, civil discussion of political issues — something that seems to have all but disappeared from public life.

“Most don’t tune into Fox News or MSNBC to see tolerant civic discussions. You’re trying to win the argument,” Journell says. “Increasingly, you’re not even seeing it from the politicians themselves. So, at some point, if we value such discussions as a society, we’ve got to see a model of it somewhere. Schools are a great place, because — even in the most homogenous schools — you have more ideological diversity than most students have at their family dinner tables or their places of worship.”



HAVING OPINIONS AND TEACHING, TOO

Before he entered academia, Journell taught high school government. He used current events — including elections — in his classes. And he even told students what his own political leanings — a little to the left — were. He didn’t worry about being accused of inappropriately influencing young minds, though.

TOUGH TOPICS Dr. Wayne Journell leads a seminar (center & right photos) for UNCG education students currently working as teaching assistants in social studies classrooms. Journell models what they’ll need to do to teach civics. “I disclose. I try to model the committed impartiality approach. We talk about current events.”



“When I was teaching in Virginia, I wouldn’t have cared if they had a camera on me the entire time,” he says. “I like to think I was doing it the right way.”

Though he didn’t know the name for it at the time, he was using an approach education scholars call “committed impartiality.” In this approach, teachers reveal their views to students, but they don’t claim their views are the right ones.

“Then the students are like, ‘Ding, ding, ding! I need to take whatever is being said and put it through a filter,’” Journell explains.

Though many education scholars are split on whether teachers should disclose personal views on politics, Journell’s research links disclosure with improved classroom instruction.

Teachers can’t be perfectly objective or neutral — they must decide when to cut off the conversation in the classroom, whether to call on the liberal or conservative student.

“When teachers disclose their views, it actually makes the discussion more vibrant, because the students realize where their teacher stands and they can ask questions,” he observes.

Even with that in mind, teachers still face challenges finding time to mix in current events with the required civics elements (the three branches of government, for example). At lower-performing schools, Journell found, teachers feel more pressure to spend classroom time on things they know will be on end-of-grade tests.

This is unfortunate, says Journell, since his research shows that teaching politics can also help engage students with the core civics material.



LEFT-WING, RIGHT-WING, ‘THE WEST WING’

In 2010, after coming to UNCG, Journell looked at how television might be used to improve civics education. When he taught high school, he had used “The West Wing,” a drama set in the White House that ran from 1999 to 2006. Now he wanted to study it formally. He found a Chatham County civics teacher willing to give it a try.

“I jumped at the opportunity,” says Roddy Story, who was teaching 10th grade Civics and Economics in Northwood High School. “When we first met, I was expecting to show maybe a handful of episodes. I remember asking him ‘How many episodes did you have in mind?’ and he said ‘The entire first season.’”

Story, who now teaches in Tennessee, spent every Friday showing an honors class and regular class “West Wing” episodes. The dialogue and plot in the show is fast-paced and complex, and Journell and Story quickly realized they needed to stop the show every few minutes to discuss what was going on and what principles of government and politics were involved.

“That’s when they really got into it,” Story says.



Journell, who observed much of his teaching that semester, says Story was also able to relate material taught on other days to scenes in the show.

“It’s kind of the Mary Poppins thing — a spoonful of sugar,” Journell says. “If you can get the students hooked on something, they’re more likely to get involved.”

Using “The West Wing” as an instructional tool, Journell found, helped students to practice thinking politically, to better understand real-life political events, and to make connections across the civics curriculum.

Though such tools can be a helpful, Journell also grapples with a more fundamental issue as he’s training young teachers: They’re simply not that politically literate themselves.

Over a three-year study, he surveyed pre-service social studies teachers on their knowledge of politics and current events. Turns out, they didn’t know much. Many of them were history majors, so they weren’t studying politics. And, he found, they were not in the habit of watching or reading news.

“The survey itself was kind of a wake-up call for my pre-service teachers,” Journell says. Some told him, “When I was just sitting there, just staring at the thing and not knowing the answers, I went home and learned the information, and I changed my habits.”

Journell models for his students what they’ll need to do to teach civics and current events. “I make it clear to them on day one,” he says. “I disclose. I try to model the committed impartiality approach. We talk about current events.”

“I think once it becomes normal for these pre-service teachers, they’ll go out and do it in their internships, and their student teaching, and then beyond.”

By Mark Toszczak • Photography by Mike Dickens • Learn more at <https://soe.uncg.edu/tehe>