

# The Case for Contention

Teaching Controversial Issues in  
American Schools

JONATHAN ZIMMERMAN AND  
EMILY ROBERTSON

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## CONTENTS

ONE / Introduction: The Controversy over Controversial Issues / 1

TWO / Historical Reflections: Teacher Freedom  
and Controversial Issues / 8

THREE / Philosophical Reflections: Exploring the Ideal of  
Teaching Controversial Issues / 44

FOUR / Conclusion: Policy and Practice in Teaching  
Controversial Issues / 92

*Acknowledgments* / 101

*Notes* / 103

*Index* / 117

ONE

## Introduction: The Controversy over Controversial Issues

In 1947, the California State Senate considered a measure that would have barred the teaching of controversial issues in public schools. "No publication of a sectarian, partisan or denominational character . . . shall be used or distributed in any school library," the measure declared, "nor shall any sectarian or denominational doctrine or politically controversial subject be taught in any school." The proposal generated an amusing satire by *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Royce Brier, who imagined a future class called "Skipping Around American History." Its teacher began by asking the class about George Washington; in reply, young "Johnny" noted that Washington was "the richest man in America, or almost." That earned a rebuke from the teacher, who warned Johnny—and his friend "Mary"—to steer away from potentially divisive subjects:

TEACHER: Johnny. We don't use the word "rich" here. We certainly don't discuss the social status of heroes like George Washington, for that would be controversial.

MARY: He won the Revolution.

TEACHER: That's right. . . . But be careful of that word. Let's call it the War of Independence. Independence is something everybody wants, and not controversial.

JOHNNY: I think slavery was race prejudice, don't you?

TEACHER: Around here, it's a ticklish subject, and I would advise you not to think about it.

MARY: Woodrow Wilson sure stopped the Bolsheviks.

JOHNNY: If he did, what's Harry Truman doing still trying to stop them?

TEACHER: Children, this is a wholly improper discussion of modern history. If you continue thinking along these controversial lines you will never grow up to be intelligent American citizens.<sup>1</sup>

The joke, of course, was on proponents of the measure, which threatened to inhibit the true skills of intelligent citizenship: debate, deliberation, and discussion. It also came on the cusp of the Cold War, which placed severe restrictions on expression and dissent across the American polity. Today, our society—and our schools—would appear much more open to debate about controversial questions. Cable-news channels and Internet chat rooms blare with discussions of every conceivable public issue, from same-sex marriage and human-made climate change to gun control and police brutality. Meanwhile, many school districts and state education agencies have official policies that seek to promote—not to prevent—classroom instruction about controversial issues. Indeed, controversy has become a central hallmark of modern America. We live in a roiling, rough-and-tumble political culture marked by endless debate and discussion. And we ostensibly prepare future citizens for that dialogue in our schools, where there is a strong consensus in support of teaching about the questions that divide us.

But a closer look clouds this sunny picture. Too many of the “debates” on our airwaves devolve into screaming matches in which combatants exchange insults rather than ideas. In our school classrooms, meanwhile, controversial issues arise far less frequently than our official policies and prescriptions would suggest. Part of the problem lies in the lowly status of American teachers, who often lack the professional training—and, in some cases, the legal protection—to engage in discussions of hotly contested public questions. Nor do they have much time for these discussions in their daily routines, which are increasingly dominated by test preparation and the other demands of federal and state accountability laws. Despite our overall consensus on teaching controversial issues, moreover, we have little agreement on *which* issues are legitimate topics for school classrooms. Should we debate recent “religious freedom” initiatives that would give citizens the right to discriminate against gay couples—even though some students might have gay parents, or might be gay themselves? Should we ask whether human activity alters the earth’s climate, when nearly every known expert on the subject confirms that it does?

This book frames a case for teaching controversial issues in schools, and for excluding those issues that are not truly controversial. To merit discussion in the classroom, we argue, an issue must be the subject of conflict among knowledgeable persons, and it must matter, deeply, to members of the general public. As public opinion changes, so do appropriate topics for instruction. In 1947, when California considered barring controversial issues from its schools, the question of state-sponsored racial segregation was hugely controversial; today, it is not. No reasonable teacher would

engage students in a discussion about the moral legitimacy of segregation, and no decent community would countenance it. But we *do* have a widespread debate over same-sex marriage, especially the question of whether laws that recognize gay marriage might inhibit the religious liberty of objectors. Recently, states have passed or considered measures to allow florists and other businesses to deny services to gay couples on religious grounds. Public perceptions of same-sex marriage are changing rapidly, and we might soon reach the point that Americans view discrimination against gay couples as the moral equivalent of discriminating against racial minorities. But we have not reached that point yet, as recent legislative debates confirm. So religious objection to gay marriage needs to be discussed in our schools, which are charged with preparing “intelligent American citizens”—as Royce Brier called them—who can arrive at their own reasoned opinions about contested public questions.

To qualify for the classroom, however, a question must also be contested by its most informed scholars. By that standard, the existence of human-made climate change would *not* be a legitimate topic for discussion in our schools. We would support—indeed, we would demand—debates about the social and political implications of climate change: how human beings might reduce it; which kinds of national and international reforms would best serve that goal; who should pay for the resulting costs, and so on. But we strongly reject the idea that schools should ask whether human beings have changed the earth’s climate, which is simply not subject to reasonable debate. Writing in 1951, 4 years after the California controversy-over-controversy, Minnesota senator Hubert Humphrey—a former teacher as well as a future vice president—insisted that schools should address public issues to prepare young people for “mature and intelligent citizenship.” But he also cautioned that schools should limit themselves to “arguable” questions about which reasonable and knowledgeable people disagreed. “I know from my own teaching experience how much heat is expended in classrooms when the debate rages over a fact as if its existence were a matter of opinion,” Humphrey wrote. Besides teaching students how to debate real issues, he concluded, schools should also teach them to “utilize the expert” to set aside issues that are not real.<sup>2</sup>

That means promoting a cautious respect for expert authority, which has become ever more tenuous in our own times. On the Internet, especially, conspiracy theories spread like computer viruses. Vaccines cause autism; AIDS does not exist; climate change is a hoax. Each of these canards is backed up by its own “experts,” of course, or so the conspiracists claim. Surely we have a duty to instruct young people about areas in which true

scientific consensus exists so they do not mistake a fake controversy for an actual one. Indeed, they cannot meaningfully engage in necessary political debates *about* the facts—How can we fight AIDS? What shall we do about climate change?—unless they learn to accept the facts themselves.<sup>3</sup> Now that so much knowledge is available online, deference to expert authority can seem quaint or even antidemocratic: should citizens not determine their own truths instead of blindly following truths that are established by others? As New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously quipped several decades ago, each of us is entitled to our own opinions—but not to our own facts. That is especially true in our so-called information age, when disinformation can gain millions of adherents from a few strategic clicks of a mouse. Agreement on a set of verified facts is actually the *sine qua non* of democracy, providing the shared assumptions for reasoned discussion. So our teachers have a duty to share these facts with their students instead of pretending that the facts themselves are subject to debate.

Most of all, teachers must model a style of “debate” different from what their students experience in other parts of our coarse and polarized political culture. On television and the Internet, talking heads and trolls shout over each other in a 24-hour cycle of snark and invective. And in our communities, Americans are less likely than ever before to encounter people of a different political perspective. Just as the Internet creates echo chambers of the like-minded, so do our neighborhoods segregate us into “lifestyle enclaves” where residents think and act in similar ways. In 1976, 27 percent of Americans made their homes in so-called “landslide counties” that voted either Democrat or Republican by a majority of 20 percent or more; by 2008, 48 percent of us lived in such environments. In the presidential election that same year, 89 percent of Americans who lived in a county with a Whole Foods grocery store voted for Barack Obama, while 62 percent of citizens living in a county with a Cracker Barrel restaurant cast their ballots for John McCain. Compared to citizens in other democracies, Americans are more likely to publicly express their political opinions. But they are less likely to discuss these views with someone of a *different* opinion; instead, they retreat into their own political cocoons. Most alarmingly, perhaps, this polarization increases with our level of schooling. The more educated you are, the less often you discuss politics with somebody across the political aisle.<sup>4</sup>

Our schools teach many things. For the most part, though, they have not taught us how to engage in reasoned, informed debates across our myriad differences. Simply put, our rhetorical commitment to “teaching controversial issues” in American schools has not been reflected in our day-to-day classroom practices. Thanks to poor preparation, some of our teachers

have not acquired the background knowledge or the pedagogical skills—or both—to lead in-depth discussions of hot-button political questions. Most of all, though, teachers have often lacked the professional autonomy and freedom to do so. That is particularly the case during wartime, when schools have sharply curtailed discussions of America's military conduct. But throughout our history—and into the present—teachers have faced formal and informal restrictions on political discussions of every kind. Rising education levels have probably increased this pressure, emboldening citizen challengers who formerly might have deferred to teachers' superior knowledge and credentials. "The high school teacher has in fact lost relative status in recent years as more and more parents are themselves high school graduates," the eminent sociologist David Riesman observed in 1958. "And while the kindergarten teacher gains admiration because she can control several dozen preliterates whose mothers cannot always manage even one, the high school social studies teacher has a harder time being one-up on American-born parents who can claim to know as much as she does."<sup>5</sup>

That is even truer today, as more and more parents have obtained college and graduate degrees. But secondary school teachers—and, in particular, those who instruct social studies—still face uniquely sharp constraints, for reasons that Riesman spelled out over half a century ago. "High school teachers can become labeled by their students as 'controversial' as soon as any discussion . . . gets all heated or comes close to home," Riesman wrote. And the threat was greatest in social studies, which "both draws on what is in the papers and risks getting into them." In many communities, that was simply too big a risk for social studies teachers to take. So most of them taught what Riesman called "social slops"—a litany of clichés and pieties—and avoided anything controversial that could only get them in trouble with one part of the public or another. "They fear that to utilize 'controversial issues' in education exposes them to criticism," wrote Hubert Humphrey, a few years earlier. "This has produced a nagging insecurity which in turn has forced many teachers to abandon valid educational techniques."<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, many other school subjects—not just social studies—involve potentially controversial issues. Teachers across the curriculum have struggled to balance their duty to address these issues with the inevitable pressures to eschew them. In the 1920s and 1930s, for example, American high-school science teachers emphasized physics and chemistry but downplayed biology. The reason was obvious: unlike the other major sciences, one observer wrote, biology threatened to "acquaint high-school boys and girls with the theory of evolution."<sup>7</sup> Citizen complaints have also restricted the forays of English teachers into controversial questions. Sometimes,

teachers have been barred from assigning *Catcher in the Rye*, *Huck Finn*, or the other so-called “banned books” that raise hackles at school board meetings across the country. Even when such works have been allowed, however, teachers often experienced sharp limits on discussing delicate themes in the texts—especially those surrounding sex. Finally, school-mandated sex education has also been a constant target of community objections. It has typically devolved to health or physical education teachers, who have often stripped their lessons of anything too explicit—or too controversial—for fear of alienating one parental constituency or another.

In the pages that follow, we examine how laws, school officials, and community opinion have all conspired to prevent or discourage American teachers from discussing controversial issues in their classrooms. But we do not want to leave the impression that teachers have always avoided such issues; most of all, we do not want to dissuade them from engaging controversies in the future. In 1953, at the height of the Cold War, a survey of social studies teachers in Ohio revealed that they were leading classroom discussions about whether President Harry Truman should have seized steel mills, whether Truman should have fired General Douglas MacArthur, and whether—as MacArthur wished—the United States should have used an atomic bomb in the Korean War. That same year, in another survey, New York City teachers reported holding debates on whether “Red” China should have a seat in the United Nations, whether Communists should be allowed to teach in public schools, whether Julius and Ethel Rosenberg should have received the death penalty for passing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, and whether Senator Joseph McCarthy was “a menace to or savior of American democracy.” Especially after several teachers were dismissed for their own Communist affiliations, some teachers also admitted that they were afraid to discuss anything controversial in their classes. But the survey seemed to show that their concerns were misplaced, or at least exaggerated. “Let the teachers who do have these fears take heart,” the survey’s author wrote. “The very subjects which they say they are afraid to teach are being taught by many of their colleagues in adjoining classrooms and neighboring schools. Such teachers are imposing an unnecessary censorship on themselves.”<sup>8</sup>

Into the present, some evidence indeed suggests that teachers overestimate the constraints on addressing controversial issues in their classrooms. Novice teachers, especially, express surprise when they hear about veteran instructors who openly discuss divisive public questions with their students. “You let them talk about *what*?!” teachers in a recent study asked a colleague when they heard about her lessons. “You let them express *what* opinion?” In many ways, these remarks speak to the new teachers’ weak preparation



for one of their central civic roles: to explore controversial issues with future citizens. They also remind us that this kind of instruction continues to occur, despite the paucity of professional training for the task and—particularly in recent years—the shrinking legal protections for it. When the United States attacked Iraq in 1991, students at a Pittsburgh high school walked out to protest their school’s refusal to address the issue. But 12 years later, when America invaded Iraq again, a high school in suburban New York sponsored a full-day discussion of it. At an all-student assembly in the gymnasium, five students and two social studies teachers presented arguments for and against the war; then the students dispersed to their respective classrooms to continue the conversation.<sup>9</sup> We hope our book will clarify when—and why—such discussion should occur. And, not incidentally, we also hope the book sparks some discussion of its own.