



January 2022

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Recommended Citation

Clabough, Jeremiah (2022) "Examining Public Policies from Progressive Democrats with U.S. Healthcare System," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 83: No. 2, Article 2.

Available at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol83/iss2/2

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Cover Page Footnote

N/A

Political parties in the United States are not static. Issues, events, and public policies cause political parties to be very fluid. For example, Democrats' policies on healthcare have shifted a lot over the last 40 years (Allen & Parnes, 2021; Dove, 2021; Kennedy, 2009; Ward, 2019). This is just one of the many examples of how the two major U.S. political parties have changed with the passage of time. The changes occurring in the Democratic and Republican parties over the last 70 years have created factions within both. These political factions are always changing because issues and societal norms are always changing. The changing societal norms cause members of both political parties to modify their positions in order to hold elected office. For example, the arguments made by Senator Ted Kennedy for universal healthcare when he mounted a primary challenge to President Carter in the 1980 presidential election are very different from Senator Bernie Sanders's arguments made in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries with Medicare for All (Allen & Parnes, 2021; Dove, 2021; Kennedy, 2009; Ward, 2019). High school social studies teachers need to design learning opportunities for their students to deconstruct the public policies for different factions within both the Democratic and Republican parties so that students can grasp diverse solutions to public issues. The process of analyzing different solutions helps develop students' civic identities as they analyze policy solutions and decide for themselves what candidates and public policies to support (Clabough, 2017; Rubin, 2010).

In this article, the author provides an activity that high school students can use to examine the healthcare policies for different factions within both of the two major U.S. political parties. Specifically, the activity focuses only on Progressive Democrats' Medicare for All. While the activity focuses only on Progressive Democrats, it could be adapted for different factions within both political parties by changing the sources examined and analysis prompts used. Progressive

Democrats were selected because this faction has gained more power within the Democratic Party over the last two presidential election cycles, and thus, students need opportunities to honestly evaluate this faction's policy beliefs. The author starts by giving a brief overview about some of the factions within the Democratic Party over the last 70 years. Then, the focus of the article shifts to discuss best practices within civic education about teaching public policies. Finally, an activity is provided to help students deconstruct the arguments made by Progressive Democrats about Medicare for All. The author also gives details for how social studies teachers can replicate the activity in this article for different factions within both political parties.

The Democratic Party over the Last 70 Years

It could be argued that the Democratic Party over the last 70 years has been even more susceptible to changing social, cultural, political, and economic forces because it has attempted to address many of the unfolding social, cultural, political, and economic issues (Clarke, 2008, Halperin & Heilemann, 2013; Humphrey, 1976; Ward, 2019). For example, the Democratic Party was the driving force in American politics during the 1960s to help address racial discrimination that African Americans faced due to Jim Crow segregation laws in the South and de facto segregation laws around the United States. Fissures arose within the Democratic Party due to advocating for civil rights issues and protests associated with the Vietnam War (Kornacki, 2018; Perlstein, 2008; Thomas, 2000).

Many members of the Democratic Party have drifted further to the political left since the 1960s as they have embraced certain stances on various public issues. Women and minority groups have gained a large influence within the Democratic Party, and members from these groups have consistently advocated for public policies to address unanswered needs within their communities. These public policies advocated for have moved the Democratic Party further left

in principle and in the general public's mind as well (Clarke, 2008; Kornacki, 2018; Perlstein, 2008, 2020). However, not all Democrats have moved further to the left in their respective eras. Presidents Carter, Clinton, and Biden all obtained the presidency by presenting themselves as moderates that were committed to the principles of the Democratic Party but were more in tuned with the political realities in their respective eras. For example, President Carter in the 1980 Democratic primaries argued that Senator Kennedy's universal healthcare program was unrealistic with the sagging U.S. economy, which is a similar approach that Vice President Biden made when approaching his arguments against Medicare for All in the 2020 Democratic primaries (Osnos, 2020; Ward, 2019). Moderate Democrats present Progressive Democrats with having policy plans that are unrealistic to implement. This is done to create the perception in many voters' minds that Progressive Democrats' policies cannot realistically be implemented. Progressive Democrats countercharge that moderate Democrats have policy plans that fail to address the full scope of an issue. For example, Senator Bernie Sanders does not disagree with President Obama's Affordable Care Act but feels this policy plan does not completely address all of the challenges in the U.S. healthcare system. He feels Medicare for All is a policy plan that goes further to address all facets of average Americans' healthcare needs (Sanders, 2016, 2018). The differences within the Democratic Party have been about more than conflicts in personality because these disagreements have been focused on contrasting public policy plans.

Teaching Public Issues

Civic education over the last century has been driven in part by a focus on how to teach public issues. Public issues are perennial topics that drive public discourse not only in one era but extend into numerous historical epochs, such as how to deal with racial discrimination and the role of the U.S. government in people's daily lives (Evans et al., 1996; Hess & McAvoy,

2015). Both John Dewey and Harold Rugg at the beginning of the social studies movement in the first couple of decades of the 20th century argued that social studies teachers should prepare their students to confront challenging contemporary issues (Dewey, 1916; Evans, 2004, 2007-2008).

The focus on public issues became even more pronounced from the work by Donald Oliver, Fred Newmann, and James Shaver with the Harvard Social Studies Project. The lead authors of the Harvard Social Studies Project designed pamphlets called the *Public Issues Series* that modeled for social studies teachers how to examine the contours of historical and contemporary public issues like racism in the United States. There were numerous pamphlets created about different historical and contemporary public issues that were designed to facilitate discussion of these issues. There was a reluctance by some social studies teachers to embrace the ideas espoused by the Harvard Social Studies Project due to the unfolding tension of hyperpartisanship in U.S. society starting in the late 1960's coupled with some feeling uncomfortable guiding potentially controversial discussions (Bohan & Feinberg, 2008, 2010; Oliver & Newmann, 1967; Oliver & Shaver, 1966).

The work on teaching public issues after the Harvard Social Studies Project was somewhat dormant until the release of the *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues* edited by Ronald Evans and David Warren Saxe (1996). This edited volume gave a theoretical rationale for the importance of teaching public issues by arguing that K-12 students needed to explore such topics to be prepared to assume the responsibilities of being future democratic citizens. Contributing authors also examined how economic, history, geography, and civic teachers can explore public issues in their classrooms. Recently, the *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues* was released in its second edition and provides an updated vision on how to teach about more contemporary public issues like Confederate monuments and topics connected to the #MeTooMovement (Clabough et

al., 2021; Bohan & Miller, 2021). The reenergized focus on teaching public issues over the last 25 years dovetails very nicely with the current emphasis on best social studies teaching practices found in the C3 Framework by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS).

The C3 Framework focuses on developing K-12 students' disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills in the four main social studies disciplines: civics, economics, geography, and history (NCSS, 2013a; Swan & Griffin, 2013). To strengthen students' disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills, social studies teachers need to design classroom activities where students analyze arguments within texts and use these sources as evidence to take civic action (Levinson & Levine, 2013; VanSledright, 2013). The best social studies teaching practices advocated for in the C3 Framework work well when employed for students to analyze public issues.

High school social studies teachers may use public policy plans from both Republicans and Democrats as texts for students to examine in order to develop their civic thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills (Clabough, 2017, 2020). Students can also answer analysis prompts about a policy plan to deconstruct a faction within a political party's beliefs about an issue. It is important to set up activities for students to grasp that members of the same political party can differ based on personal beliefs and regional locations. The students' analysis of a policy plan could be used as evidence for them to take civic action to support or oppose certain initiatives. It is important that high school social studies teachers set up learning activities that allow students to grasp how different policy plans will positively and negatively impact their lives (Journell, 2017). These learning procedures equip students with the analysis skills to be actively informed and aware of public issues that will impact their lives and those in their local community (NCSS, 2013b).

Many of the major public policies in contemporary U.S. society lead to controversy. Members of both political parties see progression of certain policies as a net sum gain or loss depending on whether their policies are moving forward or not. Once simple things as raising the national debt ceiling become opportunities for one side of the political aisle to score a partisan victory (Halperin & Heilemann, 2013; Kornacki, 2018). Unfortunately, this hyperpartisan approach to U.S. politics has been growing in American politics over the last 30 years.

The current political reality causes many high school social studies teachers to be hesitant to discuss controversial public issues. Teachers are fearful of parents complaining about discussing certain topics, and school administrators will not be supportive of teaching such issues. There is also the fear that some teachers do not feel that they possess the skills to guide the discussion of controversial issues and may possibly upset the students (Dunn et al., 2018; Gross & Terra, 2019; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2016; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). All of these feelings have been amplified as many conservative lawmakers on the state and national level have used issues that they label as controversial, especially with issues of race, as off limits for discussion in the K-12 social studies classrooms (Harvey, 2020; NCSS, 2020; Serwer, 2021). The passing of laws to restrict discussion of controversial issues for political gain has caused many teachers to fear the loss of employment. In the next section, the author provides an activity to examine Medicare for All, which reflects Progressive Democrats' beliefs for the best policy plan to address the healthcare needs of U.S. citizens.

Analyzing the Public Policies of Contemporary Progressive Democrats

Many high school students enter our social studies classrooms with misconceptions about contemporary U.S. politics. These misconceptions are fed by friends, family members, and those within a community. Additionally, the hyperpartisanship in much of the media tries to define

people, policies, and political parties as either positive or negative on a daily basis (Journell, 2018; NCSS, 2016). Social studies teachers need to set up learning opportunities for their students to cut through rumors and propaganda to see what political parties and figures actually believe about the issues.

Since Progressive Democrats have broken through into the U.S. public conscious with Bernie Sanders's strong showing in the last two presidential election cycles, it is important to help students define this type of Democrat. The teacher starts by putting students in pairs and then getting them to read the first six short paragraphs of an online entry from the Pew Research Center that provides a clear and concise definition of Progressive Democrats. This online entry can be found at the following link:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/11/09/progressive-left/>. This online entry was selected because it gives a short and concise summary of Progressive Democrats' political beliefs on issues. After pairs read this short entry, they answer the following analysis prompts.

1. What political beliefs do Progressive Democrats have? Use evidence from the source to support your arguments.
2. How are Progressive Democrats different from other Democrats? Use evidence from the source to support your arguments.
3. In your own words, summarize what it means to be a Progressive Democrat. Use evidence from the source to support your arguments.

By answering these analysis prompts, students deconstruct Progressive Democrats' beliefs and values. They are also able to use evidence from the source to articulate in their own words what it means to be a Progressive Democrat. It is important for students to articulate the public policies of different factions within political parties so they can determine for themselves their own political leanings on various issues (Rubin, 2010).

After pairs read the excerpts from the article in Pew Research Center and answer the three analysis prompts, there is a short class discussion. Students share their responses to the three analysis prompts and add onto their answers based on peers' comments. The teacher asks the following extension question. Why would Progressive Democrats emerge as a powerful faction within the Democratic Party over the last two presidential election cycles? This extension question can be the starting point to open discussion of how emerging issues and in this case the criticisms from those on the political left about the unfulfilled work during President Obama's administration and the crushing defeat of Hillary Clinton to Donald Trump lead to certain voices gaining strength within the Democratic Party (Allen & Barnes, 2017, 2021; Dove, 2021).

It could be argued that the most well-known Progressive Democrat in contemporary U.S. politics is Senator Bernie Sanders. Senator Sanders emerged as a national political figure with a strong showing during the 2016 and 2020 Democratic presidential primaries and has been a vocal voice within the Democratic Party over the last six years. One of the public policies that Senator Sanders has championed over the last six years has been Medicare for All. Medicare for All is focused on creating a single-payer health insurance on a national level that gives all Americans healthcare coverage (Sanders, 2016, 2018).

The social studies teacher can use a page from Senator Sanders's website to help students deconstruct his arguments for Medicare for All. In the same pairs as earlier, students read information for Medicare for All at Senator Sanders's website <https://berniesanders.com/issues/medicare-for-all/>. This webpage gives a short summary that captures Senator Sanders's beliefs about Medicare for All. Then, they complete the Political Philosophy Handout in the following section.

Political Philosophy Handout

Faction within a U.S. Political Party:

Public issue:

Source examined: Issues section on Bernie Sanders’s website about Medicare for All

Analysis Prompts to Use with the Source:

1. According to this source, what are the root causes of U.S. healthcare issues? Use evidence from the source to support your arguments.
2. According to this source, how should we address issues in the U.S. healthcare system? Use evidence from the source to support your arguments.
3. In your own words, summarize Progressive Democrats’ solutions to healthcare issues with Medicare for All? Use evidence from the source to support your arguments.

The completion of the Political Philosophy Handout helps students grasp how Progressive Democrats view Medicare for All as the best solution for current U.S. healthcare issues. Students can conceptualize how Progressive Democrats view the challenges and solutions to address major issues with the U.S. healthcare system. This short reading assignment helps students articulate Progressive Democrats’ values, biases, and beliefs about healthcare issues and define based on evidence what they really stand for with Medicare for All.

After pairs complete the Political Philosophy Handout for Progressive Democrats’ beliefs about healthcare issues, there is a class discussion. Students share their responses to the analysis

prompts and add onto their statements based on peers' comments. The teacher asks the following extension question. What does Progressive Democrats' focus on Medicare for All say about the current challenges of the U.S. healthcare system? This extension question opens discussions on why the current healthcare system in the U.S. creates so many challenges to be addressed by public policies along with why this topic has been such a divisive issue over the last 40 years in American politics.

All of the steps in this activity prepare students for a writing prompt to articulate Progressive Democrats' views on public policies related to the U.S. healthcare system.

Independently, students complete the following writing prompt.

Assume the role of a newspaper writer that has just reviewed Senator Sanders's website about his beliefs on Medicare for All. Write a newspaper story explaining how Senator Sanders's beliefs reflect Progressive Democrats' beliefs about healthcare issues. Use evidence from sources examined to support your arguments. The newspaper story should be a half page in length.

This writing activity allows students to summarize Progressive Democrats' beliefs about public policies connected to the U.S. healthcare system. Students are able to define and explain in their own words the public policies on a major issue in U.S. politics by a political faction within the Democratic Party. It is important for social studies teachers to design learning activities like this to equip students with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about public policies to support or oppose (Engle, 1960; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; NCSS, 2013b).

The steps in this activity should be duplicated for other political factions within both the Democratic and Republican parties. For example, the teacher could select a similar source from a moderate Democrat like President Joe Biden or Tea Party Republican like Senator Ted Cruz to see a faction's public policies with the U.S. healthcare system. The analysis prompts and Political Philosophy Handout described above could all be used with minor edits. After completing the steps above for other political factions, it would be beneficial for students to

compare and contrast the different political factions so that students can see which ones are further to the political right and left respectively. For example, students will quickly realize that Progressive Democrats are further to the political left than moderate Democrats. This sets up opportunities for students to make comparisons among the different factions within a political party as well as differences between the two political parties. Students are thus able to determine for themselves which political party and faction within a political party that they align best with on an issue (Clabough, 2017; Rubin, 2010).

All of the steps in this activity could also be replicated with other public issues. Some other public issues that might be examined include solutions to COVID 19 relief efforts, gun violence in America, and ways to stimulate the U.S. economy. The social studies teacher can also design analysis prompts to help students grasp how factions within a political party argue that different public issues are connected. For example, Progressive Democrats argue that rising costs of prescription drugs limit the amount of money that many Americans have to spend, which negatively impacts the U.S. economy (Sanders, 2018). The learning approach discussed here helps high school students engage with issues that they will soon face as future democratic citizens in a non-partisan way where they simply evaluate the merits and weaknesses of a policy plan. This approach to analyzing public issues helps to minimize charges of partisanship and indoctrination by the teacher because students are evaluating for themselves different policy plans.

Afterthoughts

The steps with the activity discussed in this article allow high school students to deconstruct the perspectives on public issues from different factions within one of the major U.S. political parties. Politicians, special interest groups, and biased media groups attempt on a daily

basis to indoctrinate U.S. citizens on what public policies to support or oppose. High school students need learning experiences that prepare them for when they will be dealing with supporting or opposing policy initiatives. It is important to move class discussions past superficial conversations with differences in candidates' personalities and instead delve into where they stand on the issues. High school students should be able to use evidence from a politician's statements to decide whether to support or oppose a policy solution (Clabough, 2017). The active involvement with democratic citizens in public issues is an important component to address lingering public issues over the last 40 years that have been unresolved and to create a more equitable society for all U.S. citizens (Ochoa-Becker, 1996).

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