

The Political Spectrum: Teaching about American Political Ideologies and Increasing Civic Participation

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Abstract

One of the most important aspects of American politics is the profound philosophical differences among liberals, conservatives, and moderates regarding human nature, the proper role and scope of government, and the nature of a moral and civil society. Unfortunately, research demonstrates that many Americans, especially K-12 students, lack a basic understanding of American political ideologies and how these ideologies impact our political, economic, and social policies and laws. This is untenable in a pluralistic democracy that requires and educated and active citizenry to function in an effective and just manner. Moreover, contemporary American politics is fraught with incivility and bitter partisan politics that hinders our ability to serve the public good and national security interests. This article will briefly examine the major ideological differences between liberals and conservatives and suggests methods and activities that can be implemented in social studies classrooms to improve knowledge, stimulate thought, and encourage active participation.

Keywords: political ideologies, democracy, citizenship, tolerance, civility, participation, social studies

1. Introduction

The 2008 and the 2012 national elections and the 2010 midterm elections, characterized by bitter partisan politics and personal attacks (Haynes, 2010) demonstrates that our politicians and citizens are divided by sharp ideological differences regarding a wide range of issues, most notably over the proper size and scope of government in a pluralistic democracy. Moreover, the high degree of incivility – candidates using derogatory terms to describe opponents, questioning their integrity and motives, untruthful attack ads, threats, and transparent anger and hostility – reflects the deep-seated ideological differences among Americans (Haynes, 2010) and serves as a poor example to K-12 students, many of whom are unclear regarding the major differences between liberals and conservatives and our two major political parties (Dye, 2011). By teaching the ideological differences between liberals and conservatives, social studies educators can help students clarify their own ideologies, emphasize that dissent is an integral part of a pluralistic democracy, and model civil behavior when participating in public discourse (Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE, 2003; Carter, 1998; Hess, 2000; Hoge, 2002; Jang, 2009; Klostad, 2007; National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).

Furthermore, research indicates that citizen participation in civic and political organizations – Kiwanis clubs, bowling leagues, parent-teacher associations (PTAs), and other groups – has declined in recent decades (Hudson, 2010). This situation, which can be attributed to numerous factors, such as apathy, time constraints owing to family and work obligations, and the stresses of modern life, is untenable in a democratic society (Hudson, 2010). The United States is facing an array of serious challenges – the deep economic recession, the national debt and annual deficits, retiring “baby boomers” that have been promised an assortment of entitlements, increasing competition owing to globalization, and enduring national security challenges – that will impact all Americans. Indeed, many younger Americans today, somewhat unconcerned with the current economic woes, will become very interested in political and economic issues when they become aware of their individual financial obligations incurred by government and private sector malfeasance. In fact, much of the current political discourse centers on the “solutions” – often formulated on the basis of political ideology and subject to controversy– to these pressing economic and political problems.

Research studies demonstrate that social studies classes that have substantial discussions of political issues, including competing and controversial perspectives, enhance civic education in numerous ways (Campbell, 2007; Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE, 2003; Chapin, 2011; Hess, 2000; Klofstad, 2007). *The Civic Mission of Schools*, an organization dedicated to improving civic education, states “When young people have opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school. Conversations, however, should be carefully moderated so that students feel welcome to speak from a variety of perspectives. Teachers need support in broaching controversial issues in classrooms since they may risk criticism or sanctions if they do so.” (The Civic Mission of Schools, 2003, p. 6)

Of course, what makes so many topics in social studies controversial are the powerful differences in political ideologies and morality – which may emanate from family background, personal experiences, specific secular or religious traditions, as well as a possible biological basis (Alford, Funk, and Hibbing, 2005) – that individuals hold about right and wrong, the proper role of government in society, and the laws and policies that they believe are indispensable to a just society based on democratic principles. Students must acquire a solid understanding of the philosophical differences among various political ideologies and be allowed to express their values, beliefs, and attitudes regarding a wide range of political issues; simultaneously, students can learn to listen to dissenting perspectives while demonstrating tolerance, respect, and civility towards their fellow citizens.

The 2010 National Council for the Social Studies Academic Content Standards does not specifically address contemporary American political ideologies; they do indirectly refer to them using other language, for example, “political parties.” One of the most important concepts in social studies centers on political ideologies – “an integrated system of ideas, values, and beliefs. A political ideology tells us who *should* get what, when, and how; that is, it tells us who *ought* to govern and what goals they *ought* to pursue” (Dye, 2011, p. 42). Thus, values, morals, and attitudes are the foundation for the development of specific political ideologies and support for certain laws and policies regarding domestic and international politics. America’s two-party political system, albeit not perfect, reflects these ideological differences.

However, political ideologies and political parties are far from a perfect match; there are liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats that obfuscate the classification of unique individuals into a monolithic political group. Yet, it is critical that secondary students have a firm understanding of the basic philosophical differences that serve to distinguish the major political ideologies. This will contribute to social studies fulfilling its core mission: preparing students for effective citizenship in a pluralistic democracy (Chapin, 2011; Schlesinger, 1998).

Thus, this article has two primary purposes. First, the article will briefly describe and analyze the two major political ideologies that dominate politics in America, it is critical that social studies students understand these differences if they are to make informed choices about candidates and domestic and foreign policy issues. Simultaneously, by teaching about political ideologies, students can begin to examine their own political values, attitudes, and beliefs by being exposed to different, and often diametrically opposed perspectives. Second, the article will present a lesson plan for teaching about political ideologies and suggest activities that can increase student competence, interest, and participation in civic affairs.

2. Modern American Conservatism

Contemporary conservatism, informed by a sober interpretation of history, is more pessimistic about human nature and cognizant of mankind’s proclivity for dominance, oppression, irrational behaviors, tribalism, and violence (Dye, 2011; O’Connor, Sabato, & Yanus, 2011). Thus, conservatives assert that law and key moral virtues – prudence, personal responsibility, self-discipline, hard work, honesty, moral courage, and a sense of community – are critical tools to restrain our innate passions and create a civil society. Critically, conservatives deny that man can be perfected by social engineering or government mandates and often favor the status quo and traditional values over changes that can disrupt the social order (Dye, 2011; O’Connor, Sabato, & Yanus, 2011). Conservatism’s suspicion of human nature informs the commitment to a strong military as the most important institution for protecting the United States in an anarchical world. The national interest should supersede all other factors when considering national security and the United States must be prepared to face existential challenges regardless of origin; America’s foreign policy’s ultimate goal is protecting America’s national security, geopolitical, and economic interests.

Conservatism advocates a strong belief in capitalism – laws of supply and demand determining prices and wages, competition, and the accumulation of wealth – characterized by low taxes and limited governmental regulations and intrusions (Dye, 2011; O'Connor, Sabato, & Yanus, 2011). Successful individuals should be free to pursue their own interests and be rewarded for their knowledge, skills, hard work, risk-taking and personal resourcefulness. The conservative narrative argues that government intervention exacerbates problems by creating harmful entitlements that diminish liberty by reducing personal responsibility, destroying incentives to work, creating citizens dependent upon government support, and providing fertile grounds for waste, corruption, and incompetence. While conservatives are committed to equality of opportunity, they reject the notion of equality of results; indeed, conservatives argue that equal opportunity will produce socioeconomic inequalities because individuals vary in their abilities, skills, habits, attitudes, and behaviors that are conducive to success in the modern world. Conservatives assert that limited government, because it places obligations on individuals, can nurture the virtues – civic participation, individual responsibility, compromise, and hard work – that make productive citizens in a democratic society (Will, 2008).

However, while conservatives generally deplore government intervention in the economic realm, they support government laws and policies that regulate social conduct deemed harmful for individuals and the larger society; conservatives oppose affirmative action programs, pornography, the legalization of drugs, abortion rights and the acceptance of homosexual behaviors and marriage; they favor strong penalties for criminal acts, and argue that government must resist the moral relativism inherent in modern American liberalism (Dye, 2011; O'Connor, Sabato, & Yanus, 2011). The modern conservative movement traces its recent roots to William Buckley, Friedrich Hayek, Russell Kirk, and Milton Friedman, all of whom agreed on this core principle of conservatism: an increase in the size, scope, and power of government reduces individual liberty and responsibility (Will, 2008). Finally, it is important to note that conservatism, like liberalism, is not a single monolithic political philosophy devoid of sophisticated nuances and sharp divisions under the umbrella label of “conservatism.” Conservatism can take many forms – religiously-based, libertarian, fiscal, national security, limited government, and others – on the political spectrum. While the political labels are necessary, caution must be taken when attempting to classify individuals into any “neat and immutable” political categories.

3. Modern American Liberalism

Modern liberalism, guided by a powerful optimism regarding human nature, contends that a strong and powerful government should provide economic security for all citizens, reduce discrimination and socioeconomic inequality, and protect civil rights (Dye, 2011; O'Connor, Sabato, & Yanus, 2011). Liberals argue that individuals or groups suffering from poverty, hunger, hopelessness, poor health, and other ills are victims of unjust institutions – public and private – and widespread discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sex, or nationality. Hence, liberals support programs, such as affirmative action, to compensate historically disadvantaged populations and provide them with opportunities long-denied because of America's long history of pervasive racism that violated our stated democratic ideals of equality before the law and equality of opportunity.

Many liberals emphasize the wide gap between our stated democratic ideals – liberty, equality of opportunity, diversity, the rule of law, justice, and the essential dignity of all human beings – and our actual practices of racial discrimination and widespread *de jure* segregation that severely limits access to quality schools, employment opportunities, health care, and public services. Racism has been the “Achilles' Heel” in America's 235 year history. Thus, liberals believe that government must take an active role in closing the contradictions between our ideals and reality; accordingly, liberals support social welfare programs for the poor (including social services, employment assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid), medical care (liberals regard this as a basic right regardless of the ability to pay, of course, some conservatives agree but are concerned with the process and financial responsibility), a high quality education that is essential to upward social mobility, strengthening civil rights laws, and reducing all forms of inequality (Ballantine & Roberts, 2009). Fittingly, liberals generally support higher taxes to pay for these social programs; they support a progressive tax system as a morally just method for achieving social justice. Furthermore, liberals believe that government must regulate the private sector, lest it engage in illegal and unethical practices that harm individuals and society. This entails laws protecting consumers and the environment from abuses by the private sector (Ballantine & Roberts, 2009).

However, while liberals support governmental intervention into the economic realm, they contend that the government should not regulate private social conduct; generally, liberals oppose restrictions on abortion rights, consenting adult sexual behaviors, laws that restrict the use of some drugs (marijuana), and oppose the death penalty (Dye, 2011; O'Connor, Sabato, & Yanus, 2011). In addition, liberals maintain that diplomacy, dialogue, compromise and respect for human rights are essential to national security and should play a bigger role in foreign policy decisions. Modern American liberalism can trace its recent roots to Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal program, John Kenneth Galbraith's 1958 defense of liberalism in *The Affluent Society*, and Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" programs that expanded government's role in health, education, and welfare (Will, 2008).

Of course, where an individual sits on the ideological spectrum influences how he/she sees the "other." For example, a far right ideologue – one that espouses a fascist/Nazi ideology – is bound to see a moderate liberal as a "far left communist." It is important that students understand that the term chosen by any specific ideological group to describe their group may not be how they are described by a competing group; a liberal may say she is "compassionate and cares about the poor"; her conservative friend may label her a "naïve" and "bleeding heart" that needs to face reality. Civil discourse requires that we teach our students to engage in political discussions and debates without resorting to anger, name-calling, dishonesty, and crude behaviors. The following section will discuss how social studies educators can teach about competing political ideologies and strategies to increase student knowledge, interest and participation in civic affairs.

4. Lesson Plan: Teaching About Political Ideologies

This is a three day (45 minute classes) lesson plan that is designed for secondary social studies students taking American government, comprehensive law studies, American history, or global studies courses (these courses discuss American foreign policy, the appropriate role on international aid, the viability of the United Nations, and positions on national security; hence, all of these issues and student views are directly correlated to political ideology). However, this lesson plan could be modified to fit grades 6-8.

National Council for the Social Studies Standards (NCSS): Academic Content Standards: Objectives Grade 11 – NCSS Theme: Government.

2. Explain, using examples, how political parties, interest groups, the media, and individuals influence the policy agenda and decision-making of government institutions.

11. Explain the role of elections and political parties (including third parties) in facilitating the democratic process.

Grade 10 – NCSS Theme: Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities.

1. Describe the ways in which government policy has been shaped by the influence of political parties, interest groups, lobbyists, the media, and public opinion.

Procedures:

I. Design a chart or table (preparing a PowerPoint presentation is an easy method) describing the basic ideological differences among the various political groups: Radicals, Liberals, Moderates, Conservatives, and Reactionaries. Explain the origin of the terms "Left," "Center," and "Right." (Day one)

II. Place students into small groups of 3-5 students and assign the following questions:

1. What factors influence an individual's choice to be a liberal, moderate, or conservative? (Hopefully, students will identify family background, religion, personal experiences, geography, historical era and contemporary events as major factors. Research involving the genetic role in influencing political ideology is in its infancy; yet there is some empirical support for the hypothesis that genetics does play a role in acquiring political beliefs).
2. Why do some individuals adhere to radical or reactionary ideologies that advocate violence, subversion, and totalitarian societies?
3. What is the relationship between political ideology and morality? (This is a high level and difficult question but is necessary to understand the passions associated with American politics and issues, such as the health care debate and capital punishment).

- III. Start a whole class discussion based on the answers from the small group work. It is important that teachers ensure that all disagreements, dissent, and controversial issues be discussed in a civil, rational, and academic manner. Students must learn to refrain from demonizing people who do not share their political views – anger, name-calling, sarcasm, condescension, and screaming are enemies of civil discourse and stifle healthy debates regarding proper laws and policies. (Day two)
- IV. Download and distribute the “Political Typology” worksheet (www.people-press.org/typology/quiz/) and instruct students to follow the directions. In all probability, they will ask the teacher the meaning of several questions and teachers must explain the answers so students can make an accurate choice regarding their views on the issues. Discuss the statements and articulate the reason(s) why a particular position is liberal or conservative; this will reinforce the PowerPoint presentation on the basic differences between the two groups. (Day three)
- V. Assessment: Assign the students an essay to describe and explain the major differences between the political ideologies and describe and defend their own ideology. Of course, they should be free to describe an eclectic ideology that combines various views and avoids an “either-or” dichotomy.

5. Conclusion

Currently, the United States is facing a host of serious domestic and international problems – 6.2 percent unemployment (June, 2014), massive debt, immigration concerns, the ongoing threat of terrorism, solving the looming entitlement crisis, and other issues – that will require bipartisan support to resolve. Therefore, it is vital that all citizens possess a deep understanding of the entrenched philosophical differences among various ideological views on the political spectrum. Social studies educators can make a significant contribution to civic education by teaching – without indoctrinating students by favoring one specific ideology and denigrating others – about American political ideologies in an academic and balanced manner that allows students to consider all relevant points and make a rational and informed decision about their political views.

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