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Jeremiah Clabough
University of Alabama at Birmingham

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Helping Develop Students' Civic Identities through Exploring Public Issues

Jeremiah Clabough
The University of Alabama at Birmingham

Middle school students have lots of questions. Some are serious questions while others are just weird. However, the most important question that middle school students grapple with is a very basic one: who am I? The answer to this question is defined and redefined throughout students' lives. During their time in middle school, students give a lot of thought to answering this question (Roney & Lipka, 2013). Social studies teachers need to utilize activities that help students define themselves in relation to the roles and responsibilities of being a democratic citizen. After all, the purpose of school is to prepare future generations of democratic citizens (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977). One key component of being a democratic citizen is the ability to analyze political parties' perspectives and arguments about public policies. The ability to analyze political parties' differences on issues helps students make informed decisions on policies and candidates to support (Engle, 1960).

In this article, the author provides an activity for how to build students' civic identities by examining the 2016 Republican and Democratic Party Platforms concerning healthcare. He gives the steps and resources for the teacher to implement this activity. The activity allows students to critically explore different perspectives about a topic while also enabling them to grasp the basic philosophical differences between Republicans and Democrats. Through all of the steps in this activity, students formulate their own political beliefs.

Building Students' Civic Identities

The concept of building students' civic identity refers to them possessing the skills and dispositions to carry out the responsibilities of being a democratic citizen (Valbuena, 2015; Rubin, 2010). Being a democratic citizen is not a passive process. It requires that students be actively involved in all aspects of their government (Parker, 2015). These aspects include but are not limited to voicing an opinion about local issues in town hall meetings, getting involved in political campaigns, and writing social media posts to point out environmental issues. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) stresses that citizens are the stewards of all aspects of their environments (NCSS, 2013a).

One important component of building students' civic identity connects to their interactions with public issues. Students must be actively involved in helping to shape public policies (Croddy & Levine, 2014). This means students need to be able to analyze a public policy proposal and see its ramifications on not only themselves but their fellow citizens. The process of analyzing public policy is made more difficult by the rancor that exists between the two political parties. Over the last 40 years, the two parties have moved farther to the political right and left respectively, which has made it more difficult to reach compromises on issues (Perlstein, 2008; Carter, 2000; Heilmann & Halperin, 2014). Any compromise in a vote by a politician can lead to backlash from constituents and special interest groups that tends to materialize in a future primary challenge. Additionally, simple processes like raising the debt ceiling become struggles designed to create political winners



and losers. This toxic political environment makes it harder for citizens to engage in meaningful dialogues about public policies. Therefore, social studies teachers need to prepare students for how to scrutinize public issues and participate in discussions with these issues in constructive ways.

Social studies teachers should design activities that allow students to meaningfully explore different solutions to a public issue (Oliver & Shaver, 1966). These include policies connected to healthcare, defense spending, and taxes. Students will grapple with these topics as future citizens. Our social studies classroom needs to be a “laboratory for democracy” where students postulate and experiment with their solutions to a public issue (Clabough & Wooten, 2016). Many of these public issues are connected to controversial issues because people’s solutions to enduring public policies are often rooted in their regional, social, cultural, economic, and political values, biases, and beliefs (Levstik & Barton, 2015). Therefore, the teacher will want to focus on fostering a classroom environment that allows students to openly share their opinions (Hess, 2009). The key to this exploration of policy recommendations is that students’ solutions need to be supported by evidence because an argument without facts is merely a person’s opinion.

In the process of scrutinizing different solutions to public policies, the teacher simultaneously has the opportunity to allow students to explore the different philosophical beliefs of Republicans and Democrats. For example, an examination of the appropriate tax rate for people in different income brackets allows students to get at the heart for how both parties perceive the blueprint for economic success differently. Republicans feel that lower tax rates enable companies and the wealthy to invest more in the economy, which will lead to more jobs. Conversely, the Democrats believe that the wealthy should be taxed more to pay for programs that allow all citizens to prosper. The exploration of current public issues helps students decide for themselves their own political party allegiances. In the next section, the author provides an activity that enables students to examine a contemporary public issue: healthcare.

Developing Students’ Civic Identities with Political Party Platforms

With this activity, students explore the 2016 Republican and Democratic Party Platforms. These platforms articulate the two parties’ views, beliefs, and biases. They may be accessed from the American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index.php>. Students can distinguish how both parties articulate their views about an issue differently. Healthcare is discussed on pages 34-36 of the Democratic platform while Republicans focus on the issue on pages 31, 36, and 37.

The steps in this activity reflect the best intentions of what should happen in our social studies classroom as outlined in the C3 Framework. To be more specific, students are researching the Republican and Democrats’ positions on healthcare through an examination of the 2016 party platforms and then communicate their solutions to addressing this issue. This reflects the essence of the inquiry arc in the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013b). There are many civic standards in the C3 Framework connected to my activity, but I argue the best fit for this lesson plan is with D2. Civ. 1.6-8. This standard focuses on the role of political parties to drive discussion of civic issues in American democracy.



In pairs, students read these pages from both parties' platforms and complete the graphic organizer in the next section. The questions in the graphic organizer allow students to articulate the beliefs of both parties about healthcare. While students are answering these questions, the teacher circulates the classroom to help students with their analysis of the two platforms.

Graphic Organizer for Two Political Parties' Views on Healthcare

Question	Republican Party Platform	Democrat Party Platform
What is the federal government's role in healthcare?		
What is the party's reasoning on why the Affordable Care Act should be supported or repealed?		
What is the solution to patients' high healthcare costs?		

After the pairs complete the reading assignment and answer the questions in the graphic organizer, there should be a class debriefing. Students add onto their graphic organizers based on peers' responses. Through guiding this discussion, the teacher's focus is on having students support their responses with evidence. The teacher may also ask students some extension questions designed to help them gain a deeper understanding about both political parties. Some possible extension questions may include the following.

1. What entity does each party ascribe the problems in healthcare to? Why do you think each party does this?
2. What does the party's solution to high healthcare costs say about its core beliefs?

These two questions enable students to gain a better understanding of the core beliefs about each party. This class discussion allows students to gain experience engaging in meaningful dialogues with contemporary issues (LeCompte, Blevins, & Ray, 2017).



After this discussion, students work in the same pairs to create a Poems from Two Voices for Republicans and Democrats’ beliefs about healthcare. Poems from Two Voices is an activity that allows students to capture the differences and similarities between two individuals or groups in a three column chart (Finney, 2003). The beliefs of one group are captured in the far left column while the beliefs of the other group are contained in the far right column. The center column is for the ideas both groups share in common. The completion of a Poems from Two Voices with the parties’ platforms enables students to convey their understanding about different perspectives with healthcare. An example Poems from Two Voices is provided in the next section.

Spoken Alone by Voice One for the Democratic Party	Both Voices Say Together	Spoken Alone by Voice One for the Republican Party
<p>1. The federal government has a role to play in guaranteeing that every American has high-quality health insurance.</p> <p>2. Premiums need to be more affordable, and prescription drug costs need to be capped.</p> <p>3. States need to extend Medicare under the provisions of the Affordable Care Act to extend health insurance for low income Americans.</p>	<p>1. Every citizen needs high-quality health insurance.</p> <p>2. Steps need to be taken to reduce patients’ healthcare costs.</p> <p>3. State governments have a role to play to guarantee that citizens have the best health insurance.</p>	<p>1. The private sector needs to be more involved to guarantee that every American has high-quality health insurance.</p> <p>2. Citizens need more options with healthcare, and we need to reduce unneeded tests and procedures during visits to the doctor’s office.</p> <p>3. States need to regulate local insurance markets and modify costly medical mandates.</p>



Example Poems from Two Voices for Republicans and Democrats on Healthcare

Adapted from Northern Nevada Writing Project and Writing Fix (2008)

After the pairs complete the Poems from Two Voices on healthcare, the teacher guides a class debriefing. Students share their findings while the teacher asks them what evidence from the party platforms supports their conclusions. After focusing on the parties' beliefs about healthcare, the focus shifts to looking at the commonalities on this topic. This class discussion enables students to articulate not only the beliefs of both parties but what they have in common with healthcare. Then, the teacher asks students to take a few minutes to articulate their own beliefs about healthcare by either siding with one of the political parties or blending ideas from both. Students write a thesis statement on a sticky note.

After students have formulated their thesis about healthcare on a sticky note, they are ready for a perspective-writing activity. Students assume the role of a political figure and make the argument for a policy solution to the issue of healthcare. Their solution to healthcare should draw on ideas from the graphic organizer, Poems from Two Voices activity, class discussions, and their own beliefs about healthcare. If students agree with the Republicans or Democrats' beliefs about healthcare, they draw on evidence from one of the two party platforms to construct their writing piece. The length of their writing piece should be a half page. A rubric for the expectations of each student's perspective writing activity is presented in the next section. Perspective-writing activities are ideal for allowing students to capture and convey a person or group's values, biases, and beliefs about an issue or event (Shaftel & Shaftel, 1967). Through this perspective-writing activity, students also gain experience constructing and articulating an argument. The ability to make an argument is important in order for students to share their opinions and engage in meaningful discussions about public issues (Monte-Sano, De La Paz, & Felton, 2015).

After students complete this activity, they edit their writing piece. Students focus on addressing grammatical and clarity issues as well as making sure their arguments contain evidence from one or both party platforms. Additionally, a thesis of the student's beliefs about healthcare should be clearly articulated in the first sentence. The teacher circulates around the classroom to help students while they are editing. The editing process helps students better capture and articulate their beliefs about healthcare.

Rubric for Student's Perspective Writing Piece

Trait	1 Improvement Needed	3 Meets Expectations	5 Exceeds Expectations
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<p>Students articulate a thesis in their writing piece.</p>	<p>Students do not convey a thesis statement about their beliefs concerning healthcare.</p>	<p>Students convey a thesis statement about their beliefs concerning healthcare but are vague with some of their ideas.</p>	<p>Students accurately and concisely convey a thesis about their beliefs concerning healthcare that draws on one or both political parties' beliefs.</p>
<p>Recognizing perspective, points of view, and biases</p>	<p>Writing shows an inaccurate view of either or both political parties' views on healthcare.</p>	<p>Writing shows an accurate view for some of either or both political parties' views on healthcare.</p>	<p>Writing thoroughly develops a sense of the unique thinking style of one or both political parties with healthcare.</p>
<p>Constructing an argument</p>	<p>Students do not convey an argument throughout their paper or draw on evidence from sources discussed to support their argument.</p>	<p>Students do not consistently convey an argument or utilize evidence from sources discussed to support their argument.</p>	<p>Students consistently convey an argument throughout the paper and utilize evidence to support their argument.</p>

This activity allows students to research and analyze Republicans and Democrats' policies with healthcare. The steps in this activity can easily be adapted for students to look at both parties' stances on other issues. Through completing all of the steps in this activity, students articulate not only both parties' stances on an issue but also formulate their own beliefs. The ability to analyze policy recommendations is critical for students to objectively weigh the merits of public policy and then get involved in influencing the direction of that issue (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). Additionally, students will not be as vulnerable to propaganda techniques used by politicians to influence how citizens think about an issue. In other words, they can reach their own conclusions about public policy. This active level of citizenship holds elected officials more accountable to citizens' wishes and helps to ensure that issues are addressed (Levine, 2007).

After students have analyzed the basic tenets of both Republican and Democratic views on an issue, they can explore more complicated nuances with both parties and the issue. A public issue like healthcare is very fluid with a policy recommendation by one politician impacting the dynamics of how people in both parties perceive the issue. Republican senators recently introduced a third attempt to reform the Affordable Care Act, which failed due to three Republican senators not supporting the measure (Eilperin, Sullivan, & Snell, 2017). This shows there are factions within political parties that view issues differently based on a politician's values, biases, and beliefs. The teacher can build on the lesson discussed in this article by asking follow-up questions to explore these nuances of issues and political parties.



Conclusion

In this article, the author provides an activity to build students' civic identities by exploring Republicans and Democrats' beliefs about healthcare. The examination of healthcare enables students to explore key tenets of both political parties. In the process of analyzing and discussing both the Republican and Democratic party platforms with healthcare, students begin to articulate and form their own political identities. The teacher will want to set up a series of activities like the one discussed in this article to enable students to more fully develop their core beliefs and values about issues that they will grapple with as future citizens. The exploration of topics using the approach articulated in this article prepares students to analyze politicians' policy recommendations and make informed decisions as future citizens (Engle & Ochoa, 1988).



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